

William Jennifer Powell

Handout #3

William J. Powell, the founder of the Bessie Coleman Aero Club and the Bessie Coleman Flying School Aviation company, was born in Henderson, Kentucky, on July 27, 1897. His parents took him and his family to Chicago with many African Americans at the beginning of the Great Migration of Blacks to the North. Most had left from southern farms, looking for better opportunities than could be found in the Jim Crow South.

After high school, Powell was accepted into the University of Illinois engineering program in 1914 when he was seventeen. Once the United States entered World War I, he bravely left school to enlist in the U.S. Army to serve his nation. He was commissioned lieutenant in the racially segregated 370th Illinois Infantry Regiment.

While fighting in France, Powell suffered a poison gas attack launched by the German soldiers. After surviving the effects of poison gas, Powell moved back to Illinois to finish his degree and to recuperate from the damage done to his health. Fortunately, he did complete his degree; nonetheless, his health was never the same. The gas attack most likely contributed to his early death at age 45.

From his experience in France, William Powell was intrigued by the recently created Army Air Corps. He attended an American Legion convention in Paris in 1927, where Powell got his chance to go up in a plane. A pilot took him on an aerial tour of Paris. He even circled the Eiffel Tower. Powell knew then he wanted to be a pilot. He began considering pursuing a career in the air and applied to flight schools in the Midwest. Disturbingly, all area flight schools and the Army Air Corps rejected his applications because of his race. The Army Air Corps recruiter told him he needed two years of college. Powell told him he had a bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois. The recruiter then told him he needed an engineering degree. Powell replied that his degree was in engineering. The chastened recruiter finally told him even though he disagreed with the policy, the Army Air Corps would not take Black applicants. Despite the setbacks, Powell persevered, and in 1928, he was finally accepted at the Los Angeles School of Flight in California.

After four years of training and diligent study, Powell received his pilot, navigator, and aeronautical engineer licenses. Powell decided to stay in Los Angeles and soon became well-known beyond the aviation community. He founded the Bessie Coleman Aero Club and the Bessie Coleman Flying School to honor the first licensed Black female aviator in the United States. As a new industry without established hierarchies and power structures, Powell had hoped that aviation would be a vehicle for Blacks to excel on merit, not constrained by the racial prejudice and the Jim Crow segregation of the period.

Living in Los Angeles, Powell was keenly aware of Jewish dominance in the early Hollywood film industry, from producers to directors to writers to entertainers and in all its facets. Many Jewish film industry members had moved from the East, especially from New York's Lower East Side. Antisemitism was widespread in the United States at the time, and the newer city of Los

Angeles offered a setting free of established societal barriers and prejudices. Powell saw similar opportunities for Blacks in California through the aviation industry.

Powell believed that as many African Americans as possible should become involved in the early stages of the new aviation field so that they could grow with it in prominence. He began efforts to bring African American aviation into public awareness. Powell wrote: "I actually believe that with the proper leadership, Negroes can be systematically trained to the use of the airplane to such an extent that a great airplane industry might spring up." Blacks would be able to pour thousands of dollars back into the black community by buying black-built planes, forming black-run airlines, hiring black pilots to fly them, and hiring black mechanics to fix them.

The innovative aviator created Bessie Coleman Aero, the nation's first black-owned airplane-building company, to achieve his goal. Powell envisioned Bessie Coleman Aero hiring Blacks to design and build aircraft. Black pilots would fly these planes and be serviced by African American mechanics. African Americans could be dominant in the industry. If Black-owned aviation companies weren't permitted to land at white-run airports, Blacks could build and staff their own. Once established in Los Angeles, Black aviation companies could create and manage airports nationwide. According to Powell, these businesses would serve all Americans, not just African Americans, and help eliminate the harsh racial division in society caused by segregation.

In 1929, Illinois Congressman Oscar DePriest, a Republican and the only African American in the U.S. House of Representatives, visited Los Angeles to honor Bessie Coleman. Powell and fellow pilot James Herbert Banning flew the Congressman above the parade caravan in a single-engine plane. They subsequently named the aircraft after DePriest in the representative's honor. The following day, Booker T. Washington's mother-in-law, Susan Hancock, came to visit. She was an investor in Bessie Coleman Aero and christened the *Oscar DePriest* plane. Powell took DePriest up in his namesake over Los Angeles. Then, DePriest reported that this was his first trip in a plane piloted by an African American. He then publicly endorsed Bessie Coleman Aero and urged locals to invest in the company. Bessie Coleman Aero had national attention.

Powell continued to network. He reached out to black entertainers, including Cab Calloway, Lena Horne, and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, when they were in Los Angeles making "race" movies meant solely for Black audiences. He explained his mission to the celebrities and sought their support. They gave him support in both donations and public appearances. Celebrities Joe Louis and Duke Ellington even visited the plant.

Powell continued to pursue African American involvement in if not domination of, the aviation field. On Labor Day 1931, Powell personally directed the Los Angeles Bessie Coleman Aero Club to sponsor the first all-Black air show in U.S. history. The show drew over 15,000 attendees. Besides himself, Powell invited Coleman graduate Irvin Wells and William Aikens. He named the trio the "Negro Formation Flying Group." Two other Black men, Maxwell Love and Lottie Theodore, performed parachute jumps. The climax was the Goodyear blimp *Volunteer* dropping a rose wreath in honor of Bessie Coleman.

