

# fly high the story of bessie coleman

The story of Bessie Coleman is an inspiring testament to perseverance, courage, and breaking barriers. From humble beginnings to becoming the first African American woman and first Native American woman to hold a pilot license, Bessie Coleman's journey is a significant chapter in aviation history and the broader fight for civil rights. This comprehensive article will delve into the early life and inspirations that shaped Bessie Coleman, her relentless pursuit of aviation education against formidable odds, her triumphant achievements as a barnstormer, and the lasting legacy she left behind. Discover how Bessie Coleman, a woman of color in a time of deep segregation, defied expectations and soared to extraordinary heights, inspiring generations to come.

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## The Inspiring Origins of Bessie Coleman

Bessie Coleman, born in Atlanta, Texas, on January 26, 1892, emerged from a background of hardship and racial prejudice that defined the American South during her formative years. Her parents, Susan and George Coleman, were sharecroppers. Her father, George, was of Choctaw descent, while her mother,

Susan, was African American. Bessie's childhood was marked by the constant struggle for survival and the pervasive injustice of Jim Crow laws. She was one of thirteen children, though only eight survived infancy. This challenging environment instilled in young Bessie a deep sense of resilience and a yearning for something more than the limited opportunities available to Black women of her era. Her early life was characterized by hard work, assisting her mother with household chores and cotton picking. Despite these demands, Bessie received some education, attending a segregated school for Black children. However, the quality of education was subpar, and she had to walk miles to attend. This early exposure to inequality likely fueled her determination to escape the confines of her circumstances and seek a life of purpose and achievement.

A pivotal influence on Bessie Coleman's aspirations was her mother, Susan, who instilled in her a strong work ethic and a belief in the importance of education, even with its limitations. Her mother's stories and her own experiences undoubtedly contributed to Bessie's burgeoning desire for independence and a life beyond the cotton fields. The seeds of her future ambitions were sown during these early years, a quiet but potent defiance against the predetermined path laid out by society.

## **Overcoming Obstacles: Bessie Coleman's Path to Aviation**

The road to becoming a pilot was paved with formidable obstacles for Bessie Coleman, primarily due to her race and gender. In early 20th century America, aviation was still a nascent and largely male-dominated field. For an African American woman to even consider entering this arena was almost unthinkable. After a brief marriage and a move to Chicago, seeking greater opportunities, Bessie found work as a manicurist. It was in Chicago, a bustling hub of innovation and cultural exchange, that she first encountered the concept of aviation. She was captivated by stories of European aviators, particularly the French pilots who had flown during World War I. Her brother, John, who had served in the U.S. Army during the war, shared his experiences of French women pilots, a revelation that struck a deep chord with Bessie. He told her that in France, women were not only allowed to fly but were revered for their skill. This sparked a burning desire within Bessie to become a pilot herself.

However, no American flight schools would admit her. The prevailing prejudice meant that her dreams were met with outright rejection at every turn. American aviation schools, reflecting the deeply ingrained segregation of the time, refused to enroll Black students, let alone Black women. This systemic discrimination presented a seemingly insurmountable barrier. Yet, Bessie Coleman was not one to be easily deterred. Her unwavering determination to achieve her goal became the driving force behind her next, bold move. She recognized that if America wouldn't teach her, she would find someone who would. This foresight and tenacity are hallmarks of her character and underscore her commitment to breaking down barriers.

# Learning to Fly: The French Connection for Bessie Coleman

Undeterred by the refusal of American flight schools, Bessie Coleman set her sights on France. Armed with her resolve and fueled by the stories of French aviators, she began to learn French, recognizing it as the key to unlocking her aviation ambitions. She worked diligently, saving money from her earnings as a manicurist and a cook in a chili parlor. Her quest for flight training was an act of sheer willpower; she refused to accept that her aspirations were beyond reach. With the financial and moral support of prominent Black figures in Chicago, including Robert S. Abbott, the founder of the Chicago Defender newspaper, Bessie was able to raise the necessary funds for her journey. Abbott saw the potential for Coleman to be a symbol of Black achievement and encouraged her to pursue her dream, believing she would be an inspiration to the entire Black community.

