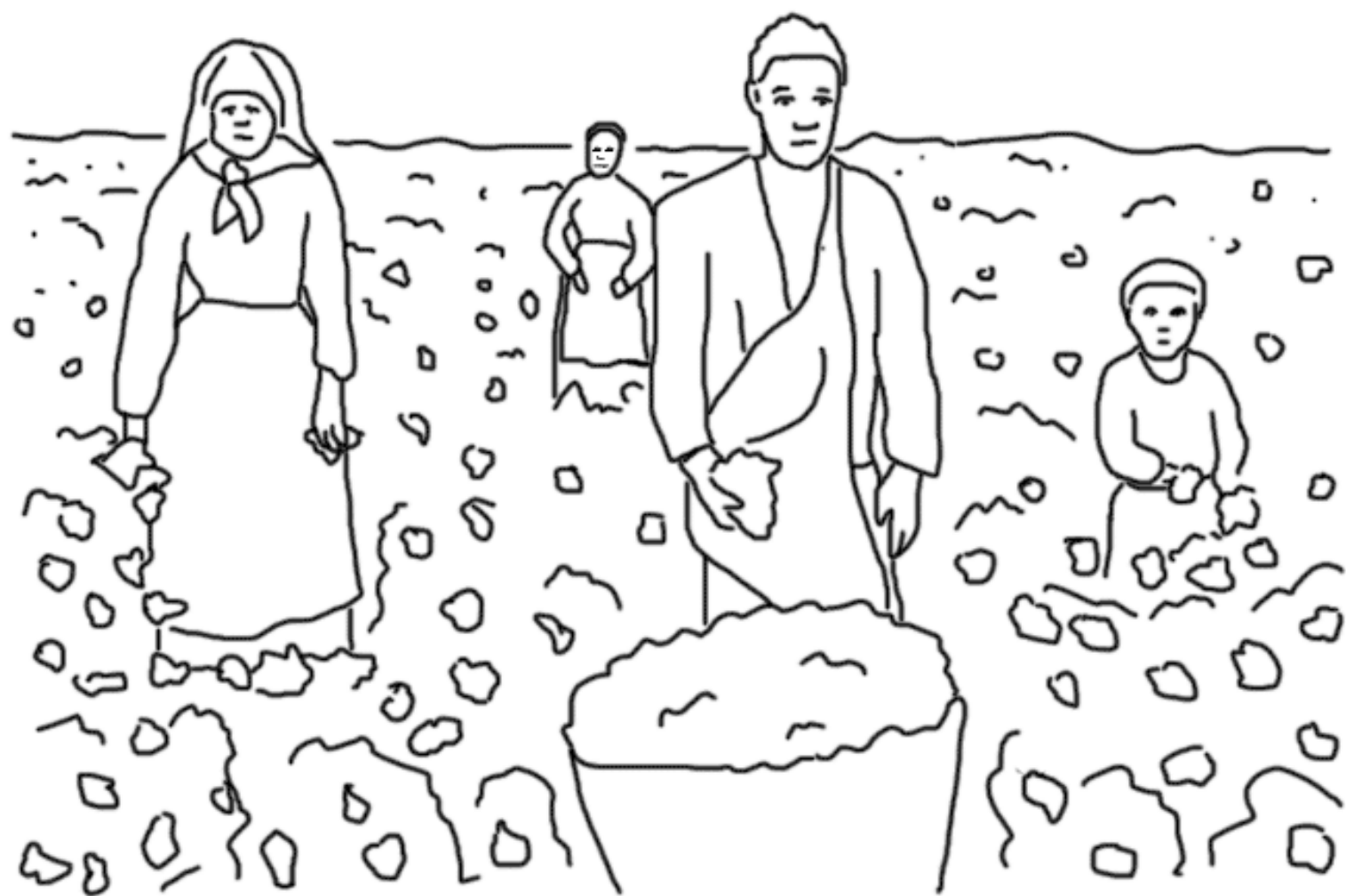


# Flying Free: The Story of Bessie Coleman



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On January 26, 1892, Bessie Coleman was born in Atlanta, Texas, the tenth of thirteen children. Her parents were sharecroppers. Her father was a Cherokee Indian and her mother was an African American. When she was just a baby, her father took the family to live in Oklahoma with his people, the Cherokees. Her mother was unhappy there and wanted to return to Texas, so they returned to live in a black section of town in a place called Waxahachie, Texas.



