

Bessie Coleman

Elizabeth 'Bessie' Coleman was the first Black woman to hold a pilot's licence. She was a pioneer in aviation and is celebrated for spearheading the path into aeronautical science for the women who followed her.



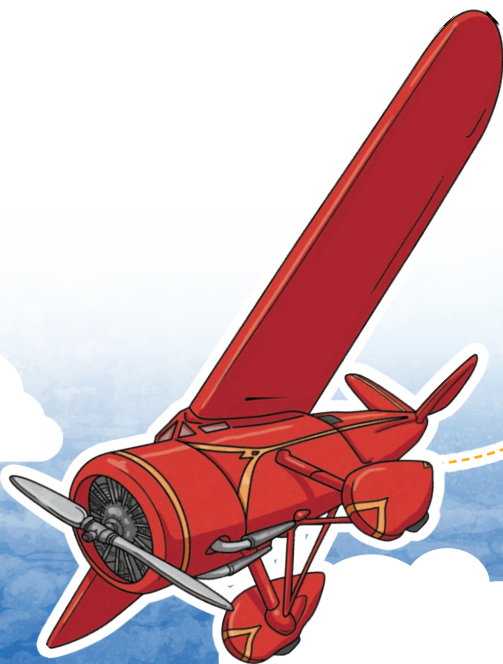
Early Life

Bessie was born on 26th January 1892 in Atlanta, Texas. She was one of 13 children born to George and Susan Coleman. Bessie attended a one-room school from the age of six. Each day, Bessie and her siblings would walk the four miles to school before returning home to pick cotton in order to support the family. At the age of 18, Bessie enrolled at Oklahoma University; sadly, she was forced to leave after only one term due to lack of funds.

Dreaming of the Skies!

In 1915, Bessie registered at Burnham School of Beauty in Chicago and took a job as a manicurist in a barber shop. Here, she would hear stories from returning pilots who had served during the First World War; her passion for flight was born. Her brothers, who had been stationed in France, would tease her, claiming she would never match the achievements of the French women they had seen flying planes - at the time American women were not permitted to become pilots.

It was during her time at the barber shop that Bessie met Robert Abbot, the editor and founder of the Chicago Defender newspaper. Robert inspired Bessie to pursue her aeronautical dreams abroad, in France. Bessie was accepted at the Caudron Brothers' School of Aviation in Le Crotoy, France and received her international pilot's licence on 15th June 1921; she was the first Black woman to hold a pilot's licence.



Flying Career

Bessie's ultimate goal - after securing her pilot's licence - was to own her own plane. Unfortunately, shortly after purchasing her first plane, Bessie suffered a serious accident during a practice flight for an air show near Los Angeles. The plane was irreparably damaged and Bessie suffered a broken leg. However, this setback did not dampen her ambitions. She continued to perform barnstorming spectacles, in borrowed planes, at air shows around the country.



Famously, she would walk on the wings of a flying plane as well as executing other astonishing stunts, such as loop the loops and figure of eights. While being most famed for her flying abilities, Bessie was also a prominent civil rights activist. Throughout her career, she performed almost exclusively at shows where the crowd was not segregated and permitted to enter through the same gates.

Legacy

"The air is the only place free from prejudices. I knew we had no aviators, ... and I knew the Race needed to be represented ... so I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviation."

Bessie Coleman

Bessie had one final goal: to open a flying school for Black people, something non-existent in America at the time. Bessie gathered support for her venture and was close to meeting her objective when a tragic accident occurred. On 30th April 1926, during a test flight for an airshow, Bessie was involved in a crash in which she did not survive.

Bessie's remarkable achievements have been acknowledged in various ways: there are numerous flight schools named after her; in 1977, the Bessie Coleman Aviation Club was founded by a group of Black female pilots and in 1995, a commemorative stamp was circulated to honour her accomplishments. Dr Mae Jemison carried a photograph of Bessie with her on her first mission aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavour when she became the first Black woman in space in September 1992. Mae, along with countless others, has credited Bessie with inspiring her to pursue her career in aviation, spurred on by the strength and determination Bessie demonstrated in her quest to become the first Black female aviator.

Questions

1. How old was Bessie when she went to Oklahoma University? Tick one.

- ☐ 13
☐ 18
☐ 21
☐ 6

2. Number the events from 1-4 to show the order that they happened in.

- ☐ Bessie went to Burnham School of Beauty.
☐ Bessie got her pilot's licence.
☐ Bessie was born.
☐ Bessie Coleman Aviation Club was founded.

