

## Soaring to New Heights: Janet Harmon Waterford Bragg

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Photo: Smithsonian Institution Archives

Janet Harmon Waterford Bragg, a pioneering aviator, was one of the first African American female aviators and the first African American woman to have a commercial pilot's license.

Throughout her life, she had a diverse career, working as a nurse and pilot. But her dedication to flying allowed for other women of color to take to the sky.

Bragg was born on March 24, 1907, in Griffin, Georgia, to a family with African and Cherokee ancestry. After graduating from Episcopal boarding schools, she attended Spelman College and earned a nursing degree. In 1929, after college, she moved to Chicago to work at Wilson Hospital.

Bragg had always had an interest in aviation, and in 1933, she enrolled in the Curtiss Wright Aeronautical University as the only woman in a class of 24 Black men. While the university accepted Black students, classes were all segregated. Bragg learned to fly under the instruction of Cornelius Coffey and John C. Robinson, two African American pioneering aviators. Even though all of her classmates were of the same race, she faced discrimination from her peers because of her gender, but she proved herself capable. As one of the few students with a job, she bought a plane for them to practice on, earning their respect. She also helped to pay for the school's first airfield in Robins, Illinois. During her time at the university, she co-founded the Challenger Air Pilots Association, which connected Blacks that were interested in aviation, with Coffey, Robinson, and some of her classmates, out of the airfield in Robins. The association evolved into the Coffey School of Aeronautics, the first flight school owned and operated by African Americans, teaching Black pilots to fly.

After graduating from the Aeronautical University, Bragg earned her private pilot's license and continued to work for the pilots association. In 1934, the flight school moved to Harlem Airport in Oaklawn, Illinois, after a storm destroyed the original hangar. The school grew in the new location and in 1939, the school got the privilege of having the only Black Civilian Pilot Training Program, a government-sponsored flight training program, not out of a college.



Challenger Air Pilots Association at the Robins Airfield

Photo: National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution

In 1943, one of her white female flight students encouraged Bragg to apply for the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), a civilian female pilot organization part of the Army Air Forces. She met with Ethel Sheehy, assistant to the head of the WASPs, who sent her home without an interview. Sheehy was surprised to see a Black pilot saying “Well, I’ve never interviewed a colored girl for flying,” to which Bragg responded, “Well, we have plenty of them fly.” Some sources claim that during Bragg’s meeting, Jacqueline Cochran, head WASP, told her “It’s difficult enough fighting prejudice aimed at females without additionally battling race discrimination,” and advised her to look elsewhere. A few weeks later, she learned that she was rejected from the program because of her race. She also applied for the nurse corps but was also rejected because the “colored quota” had already been filled.

After being rejected by the Army, Bragg enrolled in the Tuskegee Institute's Civilian Pilot Training Program to earn her commercial pilot’s license. She completed the course, passed the written test, and took the flight test, but was denied her license because of her gender. She returned to Chicago and retook the test at Pal-Waukee Airport, where she earned her commercial license, becoming the first Black woman to do so.

Bragg remained active in aviation and nursing until her death on April 11, 1993. In 1946, she purchased a Super Cruiser and completed many cross-country flying hours. She married her husband Sumner Bragg in late 1951 and the couple opened and managed two nursing homes in Chicago. They ran the business until their retirement in 1972. Afterward, they moved to Tucson, Arizona, where Bragg volunteered at the Pima Air and Space Museum and helped with their Black Wings exhibit. She also wrote an autobiography titled *Soaring Above Setbacks: The Autobiography of Janet Harmon Bragg, African American Aviator*, which the Smithsonian Institution Press published in 1996. Janet Bragg’s persistence helped to open the skies for Black and female pilots.