

Bessie Coleman (Handout #3)

Bessie Coleman was the first woman of African and indigenous American descent to get a pilot's license. She earned her license in 1921. The first woman to get a license, however, was Harriet Quimby who earned a license from the Aero Club of America ten years earlier. Quimby was soon followed by Matilde Moisant, the second woman to earn a pilot's license. Quimby had been a writer and a film actress. Impressively, she was the first woman to fly over the English Channel. Tragically, though, Quimby was killed in 1912 when her plane pitched in the air over Boston, throwing her and fellow aviator, Charles Willard's father, William from the plane.

Coleman was inspired by Quimby's feats and by the Wright Brothers' initial groundbreaking flights in Kill Devil Hills, NC. She had to go the Caudron Brothers' School of Aviation in LeCrocqy, France to get a license, however, since no flight school would accept her in America. Coleman received her pilot's license (#18310) from the *Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* in France in 1921.

Once she returned home, Coleman barnstormed around the United States. She performed the first public flight by an African American woman in 1922. Coleman was a daredevil, performing bold aerial acrobatics at air shows. She would do looped de loops, figure eights, and barrel rolls for cheering fans. To her credit, Coleman never performed in air shows where Blacks were not welcome. She told those who wanted her to behave in as stereotype characterizations at shows, "No Uncle Tom stuff for me." Furthermore, she appealed in the *Chicago Defender* a contemporary Black newspaper, "We must have aviators if we are to keep pace with the times."

Tragically in 1923, Coleman was in a major accident when her engine suddenly stopped in midair. Fortunately, the intrepid aviator survived, however, she suffered a broken leg, cracked ribs, and serious cuts to her face and body. Valiantly, she quickly jumped back into action, thrilling crowds the following year. As fate would have it though, Coleman's career unfortunately came screeching to an end in 1926. At an airshow, Coleman travelled as a passenger with pilot, William Wells. She was planning a daring 3,000-foot parachute jump for the following day. While flying, a wrench inauspiciously got stuck in the engine, and Wells lost control of the plane. He plummeted to 2,000 feet but turned the plane upside down. Coleman had not locked her seatbelt and the courageous aviator plunged to her

death on the ground below. Wells fared no better as the plane spun out of control busting into flames on impact.

A catastrophe cut Coleman's career cut short, but she her bravery and mettle lived on as her legacy and gift to future aviators. She served as an inspiration to many future female and male flyers. In 1929 William Powell founded the Bessie Coleman Aviation Club in her honor. Powell successfully owned a number of automobile service stations in Chicago but moved to Los Angeles to learn to fly. In Los Angeles, he had organized the Coleman Club to promote aviation in the Black community. Some notable Black aviators, such as James Banning and over two-hundred Tuskegee Airmen, inspired by Bessie's heroics, joined the Club and learned to conquer the sky!