

# Bessie Coleman: Community Innovator Conversation Kit



Bessie Coleman Aero Club, organized by William Powell. National Air and Space Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

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## Bessie Coleman: Community Innovator



“I knew the Race needed to be represented...so I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviating.”

– Bessie Coleman (1921)

Bessie Coleman, around 1924. National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

Bessie Coleman (1893-1926) was the first woman of African American and Native American descent to receive her pilot's license in the United States. While working as a manicurist in Chicago, she was challenged about her future by her brother, a World War I veteran who taunted her with stories of French women flyers. She sassed back, "That's it. . . . You just called it for me!" But Black men were not welcome in aviation, let alone Black women. Unfazed, Bessie learned French, earned her pilot license in France, and returned to the United States to perform aerobatics in air shows in front of desegregated crowds.

Bessie Coleman enjoyed strong support from the African American press in her fight for racial and gender equality. When rejecting a movie role that required her to play an ignorant woman wearing tattered clothing, she said, "No, Uncle Tom stuff for me." Even with her untimely death in a plane crash in 1926, she continued to be a symbol for African American communities across the United States that dreamt of flying high.

Through the suggested discussions, students will explore Bessie Coleman's legacy, her commitment to her community, and how they can support change in their community.

"Well, because I knew we had no aviators, neither men nor women, and I knew the Race needed to be represented along this racist important line, so I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviating and to encourage flying among men

and women of the Race who are so far behind the white men in this special line, I made up my mind to try. I tried and was successful."

– Excerpt from "Aviatrix Must Sign Life Away to Learn Trade," *Chicago Defender*, October 8, 1921

## Driving Questions

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How do we bring change to our community?

As individuals, what do we have to offer our communities?

## Supporting Questions

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- What are the ways that you contribute to innovation in your community?
- Should you help affect change for a community that is not your own?
- What are the issues in your community that you would like to change?
- What barriers exist for women and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) in aerospace?
- What was life like for Bessie Coleman in the early twentieth century?
- What were attributes used to describe Bessie Coleman as an aviator and community innovator?

## Civic Learning Themes

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- **Rights and Responsibilities:** The freedoms, duties, and responsibilities that all Americans should exercise and respect as participants in our shared democracy.
- **Democratic Principles:** Principles such as equality, freedom, liberty, respect for individual rights, and deliberation that make up the founding ideals of our democracy. These principles, along with civic virtues, including honesty, cooperation, and attentiveness to multiple perspectives, apply to both official institutions and informal interactions among citizens.

- Civic Disposition and Values: The personal dispositions important in a democracy include concern for others' rights and welfare, fairness, reasonable levels of trust, and a sense of public duty.

## Learning Objectives and Aligned Standards

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This conversation kit follows the learning arc outlined in the [National Council for the Social Studies College, Career and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework](#).

**D2.His.2.3-5.** Compare life in specific historical time periods to life today.

**D3.4.3-5.** Use evidence to develop claims in response to compelling questions.

**D4.1.6-8.** Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging the strengths and limitations of the arguments.

**D4.7.3-5.** Explain different strategies and approaches students and others could take in working alone and together to address local, regional, and global problems, and predict possible results of their actions.

**D2.Soc.18.9-12.** Propose and evaluate alternative responses to inequality.

## Primary & Secondary Sources

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All conversation kit resources can be found in this [Learning Lab collection](#).

Individual links to resources are also included below or enclosed as an excerpt for your convenience.

- Images:
  - [The Bessie Coleman Aero Club](#)
  - [Bessie Coleman](#)
  - [Charter Members of The Ninety-Nines](#)

- Video:
  - [The First Female African American Pilot](#)
- Newspaper article:
  - "Aviatrix Must Sign Life Away to Learn Trade," Chicago Defender, October 8, 1921 ([enclosed](#))

## Facilitation Strategies & Discussion Formats

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### Background Information

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Aviator Bessie Coleman not only wanted to fly herself, but she also wanted to help bring Black communities into the current age through aviation. Bessie's sister Elois Coleman Patterson wrote an article about her sister that described Bessie's commitment to helping Black people across the United States become aviators themselves:

"Bessie barnstormed across the country and undertook a rigorous program of speaking engagements.... When Bessie appeared over the town in which she was reared, Waxahachie, Texas, she was permitted to use the university grounds of the whites for her exhibition flying. She refused to exhibit unless her people were allowed into the grounds through the front entrance, although they were separated once inside the grounds... She decided to make an all-out effort to establish a school where she could train young Negro men to fly."

