

AirSpace Season 7, Episode 5: It Takes More Than One

Theme in then under

Matt: Welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Matt.

Emily: And I'm Emily. Back in the fifties and sixties, the flight attendant or stewardess, as they were known then, was the height of glamor, sophistication and prestige.

Matt: These young, thin, unmarried, and narrowly conventionally beautiful women were a huge marketing asset, selling the idea that airlines were exclusive and chic. They were also almost always white.¹

Emily: In the late fifties, a highly qualified woman, top of her training class, beautiful and poised, didn't understand why she wasn't being hired until an instructor told her it was because she was Black.

Matt: The lawsuit that followed opened the door to Black women being hired as stewardesses, but it was less of a floodgate and more of a trickle. We have the stories of a few of these women and the history of integration in the air, today on AirSpace presented by Olay.

Theme up and out

Emily: So it was in the 1930s that the job of the airline stewardess, which is really hard to say for me because they're strongly flight attendants in my head. Stewardesses or air hostesses was a territory in the job market solidly claimed as a -quote-unquote- women's job.

Matt: Although, actually right at the beginning of commercial air travel, airlines hired stewards instead of stewardesses. But a woman named Ellen Church convinced Boeing Air Transport, the precursor to today's United Airlines, that attendants on airlines with passenger service should be nurses and therefore women.²

Emily: Following World War II, there was a huge jump in technology, in spending power, and the ability for people to fly. And with that new boom, a job for women was quickly becoming synonymous with beauty, grace, and sex appeal.³

Matt: While they were no longer required to be trained nurses, the flight attendants of the 1950s were nonetheless expected to have a certain very specific and narrowly defined feminine appeal⁴

¹ *The Jet Sex* Victoria VanToch, University of Pennsylvania Press 2013, Kindle Edition pg 63

² *Femininity in Flight* Kathleen M Barry, Duke University Press, 2007 pg 18

³ <https://www.cntraveler.com/story/a-timeline-from-stewardess-to-flight-attendant>

⁴ *Femininity in Flight* Kathleen M Barry, Duke University Press, 2007 pg 36

And what that appeal was, was actually written down in hiring manuals and job requirements.

Emily: They had to have perfectly coiffed hair, flawless but subtle makeup, perfect grooming and no blemishes. So any flight attendant that made the cut and then gained too much weight, or got married⁵, or got older, say past the age of 32 or 35, or got pregnant, they would get fired immediately.⁶

Matt: To give a sense of how exclusive this group was, most airlines at this time accepted a lower percentage of stewardess candidates than Ivy League universities accepted students⁷.

Angela:⁸ As I'm sure a lot of people do know, or they should know that discrimination was a natural part of society.

Emily: That's Angela Tate.

Angela: And I am the Women's History Curator at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Emily: And in the requirements of all the airlines, racism was poorly hidden by coded phrases, setting beauty standards that were only achievable by white women. Things like saying no “broad noses” or quote-unquote “coarse hair.” Things like that.⁹

Angela: I think it's complicated. Both because they were the public face. Like if you look at a lot of history books around stewardesses and flight attendants, they show the ads and how a lot of airlines pushed and promoted themselves based on the beauty of their stewardesses.

And you can kind of think about how that dovetails with beauty standards, mainstream beauty standards of, you know, who was considered to be beautiful, who was not considered to be beautiful.

Matt: And even if women of color could meet these standards, all the airlines claim to be looking for some -quote- ‘special something’ that couldn't be put into words. If you didn't get the job, who's to say it wasn't just because you didn't have the ‘it’ factor, whatever it was,

Emily: Before the 1980s, the government was the one that was setting prices of flights, not individual airlines. So stewardesses, flight attendants, were used to market the individual airlines,¹⁰ and that's why there was such a high level of importance placed on using conventional beauty standards to draw in the mostly white market. And so the prettier, the more grace quote,

⁵ *The Jet Sex* Victoria VanToch, University of Pennsylvania Press 2013, Kindle Edition pg 42

⁶ *Femininity in Flight* Kathleen M Barry, Duke University Press, 2007 pg 47-49

⁷ <https://www.thecrimson.com/flyby/article/2016/6/29/acceptance-rate-lower-harvard/>

⁸ Interview with Angela Tate recorded November 21, 2022

⁹ *The Jet Sex* Victoria VanToch, University of Pennsylvania Press 2013, Kindle Edition pg 59

¹⁰ <https://clickamericana.com/topics/money-work/fly-girls-stewardess-job-requirements-of-the-50s-60s>

unquote, “graceful,” whatever that means to you and the more exclusive they could claim their stewardess corp to be based on a certain perception.¹¹ Airlines could then claim to be more exclusive, more prestigious and use that as their way of competing in the airline industry against other airlines.¹²

Matt: And we should point out that the airlines may be a great example of this, but they weren't the only industry that was behaving in this way. In this way, they are just reflecting a lot of the racism and sexism that was already rampant in other businesses with similar policies, but because they were actually advertising these women, we have great visual examples of this racism and sexism on display.

