



Willa Brown (at right, with an unidentified aviator) was an early pioneer and avid promoter of aviation, earning her pilot's license in 1937. She was co-founder, with Cornelius R. Coffey, of the Coffey School of Aeronautics at Harlem Airport in Chicago, which offered expert flight instruction to blacks unable to obtain training elsewhere in the state.

Smithsonian News Service Photo courtesy of Harold Hurd



The Challenger Air Pilots Association, formed in 1931, was one of the first U.S. black flying clubs. Harold Hurd, standing beside a Davis D-1-K monoplane, was an active association member and a member of the first black class to graduate from the Curtiss-Wright Aeronautical School.

Smithsonian News Service Photo courtesy of Harold Hurd



Smithsonian News Service Photo courtesy of U.S. Air Force

In recognition of the need for more qualified pilots of all races, the Civilian Pilot Training Program was created in 1939 with federal funds. The program offered blacks an opportunity to receive flight training, though still on a segregated basis. Schools such as the Coffey School of Aeronautics, Washington, D.C.'s Howard University and Alabama's Tuskegee Institute participated in the program.

By 1941, 102 blacks had their flying licenses, a tenfold increase in the number of black American aviators in one decade, but still a minuscule segment of the tens of thousands of pilots in the United States. With war looming in Europe, the Army Air Corps decided to open military careers to blacks, activating the 99th Fighter Squadron in March 1941. By 1944, three additional air units joined the 99th, forming the well-known 332nd Fighter Group under the command of then-Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.

During World War II, the 332nd established an impressive combat

record. Serving primarily in Italy and North Africa, the group flew more than 15,000 combat sorties and downed 261 aircraft, winning the coveted Distinguished Unit Citation.

Participation in the war effort brought a new sense of pride to the black community, an expanded base for black involvement in aviation and a renewed call to end segregation in the armed forces. That call was answered in 1948 when President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981. It was a beginning. Today, thanks to persistent pioneers, blacks participate in all aspects of aviation, in careers ranging from airline pilot to design engineer and space shuttle astronaut.



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### Madame C.J. Walker

Business acumen was also exhibited by a woman whose name has been synonymous with beauty. Born in Delta, La., in 1875 to poor ex-slave parents; orphaned and married at fourteen, she was widowed at twenty with a young child to raise alone. She then moved to St. Louis where she supported herself and her daughter by doing laundry. There, she met and married a newspaper man, Charles J. Walker.

Madame C.J. Walker, as she became known, developed and manufactured cosmetics which she first began selling door-to-door through the South and Midwest. She invented the "hot comb" and her hair straightening process which initially brought her ridicule, but with which she eventually became the first black millionairess. Through her schools and correspondence course in beauty culture, she became the first black person in the modern world to develop a large manufacturing business.

Madame Walker had great admiration for educators and became a patron of six black youths every year whom she would send to Tuskegee. In addition, she donated thousands of dollars annually to indigent youths for college educations at other institutions. She offered Mrs. Bethune her friendship and funding for the college. Dismayed by the lynchings that were sweeping the country, she donated five thousand dollars to the National Council on Lynching. This remarkable woman died in 1919.

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