

## **Daring to Fly in the Face of Tradition: Bessie Coleman (1892 – 1926)**

Women did not win the right to vote until 1920, and in the early 1900's, girls weren't even supposed to wear pants! Most people of the time felt that piloting an airplane was not for "ladies," and female African American pilots were unheard of! But Elizabeth "Bessie" Coleman had her own ideas. From the time she was a young girl, Bessie dreamed of flying. She was born into a large family. Both of her parents were African American, and Bessie's father, George Coleman, was also part Choctaw Indian. When Bessie was just nine years old, her father made a difficult decision. Weary of racial discrimination and joblessness, George Coleman left Texas and moved to Oklahoma where people with Indian blood had more rights. Bessie and the other children stayed behind, working long hours beside their mother in the cotton fields. After harvest time was over, Bessie stayed home to supervise the younger children while her mother went to work as a housekeeper. It was during these times that Bessie vowed to make something of herself. She would gaze at the high-flying birds in the sky and dream of flying as free as they were.

Bessie returned to school as soon as her sisters were old enough to help out at home. She loved her studies and finished the 8th grade at the top of her class. After graduating from high school, Bessie worked as a laundress and saved enough money to start attending Langston Industrial College in Oklahoma. But her money ran out after only one semester, so Bessie returned to domestic work. Eventually, she saved enough to move to Chicago and join her brother, John. There, she entered beauty school to learn the art of manicuring. Bessie Coleman became known as the best manicurist in black Chicago, and she earned excellent tips from some of the wealthiest residents. Bessie nevertheless continued to think about a flying career; she kept saying to herself, "What an irresistible challenge!"

Bessie's dream intensified after she learned about a female pilot, Harriet Quimby, who died when her plane crashed in 1912. She read about Eugene Bullard, a black American pilot who flew for the French Air Force during World War I. Back then, the U.S. military would not accept African American pilots. Bessie's brother, John, returned from the war with tales of female French aviators. From that time on, nothing could hold her back! Being a black woman and a manicurist with limited schooling would not stop Bessie Coleman from chasing her dream!

Bessie Coleman set out to find a flying instructor. She met several white pilots around the city, but they made derogatory racial comments and told Bessie that a woman's place was not in the sky. Several aviation schools refused to admit Bessie. Finally, she confided in a customer and good friend, Robert S. Abbott. Mr. Abbott was the publisher of a black newspaper called *The Chicago Defender*. Abbott assured Bessie that her race and gender would not be such roadblocks in France. He advised her to learn French, save her money, and apply to flying schools there. Abbott wanted to support Bessie, knowing that "the first black female pilot" would make terrific headlines and attract readers to his paper.

Bessie studied French at a downtown school and found a better-paying job as a chili parlor manager. She combined her savings and gifts from wealthy patrons to cover the costs of sailing to France where she entered a seven-month training course. The first airplanes were so unsafe that pilots were often called “flying fools.” The planes had open cockpits and were designed with flimsy materials. Bessie learned to fly a French biplane made of wood, cloth, wire, steel, aluminum, and pressed cardboard. There was no instrument panel. To steer the plane, the pilot held onto a vertical stick in front of her and operated a rudder bar with her feet. In June 1921, Bessie received her license from the International Aeronautics Federation. Bessie became the first black woman in the history of the Federation to be licensed as a pilot!

The returning Bessie Coleman made front-page news in America’s black newspapers and some popular flying magazines. More than ever, Bessie wanted a flying career, but there were no commercial flights at the time and no need for airline pilots. So, Bessie took to the air to perform for paying audiences. Bessie chose the most daring kind of stunt-flying, known as barnstorming. Barnstormers rented farmland for their shows. They would fly very low and then zoom high above the barns. They would even fly upside down or through the open barns to amaze the crowds. Bessie knew that she needed superior flying skills. Finding no willing teachers in Chicago, she again sailed for France. After two months in an advanced aviation course, Bessie left for Holland to meet Anthony Fokker, a world-famous aircraft designer. She then traveled to Germany for more training with one of his chief pilots.

In August 1922 at the age of 30, Bessie returned to the U.S., eager to begin her career as a performance flyer. At last, Bessie was ready to fly fancy loops and figure eights, pulling her plane out of tailspins in breathtaking feats of skill and daring. Bessie traveled the country and amazed her audiences as both a speaker and a barnstormer. She continued to face challenges, including some serious injuries and financial hardships, but Bessie never wavered in her dogged determination to fly airplanes.

At the same time, another famous female pilot, Amelia Earhart (1897- 1937), had her dazzling flying career. Earhart received global attention from the mainstream media during her lifetime, but the accomplishments of Bessie Coleman were not recognized until decades afterward. Like Amelia Earhart, Bessie Coleman’s life ended early and tragically, as a result of flying. Thousands of people attended the memorial services for Bessie Coleman. Many of these people – especially African Americans – were inspired by Bessie’s life and accomplishments to follow their own dreams, no matter how many or how great the obstacles.

## Bibliography

Baird, Mary S. *Summer Solutions Level 6 Reading Comprehension*.  
Cleveland: Bright Ideas Press, 2010.

Hart, Philip S. *Up in the Air: The Story of Bessie Coleman*.  
Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, Inc., 1996.

Igus, Toyomi, ed. *Book of Black Heroes, Volume Two: Great Women in the Struggle*.  
Orange, NJ: 1991.

Spivey Lynne. "Bessie Coleman 1892-1926." Atlanta Historical Museum.  
Visited on January 3, 2011. < <http://www.bessiecoleman.com/default.html>>

## Discussion Questions:

1. What events in Bessie's childhood influenced her desire to be a pilot?
2. Who were some of the people who inspired and motivated Bessie Coleman to achieve her dreams? Who were the people who supported her?
3. From the article, what can you suppose to be true about the people of France during the early 1900's? How were they different from many Americans?
4. Why did Bessie take so many chances and dangerous risks to fly airplanes?
5. How were the lives and careers of Amelia Earhart and Bessie Coleman similar? How were they different?