In 1920, Bessie Coleman embarked on her transatlantic voyage to France. She enrolled in the prestigious Caudron Brothers' School of Aviation, located in Le Crotoy, France. This was a significant step, as French aviation schools were more progressive and open to international students than their American counterparts. The training was rigorous, and Bessie adapted quickly, demonstrating a natural aptitude for flying. The environment was starkly different from the prejudiced atmosphere she had left behind in the United States. Here, she was judged on her skill and dedication, not the color of her skin. On June 15, 1921, Bessie Coleman achieved a historic milestone: she earned her pilot's license from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI). This achievement made her the first African American woman and the first Native American woman to hold an international pilot license. Her success in France was a triumph not only for her but for all those who faced similar discrimination.

## Bessie Coleman: America's First Black Female Pilot Takes Flight

Upon her return to the United States, Bessie Coleman was an aviation sensation. Her achievement as the first Black woman pilot garnered national attention, particularly within the African American community. However, the reality of American aviation remained far from inclusive. While she held a license, American authorities did not issue her a license, and she faced continued discrimination when trying to find opportunities to fly commercially or even to be a passenger. Determined to make a living as a pilot and inspire others, Bessie realized she needed to gain experience in aerial performances. She understood that to truly showcase her talent and challenge perceptions, she needed to become a skilled barnstormer.

Barnstorming, the practice of putting on aerial shows and stunts, was a popular form of entertainment in the 1920s. It offered a platform for pilots to demonstrate their skills and for the public to witness the marvels of flight. Bessie sought out further training, including advanced piloting and stunt flying, spending more time in Mexico and Cuba to gain additional experience and refine her abilities. She learned how to perform daring maneuvers, loop-the-loops, and wing-walking, captivating audiences with her fearless flying. Her reputation as "Queen Bess" began to grow, a testament to her exceptional piloting skills and her

ability to command the attention of any crowd. She was a pioneer in every sense of the word, charting a course for herself and paving the way for future generations of aviators.

## **The Thrills of Barnstorming: Bessie Coleman's Aerial Performances**

Bessie Coleman's career as a barnstormer was a vibrant and daring chapter in her life. She traveled extensively across the United States, performing at airfields and fairs, drawing large crowds eager to witness her aerial prowess. Her performances were a blend of skill, courage, and showmanship. She would entertain audiences with breathtaking stunts, including loops, dives, and graceful landings. Her most famous act was often a series of rapid figure-eights and daring dives, executed with precision and confidence. These displays not only entertained but also served as powerful statements against the racial barriers of the time. Every time she took to the sky, she was challenging deeply ingrained stereotypes about the capabilities of Black women.

The crowds that gathered to see Bessie Coleman fly were often diverse, reflecting the broad appeal of her talent. African Americans, in particular, flocked to her shows, seeing her as a symbol of hope and a tangible example of what could be achieved despite systemic oppression. Her ability to captivate and thrill audiences with her flying was a powerful form of advocacy, subtly undermining racist ideologies simply by her presence and success in a demanding and highly visible field. She was not just a pilot; she was an ambassador for her people, demonstrating that talent and determination knew no color.

## **Challenging Segregation: Bessie Coleman's Fight for Equality in Airshows**

Bessie Coleman's commitment to equality extended beyond the cockpit; she actively fought against segregation in her professional life. A significant challenge she faced was the discriminatory practice of "soda water tables," where Black attendees were often relegated to separate seating areas, sometimes in segregated sections of the airfield. Bessie refused to participate in any airshow that enforced such segregation. She would inform organizers that if the audience was not allowed to sit together, she would not perform. This firm stance meant that she would often forgo lucrative opportunities if the venue upheld discriminatory policies. Her demand was simple: she would fly, but only if all members of the audience could witness her performance on equal footing.

This unwavering commitment to racial equality often put her at odds with promoters and venue owners. However, Bessie remained resolute. Her actions had a tangible impact, often forcing organizers to reconsider their segregationist policies to secure her participation. Her refusal to compromise on matters of

principle demonstrated a deep understanding of the power of her platform. She understood that her success as a pilot was not just about personal achievement; it was an opportunity to challenge the very foundations of racial injustice. Her courage in standing up to segregation was as remarkable as her skill in the air, making her a true pioneer for civil rights.

## **Bessie Coleman's Dream: The School of Aviation**

Bessie Coleman harbored a profound dream: to establish a flight school for African Americans. She recognized the limited opportunities for Black individuals in aviation and believed that creating a dedicated school would empower future generations to pursue careers in the skies. She envisioned a place where Black men and women could learn to fly without facing the discrimination that had plagued her own journey. This dream was a direct reflection of her passion for aviation and her dedication to uplifting her community. She often spoke about her desire to give back and to open doors for others that had been closed to her.

