

Season 5 Episode 2 Leaving For Paris

*Theme music up and under*

Matt: Welcome to Airspace from the Smithsonian's National Airspace Museum, presented by Olay. I'm Matt.

Emily: I'm Emily.

Nick: And I'm Nick.

Matt: 100 years ago this year, Bessie Coleman became the first African American woman and the first woman with Native American ancestry to become a licensed pilot in the United States.

Nick: But she didn't earn that milestone here in the U.S., in part due to her being a woman, and in large part, due to her being a woman of color. Bessie had to travel all the way to Europe to get her training and license.

Emily: Today on AirSpace, we're looking back on Bessie's training and experiences in France and Germany in the 20s, and why she had to go so far to earn the knowledge to fly.

*Theme up and out*

Nick: So this is a big year in the history of people of color in aviation. It is the Centennial, the 100th anniversary of when Bessie Coleman earned her pilot's license. And that date was June 15th, 1921.

Matt: Right. So let's talk a little bit about who Bessie Coleman was. She was born in 1892 in Atlanta, Texas, the city in Texas, not the better known city in Georgia. When she was small, the family moved to Waxahachie, Texas. Then when Bessie was nine, her father George, moved to Oklahoma. He wanted to live on the reservation there, because he would have more rights because of his ancestry, which was either Cherokee or Choctaw, or maybe both. George wanted to take the family with him, but Bessie's mother, Susan, refused to leave. So Susan, Bessie, and the younger Coleman children remained in Waxahachie.

Emily: So in 1915 Bessie was 23, and she got a letter from her brother, Walter, inviting her to come stay with him in Chicago while she looked for work in Chicago. So she moved north, and eventually found work as a manicurist. Which is so far one of my favorite parts of this story.

Nick: So beginning with the confusingly named Atlanta, Texas, we are now laying our scene in Chicago, and picking up right around 1920.

Emily: So back in the 1920s, pilots didn't need a license to fly airplanes, which sounds bananas to me right now, but I'm sure it made sense back then.

Matt: So, you would basically apprentice with another pilot and learn everything that you needed to know from them. And it does sound crazy, I agree with you. But then if you think it wasn't that long before this, that you didn't have to go to medical school to be a doctor. You could apprentice with someone who was already a doctor, and then after a few years, you were called a doctor too. So I mean; pilot, doctor, both highly skilled professions that you just didn't need certification for up until a certain point.

Nick: And that's a really good point, that you didn't necessarily need a license. And the license is the thing that makes Bessie Coleman's story important. And part of the reason that she wanted to get the license is that, it was really important. It was really important from a visibility standpoint, she wanted to eventually open a flight school of her own, specifically so that the black community would have a place to learn this exciting new technology and exciting skill. So even though you didn't necessarily need a license, they didn't check every time you got into a biplane, it was *the thing* for her. It was the importance of the symbol that the license represented.

Emily: Right. But it wasn't so much that she couldn't get a license in the United States, it was that she couldn't find *anybody* to take her under their wing. haha (Nick laughs) She couldn't find anybody to provide her with that training the way everybody else was getting it in the United States. Everybody else was able to find somebody to help them with their training, except Bessie. And those barriers were coming from the fact that not only was she a woman, she was a person of color. And combining those two things, made it impossible for her to become a pilot, let alone get a pilot license. So I think one of the really powerful things about her insistence on wanting a pilot's license, was to really carve in stone and really have this tangible credential that says, "I can do this."

Nick: To help us unpack this, we spoke to one of our friends here at the museum curator, Dorothy Cochrane.

Dorothy Cochran: Okay. Hi. Yeah. My name is Dorothy Cochrane, and I am a curator for general aviation and aerial photography in the Aeronautics Department of the National Air and Space Museum.

It's not quite clear why Bessie decided she needed to go that far, except for the obvious, which is that as an African American and especially as a woman, where was she going to learn to fly? She couldn't learn to fly in the United States. She tried to learn to fly with some white flyers, and was unable to get any training from them. And so she sought the advice of Robert Abbott, who was the publisher for the *Chicago Defender*, highly influential African American newspaper at the time. And he basically just said, "You're not going to get

anywhere here in the United States, as you've already discovered. You need to go to France and you need to get your license over there." And so that's what she set her sights on.

Matt: So this is where World War I comes in, and the experience that Bessie's brothers had when they were abroad serving in the armed forces. They were in France.

Dorothy Cochran: They talked about being in France, and how different it was for African Americans over there. And they also talked about seeing women flying in France, and being able to fly. And so that was something that really peaked Bessie's interest.

Emily: So France at the time was much more welcoming to Black people than the United States, low bar, but it was more accommodating. And Bessie already had family connections in that she already sort of knew firsthand experiences from her brothers during World War I. So compared to the United States at the time, France seemed to be the place to be.

Dorothy Cochran: Well, the reason that they told her, her brothers and Abbott, told her to go to France, is because the racial situation there in France was very different from in the United States, was much more accommodating to people of other races, much more accommodating to Blacks in general.

Emily: So Dorothy mentioned Robert Abbott, who's the publisher at the *Chicago Defender*, and she mentions him a few times. And so there was this really interesting symbiotic relationship between Bessie Coleman and the *Chicago Defender*, in that they were kind of using Bessie in order to sell newspaper. And Bessie was using the *Chicago Defender* to raise money so that she could go to France and actually get her pilot's license.

