

Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman

The "daredevil aviatrix," “Queen Bess”

“If I can create the minimum of my plans and desires there shall be no regrets”- Bessie Coleman

Coleman was glamorous, gutsy, daring – an aviation pioneer. In times when most black women were limited to jobs such as maids or manicurists – which Coleman once was – she gained a coveted international pilot's license in 1921, two years before Amelia Earhart. She is credited as the first licensed African-American Pilot in the U.S., First African American woman to fly a plane, and the first American to get an International Pilot's license.

Elizabeth Coleman was born Jan. 26, 1892, in a small Texas town. Her father, George left the family to claim land in an Indian Territory, as three of his grandparents were either Choctaw or Cherokee. Her mother, Susan, was most likely born a slave and raised her 9 surviving children on her own (she gave birth to 13). She encouraged her children to read, because she could not. Bessie's sister Elois later recalled that even though their mother "had to pinch pennies, she managed to get books from a wagon library that passed house once or twice a year." Bessie often read to her younger siblings and enjoyed tales of black heroes such as Harriet Tubman or Booker T. Washington. She also read fiction, especially Uncle Tom's Cabin, although she saw the characters of Topsy and Uncle Tom as exactly what she did not want her life to be. Years later, when she was raising money for a flight school to train black pilots, she told reporters she was going to make "Uncle Tom's cabin into a hangar."

Black Wings, published in association with the National Air and Space Museum spotlights her story in its first chapter, "Barnstormer Bessie Coleman Takes to the Air." According to *Black Wings*, she headed to Chicago in 1915, where her older brothers lived. She worked first as a manicurist and then as a manager for a chilli restaurant. When her brothers returned from World War I, they told her of the lack of prejudice in France, and she heard tales of wartime aviation and decided she would learn to fly.

After flight schools in America turned her down, she made it to France in 1920, with the help of black philanthropists, including Robert Abbott, the founder of the *Chicago Defender*. After training at the Cautron Brothers School of Aviation in Le Crotoy, France, Coleman obtained an international pilot's license on June 15, 1921, and gained fame across the U.S. as a "daredevil aviatrix." In the days of wild, barnstorming air shows, Coleman became something of a rock-star flier. She also lectured widely and was determined to combat racial discrimination. She traveled the Country to give inspirational speeches to school children and performing exhibitions. She refused to perform if blacks were not allowed to enter through the front gate alongside whites. She dreamed of starting a flight school, especially to encourage minorities and women to enter into aerospace careers.

During a speaking tour through Florida in early 1926, Coleman met an Orlando couple, Rev. Hezakiah Keith Hill and his wife, Viola Tillinghast Hill, respected community activists. She became close to the couple and stayed with them at the parsonage of Orlando's Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Institutional Church. Mrs. Hill, knowing that Bessie was paying for her airplane in installments, suggested that Bessie open a beauty shop to supplement her income. For Bessie the

spacious house on shady, tree-lined Washington Street became the center of her life, the idyllic home she had never had," Coleman's biographer Doris Rich wrote in the fullest account of her life, *Queen Bess*.

Coleman lost her first airplane during a crash and she was purchasing a used Curtiss JN-4, or "Jenny," from a Texas company in installments. Edwin Beeman, a wealthy white Orlandoan whose family had made its money in chewing gum and who was fascinated by aviation, gave Coleman the money for the final installment on her plane. Coleman left Orlando and headed to Jacksonville for a flying exhibition. During a rehearsal, on April 30, with her manager, William Wills, on board, the plane spun out of control. Coleman was flung out of the plane to her death; Wills died in the crash.

More than 5,000 attended services for Coleman in Jacksonville, including schoolchildren who had heard her speak only the day before she was killed. Then her body was put on a train to Orlando. The service that followed on the morning of Monday, May 3, was one of the largest Mount Zion Missionary Baptist had ever seen. After it was over, mourners – led by Viola Hill, who would accompany the body to Chicago – crowded the Orlando train station to say goodbye to an American heroine.

"As the body of Miss Coleman was being raised into the baggage car, en route to its final resting place," one report said, "more than 500 voices, representing the colored population of the city, hummed sweetly, 'My Country, 'Tis of Thee.' "

A notice of services for Bessie Coleman did make the Orlando Morning Sentinel, but it was deep in the back pages, under a notice about penalties for jay-walking and next to a brief on why "pressure cooking is here to stay." Considering the laws and attitudes of the South at the time, perhaps it's remarkable the notice was in the paper at all. Bessie Coleman, whose ancestors were African and Native American, was a woman of color. "Funeral for Negro Aviatix," the tiny notice in the Orlando paper said.

Honors/Namesakes/Other Facts:

-A public library in Chicago was named in Coleman's honor, as well as a road at O'Hare International Airport and at Frankfurt International Airport.

-Bessie Coleman Middle School in Cedar Hill, Texas is named for her.

-Bessie Coleman Boulevard in Waxahachie, Texas, (where she lived as a child) is named in her honor.

-B. Coleman Aviation, a Fixed Base Operator based at Gary/Chicago International Airport is named in her honor.

-Several Bessie Coleman Scholarship Awards have been established for high school seniors planning on careers in aviation.

-In 1995, the U.S. Postal Service issued a 32-cent stamp honoring Coleman. The Bessie Coleman Commemorative is the 18th in the U.S. Postal Service Black Heritage series.

-In 2005, The National Aviation Hall of Fame enshrined Bessie Coleman as the first African American in the H.O.F.

-In 2012, a bronze plaque with Coleman's likeness was installed on the front doors of Paxon School for Advanced Studies located on the site of the Jacksonville airfield where Coleman's fatal flight took off.

-Mae Jemison, the first African-American female astronaut in space, carried a picture of Bessie Coleman with her on her first mission (Endeavor, 1992)

-Every April 30, African American aviators -- men and women -- fly in formation over Lincoln Cemetery in southwest Chicago (Blue Island) and drop flowers on Bessie Coleman's grave.

-Black flyers founded the Bessie Coleman Aero Clubs, right after her death. The Bessie Aviators organization was founded by black women pilots in 1975, open to women pilots of all races.

-The Orange County Regional History Center includes Bessie Coleman in an Aviation and Space exhibit

Sources (From the Orange County Regional History Center, Archives and Research Center):

Orlando Sentinel (Florida Flash Back articles 2001 and 2008)

Ebony Magazine (May 1977)

NY Times (Various articles 1921-present day)

Essence Magazine ("June"/no year provided on copy)

Orlando Morning Sentinel (1926)

Black Wings (W. Powell, 1934)

National Aviation Hall of Fame (e-mails from History Center for exhibit research)