To fund her ambitious project, Bessie continued to perform in airshows, meticulously saving every penny. She understood the financial commitment required to establish and run a flight school. She hoped that her performances would not only earn her a living but also inspire young Black Americans to dream big and to pursue careers in aviation. Her vision was to create a legacy that extended beyond her own flying achievements, a legacy of opportunity and empowerment for the entire Black community. She believed that once Black people had their own flight school, they could truly begin to claim their rightful place in the field of aviation.

## **The Tragic End and Enduring Legacy of Bessie Coleman**

Tragically, Bessie Coleman's life was cut short on April 30, 1926, at the age of 34. She was in Jacksonville, Florida, preparing for an airshow. While riding as a passenger in a biplane piloted by her mechanic, William Wills, the aircraft suddenly spiraled out of control. Bessie was thrown from the plane and tragically died on impact. The cause of the accident was later determined to be mechanical failure; the plane was not properly maintained, and Wills was unable to regain control. Her untimely death sent shockwaves through the nation, particularly within the African American community, which mourned the loss of its beloved aviator.

Despite her brief but impactful career, Bessie Coleman's legacy is profound and far-reaching. She shattered racial and gender barriers, proving that the sky was not the limit for those who dared to dream. Her courage, determination, and unwavering commitment to equality continue to inspire countless individuals. Her dream of a flight school for African Americans was eventually realized by others who followed in her footsteps. Organizations like the Bessie Coleman Aviation Museum and various scholarship programs have

been established in her honor, ensuring that her story and her contributions are remembered. She remains a powerful symbol of perseverance and a beacon of inspiration for aspiring pilots, especially women and people of color, reminding them that with courage and dedication, any obstacle can be overcome.

## **How Bessie Coleman Continues to Inspire Future Aviators**

Bessie Coleman's influence resonates powerfully in the modern aviation world. Her pioneering spirit serves as a constant reminder that diversity and inclusion are not just desirable goals but essential components of progress. For young Black girls and boys who aspire to fly, Bessie Coleman is more than just a historical figure; she is a living testament to the fact that their dreams are valid and achievable. Aviation organizations and educational institutions frequently highlight her story to encourage underrepresented groups to pursue careers in aviation and aerospace.

Scholarships and programs named in her honor provide crucial financial and mentorship support to aspiring pilots from diverse backgrounds. These initiatives directly address the barriers that Bessie Coleman faced, making aviation more accessible. Her life story, often shared in schools and through various media, instills a sense of possibility and empowers individuals to challenge societal expectations. The enduring appeal of Bessie Coleman lies in her relatable human journey: a person who faced immense adversity but refused to be defined by it, instead choosing to soar above it, leaving an indelible mark on history and inspiring countless others to reach for their own skies.

## **Conclusion: The Enduring Soar of Bessie Coleman**

The narrative of Bessie Coleman is a compelling testament to the power of human will and the pursuit of dreams against overwhelming odds. From her humble beginnings in Texas to her groundbreaking achievement as the first African American woman pilot, Bessie Coleman's journey is etched in the annals of aviation history and the broader struggle for civil rights. Her refusal to be deterred by racial and gender discrimination, her daring pursuit of flight training in France, and her thrilling performances as a barnstormer all highlight her extraordinary courage and pioneering spirit. Bessie Coleman not only conquered the skies but also challenged the restrictive social norms of her time, advocating for equality in airshows and dreaming of an aviation future for her community. Though her life was tragically cut short, her legacy continues to inspire, with her story empowering generations of aspiring aviators, particularly women and people of color, to break barriers and reach for their own stars. The indelible mark left by Bessie Coleman ensures that her adventurous spirit and her fight for a more equitable world continue to soar.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## Who was Bessie Coleman and what made her unique?

Bessie Coleman was the first African American woman and the first Native American to hold a pilot's license. She achieved this remarkable feat in 1921, defying racial and gender barriers of her time.

## What challenges did Bessie Coleman face in her pursuit of aviation?

Coleman faced significant obstacles due to her race and gender. American flight schools refused to admit her, forcing her to learn French and seek training in France, where aviation was more progressive.

## Where did Bessie Coleman get her pilot's license?

Bessie Coleman earned her pilot's license from the prestigious Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI) in France on June 15, 1921.

