

## Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman, Aviator

Date of Birth: 26th January, 1892  
Spouse: Claude Glenn (m. 30th January, 1917). They separated soon after marriage.  
Date of Death: 30th April, 1926 (Age 34) - Burial at Lincoln Cemetery, Cook County, IL, USA  
Aviator Pilot License: June 15, 1921



### Noteable Works and Achievements

- Was the first woman of African-American descent and first of Native American descent to obtain a pilot license
- Bessie chose to do a major exhibition on the 19th June, 1925, sixty years after the Civil War was declared ended in Galveston, Texas, to show that African-Americans can be aviators, too.

### Biography

(26th January, 1892 - 30th April, 1926)

Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman is one of the groundbreaking pioneers of flight in the early 20th century. She is the first woman of African-American descent and first of Native American descent to obtain a pilot license. For Bessie, the skies were a place of freedom and equality, free from the racism she had known her entire life. She was a strong advocate for the rights of African-Americans, not only as aviators but within other aspects of her life, as well.

In 1916, Bessie Coleman moved to Chicago, Illinois. It was there, that she became interested in flying from listening to the stories told by World War I pilots. Determined to become a pilot herself, and unable to find anyone in the United States who would train her, she studied in France instead. She earned her license in 1921.

Bessie Coleman quickly discovered that stunt flying is how you made money as a pilot and that she needed more training to succeed. She returned to France in February of 1922 for advanced training, studied in Germany with ed to the Netherlands, where she met Anthony Fokke with one of the Fokker Corporation's pilots (Plantz, 2014). She returned to the United States in August of 1922, where she performed in numerous airshows, flying mostly military biplanes from WWI. She quickly became a renowned and widely popular aviator known as “Queen Bess.”

Bessie Coleman dreamed of owning her own plane and opening a school of flight for African-American aviators. She purchased her own Curtiss JN-4 “Jenny” Biplane in 1926, a major achievement for any pilot at the time.

Because the plane had been poorly maintained prior to purchase. In her first flight in the plane, it went into an unexpected dive and spin. She was not belted in because she was looking over the edge of the plane to inspect the ground for a parachute jump the next day (Platz, 2014) and was thrown from the plane. She died instantly on impact. The plane crashed and William Wills was also killed. The investigation on the crash discovered that a wrench that had been used on the engine had jammed the controls.

While Bessie Coleman was never able to open her flight school she dreamed of, she was a true pioneer in aviation. She earned many honors after her death: inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame (2001), the National Aviation Hall of Fame(2006),the International Air and Space Hall of Fame (2014). In addition, airports, roads, and other public infrastructure were named after her in the United States, Germany, and France. Every year on the anniversary of her death, pilots put flowers on her grave in the Lincoln Cemetery in Chicago, Illinois (Rich, 1993).

She continues to be an inspiration to others.

### Reading List

- Hart, P. (2005). Bessie Coleman. Lerner Publications.
- Plantz, C. (2014). The Life of Bessie Coleman: First African-American Woman Pilot. Enslow Publishing, LLC.
- Rich, D. (1993). Queen Bess: Daredevil Aviator. Smithsonian Institution Press.