

Bessie Coleman

Queen of the Skies

Groundbreaking civil aviator; first Black American woman to earn a pilot's license

1892-1926

Aviator

Daredevil

Activist

Pioneer





“Brave Bessie” Coleman

Born to poor sharecroppers in Atlanta, Texas in 1892, Bessie Coleman was the first African American woman to earn an aviation pilot's license and the first black person to earn an international aviation license – from the *Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* in France.

Because of her family's Cherokee ancestry, she is also the first American Indian woman to earn these distinctions.

Throughout her career as a **daredevil** stunt pilot in airshows, she consistently defied expectations and broke through racial and gender barriers to dazzle audiences and inspire future generations of Black American pilots, aviators, and astronauts.



Bessie Coleman in her aviator gear, c. 1920s.



Humble Origins

Bessie Coleman had twelve brothers and sisters. Her mother, Susan, worked as a maid, and her father, George, was a farmer of mixed Black and Cherokee ancestry.

In 1901, like many Black Americans in the South, her father decided to move to Oklahoma in hopes of escaping racial discrimination.

Bessie's mother chose not to go with him. Instead, the rest of the family stayed behind in Texas.



Sharecroppers picking cotton in Decatur, Georgia, 1907.



Humble Origins

Bessie grew up helping her mother pick cotton and wash laundry to earn extra money. By the time she was eighteen, she saved enough money to attend the Colored Agricultural and Normal University in Langston, Oklahoma. She dropped out of college after only one semester because she could not afford tuition.

What do you imagine life was like in the rural South for Black Americans in the early 20th century? What economic barriers did Black women in particular face?

How and why did people become **sharecroppers**? What conditions did this kind of work entail?

“Picking cotton on Alexander plantation, Pulaski County, Arkansas,” Photograph by Ben Shahn, 1935





North to New Opportunities

When she was 23, Coleman moved to Chicago to live with her brothers, where she attended the Burnham School of Beauty Culture and became a manicurist in a local beauty shop. Her brothers served in the military during World War I, returning with stories of their time in France.

From these tales, Coleman discovered that French women were allowed to fly. This sparked her dreams of being a pilot, which soon burned as a single-minded determination.

Bessie Coleman's passport photo, taken before her first trip to Europe.