## Simple Solutions® Black History Month Worksheet

Use the hints below and information from the article, "Daring to Fly in the Face of Tradition: Bessie Coleman 1892 – 1926" to complete the crossword puzzle on the next page.

### Across

5. the most daring type of stunt-flying
7. another famous female pilot of the early twentieth century
9. the profession of Bessie's mother
10. female pilot who died in a plane crash in 1912
11. country where Bessie was able to earn a pilot's license
14. Bessie, her mother, and the younger children worked in the fields, picking \_\_\_\_\_.
15. another word for aircraft pilots
16. newspaper published by Robert S. Abbott, *Chicago* \_\_\_\_\_

### Down

1. Bessie's first adult job
2. part of George Coleman's ethnic heritage
3. Bessie earned excellent tips and met an important patron while working at this profession.
4. location of Langston Industrial College where Bessie attended school
6. lightweight metal that the French biplane was made of
8. Bessie was the first black woman to graduate from the International \_\_\_\_\_ Federation.
12. African American pilot who flew for the French during World War I
13. nickname for pilots who flew the flimsy biplanes of the early 1900's

### Word Bank for Crossword Puzzle

Choctaw	housekeeper	laundress	Bullard
Oklahoma	Quimby	France	cotton
aluminum	fools	manicurist	Earhart
barnstorming	Defender	aviators	Aeronautics



## Teacher's Guide

### Notes on "Daring to Fly in the Face of Tradition: Bessie Coleman (1892 – 1926)"

The inspiring story of Bessie Coleman was not as widely popularized as that of her contemporary, Amelia Earhart. Although both women were brave pioneers and trailblazers in the field of aviation, Bessie Coleman never had many of the advantages that Amelia Earhart enjoyed. Bessie suffered the effects of discrimination, both as a woman and an African American. She had to travel to France just to find a flight instructor who would take her seriously. Bessie had some wealthy patrons, but their backing was not enough to allow her to fly a plane that was safe. Instead, Bessie died tragically while attempting a parachuting stunt in her prized "Jenny" biplane. The plane, whose gears were not covered, malfunctioned when a loose wrench slid into its mechanism during a practice flight. The plane spiraled out of control; Bessie fell to her death, and her pilot, William Wills died in the crash as well.

Although Bessie Coleman did not live long enough to achieve her goal of creating a flight school for African Americans, her extraordinary life inspired the creation of the school after her death. An African American entrepreneur, William J. Powell, joined others who had been touched by the enthusiasm and dedication of Bessie Coleman. Together, they opened a school called the Bessie Coleman Aero Club in 1929. Today, there is an organization of women pilots – the Bessie Coleman Aviators – which was created in her honor. Many more honors and a great deal of recognition have been bestowed upon Bessie's life and career in recent years. She is credited with opening doors to the field of aviation for young women and men of all races.

### Discussion Questions (Answers may vary.)

1. What events in Bessie's childhood influenced her desire to be a pilot?

*Bessie faced many hardships as a young child: being separated from her father, having to work long hours as a cotton picker, missing many months of school. She dreamed of being liberated when she saw birds flying free overhead. Bessie was a gifted child and young woman who knew she was meant for more challenge and adventure than traditional women's work could provide.*

2. Who were some of the people who inspired and motivated Bessie Coleman to achieve her dreams? Who were the people who supported her?

*Bessie was encouraged and supported by her brother, John, and by the stories of Harriet Quimby and Eugene Bullard. Robert Abbott provided financial support and persuaded Bessie to go to France to study aviation.*

## Simple Solutions® Black History Month Worksheet

3. From the article, what can you suppose to be true about the people of France during the early 1900's? How were they different from many Americans?

*It appears that the French were more open and more tolerant of diversity than Americans at the time. As a black woman, Bessie was able to attend flight school.*

4. Why did Bessie take so many chances and dangerous risks to fly airplanes?

*Bessie really had no choice since she wanted a career in flight. She had to fly the planes that were available to her, and she was willing to take the risks because of her strong desire to fly.*

5. How were the lives and careers of Amelia Earhart and Bessie Coleman similar? How were they different?

*Coleman and Earhart lived during roughly the same time period. They were both women and pioneers in the field of flight. As a white woman, Amelia Earhart enjoyed more publicity and had more financial support than Bessie Coleman. Both pilots died tragically and at an early age, as a result of flying airplanes.*

### Across

5. the most daring type of stunt-flying **barnstorming**  
7. another famous female pilot of the early twentieth century **Earhart**  
9. the profession of Bessie's mother **housekeeper**  
10. female pilot who died in a plane crash in 1912 **Quimby**  
11. country where Bessie was able to earn a pilot's license **France**  
14. Bessie, her mother, and the younger children worked in the fields, picking \_\_\_\_\_. **cotton**  
15. another word for aircraft pilots **aviators**  
16. newspaper published by Robert S. Abbott, Chicago \_\_\_\_\_ **Defender**

### Down

1. Bessie's first adult job **laundress**  
2. part of George Coleman's ethnic heritage **Choctaw**  
3. Bessie earned excellent tips and met an important patron while working at this profession. **manicurist**  
4. location of Langston Industrial College where Bessie attended school **Oklahoma**  
6. lightweight metal that the French biplane was made of **aluminum**  
8. Bessie was the first black woman to receive her license from the International \_\_\_\_\_ Federation. **Aeronautics**  
12. African American pilot who flew for the French during World War I **Bullard**  
13. nickname for pilots who flew the flimsy biplanes of the early 1900's **fools**