Bessie had a happy childhood there, but her father longed to return to the Cherokees. He moved back to Oklahoma when Bessie was nine. Her mother, refusing to leave Texas, raised the remaining five children by herself. Bessie could see that her mother's life was hard. She helped her mother take in laundry and watched the younger children. She helped plant a garden and learned how to cook for the family.



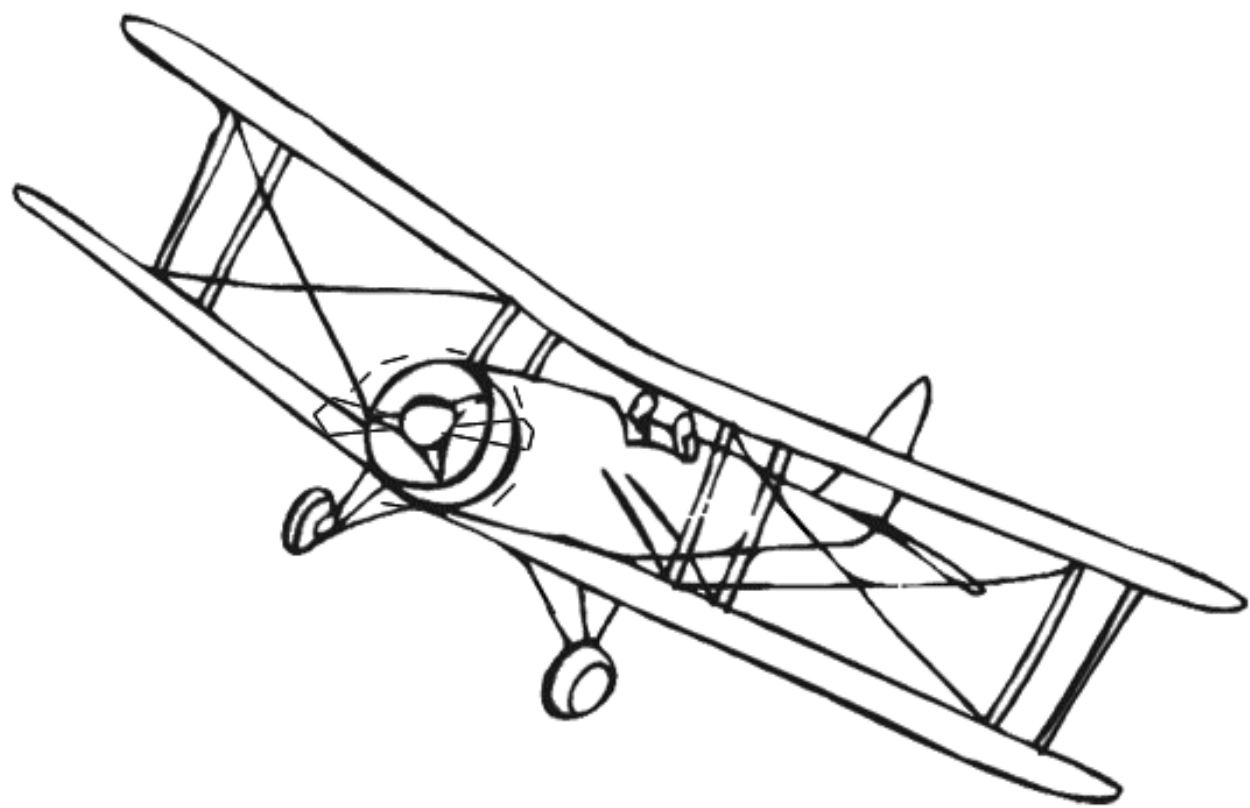
Bessie's mother could not read or write, but she wanted her children to have an education. Bessie attended school in an all-black one-room schoolhouse. Helping with the cotton harvest interrupted her education every year, but she never gave up. Her mother borrowed books and magazines from a book wagon that came through town. Among the magazines Bessie read was an article about the Wright brothers and their latest flying machine. Bessie thrilled when she saw this, and from then on, she read everything she could about flying. She dreamed of taking flying lessons, but there were no flying schools that would accept a black girl. Bessie still did not give up on her dream.



