



Bessie Coleman: African American Aviatrix

The beginning of African Americans in aviation can be traced to a World War I fighter pilot by the name of Eugene Bullard. Born in Columbus, GA in 1894, Eugene witnessed the unmitigated violence and wrath of white Americans against fellow African American citizens in his early youth. Determined to seek a better life at the turn of the century, he made his way to France and subsequently joined the French Military. Eugene later applied for pilot's training, was accepted and eventually became a fighter pilot in the French Air Force. Bessie Coleman also traveled to France to receive pilot's training, but unlike Eugene Bullard, she received her instruction from a civilian pilot and was never part of the military.

Born in Atlanta, TX on January 26, 1894, she was the 12th of thirteen children. Shortly after her birth, Bessie's family moved to Waxahachie, TX near Dallas. At the age of seven, Bessie's father (who was three-quarters Choctaw Indian and one-fourth African American) moved to American-Indian territory and left the family in Texas. At an early age, Bessie developed a desire to know more and was encouraged by her mother to learn as much as possible. The principle income for the family was money that Bessie's mother made by taking in washing and picking cotton. A drive for knowledge led her to go to Langston Industrial College in Oklahoma in 1910. Due to a lack of money, she was forced to leave after only one semester and find work. She returned to Waxahachie and remained there until 1915 and subsequently moved to Chicago in 1915. During her time in Chicago, Bessie took a course in manicuring and started working at a Barber Shop. She became interested in aviation while in Chicago and she set her goal on becoming a pilot. Bessie saved her money for flight instruction. Unfortunately, being an African American and a woman, no one in the United States would teach her how to fly. Bessie eventually moved to France to receive aviation training.

Bessie left the United States for France in the Summer of 1920 and was taught at the French Flight School of-Ecole d' Aviation des Freres Caudron at Le Crotoy where she was trained on a Newport, which was an aircraft made of wood, wire, steel, aluminum, cloth and pressed cardboard. In 1922, Bessie returned to the United States with her International Pilot's Licenses. The licenses that she had earned allowed her to fly anywhere in the world. Upon becoming the first African American female pilot to earn a pilot's certificate, Bessie's next goal was to become an acrobatic pilot. As an African American female acrobatic pilot, she would be an unusual attraction. To accomplish this goal, Bessie returned to France for some advanced training and when she returned in 1922, she performed above the crowds at air shows. Bessie had her first accident while flying and advertising for the Firestone Rubber company in California.

After a brief recovery, Bessie began to fly again. Her third goal was to establish a flying school for Black Aviators. She would fly into a city and attend African American churches to collect funds to accomplish her goal. Unfortunately, tragedy struck before she had an opportunity to fulfill her last dream. She was preparing to conduct an air show in Jacksonville, FL at the invitation of the local Negro Welfare League to perform for a Memorial Day celebration. The day before the event, April 30, 1926, Bessie and her mechanic William D. Willis, took her airplane up for a test run. During one of the maneuvers, the airplane became uncontrollable and rolled upside-down. Bessie, not wearing her seat belt, fell from the airplane to her tragic and untimely death.

A stamp was commissioned in 1995 to honor her contribution to Aviation.

