

Bessie Coleman

Handout #3

Bessie Coleman earned her pilot's license in 1921. Her inspiration came from the celebrated first woman to get a license, Harriet Quimby, who had earned a license from the Aero Club of America ten years earlier. Quimby was a celebrated writer and well-known 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 famous aviator Charles Willard's father, William, out of the aircraft.

Coleman was inspired by Quimby's feats and the Wright Brothers' initial groundbreaking flights in Kill Devil Hills, NC, in 1903. She wanted to become an aviator, like her hero, Quimby. Unfortunately, no flight school would accept her in America since she was a Black woman. Coleman had to go to the Caudron Brothers' School of Aviation in LeCrotcy, France, to get a license. She 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 loop 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 stereotype characterizations at shows, "No Uncle Tom stuff for me." Furthermore, she appealed to 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. Luckily, though, the intrepid aviator survived. Nevertheless, she suffered a broken leg, cracked ribs, and severe 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. Coleman traveled as a passenger at an airshow with the 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, bursting into flames on impact.

A catastrophe cut Coleman's career short, but 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 several automobile service stations in Chicago but moved to Los Angeles to learn to fly. He organized the Coleman Club in Los Angeles to promote aviation in the Black community. Some notable Black aviators, such as James Banning, inspired by Bessie's heroics, joined the Club and learned to conquer the heavens! As America's entrance into World War II loomed, an acolyte of Coleman's legacy, Wilma Brown, convinced President Franklin Roosevelt to allow Black men to train as aviators to fight America's enemies. The Tuskegee Airmen owe their origins to the legacy of Bessie Coleman.