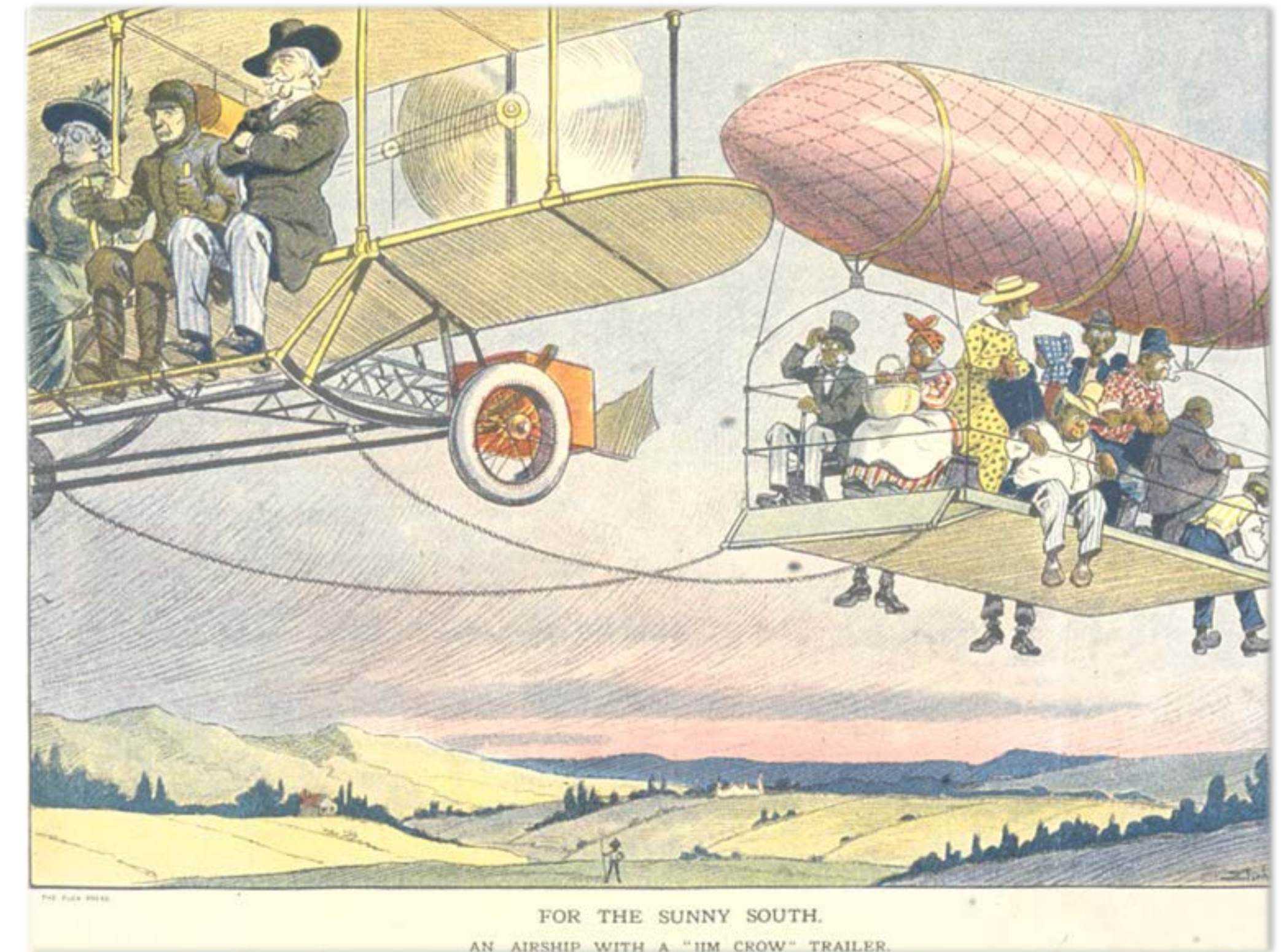


Technological Progress, Moral Stagnation

In the early days of aviation, after the Wright Brothers had demonstrated human flight was possible in 1903, nobody knew how much this technology would change the world. Commercial air travel was still decades away. In the meantime, segregation – both official and unofficial – was the rule in the U.S. This applied to the emerging field of aerospace, too.

What new technologies are changing the world today? How might they become even more important in the future?

Are some people prevented from enjoying the benefits of these technologies? How so?



A racist cartoon from 1913 imagines a future for mass “airship” travel, but with a biplane pulling a segregated “Jim Crow” car full of caricatured African Americans over a Southern landscape.



Refusing to give up

No American flight school would accept a Black person, especially a woman, as a student. But that didn't stop Coleman from applying.

Coleman said later about the obstacles she faced: **"I refused to take 'no' for an answer."**

Robert Abbott, a well-known African-American publisher and founder of the *Chicago Defender*, told Coleman to move to France, where she could escape discrimination and learn to fly.



Robert Sengstacke Abbott in the 1930s.



Black American Expatriates in Europe



Coleman's situation was not unique. In the early 20th century, many Black artists, intellectuals, and athletes chose to work and live abroad in Europe to escape racial discrimination in America. The only Black American pilot to fly combat missions in WWI, boxer and vaudeville performer **Eugene J. Bullard** of Columbus, Georgia, fought for France.

Coleman began taking French classes at night because her application to flight schools needed to be written in French. Her hard work paid off.

Corporal Eugene J. Bullard, French Foreign Legion, c.1917



Bessie gets her wings

Coleman was accepted at the Caudron Brothers' School of Aviation in Le Crotoy, France. In November 1920, she travelled to Paris, abroad for the first time in her life, and began her studies.



