

Discovery Theater

presents

Bessie Coleman: On Freedom's Wings...



an original play by Roberta Gasbarre

A REPRODUCIBLE LEARNING GUIDE FOR TEACHERS.

This guide is designed to help you and your students prepare for, enjoy, and discuss ***Bessie Coleman: Fylin' Free***. It contains background information, discussion questions and activities. Appropriate for ages 8-15.

Discovery Theater Artistic Director: Roberta Gasbarre
Learning Guide: Jacqueline E. Lawton

Discovery Theater programs are made possible, in part, by gifts from



The Smithsonian Associates

Guenther and Siewchen Yong Sommer

(202) 633-8700 • Info@DiscoveryTheater.org • DiscoveryTheater.org

See our website for tickets, location, directions, resources for teachers, and much more!

Who is Bessie Coleman?

Bessie Coleman, or "Queen Bess" as her fan called her, was the first African American woman ever to fly an airplane and the first African American to earn an international pilot's license. She became well known for her skill as a pilot and for taking daring risks with stunts.



Bessie Coleman was born in Waxahachie, Texas on January 26, 1892, or so we think. When Bessie became famous, she claimed to be about four years younger, saying she was born in 1896. She grew up on a small

Texas



farm in Waxahachie, Texas. She was one of 13 children and her family worked at cotton pickers. Even though the local school shut down during the long cotton-picking season so that children could help harvest crops, Bessie thrived on education and was an exceptional student.




When Bessie moved to Chicago to live with her brother her dream to become an aviator began to take shape. However, she faced two major obstacles. In the early 1920s, women pilots were rare and black women pilots were a virtual nonexistent. But that wasn't going to stop Bessie. She was determined! She set sail for France in November of 1920, and enrolled in a seven-month training course at the Ecole d'Aviation des Freres Caudron at Le Crotoy. There, she

received her license from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale in June of 1921 and became the first black woman in the institution's history to do so. Her first airshow was on September 3, 1922 at an event in Long Island, New York, which honored veterans of the all-black 369th American Expeditionary Force of World War I. Bessie continued to fly stunts for the next five years. She even started working to establish a school for young, African American aviators. However, on April 30, 1926, the plane that Bessie was flying in crashed. It turns out a wrench had slid into the gearbox, jamming the engine and causing the plane to spin out of control. Sadly, Coleman died before she was able to realize this dream.

However, her cherished legacy and many great accomplishments served as inspiration for many African American men and women. In the last year of her, Bessie did a series of speaking tours and traveled to schools, theaters, and churches all over the country. She spoke about her dream and passion for flying. She even showed film footage of her aerial stunts. Several years after her death, African American aviators formed a network of Bessie Coleman Aero Clubs. A new organization known as the Bessie Coleman Aviators Club, open to women pilots of all races, was founded in 1977. And every April, on the anniversary of Coleman's death, the Bessie Coleman Aviators, along with pilots from the Chicago American Pilots Association and the Negro Airmen International, fly low over Lincoln Cemetery in the Chicago suburb of Blue Island to drop flowers on her grave.



Did you know???






-  Waxahachie is a Native American word that means "cow creek" or "buffalo creek" and is not the name of a Native American tribe which is a common misconception.
-  Waxahachie is called the "The Gingerbread City" because of the large number of late Nineteenth Century Victorian-style homes and buildings remaining today.
-  Over 30 movies and television shows have been filmed in Waxahachie, including Born on the 4th of July, Places in the Heart, Prison Break, Tender Mercies, and Walker Texas Ranger.

The History of Whit Gold aka Cotton

The cotton plant has been around for centuries. The oldest cotton fabrics discovered by archaeologists were found in the Indus Valley of India (Pakistan) and are believed to have been cultivated around 3000 B.C. Egyptians and Arabs were also known to have worn and sold cotton. Even in the United States, as early as the 1500s, American Indians grew cotton. Then the Spaniards settled in Florida and raised cotton as well. It wasn't until 1730 that cotton was first spun by machinery. Then in 1790, Samuel Slater, an English mill worker, who migrated to America, built the first American cotton mill from memory. Improving upon the cotton mill, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, which separated the cotton lint or fibers from the cotton the seed. The cotton gin made it possible for large quantity of cotton to be separated, but it still had to be picked by hand. Bessie Coleman and her family picked cotton by hand. It was hard work and it took a long time. The average work day started at 5 o'clock in the morning and ended at 5 o'clock at night. On average, 450 pounds of seed cotton can be picked in one day by hand. In the late 1930's John Daniel Rust and Mack Rust (The Rust Brothers) developed a mechanical cotton picker, which allowed 8,000 pounds of seed cotton in one day.



Did you know???