Nick: Yeah. And so when we say that they were selling papers with headlines based on her ambition and achievement, it's not sensationalism in a negative sense. It's making a sensation in service of the mission that Robert Abbott and the *Chicago Defender* and Bessie all shared, which was to make inroads and bring attention to Black aviators.

Matt: You could say that their interests were pretty well aligned in this project.

Nick: Yeah. And earnest all the way around.

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Emily: So it's after World War I. Bessie has finally raised enough money, and it's in November of 1920 that she sets sail from New York heading to France. And so when she arrives in France, she's actually turned away from the first flight school that she approaches, because they're really reluctant to take on women into the school, because they've just had two women die in a training accident.

Dorothy Cochran: But then she learned about the Caudron Brothers School of Aviation, and the Caudron Brothers were very well known pilots and manufacturers of the era. In fact, the museum has a Caudron aircraft, a French bomber that was used in World War I. So they were very well known, and it was an excellent school of aviation. And so she was accepted there, and did enter the class. So that was just a marvelous opportunity for her, because this was a well established school. It was credentialed. People knew that it was a good school. And if you were able to graduate from there to complete the course, you did know how to fly. And so she had a seven-month course there and passed it, and then was able to be issued the license from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale.

Emily: So when Bessie finally finishes this seven-month course, just in case you missed it at the top, it is June 15th, 1921 when this happens. We're talking about it because it's the 100th anniversary. So you should remember this date because it's a big one.

Matt: So Bessie went back to the United States after she had her license. But once she got there, she realized that to do the things she actually wanted to do, she still needed more training.

Dorothy Cochran: After she got her license. She actually stayed in France for another month, and wrote that she had received training from a French ace, and then decided when she did come home, that she really didn't have the type of training that she needed to open a flight school, which was her ultimate goal. And to first to earn money to open a flight school, to give performances and exhibitions. So she actually went back over to France within a few months in February of 1922, and took more instruction in and around Paris. And then also went to Berlin, Germany and flew with former World War I German pilots and aces. And she actually did many flights over Berlin, and some of them were actually filmed. So she got much more training on then doing the types of spins and things like that, that she would do, and climbing turns and some rolling of the wings, and that sort of thing that she could then turn into flight exhibitions back in the United States.

Emily: So unfortunately, the newsreel footage of Bessie flying over Berlin has been lost to wherever those kinds of things get lost to. But she gave a lot of press interviews at the time, which was a really big part of her strategy, especially because one of her big goals was to get enough money to open a flight school so that other Black pilots, other Black female pilots wouldn't have to raise the money to go all the way over to France. They could actually get that training right here in the United States. So one of the things that she was doing to try and raise that money, was to perform in shows. But to do that, you need an airplane, but to do that, you need money. And so you just have this big cyclic problem of needing money to gain the notoriety, to gain the resources and the infrastructure you need to do the ultimate goal, which is: create a school.

Dorothy Cochran: You have to give her accolades galore for persevering to be able to do all this. And it's the whole mission, like you say, how did she earn the money? She got the idea, she latched onto it. "This is something I want to do now, how do I make it happen?" And she saw it through, she never stopped. She made it happen. So she was always there talking to people, getting what she needed, resources. And then she came through and actually got her license, and did start doing exhibition flying. There were long periods either from when she had accidents and had to recover, or from when she had no money where she was in Chicago thinking, making more money, contacting with people, trying to get funding, to be able to borrow another airplane and give another show. So you have to give her this incredible amount of admiration for pushing through. And it's such a tragedy that she was so close to really establishing a good exhibition career and possibly actually opening that flight school, when she was tragically killed.

Nick: Yeah. That brings us to the end of our story, which is tragic and cut short. Bessie was up in an airplane near Jacksonville, Florida on April 30th, 1926. She was a passenger. The plane was being flown by her mechanic, William Willis. Bessie was not wearing a seatbelt because she needed to be able to look up and over the edge of the plane to scout for a location for a parachute jump that she was going to do as part of the air show that she was flying the next day. About 10 minutes into the flight at about 610 meters, Willis lost control of the plane and Bessie was dropped out of the aircraft and killed. Willis was not able to recover, and he was killed in the crash.

Matt: Yeah. Later on, because Willis was not able to right the plane afterwards, it was speculated that there was some kind of mechanical problem, as opposed to pilot error. And they did find a wrench inside of the engine box, which maybe caused the problem.

*Music in and under*

Nick: So even though Bessie's career was cut short tragically, here we are talking about her 100 years later. And for excellent reason. In her short flying career, she had a huge impact. She inspired a lot of people to get into aviation who otherwise would not have necessarily thought to do so because they did not see anyone that looked like them until Bessie Coleman came around. There are flying clubs and schools named after her. There are pilots that heard her story and decided to fly for themselves. An aero club in Chicago flies over her grave every year in April, and airdrops flowers on it. And she's also still celebrated in France.

*Music up*

AirSpace is from the Smithsonian's National and Space Museum. It is produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mixed by Tarek Fouda. AirSpace is presented by Olay, and distributed by PRX.

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