Bessie Coleman received her international pilot's license on June 15, 1921, from the *Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* (the International Aeronautical Federation).



Adventures in Europe

After a brief return to the U.S., where she still could not find teachers to train her, Bessie went back to France, where she continued her studies.

Coleman traveled to the Netherlands and Germany, where she met the great Dutch aircraft designer **Anthony Fokker** and trained with one of the Fokker Corporation's chief pilots.

By August 1922, she was ready to return home and begin her career as an airshow pilot, with a fresh repertoire of thrilling stunts and tricks.



Influential Dutch aircraft engineer Anthony Fokker, 1912.



Adventures in Europe

The air is the only place free from prejudices. I knew we had no aviators, neither men nor women, and I knew the Race needed to be represented along this most important line, so I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviation...

Bessie Coleman



SNAPPED IN BERLIN, GERMANY
After a flight over the ex-Kaiser's palace, with a "Pathé" cameraman. The views which were taken were widely distributed through "Pathé News Reel"

Bessie Coleman and a cameraman from the French film company Pathé, after filming a flight over the former German Kaiser's palace after WWI.



A Thrilling American Debut

HERE SOON!

Aviatrix Bessie Coleman

In Person and on the Screen with 2000 Feet of Film Showing her Flights in Europe and America.

Read the Following Facts About the Dashing and Daring Girl who Flirts with Death in Her Airplane.

She is a Ranch Girl.
Born in Texas.
She weighs 130 lbs.
She is a graduate of the French School of Aviation at Paris, France.
She is the only woman in the world that handles a 22 horse-power German Benz Plane and she flew over the palace of the Ex. Kaiser, in Berlin, Germany, with a Pathe Camera Man.
She is the only woman in the world holding an international Pilots license, enabling her to make flights in any country.



The Governor of Ohio and Mayor of Columbus Writes Miss Coleman Letters of Welcome

GOVERNOR'S LETTER
STATE OF OHIO
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT
COLUMBUS

Coleman's debut performance upon her return home was a tribute to WWI veterans of the Black 369th Infantry Regiment at Curtiss Field in Long Island, NY, on September 2, 1922.

She performed with another early Black aviator, the Trinidadian parachutist **Hubert Julian**.

This event, and Coleman's status as the "world's greatest woman flier," was promoted by her friend Robert Abbott and the *Chicago Defender*.



Taking the country by storm...

A couple months later, Coleman performed a similar show in Chicago, this time as a tribute to WWI veterans of the 370th Infantry. Coleman's aerial maneuvers dazzled audiences and included upside-down loops, figure "8"s, and high-risk stunts like "near-miss" dips towards the ground.

Coleman became wildly popular on both sides of the Atlantic – and the color line. Touring the country, Bessie not only performed aerial **exhibitions**, but took passengers on joyrides, taught flight lessons, and tried to build interest in her vision of a flight school open to Black students.

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BESSIE COLEMAN

THE RACE'S ONLY

AVIATRIX

WILL MAKE HER INITIAL
LOCAL FLIGHT AT

CHECKERBOARD AIRDROME

SUNDAY, OCT. 15
3 P. M. SHARP

DIRECTIONS
METROPOLITAN "12"—Garfield Park
to Forest Park station; motor bus
to field.
AUTO ROUTE—West on Jackson Blvd.
to Desplains Ave., south to Broom-
field Road; west three blocks to
Checkerboard Airdrome.

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...and taking serious risks



Two years into her airshow career, Coleman survived a terrifying accident. In February of 1923, her engine suddenly suddenly failed, and she had to make a crash landing. Coleman was badly hurt, suffering a broken leg, cracked ribs, and **lacerations** on her face. She eventually healed from her injuries – but it was a close call.



Bessie's "Jenny"

Coleman was fearless and wouldn't quit. Her accident did not stop her from flying. She went back to performing dangerous air tricks in 1925.

Her hard work helped her to save up enough money to purchase her own plane, a Curtiss JN-4 equipped with an OX-5 engine, the most widely-used aircraft engine in the country in the 1920s.