-  There are about 500 pounds of cotton in one bale.
-  The major cotton producing areas in the United States are California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and Kansas.
-  These states are referred to as the Cotton Belt.
-  Texas, whose 3-year average production was over 6.2 million bales of cotton for the years 2006 through 2008, is the leading cotton-producing state.
-  The cotton industry earns \$27 billion in revenues and cotton's total economic

www.cottonsjourney.com/Storyofcotton/default.asp -- learn the History of Cotton.

www.ehow.com/how_2183356_pick-cotton-fields.html -- to learn how to pick cotton by hand.

Extra! Extra! Read All About the Chicago Defender!

Robert S. Abbott, a close friend and mentor of Bessie Coleman, founded The *Chicago Defender*. So when Coleman first appeared in an American air show on September 3, 1922, that the *Chicago Defender* newspaper called her "the world's greatest woman flyer!" Bessie was an instant hit! And it's now wonder, historians believe that the *Chicago Defender* is the most influential African American newspaper during the early and mid-20th century. At the height of the *Defender's* success, it is estimated that each paper sold was read by four to five African Americans or more than 500,000 people each week. Historians believe that the *Defender*, played a large role in the widespread "Great Migration" of African Americans from the South to the North. Have you heard of the Great Migration was? It was " movement resulted in over one and a half million southern blacks migrating to the North between 1915-1925. At least 110,000 came to Chicago alone between 1916-1918, nearly tripling the city's black population.



Did you know???



Abbott began the Chicago Defender with an initial investment of 25 cents, a press run of 300 copies, and worked out of a small kitchen in his landlord's apartment.

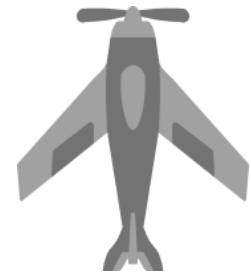


The Chicago Defender was the first black newspaper to have a circulation over 100,000, the first to have a health column, and the first to have a full page of comic strips.

www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/defender.html -- To learn more about Robert Abbott and the Chicago Defender

Famous First African Americans in Air and Space

Bessie Coleman is famous for accomplishing her dream to fly! She is the first African American female pilot and the first African American to receive a international pilot's license. What's more, her hard work and determination inspired others to pursue their own dreams. Here are a few other pioneers who defeated the odds and took to the skies:



First Military Combat pilot: Eugene Jacques Bullard, born in Georgia in 1917, was denied entry into the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War I because he was black. Well he didn't let that stop him. Instead, he enlisted in the French Flying Corps and received the Legion of Honor, France's highest military honor.

First astronaut: In 1967, Robert H. Lawrence, Jr. became the first black astronaut, but he died during a training flight and never made it into space. In 1983, Guion Bluford became the first black astronaut to travel in space. Looks as though Robert Lawrence paved the way! Then in 1992, Mae Jemison became the first black female astronaut! Bessie would have been proud!

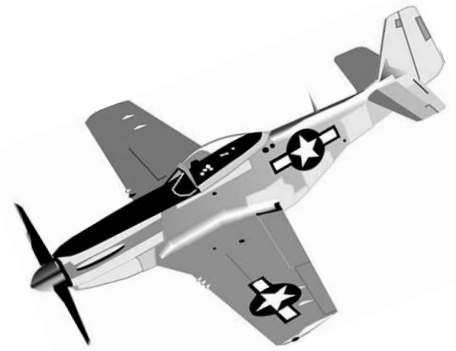
Flight around the world: In 2007, Barrington Irving became the first African American to fly around the world. He made it around the world in 96 days, 150 hours!

<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/bhmfirsts.html> -- To find out more about firsts by African Americas!

Who were the Tuskegee Airmen?

The Tuskegee Airmen were America's first black military airmen. These men were brave, smart, and highly skilled, but they faced the same racial discrimination that Bessie Coleman had. And much like Bessie they were determined to serve the United States during World War II. Some men learned to fly single-engine and twin-engine planes and others became navigators and bombardiers. In all, 994 pilots graduated from the Tuskegee Army Air Field in Tuskegee, Alabama between 1941 and 1946. Many of these courageous pilots served overseas in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. The men of Tuskegee were respected amongst each other, but not in the rest of the country.

When WWII ended in 1945, these pilots returned home heroes and were met with racism and discrimination. It wasn't until 1948 when President Harry Truman enacted Executive Order Number 9811 that steps were made to end racism in the military. This Order stated that equal treatment and opportunity in all of the United States Armed Forces.



www.tuskegeearmen.org/Tuskegee_Airmen_History.html -- to learn more about the Tuskegee Airmen.

<http://www.nasm.si.edu/blackwings/hstory/index.html> -- This online exhibit is about the early black pioneers of aviation who learned to fly despite all these formidable obstacles.