Angela: Of course, you know, this is why we celebrate firsts, the first woman to do this, the first Black woman to do this, et cetera, because discrimination was so widespread and was just a normal part of just the employment landscape.

Emily: The breakdown of this discrimination didn't really start to happen until this post-war era.

Angela: I do think that the desegregation of the military in 1948¹³ was also a turning point for the rest of the job sector of saying, ‘oh, well, if this federal institution, the military is saying that segregation is wrong and we're not supposed to do that. Maybe we should take kind of, kind of take note’ if there were visionary and, you know, leadership that was open minded and thinking more about the future and about the quality of the workforce as opposed to, you know, we're gonna discriminate against you no matter how talented you are, how educated you are.

Matt: But the airlines as they came of age in this post-war era, really held fast to that discrimination.

Emily: Right, Matt. So the very first Black woman flight attendant was a Cameroonian princess¹⁴ who was hired by a French airline, not an American airline, but a French airline to fly routes in colonial European Africa in 1957, but the United States wasn't very far behind.

Angela: The jet age as, as historians call it, the fifties and the sixties, was also this period of intense internationalism, you know, countries all over the world had airlines and they had stewardesses and pilots from their own ethnic backgrounds. So that was probably very much influencing what was going on in the United States at the same time.

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tj4ByStZ1bA&list=PLFDC16B72B15B51D7&index=18> ad for TWA and milk 1964

¹² *The Jet Sex* Victoria VanToch, University of Pennsylvania Press 2013, Kindle Edition pg 30

¹³

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/executive-order-9981.htm#:~:text=On%20July%2026%2C%201948%2C%20President,desegregation%20of%20the%20U.S.%20military.>

¹⁴

https://www.afacwa.org/world_s_first_black_flight_attendant_honored#:~:text=Doualla%2DBell%20Smith%20had%20no.world's%20first%20black%20flight%20attendants.

Matt: At this time, airlines in America were advertising for young women to join this glamorous position and see the world. And one of these ads caught the eye of Patricia Banks Edmiston¹⁵ in 1954.¹⁶

Patricia Edmiston:¹⁷ Well, I think back at that time, um, my parents had separated and I was in college at the time and I saw an advertisement in Look Magazine for the Grace Downs Air Career School. And I just thought it would be interesting if I get away and fly because most people of color back in those days didn't really have the money to be flying everywhere. So I just thought it would be a nice opportunity.

Emily: Patricia had no problem enrolling at Grace Downs in Manhattan, and she did really well in school. But when she graduated and the airline sent people to interview and hire graduates, Patricia had three interviews and no job offers.

Patricia Edmiston: I had graduated with really good grades. My average was about 95. I was interviewed by Mohawk, TWA and Capital Airlines. Mohawk was a regional, and of course, TWA and Capital were among the top commercial aircrafts, and I wasn't getting any response.

And one day when I was leaving the facility, one of the chief's hostesses stopped me and she said, I am very sorry to see you going through this. I, I don't like seeing you go through this. She said, but I have to let you know that the airlines do not hire Negroes in flight capacities.

Matt: It really hadn't occurred to Patricia that she would face this kind of discrimination in the North. The school was in New York City, shouldn't she be free from this?

And she had told a family friend about what she had been told, and that friend referred her to Harlem's Congressman Adam Clayton Powell.¹⁹

Patricia Edmiston: And Adam Clayton Powell referred me to the New York State Commission Against Discrimination, and they took the case, uh, Solomon Heifitz and Mary Brown were the attorneys who took the case.

Well, they did a lot of investigations. The statute of limitations for Mohawk and TWA had run out, but it held strong with Capital. However, although the statute of limitations had run out, they were the major airlines being investigated because I named them. The personal records began to be reviewed, and of course it was clear that this was a problem because there was no Blacks in flight with either of these airlines.