Bessie's "Jenny"

The Curtiss JN (nicknamed "Jenny") was among the most popular line of biplanes in the early decades of aviation. It began its life as a training aircraft for the U.S. Army, and was widely used to transport supplies and as an aerial ambulance in WWI.

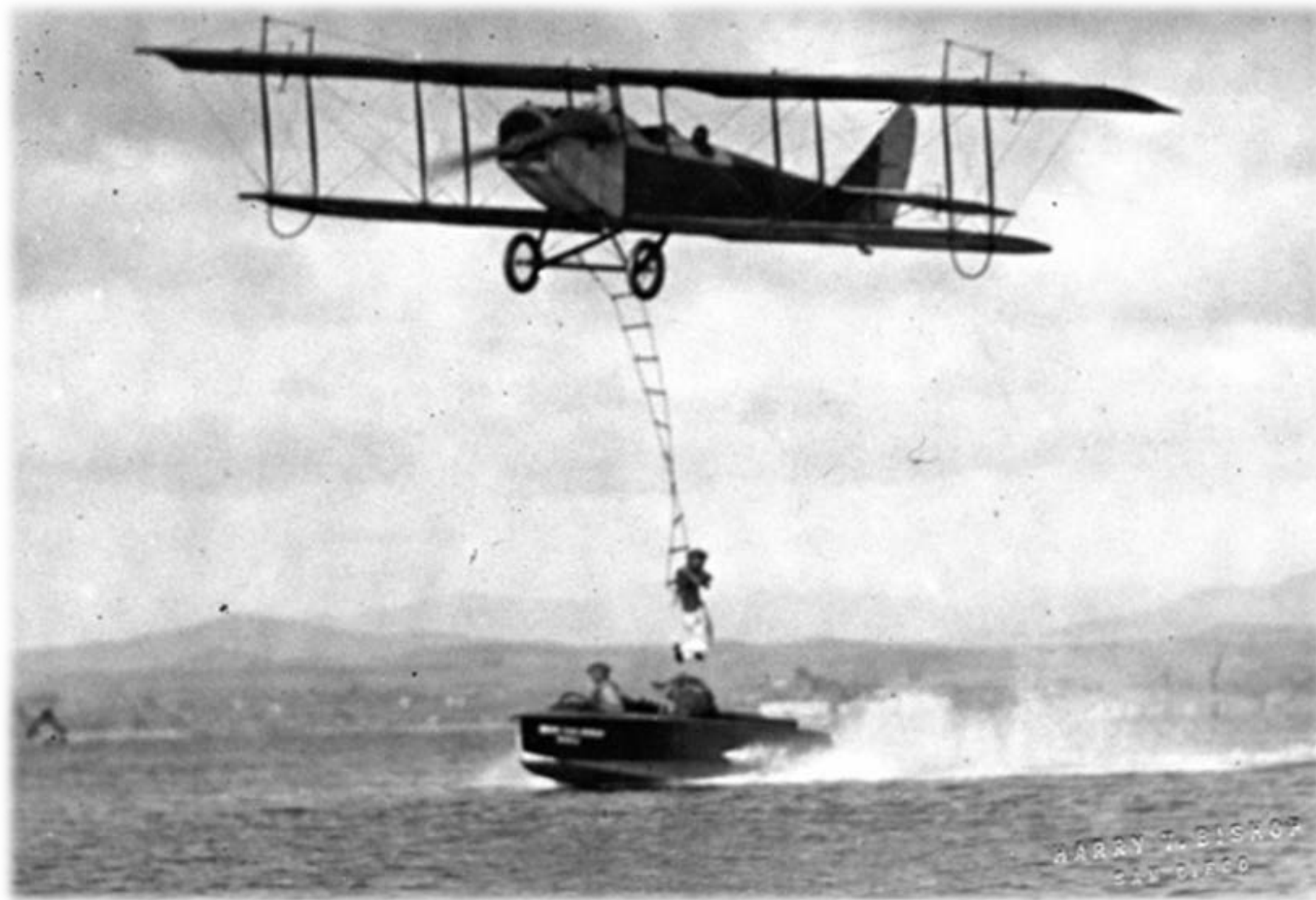
A modern replica of Bessie Coleman's "Jenny" biplane, bearing her nickname "Queen Bess," from the Historical Museum in Bessie's hometown of Atlanta, Texas.