For Discussion Before the Show

Ask the students to think about dreams they have for their future. What kinds of activities or classes are they really good at in school? What are they interested in learning more about in school? What if someone told you that you couldn't accomplish your goal? What would you do? If they are already involved in activities after school that they really enjoy, ask them what would happen if someone told them that they could no longer participate because of their eye color or hair color. Ask them what they would do to overcome these obstacles, but stay true to themselves.

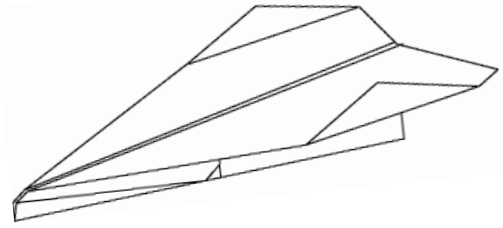
For Discussion After the Show

Who did you learn about *Bessie Coleman: On Freedom's Wings*? Why was life difficult for them? What are some of the challenges that they had to overcome? Who helped them along the way? How did they get their ideas? Who impressed you the most? Why? What good advice can you take away from the show?

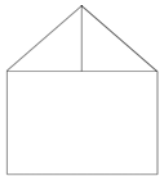
How to Make a Paper Airplane

Classic Dart

This plane is the classic schoolyard dart. It has short, compact wings and will fly straight as an arrow. It generally needs some up elevator along the back wing edges to fly properly.



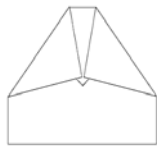
First, place your paper as shown on the left.



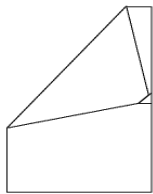
Then, pull the top right corner down toward you. Repeat with the top left corner.



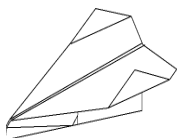
Next, fold the top point down toward you.



Then, fold the top left and top right corners down and toward you. Fold the tip up and over the two diagonal folds along fold to secure them in place.



Flip the plane over and fold the right side over onto the left side so that the outside edges of the wings line up. Also make sure the diagonal folds do not become untucked from the tip you folded up in the previous \step.



Fold the wings down along fold lines and bend the winglets back into triangles. You are ready to fly!

www.funpaperairplanes.com/Plane%20Downloads.html -- 5 free paper airplane designs with terrific video instruction.

Vocabulary

Determination – having a purpose or drive to achieve something or complete something.

Discrimination – the unfair treatment of a person or group because they are different from you.

Mentor – a trusted advisor or guide.

Obstacle – something that stands in the way.

Opportunity – a good chance for advancement or progress.

Racism – a belief that one race of people is better than another.

Related Resources

- **Fly High: the Story of Bessie Coleman.** Louise Borden and Mary Kay Kroeger. New York: Margaret K. McElderry, 2000.
- **Talkin' About Bessie: the Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman.** Nikki Grimes. New York: Orchard Books, 2002.
- **Bessie Coleman: First Black Woman Pilot.** Connie Plantz. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 2001.
- **Queen Bess: Daredevil Aviator.** Doris L. Rich. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.
- **Bessie Coleman: Daring to Fly.** Sally M. Walker. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 2003.
- **Distinguished African Americans in Aviation and Space Science:** Betty Kaplan, Miriam Sawyer Gubert, and Caroline M. Fannin.
- <http://www.bessiecoleman.com/> – Bessie Coleman fan site.
- http://www.gale.cengage.com/free_resources/bhm/bio/coleman_b.htm – Black History Month Website.
- <http://www.greatwomen.org/women.php?action=viewone&id=182> – National Women's Hall of Fame.
- <http://www.allstar.fiu.edu/aero/coleman.htm> -- Bessie Coleman on the ALLSTAR Learning Laboratory's – Blacks in Aviation

About Discovery Theater

Discovery Theater, the Smithsonian Institution's theater for children, has been dedicated to offering the best in live performing arts for young people since 1979. Each year, more than 50,000 Washington-area children and their adults visit DT (now located in the Smithsonian's S. Dillon Ripley Center on the National Mall in Washington, DC) to explore American history and cultures, folk tales from around the world, and exciting, accessible science and math programs in the company of puppeteers, storytellers, dancers, actors, musicians and mimes. DT performances unite ideologies, enact themes that reflect the diversity of its audiences, open avenues of self-reflection, and offer an enjoyable means for parents and teachers to demonstrate life's lessons.

DT frequently collaborates with distinguished partners such as The Library of Congress, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The Lemelson Center for Study of Invention and Innovation, and America's Jazz Heritage, A Partnership of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and the Smithsonian Institution. Some of our favorite programs are also going on tour, and our partnership with Round House Theater in Silver Spring, MD means that DT's special brand of educational entertainment for kids is more widely available than ever before. For details, call (202) 633-8700 or see www.DiscoveryTheater.org.

