

Willa Beatrice Brown

Handout #5

Willa Brown was the first African American and indigenous woman to earn a pilot's license in the United States. She found her inspiration to fly in the Bessie "Queen Bess" Coleman's legacy, a fellow African and indigenous American woman. Coleman had been turned away from air training schools in the U.S. because of her race and sex, but she earned a pilot's license in France in 1921. In Coleman's honor, Brown organized flyovers and flower drops across Coleman's grave at Lincoln Cemetery outside of Chicago. Brown was the first Black woman to run for Congress when she ran as a Republican in Chicago. She was the first Black officer in the Civil Air Patrol. She was also the first woman to earn both a pilot's license (1938) and an aircraft mechanic's license (1935).

Brown accomplished many great feats throughout her life. She learned to fly at the segregated Harlem Field in Chicago. She also attended the Curtiss-Wright Aeronautical University. Curtiss-Wright was forced to integrate by John Robinson and Cornelius Coffey who had threaten to sue them if they did not integrate. Still, they admitted very few women. Remarkably, Brown was able to earn her aircraft mechanic's license there in 1935. She and Coffey went on to cofound the Coffee School of Aeronautics, the first private flight school owned and operated by African Americans. The Coffee School trained hundreds on Black men who would go on to study at Tuskegee.

The creation of the Tuskegee Airmen is often credited to Brown's lobbying and her effort in training Black pilot's. Brown, Coffee, and Enoch P. Waters had formed the National Negro Airman Association of America, later the National Airman Association of America to attract more African American interest in aviation. They knew there was a shortage of pilots in 1938 and used this organization to help fill the void as the threat of world war loomed. Unfortunately for Brown and Coffee, the Coffee School of Aeronautics nor the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) were authorized to train the much-needed Army pilots for the U.S. Army Air Corps. The Army did allow Coffee and ten black colleges to provide men for the official training at Tuskegee, though. Brown's efforts were noticed, and *Time* magazine profiled her and her work on September 25, 1939.

Brown also worked diligently to disprove a 1925 Army War College study that had deemed African Americans unfit to fly. This helped those who wanted African American pilots win over some hardliners. She even wrote the First Lady, Eleanor

Roosevelt to enlist her help in some areas Brown would speak about privately. Roosevelt invited Brown to pilot one of her trips and then to the White House to discuss civil rights along with aviation.

Brown later testified before Congress, lobbying to integrate the U.S. Army Air Corps, including the integration of the Civilian Pilot Training Program. As part of the U.S. Army, the Army Air Corps too was segregated. Sadly, the U.S. Navy had only been first segregated twenty-three years earlier, during the Woodrow Wilson Administration. In part from Brown's efforts, along with efforts of others, President Harry S Truman issued Executive Order #9981 desegregating the Armed Forces in 1948. Unfortunately, the bulk of actual desegregation did not take place until five years later when Dwight D. Eisenhower took office in 1953. As a former general of the Army and recent conqueror of Europe and Nazi Germany, he would experience little resistance to effectuating 95% of the actual integration.

During the War, Brown served in the Civil Air Patrol, Squadron 613-6 and rose to the rank of lieutenant. The famous Harlem Renaissance artist, Charles Henry Alston painted Brown for the Office of War Information and Public Relations to foster goodwill within the nation's Black community. Copies of her image appeared in newspapers to encourage support for the war effort. The portrait also included appellation: *Aviatrix, Maker of Pilots*.

After the war, Brown worked as a teacher in Chicago and served as a member of the Federal Aviation Administration Woman Advisory Board during the Nixon Administration. When she died in 1992, obituaries called her the "Dean of Black Wings," In the *Aviatrix, Maker of Pilots* 'honor, they flew over her grave with a flower drop as they had for fellow aviation heroine, Bessie Coleman. Brown was buried in Lincoln Cemetery the same cemetery where the Bessie Coleman had been laid to rest sixty-six years earlier.