3. Fill in the missing words.

Here, she heard stories from returning pilots who had _____ during the First World War; her _____ for flight was born.

4. Look at the first paragraph.

Find and copy one word that means the same as 'leader'.

5. Where did Bessie get her pilot's licence?

6. **However, this setback did not discourage her.**

What does this passage tell you about Bessie's personality?

7. How do you think Bessie's experience of being a pilot was different to female pilots today?

8. Summarise the key facts you have learnt about Bessie from this text in 30 words or fewer.

Answers

1. How old was Bessie when she went to Oklahoma University? Tick one.

- ☐ 13
☒ **18**
☐ 21
☐ 6

2. Number the events from 1-4 to show the order that they happened in.

- 2** Bessie went to Burnham School of Beauty.
3 Bessie got her pilot's licence.
1 Bessie was born.
4 Bessie Coleman Aviation Club was founded.

3. Fill in the missing words.

Here, she heard stories from returning pilots who had **served** during the First World War; her **passion** for flight was born.

4. Look at the first paragraph.

Find and copy one word that means the same as 'leader'.

pioneer

5. Where did Bessie get her pilot's licence?

France

Caudron Brothers' School of Aviation

Le Crotoy

6. **However, this setback did not discourage her.**

What does this passage tell you about Bessie's personality?

Pupils' own responses, such as: This passage tells me that Bessie was a strong, determined person who doesn't give up. She was not going to let a problem or setback get in the way of her achieving her dreams.

7. How do you think Bessie's experience of being a pilot was different to female pilots today?
Pupils' own responses, such as: I think that Bessie's experience was different from female pilots today because she was one of the first women to become a pilot. Although most pilots are still men today, when Bessie became a pilot there were no women at all. She was creating her own path rather than following someone else's.
8. Summarise the key facts you have learnt about Bessie from this text in 30 words or fewer.
Pupils' own responses, such as: Bessie Coleman was the first Black female pilot. She travelled to France to get her pilot's licence and performed amazing stunts at breathtaking airshows.

Bessie Coleman

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Early Life

Bessie was born on 26th January 1892 in Atlanta, Texas. She was one of 13 children born to George and Susan Coleman. Bessie attended a one-room school from the age of six. Each day, Bessie and her siblings would walk the four miles to school before returning home to pick cotton in order to support the family. At the age of 18, Bessie enrolled at Oklahoma University; sadly, she was forced to leave after only one term due to lack of funds.

Dreaming of the Skies!

In 1915, Bessie registered at Burnham School of Beauty in Chicago and took a job as a manicurist in a barber shop. Here, she would hear stories from returning pilots who had served during the First World War; her passion for flight was born. Her brothers, who had been stationed in France, would tease her, claiming she would never match the achievements of the French women they had seen flying planes - at the time American women were not permitted to become pilots.

It was during her time at the barber shop that Bessie met Robert Abbot, the editor and founder of the Chicago Defender newspaper. Robert inspired Bessie to pursue her aeronautical dreams abroad, in France. Bessie was accepted at the Caudron Brothers' School of Aviation in Le Crotoy, France and received her international pilot's licence on 15th June 1921; she was the first Black woman to hold a pilot's licence.



Flying Career

Bessie's ultimate goal - after securing her pilot's licence - was to own her own plane. Unfortunately, shortly after purchasing her first plane, Bessie suffered a serious accident during a practice flight for an air show near Los Angeles. The plane was irreparably damaged and Bessie suffered a broken leg. However, this setback did not dampen her ambitions. She continued to perform barnstorming spectacles, in borrowed planes, at air shows around the country.

Famously, she would walk on the wings of a flying plane, as well as executing other astonishing stunts, such as loop the loops and figure of eights. While being most famed for her flying abilities, Bessie was also a prominent civil rights activist. Throughout her career, she performed almost exclusively at shows where the crowd was not segregated and permitted to enter through the same gates.



Legacy

"The air is the only place free from prejudices. I knew we had no aviators, ... and I knew the Race needed to be represented ... so I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviation."

Bessie Coleman

Bessie had one final goal: to open a flying school for Black people, something non-existent in America at the time. Bessie gathered support for her venture and was close to meeting her objective when a tragic accident occurred. On 30th April 1926, during a test flight for an airshow, Bessie was involved in a crash in which she did not survive.