¹⁵ <https://archives.nypl.org/scm/21889#bioghist>

¹⁶ *The Jet Sex* Victoria VanToch, University of Pennsylvania Press 2013, Kindle Edition pg 58-59

¹⁷ <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/patricia-banks-edmiston>

¹⁸ Interview with Patricia Banks Edmiston recorded November 21, 2022

¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Clayton_Powell_Jr. Harlem Congress member 1945-1971

Emily: Around the same time, the NAACP had sort of noticed that there was a lot of this institutional racism, specifically in the airline industry with respect to airline flight attendants, stewardesses.

So they decided to try and do it from kind of a scientific perspective, or at least that's how I see this story in that they went to modeling agencies that catered to Black women and they hired Black models to apply to be flight attendants on major airlines.²⁰

And their hope was to see whether or not they would be hired. And it provided them an opportunity to file complaints and sort of collect the data against the airline industries to say, 'Hey, look, you aren't hiring Black women into your stewardess corps, and we want to file complaints against these airlines.' And so they use this as an opportunity to try and prove their case.

Matt: That effort was revealing but didn't actually receive a hearing. But it was clear to the airline industries that civil rights organizations like the NAACP and the New York Urban League were watching them and that they saw what their practices were.

So facing that pressure, several airlines filed new non-discrimination policies saying that they would hire Black women to be stewardesses. However, none of them actually did.²¹

Emily: While the investigation set off by Patricia's complaint, specifically named three airlines, Mohawk and TWA saw the writing on the wall and both hired or tried to hire Black flight attendants.

Matt: TWA's choice, Margaret Grant, was hired, but during her medical clearance she found out she had a medical condition that barred her from flying.²² Mohawk hired Ruth Carol Taylor.²³

Ruth took her first flight with Mohawk in February 1958, becoming the first Black flight attendant in America. However, Ruth stayed at Mohawk for only a few months before leaving to get married. Patricia waited for several years through investigations before she finally received a hearing.²⁴

Patricia Edmiston: The New York State Commission did investigations for, for five years. In 1960, they felt that they had enough information and Capital Airlines was taken to court and discrimination was proven, and Capital Airlines was ordered to hire me.

Emily: Patricia was hired by capital in 1960. She flew for about a year.

²⁰ *The Jet Sex* Victoria VanToch, University of Pennsylvania Press 2013, Kindle Edition pg 66

²¹ *The Jet Sex* Victoria VanToch, University of Pennsylvania Press 2013, Kindle Edition pg 64

²² The New York Times 07/11/1958 "Negro Air Hostess Resigns"

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1958/07/11/79456844.html?pageNumber=28>

²³ *The Jet Sex* Victoria VanToch, University of Pennsylvania Press 2013, Kindle Edition pg 70

²⁴ Also see, Marlene White v. Northwest Airlines, Inc 1961

But being hired was, but being hired was only the start of a different kind of discrimination. Rather than being kept out of the airline industry by the airlines themselves, she was facing discrimination and racism from coworkers and passengers.

Patricia Edmiston: But there, there was questions from the passengers. This gentleman got on the plane one day and he looked at me and he said, ‘oh, I’m surprised. He said, you must be from Northern India. And I very nicely and humbly said, ‘no, sir, I’m from Northern Africa.’ Well, he almost passed out. That poor gentleman. He almost passed out.

Emily: And from the places she stayed while flying.

Patricia Edmiston: I stayed in the Joy Motel. There was also a hotel in Tennessee and they bid for crews to stay at their locations. And this Joy Motel had outbid the hotel. So the hotel spread a rumor that the Joy Motel was integrating, and I caused a riot in Alcoa, Tennessee behind that.

And the airline was very upset about that because they said to me, you have a log book and in the back of that log book, when you travel south, it’s where you’re supposed to stay. I never noticed it. No one ever pointed it out to me. But from there on, when I flew south, they would have security meet me at the plane and take me to Black motels or hotels from there on in.

Matt: And the problem wasn’t just finding a place to stay while you’re on the road. Stewardesses were actually also required to live not far from the airport, which could be challenging if a lot of the neighborhoods near the airport were redlined and Black people weren’t allowed to live there.²⁵

Emily: But Patricia knew as one of the first, she needed to also be the absolute best and not give anyone any reason to doubt her behavior or character, or the airlines would use her as an excuse to never hire another Black flight attendant.