## What kind of performances was Bessie Coleman known for?

After earning her license, Coleman became a barnstorming pilot, performing daring aerial stunts and "wing walking" displays. She gained fame for her courage and skill in the air.

## What was Bessie Coleman's dream for the future of aviation?

Coleman dreamed of opening a flight school for African Americans in the United States. She wanted to inspire and provide opportunities for others in her community to enter the field of aviation.

## How did Bessie Coleman inspire future generations?

Bessie Coleman's perseverance in the face of adversity and her pioneering achievements broke down barriers and served as a powerful inspiration for African Americans and women in aviation and beyond.

## What was the nickname Bessie Coleman earned for her aerial skills?

Bessie Coleman was often referred to as 'Brave Bessie' or 'Queen Bess' due to her daring aerial maneuvers and her commanding presence in the sky.

## When and how did Bessie Coleman's life tragically end?

Bessie Coleman died on April 30, 1926, during a practice flight in Jacksonville, Florida. The parachute she was testing malfunctioned, and she fell from the plane.

# What legacy has Bessie Coleman left behind in the aviation world?

Bessie Coleman's legacy is that of a true pioneer who challenged societal norms. Her story continues to inspire, and numerous aviation organizations, scholarships, and even aircraft have been named in her honor.

## Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Fly High: The Story of Bessie Coleman, with short descriptions:

### 1. Wings of Change: Bessie Coleman's Courageous Journey

This biography explores Bessie Coleman's early life and the immense challenges she faced as an African American woman in early 20th-century America. It delves into her determination to learn aviation and the innovative ways she overcame societal barriers to become a celebrated pilot. The book highlights her international training and her dream of establishing a flight school for her community.

### 2. The Sky's Not the Limit: Pioneers of Aviation

This collection celebrates the groundbreaking individuals who pushed the boundaries of flight, with a dedicated section on Bessie Coleman. It contextualizes her achievements within the broader history of early aviation and the male-dominated field. Readers will learn about her unique barnstorming career and the impact she had on inspiring future generations of aviators.

### 3. Above the Clouds: Inspiring Women in Flight

Focusing on the contributions of women to aviation, this book features Bessie Coleman as a central figure. It examines the societal expectations women navigated and how Coleman defied them with her ambition and skill. The narrative emphasizes her resilience and her role as a trailblazer for both women and people of color in the sky.

### 4. Brave Skies: Stories of Courageous Flyers

This anthology presents a series of inspiring tales about pilots who demonstrated exceptional bravery and determination. Bessie Coleman's story is prominently featured, detailing her unwavering pursuit of flight despite significant obstacles. The book underscores her commitment to challenging segregation and her advocacy for equality.

### 5. The Barnstormer's Legacy: Bessie Coleman's Aerial Acrobatics

This title specifically focuses on Bessie Coleman's exciting and dangerous career as a barnstorming pilot. It describes the thrill of her aerial performances and the daring stunts that captivated audiences across the country. The book explores how she used her performances to challenge racial prejudice and promote the possibilities of flight.

### 6. Dreaming of Flight: Bessie Coleman and the Promise of the Skies

This book explores Bessie Coleman's personal dreams and aspirations, tracing her journey from humble beginnings to becoming a renowned aviator. It highlights the societal context of her time and the

significant hurdles she had to overcome. The narrative emphasizes the hope and inspiration her achievements offered to those facing similar challenges.

#### 7. Echoes in the Air: Bessie Coleman's Lasting Impact

This work examines the enduring influence of Bessie Coleman on aviation and civil rights. It delves into the ways her courage and activism continued to resonate long after her untimely death. The book celebrates her vision for a more inclusive future in aviation and her role as an icon of perseverance.

#### 8. First to Fly: African Americans in Aviation History

This comprehensive history chronicles the contributions of African Americans to the field of aviation, with Bessie Coleman as a foundational figure. It details the systemic racism and discrimination faced by Black aviators and how they persevered. The book positions Coleman as a crucial pioneer who paved the way for future generations.

#### 9. The Unflown Dream: Bessie Coleman's Vision for a Flying School

This biographical account focuses on Bessie Coleman's most ambitious goal: establishing a flight school for African Americans. It details the planning, challenges, and profound hope behind this endeavor. The book explores the tragic circumstances that prevented the full realization of her dream and its lasting inspiration.

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