“Barnstorming” in the early days of flight

While many JN variations were manufactured throughout the 1920s, they featured two pairs of wings at different levels (hence "bi"-plane) and, typically, two cockpits with the controls in the aft (rear).



Daredevils perform a stunt over the water with a Curtiss JN-4, the same model used by Bessie Coleman.



“Barnstorming” in the early days of flight

While many JN variations were manufactured throughout the 1920s, they featured two pairs of wings at different levels (hence "bi"-plane) and, typically, two cockpits with the controls in the aft (rear).



After the war, in the “**barnstorming**” age of civic aviators like Coleman, Charles Lindbergh, and others, the “Jenny” remained a top choice of pilots: a reliable, easily-modified, mass-produced aircraft in an era when aviation was all about entertainment.



Standing up for her community

Not long after purchasing her “Jenny,” Coleman returned to her hometown of Atlanta, TX to perform for large crowd of spectators. By now her reputation was attracting thrill-seekers of all races. According to Kerri Lee Alexander of the National Women’s History Museum:



*Segregated seating sign
from a theatre in 1931*

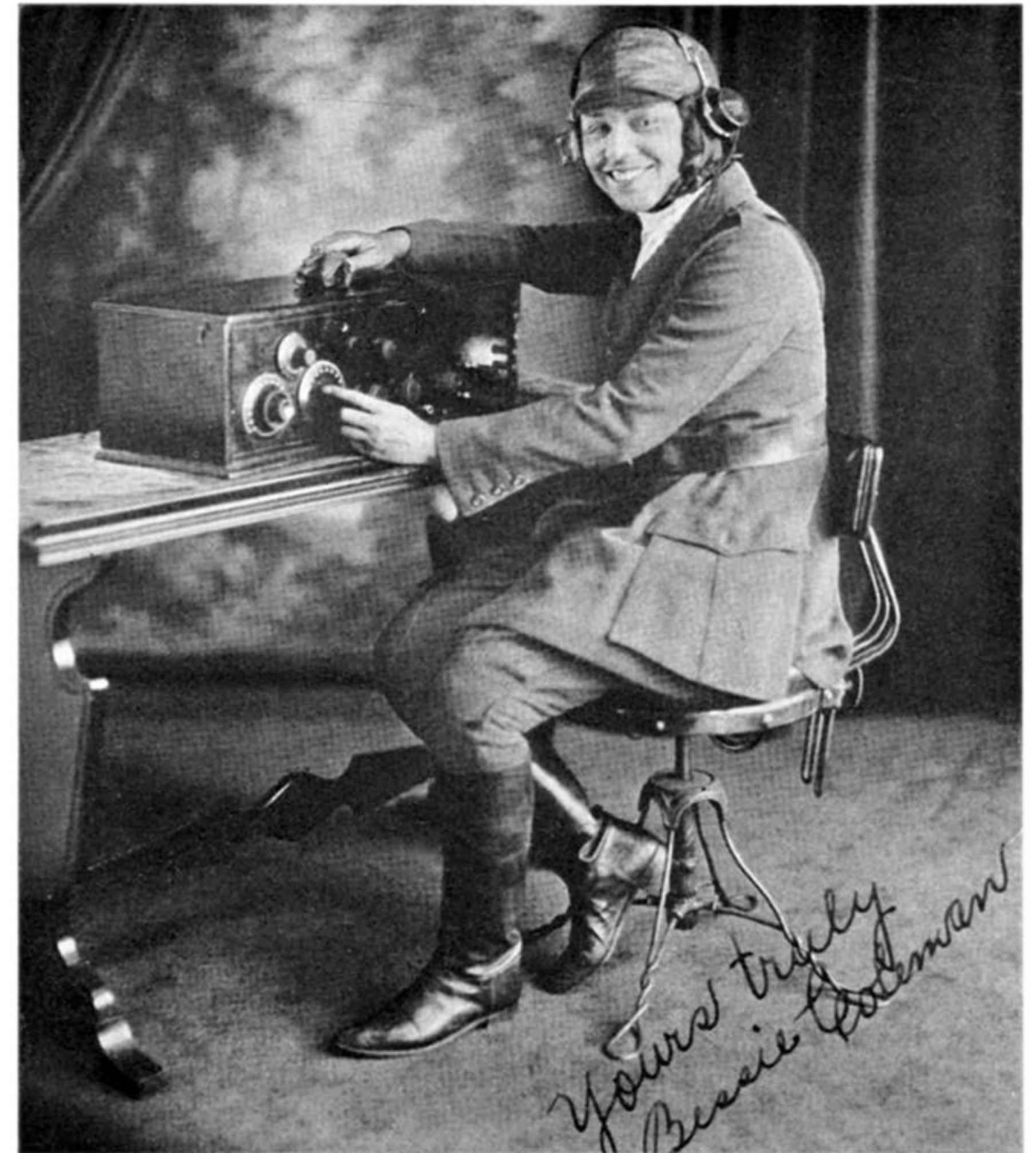
“Because Texas was still segregated, the managers planned to create two separate entrances for Black and White people to get into the stadium. Coleman refused to perform unless there was only one gate for everyone to use...