Patricia Edmiston: There was also so many things that put pressure on me, really, and I just felt, I honestly felt in my heart that I did a good job and that if how I presented myself did not allow other people of color to get hired, it probably would never happen. You know, I just felt that they could see that we could perform as well as any of my white counter counterparts.

Matt: Patricia left Capital after a year, but not because she didn’t do a great job and not even because of the discrimination. She had actually continued to go to college during the five years that her case was being investigated and she fell in love. She got married and she had to leave the airline.

Emily: After Patricia left Capital, there were several years where airlines hired very, very few, if any Black women.

²⁵ *Stars in the Sky* by Casey Grant, 2014 Wasteland Press, Kindle Version pg 48

Matt: In 1964, president Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, which among other things, banned discrimination in employment and made this the law of the land. This opened new doors for people of color in all industries, and all those Black women still filing complaints or suing to win a job as a stewardess now had another legal leg to stand on.

Emily: The airlines had no choice but to hire Black women for the job, and by the mid 1960s, most airlines had hired their first Black stewardess. One of those in this round of first hires was Patricia Murphy, Delta's first Black flight attendant

Pat Murphy:²⁶ I flew with Delta Airlines. I was hired in 1966.

Matt: Now, Pat hadn't actually applied to be a stewardess. She was originally hired to be a reservations agent, so when she was placed instead in the stewardess training program, she was excited but didn't actually know she was making history until she graduated.

Pat Murphy: When I graduated the flight school with Delta, I was taken aside, it was, this was, in Atlanta, uh, during the graduation and was told 'Pat, you will, you are the first African American lady that's flying with us.' So I was a little taken aback but it thrilled me a little bit. It, it got my attention on that area. But I was very grateful that I was hired and said that I was very grateful and they wanted me to fly with their company.

Emily: Shortly after Delta hired Pat, they started hiring more and more Black women and eventually some Black men to be flight attendants. Delta started with hiring just a few Black flight attendants, but as time went on, they started hiring more and more.

Matt: One of them was Casey Grant. And by the time she was hired in 1971, there were two other Black women in her class, and they all knew about the women who had come before them.

Casey:²⁷ But I knew about Pat, and Pat was a celebrity.²⁸ Pat is a very kind and very humble person, and so therefore she never took it as if she was, a big shot and she was, 'oh, I'm so important.' Never, ever, she was very, very, very ladylike, very humble. So I was, very anxious to meet the very first Black flight attendant and to see her as elegant and as beautiful as she was to walk down the hall and you would go. *gasp* it was a movie star. It was like, 'that's the first black flight attendant for Delta Airlines!' And she would embrace us warmly and she would be encouraging, and she always wanted to, to add, to ask how many more have there been, how many more? And we took that as a personal tally to see how many more had come in under us. And, uh, so no, she didn't realize that she was a trailblazer, But, we, I thought she was just a movie star when I met her.

²⁶ Interview with Patricia Grace Murphy and Casey Grant recorded November 17, 2022

²⁷ Interview with Patricia Grace Murphy and Casey Grant recorded November 17, 2022

²⁸ *Stars in the Sky* by Casey Grant, 2014 Wasteland Press, Kindle Version pg 53

Emily: The flight attendants themselves kept track as their numbers grew, but any official tally was never actually kept. And unless you knew someone who was already a flight attendant, it was easy to think the job was still only held by white women.

Matt: For example, when Casey was encouraged to apply in the seventies, she didn't think it was realistic for her

Casey: Well, my background is my father was in the Air Force, and so therefore I had started traveling at a young age. I started school in England. I lived in Africa, lived in California, and we settled in Illinois, and I thought the only way you could see the world was to join the service. But I was working at the University of Illinois in the president's office, and my boss suggested, you know, why don't you see about this stewardess. Well, *Ebony* or *Jet* had just had an article saying that a Black, a beautiful Black girl that was a nurse had applied to be a stewardess, and she was turned down. And so therefore I knew that, you know, that was not an occupation that I could be, I thought that I could be considered for.

Emily: Pat and Casey both started years after Patricia left Capital, but they still faced racism on the job.

Pat Murphy: If I was working on the first class area, one of the pilots, let's say the captain I remember one incident I couldn't serve him, because he didn't want me to serve him. My comrades, Uh, circled around me and said, look, we can come together as a unit. We can take care of this. And so they took care of it, and so I backed off. So to me, that part, unity with the cockpit crew was a little tough for me but after that happened with the female flight attendants it turned out to be wonderful because of the apologetic captain in the cockpit. He, he apologized and realized what he had done. Just because I wasn't the same color that he was. It turned out okay. It turned out fine.