When Bessie turned eighteen, her mother had saved up enough money to enroll her in the Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University in Langston, Oklahoma. The money ran out before she could finish her first year. Bessie had to come home and find work to earn enough money to finish her education. She was determined to go on to school so she could earn enough money to take flying lessons. She took in laundry, minded white children, and picked cotton, but it was not enough. Her mother sent her to Chicago to live with her brothers and find work there. She became a manicurist, which is a person who cleans, trims and polishes other people's fingernails. In her free time, Bessie read about airplanes and flying.

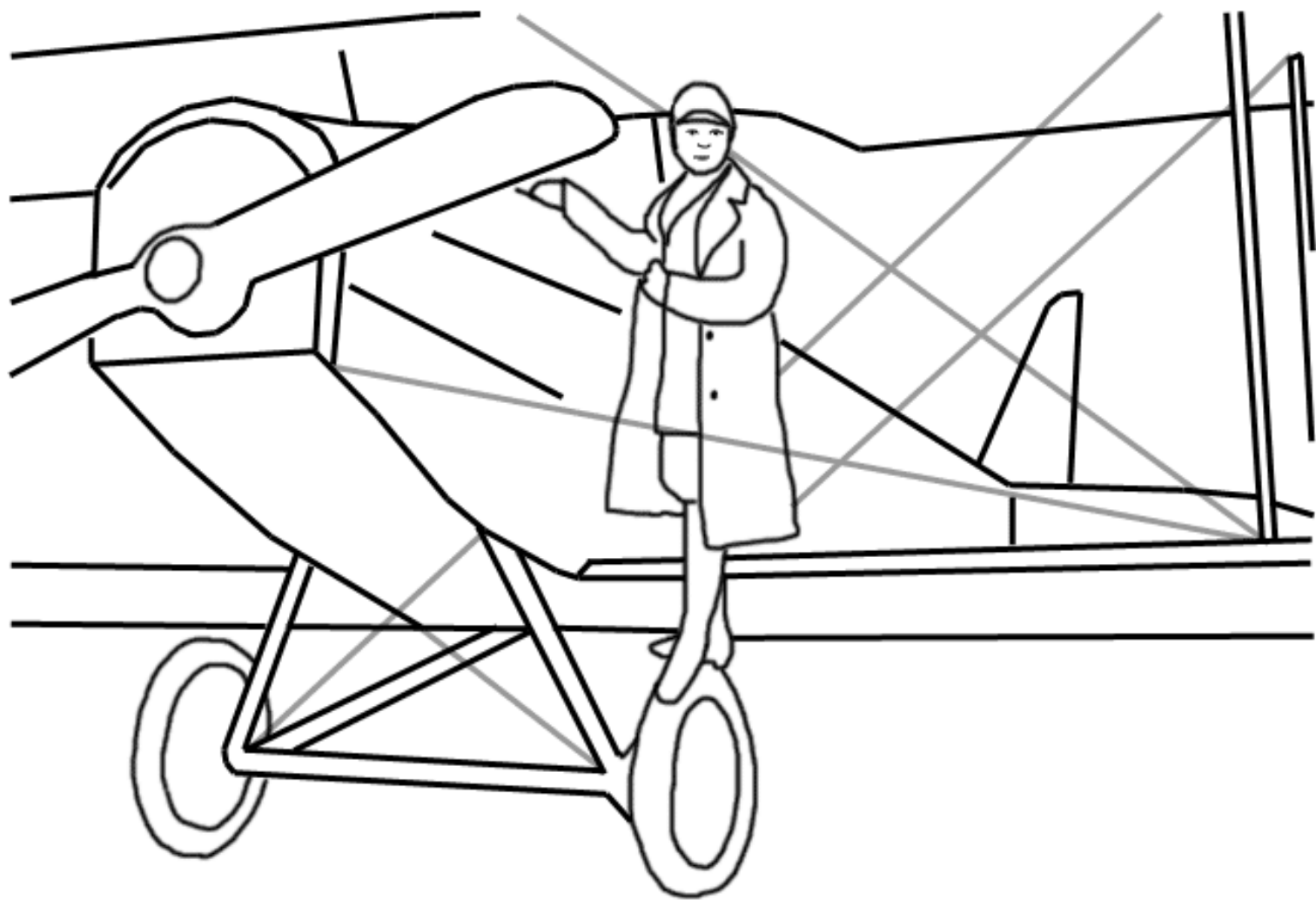


