

Getting to know African American Aviator: Willa Beatrice Brown

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Willa Brown in her Civil Air Patrol uniform

Although many are familiar with a number of early black aviators, such as Bessie Colman, James Herman Banning, C Alfred “Chief” Anderson, and the Tuskegee Airman, little is known about a number of other black aviation pioneers. Few books or articles focus on the contributions made by these male and female pilots, mechanics, and airport operators allowing their legacies to slip quietly into the past. This is the story of one such pioneer – Willa Beatrice Brown – whose efforts helped open aviation careers to African Americans.

Willa Beatrice Brown was born on January 22, 1906, in Glasgow Kentucky, the second child and only daughter of Hallie May Carpenter and Eric Brown. She attended Wiley High School, a desegregated school in South Terre Haute; she graduated in 1923. After high school, she enrolled at Indiana State Normal School, now Indiana State University, where she majored in business and minored in French. Prior to graduation, Brown accepted a teaching job at the segregated Roosevelt Annex in Gary Indiana. Brown taught typewriting, and stenography at the

school, sponsored the writing club, and served as the faculty advisor for the school's newspaper. During the summer, Brown returned to college in Terre Haute to finish her degree, which she received in 1931.

While working in Gary, Brown met Wilbur J. Hardaway, a black Republican, alderman who represented the city's 5th ward on the city council. Brown and Hardaway married on November 24, 1929, but divorced in 1931. Hardaway probably fueled Brown's desire to promote equal rights.

With her teaching duties over in the summer of 1932, Brown moved to Chicago where she held a number of jobs, mostly secretarial, in the private and federal sectors. In 1934, she met John C. Robinson, a black pilot and mechanic. This meeting would change her life. Robison introduced her to Cornelius Coffey. Robison and Coffey taught mechanics at the Curtis Wright Aeronautical School. At their urging, in 1932, the school admitted its first all-black class, which included numerous students including Willa Brown and Janet Waterford Bragg. Brown ultimately passed the master mechanics course.



Challenger Air Pilot's Association at Harlem airport

She joined the Challenger Air Pilots Association, serving, in part, as the organization's publicist. She hoped to get more African Americans interested in aviation. In 1936, for example, Brown walked into the *Chicago Defender* news room wearing jodhpurs, jacket, and boots and announced, "I want to speak to Mr. Enoch Waters," the paper's city editor. She asked the paper to provide publicity for a Challenger Air Pilots Association-sponsored air show. Waters not only provided publicity, but, intrigued by the petite, comely aviatrix, covered the event himself. As a reward for his help, Brown took Waters up in her plane. Waters, along with others Brown influenced, became a proponent of providing black pilots more career opportunities.

To encourage women to fly, Brown and other female pilots at Harlem airport established the Chicago Girls Flight Club. Brown, along with Coffey, Waters, and others also broadened the scope of the Challenger Air Pilots Association and formed the National Negro Airman Association of America on August 16, 1937; the organization soon renamed itself National Airman Association of America (NAAA).

Brown became Coffey's business partner when he opened the Coffey School of Aeronautics in 1937. She also continued her pursuit of a pilot's license. She received her solo pilot's license in April 1938, and two months later, on June 22, a private pilot's license, which allowed her to carry non-paying passengers in her plane. In response to an article written about her achievement, Brown said "When I passed the written test last month to get a private pilot's license, I was overcome with joy." On April 6, 1939, Brown received her limited commercial license, and in June 1940 her ground instructor license.



Harlem airport, Courtesy of www.aifields-freeman.com

On June 27, 1939, President Roosevelt signed the Civil Pilot Training Act into law. The law authorized the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) to train civilian pilots through educational institutions. By law this program had to include African Americans. In addition to training black pilots at six black universities, the program required that at least five percent of the trainees be non-college students. For the non-collegiate programs, the CAA required that a “responsible civic body” conduct the ground school and a “nearby commercial flying school” provide the flight program. The NAAA applied to the CAA; it planned to work through the Coffey School of Aeronautics to provide the flight training. Willa Brown worked tirelessly to get the NAAA accepted into the program. Her efforts succeeded, and in the fall of 1939, the CAA notified the organization that it had been selected as one of the training providers.

President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8974 on December 12, 1941, which transformed the CTPT into a wartime program, designed to train pilots for service in the military. As a result, the CAA barred women from the training classes and closed a number of the black training schools. Only Tuskegee Institute and the NAAA/Coffey school continued to train black students. Coffey and Brown’s school trained some pilots who became Tuskegee Airmen.

Brown was also instrumental in establishing the first desegregated Civil Air Patrol (CAP) unit in the country. After receiving approval from the U.S. Office of Civilian Defense, the 111th Flight Squadron of the Illinois CAP began operations in March 1942. Twenty-five pilots, mostly from Coffey and Brown's school, comprised the unit. Cornelius Coffey served as squadron commander, with a commission as a captain, while Brown held a commission as a second lieutenant serving as the adjutant.

When the war ended, along with its government training contracts, the Coffey School of Aeronautics closed its doors. Brown and Coffey married on February 7, 1947. The marriage lasted less than 10 years.

With the Coffey school closed, Willa Brown set her sight on a career in politics. In 1946, she became the first black woman to run for a congressional seat in Chicago's first district. She ran as a Republican and lost in the primary election. She ran and lost again in 1948 and in 1950. Brown subsequently went to work for the federal government.

Willa Brown married J. H. Chappell on September 12, 1955. She became active in his church after their marriage. She returned to the classroom in 1962, teaching at different Chicago public schools. She retired in 1971.

In 1971, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) appointed Brown to its Women's Advisory Committee on Aviation, the first black woman to join the group. President Lyndon Johnson had created the committee on May 4, 1964, to advise the FAA (then the Federal Aviation Agency) on problems and matters relating to women in civil aviation. Brown resigned from the board in 1974. She remained active in a number of aviation and social organizations after leaving the committee.

Willa Brown died from complications of a stroke in Chicago on July 18, 1992, at the age of 86. She received a number of accolades posthumously. In 2003, the Women in Aviation International organization listed Brown as one of the 100 most influential women in the aviation and aerospace industry. She was inducted into the Aviation Museum of Kentucky's Hall of Fame in 2003 and into the Illinois Aviation Hall of Fame in 2016.

Despite the fact that little is really known about Willa Brown, her pioneering efforts on behalf of African American pilots ensures her an important place in aviation history. Her determined efforts on behalf of black aviators and relentless advocacy to allow black pilots into the Army Air Corps helped lead to the organization of the 99th Pursuit Squadron, desegregation of CAP units, and, ultimately desegregation of the military. Her genuine love of aviation and desire to introduce the joys of flying to others inspired a generation of student fliers. In an era where many believed blacks did not have the aptitude to fly, Brown irrevocably proved them wrong.