Casey: But then there were some cases where we had to share rooms. And the ones that were prejudiced, you knew they were prejudiced because they would never when it came time for them to share a room with you. They wouldn't share the room with you. They would say, I'm gonna stay with the other white flight attendant. And at first you didn't recognize what happened. Until it happened to you about two or three times. And then the Black flight attendants, the few that were there, when we compared our stories, we realized what it was. They did not wanna take a shower after you and, uh, as if they had to stay with you, they wouldn't take a shower. And so, At that point, once again, you grew up, you realize you are not gonna let a narrow minded person dictate this job or your career.

Matt: Casey eventually wrote a book about her experiences²⁹ and the experiences of other Black flight attendants. She says, until she wrote that book, she hadn't heard about all of the other incidents her colleague had endured.

²⁹ *Stars in the Sky* by Casey Grant, 2014 Wasteland Press

Casey: The reason I feel that this story, which is told in my book, *Stars in the Sky*, and my passion about it is the Black flight attendants, trials and tribulations are not known. People see a beautiful Black flight attendant or a woman of color, and they don't realize the struggle, the struggle of opening that door. The rejection and the denial. They did not want to hire. So I felt I, and I still feel the need is the history. It's that we need to be recognized. We have our Tuskegee Airmen, we have other Black pioneers in aviation, and nobody knows the story of the Black flight attendant struggle and the strength that it took us to get the job, maintain, hold our heads up high and represent our race.

Emily: Outside of Casey's book and a few others, there's not a lot of information on the stories and lives of the early Black flight attendants.

Finding out who was the first at each airline and when they started, and even just basic demographic data of how many flight attendants were Black is really hard. Curator Angela Tate at the National Museum of African American History and Culture has a theory about why that is.

Angela: Marginalized communities, whether it's based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, they tend to have not been collected. And they also in turn did not see their lives as, you know, something that they should document and collect. And so then histories are always erasing and glossing over people that have been there and then, 'oh look, I just discovered this one person's story, they're the first.' And then we kind of get into this habit of like going from first to first to first. Whereas if you actually sat down and talked to the people, they'd be like, oh, I always knew them, or they were my mentor, or, oh, my parent introduced, or someone introduced me to them and they are the one that got me into this, into this field or this job sector.

I mean, that's kind of what runs through Casey's book the entire time of, 'oh, we were all connected. We all pretty much knew each other. Whenever there was a new class of flight attendants and there were Black women in the class, we were like, Hi, how are you? Let's connect.' And so I think that the, the concept of the first is because of the lack of institutional knowledge and the way the field of history or even how museums and archives have developed across time that have not paid attention to marginalized communities.

Matt: With Casey's help, Angela has collected Casey's personal papers and uniforms, as well as some of Pat's papers and uniforms and the uniform of Eugene Harmond,³⁰ Delta's first Black male flight attendant. They're not currently on display at the Museum of African American History and Culture, but they're working to preserve and present the collection.

Emily: In addition to telling their stories, and Casey's book, Patricia, Casey and Pat share the history of Black flight attendants with the help of an organization called the Black Flight Attendants of America, Inc.³¹ a group of current and former Black flight attendants that use their camaraderie and their influence to support one another and educate and encourage young Black people to pursue careers in aviation.

³⁰ <https://news.delta.com/delta-first-black-male-flight-attendant-eugene-harmond>

³¹ <http://www.blackflightattendantsofamerica.org/>

Matt: Casey, a few members of Congress, and the Black Flight Attendants of America Inc. were able to designate February 16th as Black Aviation Professionals Day³².

Emily: We could tell so many other stories about the many women and eventually men that made flight attending a career that is open to everyone.

Today there are about 110,000 people working as flight attendants in America, and about 13% are Black. Which is pretty close to the same percentage of Black people there are living in the United States.³³

Theme in then under

Emily: AirSpace is from the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. It's produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mixed by Tarek Fouda. Production assistance from Amy Stamm and Sofia Soto Sugar.

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Theme up and out

PRX audio logo

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<https://mcbath.house.gov/press-releases?ID=0BB25954-7909-484A-AC84-2DAF0CE6EE29#:~:text=February%2016%2C%202022,International%20Black%20Aviation%20Professionals%20Day.>

³³ <https://datausa.io/profile/soc/flight-attendants#demographics>