Bessie worked in Chicago for five years. During this time, she met a newspaper publisher named Robert Abbot. When she told Mr. Abbot about her dream to become “somebody” and learn to fly, he decided to help her. Mr. Abbot told Bessie if she really wanted to learn to fly, she would have to travel to France. There were many good flying schools in France that would allow people of all races to attend. At the age of twenty-eight, Bessie had saved enough money to go to France. In November of 1920, Bessie Coleman sailed for Paris with a Red Cross unit. She was going to achieve her dreams.



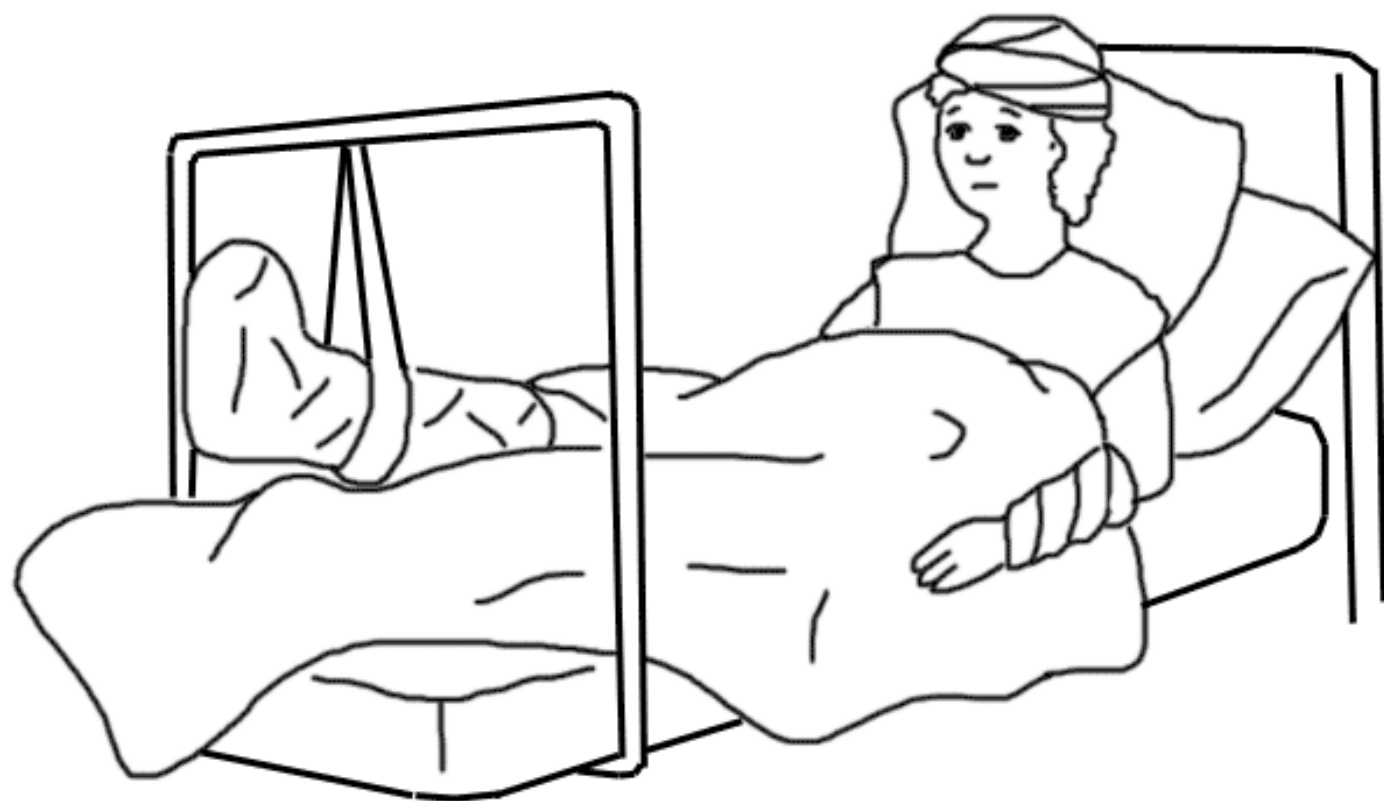
Bessie completed a ten-month course in seven months and received her pilot's license in June of 1921. She was the first black woman ever to earn a license from the prestigious French flying school. She was the only licensed black woman pilot in the world.