Bessie's remarkable achievements have been acknowledged in various ways: there are numerous flight schools named after her; in 1977, the Bessie Coleman Aviation Club was founded by a group of Black female pilots and in 1995, a commemorative stamp was circulated to honour her accomplishments. Dr Mae Jemison carried a photograph of Bessie with her on her first mission aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavour when she became the first Black woman in space in September 1992. Mae, along with countless others, has credited Bessie with inspiring her to pursue her career in aviation, spurred on by the strength and determination Bessie demonstrated in her quest to become the first Black female aviator.

Questions

1. When did Bessie get her pilot's licence? Tick one.

- ☐ 1892
☐ 1921
☐ 1995
☐ 1915

2. Draw **four** lines and match each word to its definition.

pioneer

manicurist

aviation

barnstorming

The flying or operating of aircraft.

A person who is one of the first to develop a new area of activity.

Flamboyantly energetic and successful.

A person who looks after people's nails.

3. Look at the section called **Dreaming of the Skies!**

Find and copy one phrase which tells you that the pilots in the barbershop inspired Bessie.

4. Give **two** examples of the stunts that Bessie performed in her shows.

- _____
- _____

5. Fill in the missing words.

Robert _____ Bessie to pursue her _____ dreams
 _____, in France.

6. What impact do you think Bessie's brothers' teasing had on her ambitions?

7. How do you think Bessie's life may have been different if she had not met Robert Abbot?

8. **Bessie had one final goal: to open a flying school for Black people, something non-existent in America at the time.**

What does this passage tell you about Bessie?

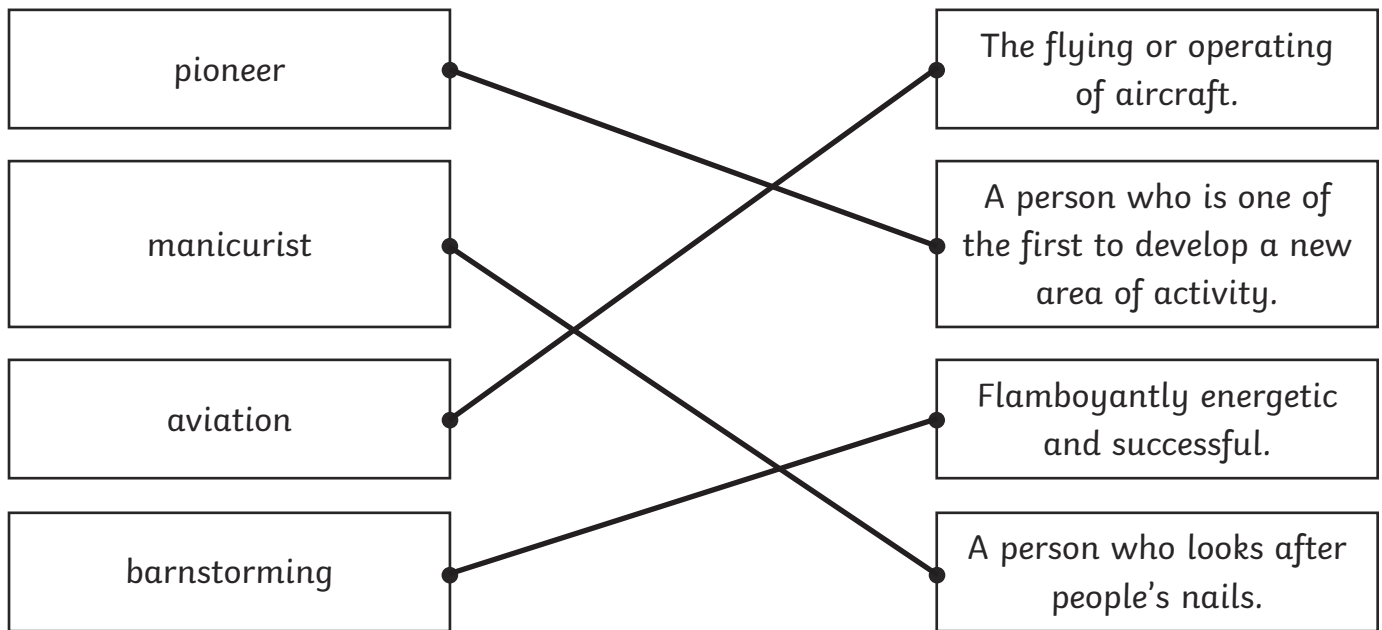
9. How do you think Bessie's experience of being a pilot was different to female pilots today?

Answers

1. When did Bessie get her pilot's licence? Tick one.

- ☐ 1892
☒ **1921**
☐ 1995
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2. Draw **four** lines and match each word to its definition.