After his success, Powell organized a second show called the “Colored Air Circus” on December 6, 1931, at L.A.’s Eastside Airport. He wanted to put together the largest group of black pilots in the air at one time, at least five pilots. He decided to call them “The Five Blackbirds.” He had himself, Irvin Wells, and William Aikens from the original show as part of the five. He then approached the Chief Pilot of Powell’s Bessie Coleman Aero Club, James Herman Banning. Banning was the second African American to obtain a license from the U.S. Department of Commerce (the licensing bureau at the time). He was the nation’s second Black pilot after Coleman. Surprisingly, Banning refused to fly in the show unless he got paid. He wanted to be a featured pilot. He had helped train the “Negro Formation Flying Group” of the previous show. Powell would not pay him because Coleman School renewed Banning’s license when he came to L.A. with an expired license. Powell had also given him three hundred hours of free flying time.

Despite the dispute, Banning was still part of the show. Powell recruited William Johnson, another Black pilot of whom little is known. Powell also offered a slot to Marie Coker, a “very high-spirited, entertaining lady,” She was well-known for performing the “shake dance,” a sort of erotic belly dance practiced by Mae West. Once Coker earned her license through the Coleman school, Powell asked her to become a Blackbird. He told her, “This is going to be the greatest thing that you have ever gotten in to.”

Powell looked for a headliner other than Banning. He approached Hubert Julian, the self-proclaimed “Black Eagle of Harlem.” Julian bragged that he was a colonel in the Royal Abyssinian Air Force. He boasted of having 1,000 hours in the air. Julian turned out to be an empty braggart. Powell wrote, “If someone could rid Julian of his spasmodic outbursts of egotism, there could hardly be a speaker found to excel him.” Nevertheless, Powell made Julian the show’s feature attractive.

Once Julian arrived in Los Angeles, Powell arranged for Mayor John C. Porter, Los Angeles County Supervisor John R. Quinn, and Los Angeles County Sheriff Eugene Biscailuz to welcome Julian on the steps of City Hall as the nation’s “greatest Negro flier.” They welcomed all of the African American aviators for the airshow. The event marked the first time in history that a mayor of Los Angeles formally welcomed Black people on the steps of City Hall. Of course, naming Julian the featured pilot didn’t sit well with Banning. Even though he wasn’t getting paid, he expected to top billing.

Unfortunately, Julian was a disappointment. His triple parachute jump turned out to be an average single parachute jump. Powell wrote, “[The] hair-raising stunts...never materialized. He didn’t even make a sharp bank but soon descended, asking for a glass of water, stating that it was quite different to do all that hard flying and make a parachute jump also.”

After that Julian fiasco, however, the Blackbirds took to the air “and saved the day,” according to Powell. Six Blackbirds took off, flying in a “V” back to the field, then buzzing the crowd in a train, or “follow-the-leader,” as Coker described it. She explained, “[Powell] would lead, the first one would fall off, then the second one, then the third one, and we would make a line and

come on back around and make another string and come off. That's all we did, and that was good enough." After each flier landed, enthusiastic ovations erupted, and then Maxwell Love and Marie Daugherty performed parachute jumps. The show received glowing reviews in the Black press. The white media regrettably ignored the event.

Afterward, Powell formulated more ambitious plans for the Blackbirds. He wanted to lead a 100-city barnstorming flying tour across the United States to promote his vision of Black-run aviation industries. Meanwhile, he entered the 1932 National Air Races' transcontinental competition with Irvin Wells. They would become the first Blacks to fly across the country. Powell and Wells qualified for the race in an OX5 Lincoln Paige, flying at an average speed of 94.7 mph. They were one of 56 teams that had entered airplanes in the competition. Two days before the race began, the pair learned that James Banning was setting off for New York City. He was determined to beat Powell and Wells across the country. Powell was annoyed but pleased that another Black pilot would be trying to cross the nation. Powell and Wells were set for the journey and took off from Los Angeles. Unfortunately, they crashed in the Sacramento Mountains and had to return home. In contrast, Banning successfully made the trek and became the first Black pilot to cross the country.

Despite the Blackbirds Airshow's tremendous success following the Lincoln Paige crash, Powell could not organize his ambitious quest to conduct airshows in one hundred cities. To add insult to injury, the Great Depression seriously crippled Bessie Coleman Aero, as financial support began to dry up, and the firm had to close. In 1934, Powell created a second aviation company called "Black Wings." Sadly, like Bessie Coleman Aero, Black Wings did not survive the national financial disaster. Despite the setbacks, Powell never abandoned his dreams. He wrote a book titled *Black Wings*, a semi-biographical account of how he became a pilot. *Black Wings* is a fictionalized account of Powell's life. He aimed to inspire young African Americans to enter aviation as pilots, designers, engineers, and mechanics. He called for them to "fill the air with black wings!" Powell continued to advocate for Blacks in Aviation. In 1937, he published a journal dedicated to aviation in the Black community titled *Craftsman Aero-News*.

Sorrowfully, William J. Powell died five years later, in 1942, in Los Angeles at 45 years of age. Most believe he finally had succumbed to exposure to poison gas the Germans inflicted on him during World War I. The leading African American aviator eventually lost his battle with poison. Still, his accomplishments and dreams lived on with the Black aviators who would become Tuskegee Airman and flight German fliers in the skies over Europe in another horrific World War.