

Black Aviation Pioneers Outfly Prejudice



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Had it not been for the tireless efforts of several notable Black aviation pioneers, the field of aviation might not have grown from a fledging science into a truly global mode of transportation. During the interwar years, Chicago and the surrounding area provided rich opportunities for aviation, and many key developments were advanced by African-American aviators and mechanics. A few of these pioneers include [Bessie Coleman](#), [Janet Harmon-Bragg](#), [Willa Brown](#), [Dale L. White Sr.](#), [Chauncey Spencer](#), [John Robinson](#) and [Cornelius Coffey](#), many of whom knew each other and were close.

Bessie Coleman has gone down in history holding two firsts: She was the first [African American and the first African American woman to earn an international pilot's license](#). Though her life was tragically cut short in a plane accident, her influence on those who followed is still felt today. Born in Texas, she moved to Chicago when she was 23. No aviation school would admit her, so she attended a flight school in France in 1920, earning an international pilot's license and establishing her legacy and the legacy of Black aviators who would follow. Her contributions inspired the next generation of Black aviators and had influence on the other Chicago aviation greats who followed.

Cornelius Coffey, the [first African American certified aircraft mechanic](#) in the United States, never met Coleman, but he carried on the tradition of excellence. An Arkansas transplant, he graduated at the top of his class in an auto engineering

school. Coffey befriended another great aviator, John Robinson, and together they pursued their passion for flight. They enrolled in Chicago's Curtiss-Wright School of Aviation, but when they attended the class, they were turned away for being Black. However, their employer at the time, threatened to sue the school and the two men had their tuition honored. Coffey graduated the program first in the class, with Robinson graduating second in the class. The school brought both men onboard to teach all-Black classes, a milestone both for African American aviation opportunities and for Chicago's contributions to flight. From this class came many of the other African American aviators of Chicago's Black aviation renaissance, including Willa Brown, Janet Bragg, Dale White, among many others.

Though the burgeoning community of Black pilots was gaining distinction, most airfields would not allow them to operate out of their airport. Robinson and Coffey created [the Challengers Air Pilots' Association \(CAPA\)](#), a group by and for Black aviators. The group, which included Coffey, Robinson, Bragg, and White, then built the [first airport for African Americans](#) just south of Chicago in Robbins, Ill. CAPA also began the annual tradition of [flying over Coleman's grave](#) in Chicago and dropping a wreath of flowers.

Two women, Willa Brown and Janet Harmon-Bragg, took Coleman's legacy and soared, proving themselves against the double-headed hydra of racism and sexism. Harmon-Bragg studied under Coffey and Robinson as the [only woman](#) in a class of 24 in 1933. She worked as a nurse at several hospitals and used her money to buy three planes, which she and her fellow CAPA members used to practice flying. Though she had many hours of flight training and later became the first Black woman to earn her pilot's license in the U.S. and later earned her commercial license, she was denied her license at first and was turned down by the Women Airforce Service Pilots in WWII. She would continue to fly for many years and helped further the Black aviatrix legacy through her advocacy.

[Brown earned her](#) pilot license in 1938, her commercial license in 1939 and earned her Master Mechanic Certificate in 1935. A flight instructor and advocate, she helped organize an air show featuring African American pilots. Later, she would be the co-founder and director of the Coffey School of Aeronautics and would continue the tradition of pushing flight opportunities for African-Americans. These opportunities came as America transitioned to war. Brown lobbied First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to allow African Americans to fly for the US Army. While the effect of Brown's campaign are open to debate, resulting legislation opened the possibility for the Coffey school to provide training for pilots. Some of these pilots would go on to fly in the famous 99th Fighter Squadron, known more popularly as the Tuskegee Airmen. Throughout WWII, Brown and others in the Chicago African American flight culture continued to push for greater equality. In large part due to Brown's advocacy by March 1942, the Civil Air Patrol stood up the first desegregated unit Civilian Air Patrol unit, members of which came primarily from the Coffey school and for which

Coffey was the squadron commander and Brown as a second lieutenant. Though the school would close after the war, the mark it made on aviation and for equality is immense and lasting.

There are other stories about how the Chicago pilots paved the way for others. In 1939, Spencer and White took off from Chicago on a 3,000 mile round trip to Washington, D.C. to lobby for legislation to enable African Americans to join the US Army Air Corps. The two met with several senators, including then-senator, Harry S. Truman in this advocacy. Eight years later, President Truman signed an executive order establishing the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, committing the government to integrating the segregated military.

There was also a parallel track to this advocacy. In 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Civilian Pilot Training Act of 1939 into law. This law allowed the FAA's predecessor agency, the Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA), to train civilian pilots—both men and women—through educational institutions. The law also contained a provision introduced by Rep. Everett M. Dirksen (R-IL) that "none of the benefits of training or programs shall be denied on account of race, creed, or color." Although training remained mostly segregated, instruction for black students began at six schools, but quickly expanded to several more schools. Overall, the CPTP graduated around 2,000 black pilots.

Though the prejudice and setbacks these men and women, and millions of others, forced them to beat unfair odds, the legacy of Chicago's Black aviators proved that African Americans everywhere could rise to the top of their professions and become preeminent experts. Today's aviation owes an incalculable debt to these brave and brilliant people.



Challenger Air Pilots Association at the Robbins, Ill. airport, built by and for Black aviators from the materials CAPA found in the area.



Bessie Coleman, the predecessor and inspiration for the Black Chicago aviators who would follow in her footsteps.



Janet Harmon-Bragg, early Black woman aviator and advocate, she worked multiple jobs, including as a nurse, to buy planes that CAPA and others would go on to use for flight practice.



Willa Brown, advocate for Black, female aviators and desegregation of the aviation community. She co-founded the Coffey School of Aeronautics, integral to both the Black aviator community and to the Civilian Pilot Training Program, which helped train and supply many of the later Tuskegee Airmen.