3. Look at the section called **Dreaming of the Skies!**

Find and copy one phrase which tells you that the pilots in the barbershop inspired Bessie.

her passion for flight was born

4. Give **two** examples of the stunts that Bessie performed in her shows.

Any two of the following:

loop the loop

figure of eight

walking on the wings

5. Fill in the missing words.

Robert **inspired** Bessie to pursue her **aeronautical** dreams **abroad**, in France.

6. What impact do you think Bessie's brothers' teasing had on her ambitions?

Pupils' own responses, such as: I think that Bessie's brothers teasing her probably made her even more determined to succeed. I think she was quite a strong-willed woman who would have wanted to persevere, even when other people were telling her she would fail.

7. How do you think Bessie's life may have been different if she had not met Robert Abbot?

Pupils' own responses, such as: I think Bessie's life would have been very different if she had not met Robert Abbot. At the time women in America were not allowed to apply for a pilot's licence, it was Robert who gave Bessie the idea to travel abroad to France to pursue her dream there instead.

8. **Bessie had one final goal: to open a flying school for Black people, something non-existent in America at the time.**

What does this passage tell you about Bessie?

Pupils' own responses, such as: This tells me that Bessie was someone who wanted to make a difference. She believed that women, including Black women, had the right to train as pilots but she didn't just want to do it herself, she wanted to make sure other women after her would have the opportunity too.

9. How do you think Bessie's experience of being a pilot was different to female pilots today?

Pupils' own responses, such as: I think Bessie's experience would have been very different because she was paving the way for other female pilots; she was the first Black woman to become a pilot in the USA. However, female pilots today probably still face some similar challenges because aviation is still a very male-dominated world.

Bessie Coleman

Elizabeth 'Bessie' Coleman was the first Black woman to hold a pilot's licence. She was a pioneer in civil aviation and is celebrated for spearheading the path into aeronautical science for the women who followed her.



Early Life

Bessie was born on 26th January 1892 in Atlanta, Texas to her parents, George and Susan Coleman. She was one of 13 children born to the couple, who both worked as sharecroppers (farmers who rented land in return for a share of the crop profit). From the age of six, Bessie attended a one-room school. Each day, Bessie and her siblings would walk the four miles to school before returning home to pick cotton in order to support the family. At the age of 18, Bessie enrolled at Oklahoma University; sadly, she was forced to leave after only one term due to lack of funds.



Entering the Aeronautical World

In 1915, Bessie relocated to Chicago to live with her brothers. She registered at Burnham School of Beauty before taking a job as a manicurist in a barber shop. Here, she would hear stories from returning soldiers who had served as pilots during the First World War; her passion for flight was ignited. Her brothers, who had been stationed in France, would tease her, claiming she would never match the achievements of the French women they had seen flying planes. At the time, American women were not permitted to become pilots - this sibling taunting further strengthened her desire to take to the skies.

It was during her time at the barber shop that Bessie met Robert Abbot, the editor and founder of the Chicago Defender newspaper. Robert inspired Bessie to pursue her aeronautical dreams abroad, in France. Bessie secured financial backing from prominent banker Jesse Binga as well as taking French classes in the evening in order to write her application to French flight schools.

Bessie was accepted at the Caudron Brothers' School of Aviation in Le Crotoy, France and received her international pilot's licence on 15th June 1921; she was the first Black woman to ever hold a pilot's licence.

Flying Career

Bessie's ultimate goal - after securing her pilot's licence - was to own her own plane; a feat she achieved in 1923 when she purchased a military surplus Curtiss JN-4 plane, known informally as 'Jenny'. Unfortunately, shortly after, Bessie suffered a serious accident during a practice flight for an air show near Los Angeles. 'Jenny' was irreparably damaged and Bessie suffered a broken leg. However, Bessie was undeterred. She continued to borrow planes and perform barnstorming spectacles at air shows around the country. Famously, she would walk on the wings while aloft as well as executing other astonishing stunts such as loop the loops, figure of eights and parachuting out of her plane at great heights.

During this time, she also toured the country, giving flying lessons and encouraging women and people from the Black community to pursue a career as a pilot. While being most famed for her flying abilities, Bessie was also a prominent civil rights activist. Throughout her career, she performed almost exclusively at shows where the crowd was not segregated and everyone was permitted to enter through the same gates.



Legacy

"The air is the only place free from prejudices. I knew we had no aviators, ... and I knew the Race needed to be represented ... so I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviation."

Bessie Coleman

Bessie had one final aspiration: to open a flight school for Black people, something still non-existent in America at the time. Bessie garnered support for her venture and was close to meeting her objective when a tragic accident occurred. On 30th April 1926, during a test flight for an aerial show in Jacksonville, Florida, Bessie was involved in a crash in which she did not survive; she was 34 years old.

