

Bessie Coleman

Atlanta, Texas ' Chicago ' Paris ' the sky

In Sixty Seconds

Origins. Born January 26, 1892, in Atlanta, Texas, to sharecropper parents. Tenth of thirteen children. Walked four miles each way to a one-room segregated schoolhouse. Picked cotton to save for a single term at Langston University in Oklahoma, then moved to Chicago at twenty-three to live with her brothers.

Work. She worked as a manicurist on Chicago's State Street, saving money toward a goal she had set for herself in public: learn to fly. Every American flight school turned her down. She enrolled in a Berlitz French class instead. Sponsored by Chicago Defender publisher Robert Abbott and Chicago banker Jesse Binga, she sailed for France in November 1920 and trained at the Caudron Brothers School of Aviation in Le Crotoy.

Impact. On June 15, 1921, she received her pilot's license from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale. She was the first Black woman in history to hold a pilot's license and the first Black person of any gender to hold an international pilot's license. She returned to the United States as an aerial stunt pilot and refused to perform at any airshow whose audience was racially segregated.

Legacy. Her dream of founding a flight school for Black Americans was cut short by her death in a mechanical failure in 1926 at thirty-four. The Bessie Coleman Aero Club, founded in Los Angeles in 1929 by William Powell, carried out the mission she had started. The United States Mint issued a Bessie Coleman quarter in 2023 as part of the American Women series. The U.S. Postal Service issued a Bessie Coleman stamp in 1995.

The Network

Robert Sengstacke Abbott

Publisher, sponsor. Founder and publisher of the Chicago Defender. He told Coleman that if she wanted to fly she would have to leave the country, and then helped pay her passage to France in 1920 and covered her career in the Defender for the next six years.

René and Gaston Caudron

Flight instructors. Brothers who founded the Caudron school of aviation in Le Crotoy on the Somme coast of France. They accepted Coleman as a student in 1920 and trained her on the Nieuport Type 82 biplane through her FAI license in June 1921.

Jesse Binga

Banker, sponsor. Founder of the first Black-owned bank in Chicago. Co-sponsored Coleman's flight training in France alongside Abbott, and handled the financial side of her international travel.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett

Elder, eulogist. Journalist, anti-lynching activist, and suffragist. She delivered one of the eulogies at Coleman's funeral in Chicago in May 1926 to a crowd of ten thousand.

For Discussion

1. Every American flight school refused Coleman. She learned French and sailed to Paris to train. Which modern technical fields require a comparable workaround for aspirants who cannot access domestic training, and what institutional changes would reduce the need for that workaround?
2. Coleman refused to perform at airshows that required segregated audiences. What did that refusal cost her financially in 1922, and which contemporary performers have made analogous refusals, at what cost?
3. Robert Abbott at the Chicago Defender funded Coleman's passage and promoted her career through the paper's national circulation. What is the role of a Black-owned press in making individual Black achievement visible at national scale, and what filled that role when the Black press declined in the late twentieth century?
4. Coleman was killed at thirty-four when a wrench left in the engine compartment slipped into the control gears of her training aircraft. Equipment reliability is itself a product of access to capital. How did Coleman's capital access shape her operating conditions, and where does the same relationship shape accident rates in contemporary high-risk industries?
5. William Powell founded the Bessie Coleman Aero Club in Los Angeles in 1929 to train Black aviators. By 1939, his students were flying combat missions. What institutional pathway carried Coleman's work from her death in 1926 to Powell's club in 1929 to the Tuskegee Airmen in 1941, and what does that pathway look like when it works versus when it breaks?



Primary Sources

1. Rich, Doris L. *Queen Bess: Daredevil Aviator*. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.
2. Hart, Philip S. *Up in the Air: The Story of Bessie Coleman*. Carolrhoda Books, 1996.
3. Fédération Aéronautique Internationale. License No. 18310 granted to Bessie Coleman, June 15, 1921.
4. Chicago Defender archive coverage of Bessie Coleman, 1921-1926, Chicago Public Library.
5. Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. Bessie Coleman biographical file and archival collection.

