



Willa Brown: Aviatix

During the early-to-late twenties and early thirties, many African Americans were beginning to experiment with aviation and took to the sky. This new adventure was not limited to males; in fact, there were many women who were flyers. To name just a few: Bessie Coleman, Janet Bragg and Willa Brown.

Willa Brown started her first career as a teacher and later got involved in aviation in the Chicago area. During her lifetime, she made important contributions to the field of aviation, politics, and civil rights. Willa was born on January 22, 1906 in Glasgow, KY. And later in life, she became a pioneer in the field of aviation with many “firsts.”

She became the first African American female to hold a commercial pilot’s license, and the first woman to hold a combination of commercial pilot’s licenses and mechanic licenses. In addition to these accomplishments, she held a masters degree from Northwestern University.

Much of her inspiration came from Bessie Coleman, who was several years before her time. As an African American woman, Bessie could not find anyone in the United States willing to teach her to fly - so she was forced to go to France and get an international pilot’s license. Bessie spent her early days in Chicago and was very well known within the African American community throughout the country as an accomplished pilot.

Willa started taking flying lessons in 1934 in Chicago at an Aeronautical University. Soon she became a member of the Challengers Air Pilots association and the Chicago Girls Flight club. Later she purchased her own airplane.

In 1937, she founded the National Airman’s Association of America whose primary mission was to gain admission to the military aviation. Within a period of three years, she and Cornelius R. Coffey started the Coffey school of Aviation. Within the next seven years, they had trained approximately 200 pilots. Many of these individuals would later join a group of Airmen who became known as the Tuskegee Airmen. She has been given much credit for efforts, which brought about the creation of the Tuskegee Airmen and eventually the integration of military flying in 1948.

Willa was also an active participant in the Civil Air Patrol and in 1941, she became the first African- American Officer and was later named National Coordinator of a Chicago unit. By 1943, Willa had obtained her mechanics licenses whereupon she became the first woman in the United States to hold both a commercial pilot’s license and a mechanics certificate.

In addition to these activities, she lobbied for the inclusion of African Americans in the Civilian Pilot Training Program. After World War II and the integration of the Military Forces, Willa taught school until the seventies. She passed away at 86 years of age and is remembered in the African American Community for her dedication to the promotion and integration of aviation in the United States of America.

