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Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

"The air is the only place free from prejudices. I knew we had no aviators, neither men nor women…I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviation."

Interview with Bessie Coleman

Setting her Sights on the Skies

In the air and on the ground, Elizabeth "Bessie" Coleman defied the laws of gravity and racial and gender discrimination. In the face of what seemed to be the impossible, Coleman always managed to find a way. She became the first woman of African-American and Native-American heritage to earn a pilot's license in the U.S.

One of thirteen children, Coleman was born to a family of sharecroppers in 1892 in Atlanta, a small Texas town. From a young age, she picked cotton alongside her siblings and attended a one-room school whenever she was able. Her aptitude for mathematics earned her a place at a Missionary Baptist Church school where she graduated in 1910. She then attended the Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University (now

Langston University), but lacking money for tuition, she was only able to complete one term.

In 1915, Coleman joined her brother in Chicago and took a job as a manicurist. During WWI, he served in the Army in France. On his return, he regaled Coleman with stories about pilots and planes and also the social and political freedoms enjoyed by French women. According to Doris Rich, one of Coleman's biographers, he claimed that French women could even fly planes. When he declared that Black women in the U.S. "…ain't never goin' to fly," Coleman decided to prove him wrong.

She applied to flight schools but was met with rejection because of race and gender. Coleman doubled down. She took a higher paying job as a restaurant manager and learned French. When Coleman was accepted into a prestigious flight school in Northern France, she enlisted financial help from Black philanthropists. In November, 1920, Coleman set sail for France.

Seven months later, Coleman became the first American woman to earn an international pilot's license from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale. At the time, planes were rickety and dangerous. The one she flew lacked both a steering wheel and brakes. Instead, she maneuvered it with a large wooden stick and used her feet to control a rudder bar. To stop the plane, Coleman had to land first, then drop and drag a heavy metal runner on the ground.

After getting her license, Coleman learned stunt flying in Germany where she studied with WWI aces. Her aeronautic acrobatics were captured by journalists on newsreels and shown back home, paving the way for her future celebrity in the U.S.

Returning home, in 1922 on Labor Day, Coleman made the first public flight by a woman of both Native and African descent. Barred from being a commercial pilot, she earned her living dazzling crowds at aerial shows. Coleman performed daredevil loop-the-loops and stunts that involved her walking out onto the wings of her plane while in flight. She was also known to hand the controls to a co-pilot, then parachute to the ground.

Coleman enjoyed her celebrity but was steadfast in maintaining her dignity. Cast in a film based on her life, Coleman was enthusiastic until she discovered that the movie would open with her character dressed in rags. Coleman withdrew. "No Uncle Tom stuff for me!" she said, declaring the portrayal was demeaning.

Coleman used her fame to spread her message against discrimination. She refused to perform before segregated audiences in the South. During her

numerous speaking engagements at schools and churches, she encouraged Black Americans to reach for new heights by pursuing aviation.

Coleman's personal dream was to start her own flight school for African Americans. In April, 1926, her dream came to a tragic end. While rehearsing for an aerial show in Jacksonville, Florida, Coleman's plane sputtered out of control and she plummeted 2,000 feet to the ground. Both she and her co-pilot were killed. Coleman was only 34 years old.

Services were held in Florida and Chicago, drawing an estimated 10,000 people who paid their respects. Journalist and civil rights activist Ida B. Wells, gave the eulogies. Despite the respect and attention Coleman received, her legacy was mostly forgotten.

In 1992, astronaut Mae Jemison became the first African-American woman in space. Jemison carried a photo of Coleman into orbit and later wrote that she was "embarrassed and saddened that I did not learn of her until my spaceflight beckoned on the horizon."

Since then, Coleman's story has been told in numerous books, articles, and films. In 1995, the U.S. Postal Service issued a stamp in her memory and in 2023, the U.S. Mint issued a quarter in her honor. Today, many flight schools around the country and roads near airports are named in her honor. Coleman is buried in Lincoln cemetery in Chicago.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask Yourself: How do I respond to barriers intended to keep me from my dreams? What risks am I willing to take for what I believe in?

Ask a Friend: Tell me about a time when you confronted what seemed impossible and discovered a new power within yourself that propelled you forward.

Shout Outs!

Dr. Katalin Karikó has been awarded the Nobel Prize for her pioneering work in developing the MRNA Covid vaccine. Learn more about this remarkable woman by reading my story about her from a previous issue.

Sharon Spaulding discovered the hidden story of

Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex education and reproductive rights activist, when she married one of Dennett's great-grandsons. Today, she curates the family's archives.

Sharon has spent twelve years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her essays about Dennett have appeared in *Ms.Magazine*, *Smithsonian*, and *New Hampshire Magazine*.

Sharon is a popular speaker at women's and civic groups, and also book clubs. She is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. Schedule a talk with your group!

Sharon lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs, Gus and Hank.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. **www.SharonSpaulding.com**