Standing up for her community

...After many meetings, the managers agreed to have one gate, but people would still have to sit in segregated sections of the stadium.”

Coleman conceded to this compromise and performed. Her reputation for principled support for integration and civil rights made her beloved in the Black community.



Autographed picture of Coleman operating a radio.
Quote source: <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/bessie-coleman>



From Sky to Screen (Almost)

Coleman became famous enough that she was offered a starring role in the movie *Shadow and Sunshine*, and news of the production – conceived by the Black-owned Seminole Film Company, with over 100 Black extras – created a buzz in the national Black media.

But when Coleman discovered that the movie opened with her appearing in rags, Coleman declared: “No Uncle Tom stuff for me!” and walked away from the role.

The decision proved controversial, provoking a backlash in the Black entertainment industry and affecting her ability perform at Black-run fairs and airshows.

Poster for the 1926 film The Flying Ace, a “race film” created by Black American filmmaker Richard E. Norman. The female protagonist was lightly based on Coleman.





Growing in Faith and Wisdom

Early in 1926, Bessie Coleman travelled through Florida, lecturing on the importance of flight for the nation's future, imploring Black men and women to pursue aviation and raising money to start her own flight school.

Her journey took her to Orlando's historically Black neighborhood, Parramore.

A modern-day mural in the Parramore neighborhood of Orlando, Florida, celebrating its historical and cultural Black heritage.





Growing in Faith and Wisdom

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Her journey took her to Orlando's historically Black neighborhood, Parramore.

Here she met the pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church, Rev. Hezakiah "H.K." Hill, and his wife, Viola. Through her close friendship with the Hills, Coleman found faith in God – and a second family.

She declared herself to be a "born-again" Christian, often speaking publicly about her religion and praying before flights.

In fact, she knelt in prayer beside her "Jenny" right before the final flight of her life.



Mount Zion Baptist Church in Orlando, Florida, today.



Last Days in Florida

Bessie Coleman spent most of her final months with Rev. and Mrs. Hill, who she called “Daddy” and “Mother,” and immersed in the welcoming community around Mt. Zion church.

Coleman spoke about aviation at church events, theatres, and local schools in Orlando, attracting droves of children and older admirers who were fascinated by the new world of flight and wanted to hear of Coleman’s adventures.