She was warmly greeted when she came back to the U.S. in the fall of 1921. However, Bessie soon realized that she would need advanced training in order to become a stunt pilot. She returned to France in 1922 to learn to fly figure eights, and loop-the-loops. It was after this that Bessie began her barnstorming career. Barnstorming is performing at county fairs and carnivals in demonstrations of stunt flying and parachute-jumping. Around this time, Bessie began to dream of opening her own flying school.



Her friend, Robert Abbott, sponsored her first appearance in New York, billing her as “the world’s greatest woman flyer.” She went all over the U.S. putting on shows, doing aerial stunts that excited the crowds. At one performance, her plane engine sputtered and died. The people on the ground thought she was going to crash. At the last minute, she regained control of the plane and landed. After that performance, she was given the nickname, “Brave Bessie.”





Bessie continued to put on air shows. She also lectured at universities, flying schools, and town halls. She wanted black people to know that if she could accomplish her dream, they could too. In 1924, Bessie went to California to earn money flying for a tire company. She took the company plane up in the air for a test flight. While in the air, the plane's engine shut down. Her plane dove to the earth. Bessie awoke in the hospital with many broken bones. It was a whole year before Bessie was able to fly again, but she did not give up.



Bessie believed the sky was the only place a person could be truly free, so she picked up where she left off and went back to stunt flying. She flew in air shows all across the United States. In the spring of 1926, Bessie went to Florida to perform for the Jacksonville Negro Welfare League's annual celebration. The event would honor Bessie. She was excited about this show. She had almost raised enough money to open her flying school. She saw her old friend Mr. Abbott at the show. He warned her that she should not fly on the test flight that day. She told him not to worry.



Bessie flew beside the test pilot William Wills on this flight. The plane climbed to three thousand feet. The crowd below watched the plane. After ten minutes, it began a nose-dive and sped towards earth. Bessie was not wearing her usual parachute, and when the plane flipped over, Bessie fell to her death. The test pilot died when the plane crashed. Instead of celebrating, the crowd said goodbye to Brave Bessie. She was buried in Lincoln Cemetery in Chicago. Her dream of opening a flying school did not end with her death. In 1932, the "Bessie Coleman Flying Club" was opened for people of color. Bessie's life has been an inspiration to people of all races.

1. In what year was Bessie Coleman born?

- a. 1922
- b. 1892
- c. 1776
- d. 1902

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

2. How old was Bessie when her father left?

- a. seven
- b. two
- c. nine
- d. thirteen

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

3. What sparked Bessie's interest in flying?

- a. meeting a pilot
- b. reading an article about the Wright brothers
- c. reading about trains
- d. reading about women pilots

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Why didn't Bessie graduate from the university?

- a. She failed her exams.
- b. She got married.
- c. She dropped out of school.
- d. She ran out of money.

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

5. How did she get the nickname "Brave Bessie"?
- a. She nearly crashed but then started the plane again.
  - b. She fought off a bear attack.
  - c. She got lost in the woods and found her way back.
  - d. She jumped out of an airplane.

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

6. What was Bessie Coleman's dream?
- a. to own her own airfield
  - b. to open a flying school for people of all races
  - c. to become President of the United States
  - d. to become Amelia Earhart

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_