Bessie's remarkable achievements have been memorialised in various ways. There are numerous flight schools named after her: in 1977, the Bessie Coleman Aviation Club was founded by a group of Black female pilots and in 1995, a commemorative stamp was circulated to honour her accomplishments. Dr Mae Jemison carried a photograph of Bessie with her on her first mission aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavour when she became the first Black woman in space in September 1992. Mae, along with countless others, has credited Bessie with inspiring her to pursue her career in aviation, spurred on by the strength and determination Bessie demonstrated in her quest to become the first Black female aviator.

Questions

1. Where was Bessie born? Tick one.

- ☐ New York
- ☐ Chicago
- ☐ Atlanta
- ☐ Oklahoma

2. Number the events from 1-4 to show the order that they happened in.

- ☐ Bessie got her pilot's licence.
- ☐ Bessie attended a one-room school.
- ☐ Bessie crashed her first plane.
- ☐ Bessie moved to Chicago.

3. Look at the first paragraph. Find and copy one word which means the same as 'leading'.

4. How did Bessie and her siblings get to school?

5. Fill in the missing words.

She was one of 13 children born to the couple, who both worked as _____
(farmers who rented land in return for a share of the crop _____).

6. **At the age of 18, Bessie enrolled at Oklahoma University; sadly, she was forced to leave after only one term due to lack of funds.**

What does this passage tell you about Bessie?

7. Summarise what you have learned about Bessie in 25 words or fewer.

8. **She was a pioneer in civil aviation...**

What impact did Bessie's achievements have on women's involvement in aeronautical science?

9. **Throughout her career, she performed almost exclusively at shows where the crowd was not segregated and permitted to enter through the same gates.**

What does this passage tell you about Bessie?

10. **Dr Mae Jemison carried a photograph of Bessie with her on her first mission aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavour when she became the first Black woman in space September 1992.**

What do you think Bessie and Dr Mae Jemison have in common?

Answers

1. Where was Bessie born? Tick one.

- ☐ New York
- ☐ Chicago
- ☒ **Atlanta**
- ☐ Oklahoma

2. Number the events from 1-4 to show the order that they happened in.

- 3** Bessie got her pilot's licence.
- 1** Bessie attended a one-room school.
- 4** Bessie crashed her first plane.
- 2** Bessie moved to Chicago.

3. Look at the first paragraph. Find and copy one word which means the same as 'leading'.
pioneer

4. How did Bessie and her siblings get to school?

They walked four miles.

5. Fill in the missing words.

She was one of 13 children born to the couple, who both worked as **sharecroppers** (farmers who rented land in return for a share of the crop **profit**).

6. **At the age of 18, Bessie enrolled at Oklahoma University; sadly, she was forced to leave after only one term due to lack of funds.**

What does this passage tell you about Bessie?

Pupils' own responses, such as: This passage tells me that Bessie was very intelligent and wanted to continue her education by attending university. However, it also tells me that sadly her family was quite poor and she was unable to stay at university because she could not afford it.

7. Summarise what you have learned about Bessie in 25 words or fewer.

Pupils' own responses, such as: I have learned that Bessie was a very determined woman who became the first Black female pilot in the USA.

8. **She was a pioneer in civil aviation...**

What impact did Bessie's achievements have on women's involvement in aeronautical science?

Pupils' own responses, such as: I think that Bessie's achievements had a very significant impact on women in aeronautical science. She paved the way for other women, especially Black women, to become pilots and inspired many future scientists, aviators and astronauts.

9. **Throughout her career, she performed almost exclusively at shows where the crowd was not segregated and permitted to enter through the same gates.**

What does this passage tell you about Bessie?

Pupils' own responses, such as: This passage tells me that Bessie was a firm believer in equality and the civil rights movement. She avoided performing at segregated events because this went against her beliefs and she did not want to profit from performing at events that did not treat Black people equally. She hoped that refusing to perform at such events would support the civil rights movement and influence change.

10. **Dr Mae Jemison carried a photograph of Bessie with her on her first mission aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavour when she became the first Black woman in space September 1992.**

What do you think Bessie and Dr Mae Jemison have in common?

Pupils' own responses, such as: I think Bessie and Mae have a lot in common because they were both Black female pioneers in science. They both led the way for other Black women to become aviators. They would both have faced many challenges to achieve their dreams but they persevered and were able to lead the way for other Black female scientists.