

Bessie Coleman

Born in 1892 in Texas, Bessie Coleman started out picking cotton. But her dream was in the sky.

Coleman had to go all the way to France to achieve it; no American flight school would take her. In 1919, she left for Europe and, in 1921, became the first person of African-American descent and the first person of Native American descent to become an internationally licensed pilot by the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale. Coleman received training from the Fokker Corp., and met with Anthony Fokker, one of the world's most distinguished aircraft designers.

Queen Bess, as she was called, returned to America to make her living barnstorming, or flying in stunt shows. Coleman also lectured and even opened a beauty shop to make money to buy a plane. At her shows, she would refuse to take to the air unless the crowd was desegregated and

everyone used the same gate.

Coleman bought a Jenny JN-4 in Dallas in 1926. Her mechanic and agent, William D. Willis, flew

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the plane back to Coleman in Jacksonville, Fla., making several stops for mechanical issues



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along the way. Coleman insisted on flying and, on April 30, fell 3,500 feet from the open cockpit to her death during a test flight. It was found a wrench used to service the engine had jammed the controls. More than

10,000 mourners attended her funeral in Chicago, which was presided over by journalist Ida B. Wells, a champion for equal rights.

Airport roads and memorials around the world honor Coleman, as do sev-



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eral schools and aviation awards. Mae Jemison, the first African American

female astronaut, took a picture of Coleman with her into space.

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