At the same time, the Hills pleaded with Coleman to quit stunt flying, open a beauty shop, and focus her passion for flight on the lecture circuit.





April 30, 1926

While preparing for a show in Jacksonville, Florida, Coleman took a test flight for an upcoming airshow with mechanic William Wills.

The “Jenny” Coleman purchased had not been well maintained. At 3,000 feet in the air, with Wills piloting the plane as Coleman examined the terrain from the passenger cockpit, a stray wrench somehow jammed the aircraft engine.



The steering failed, and Wills lost control. The plane went into a tailspin, plummeting down to earth. Coleman was not wearing a seatbelt, and her cockpit was not enclosed.

April 30, 1926

Coleman fell from the open plane to her death. She was 34 years old.



GIRL SLAYS MOTHER, BROTHER, WITH SHOTGUN

NATIONAL EDITION **Chicago Defender** **WORLD'S GREATEST WEEKLY** **USE CLASSIFIED ADS FOR QUICK RESULTS**

VOL. XXII, NO. 7 CHICAGO, ILL., SATURDAY, MAY 8, 1926 PRICE TEN CENTS

PROBE MURDERS IN ALABAMA PRISON CAMP

BESSIE COLEMAN, AVIATRIX, KILLED

DARROW TRAPS WITNESSES IN SWEET CASE

TWO LIVES SNUFFED OUT WHEN PLANE CRASHES DOWN

CHANGE TESTIMONIES AS DEFENSE CREW OPENS FIREWORKS

TRAGEDY OF THE AIR IN PICTURES

MME. WALKER

UCID MARRIES

GIRL SLAYS

Black America Mourns its Heroine



Bessie Coleman was deeply mourned in the Black community. The *Chicago Defender*, the newspaper that had helped promote Coleman since the start of her career, covered her death and memorial services extensively.

Coleman's passing, however, received little notice in the mainstream press.





Black America Mourns its Heroine

Ceremonies in her memory were attended by tens of thousands of mourners, first in Florida and then at her funeral in Chicago, where her eulogy was delivered by the famous journalist and civil rights activist **Ida B. Wells**.

Who are your heroes? What qualities and actions make them heroic?

Has a public figure you deeply admire died tragically? How did you respond? How did your friends and family respond?



Ida B. Wells in the 1920s.



Bessie Coleman Aero Club

Bessie Coleman died far too soon.

But the extraordinary accomplishments of her short life were not in vain. She inspired the next generation of Black American aviators, and paved the way for Black-operated flight schools, growing numbers of Black aviation professionals, and eventually an integrated United States Air Force.

One man she inspired was U.S. Army veteran and aspiring pilot **William J. Powell**, who founded the Bessie Coleman Aero Club in 1928.



William J. Powell in his army uniform in France, 1917.



Bessie Coleman Aero Club

Powell devoted his life to picking up where Coleman had left off, promoting aviation to Black America and fighting to expand opportunities.

In 1931, the Aero Club put on the first-ever all-Black air show for over 15,000 spectators.

Powell's 1934 book *Black Wings*, which captured the imagination of the rising generation of Black aviators, was dedicated to Bessie Coleman.



Members of the Bessie Coleman Aero Club, early 1930s.

A legacy for future generations



Mae Jemison, the first African American woman astronaut, carried Bessie Coleman's picture with her on her first flight.

In her afterword to *Queen Bess: Daredevil Aviator*, Jemison wrote that she was frustrated that, despite being a history buff who grew up in Chicago, she didn't hear about Coleman until her "spaceflight beckoned on the horizon... I wished I had known her while I was growing up, but then again I think she was there with me all the time ...

... I point to Bessie Coleman and say here is a woman, a being, who exemplifies and serves as a model for all humanity, the very definition of strength, dignity, courage, integrity, and beauty."



Vocabulary

Aviatrix

Aerospace

Aeronautical

Barnstorming

Biplane

Cockpit

Daredevil

Exhibition

Expatriate

Lacerations

Manicurist

Parachutist

Sharecropper



WOODSONCENTER