– Excerpt from *Brave Bessie* by Elois Coleman Patterson

Black people were rejected from aviation schools across the United States in the early 20th century due to racist views and laws. Bessie applied to many US flight schools and was rejected from all of them, sometimes on the basis of being Black, and sometimes being both Black and a woman. This lack of opportunity is what lead her to France:

"She was refused by each aviation school to which she applied, sometimes because of her race and sometimes because she was both a Negro and a woman. She took her quest to Robert S. Abbott, a founder, editor, and publisher of the Chicago Weekly Defender. He advised her to study French, and Bessie promptly enrolled in a language school in Chicago's Loop. That accomplished,

he assisted her in contacting an accredited aviation school in France. She planned to obtain certification and return to the United States to open an aviation training school for young blacks... Bessie made two trips to Europe, returning to Chicago from the second one in 1922...holder of a certificate from the FAI [Federation Aeronautique Internationale, the flying school that issued Bessie's license]... She put on an air exhibition in 1922 at Checkerboard Field, today known as Midway Airport, Chicago, after which she received many calls from young Negro men, anxious to learn to fly. Bessie had obtained her certificate at great personal expense and sacrifice. She told prospective students that they had to wait until either some forward-thinking blacks opened a training school or until Bessie herself could give enough demonstrations and accrue sufficient money to undertake opening a school herself."

– Excerpt from *Brave Bessie* by Elois Coleman Patterson

Bessie Coleman had many nicknames, including the gendered "aviatrix." These nicknames included "Brave Bessie" and "Queen Bess"; many different people saw her as brave, successful, a risk-taker, and determined. These attributes inspired people across the United States, especially after her untimely death in a plane crash. Thousands of people attended her funeral in Jacksonville, Florida, including activist and journalist Ida B. Wells, and thousands more visited her remains as they lay in state in both Orlando, Florida, and Chicago, Illinois. Bessie Coleman Aero Clubs, like the one run by William J. Powell, sprung up around the country. These clubs promoted aviation awareness in the Black community. Both men and women were welcome to apply. Powell became a talented visionary and promoter of Black involvement in aviation. Five years after Bessie's death, the first all-Black Air Show occurred in California, with an estimated 15,000 spectators attending.

White women also struggled to find slots in aviation clubs and aviation, though they had more success due to the color of their skin. The first woman to receive her pilot's license in the United States was a white woman, Harriet Quimby, about a decade before Bessie took to the skies. One of the first aviation clubs for women would become the international women's organization "The Ninety-Nines," which was open to any woman with a pilot's license "for mutual support, the advancement of aviation, and to create a central office to keep files on women in aviation." Though inclusive of women from the United States and around the world, the early members of The Ninety-Nines were predominantly white. Women continued to break barriers throughout the 20th

century, but the trend of white women gaining access to spaces first continues to this day.

## Preparation Notes for Facilitators

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- Gather and distribute resources listed above for the classroom.
- Prepare for facilitating open-ended, difficult conversations. Each classroom and facilitator has techniques unique to them. If you are looking for further ways to develop these types of conversations, please explore the following resources:
  - [“Preparing Students for Difficult Conversations”](#) from Facing History and Facing Ourselves
  - [“Starting With Ourselves: Preparing for Tough Classroom Conversation”](#) from Learning for Justice
  - [“Difficult Dialogues”](#) from Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching
  - By cultivating an open, honest, and respectful space for dialogue year-round, students and facilitators will be in a great starting place to begin conversations around Bessie Coleman and her legacy.
- This conversation kit uses the thinking routine "See/Think/Wonder." Learn more about how to use this thinking routine in your classroom:
  - (Video) [See/Think/Wonder](#) in the Museum from the National Gallery of Art
  - (Article) [“See, Think, Wonder”](#) from Facing History and Facing Ourselves
  - (Article) [“See, Think, Wonder”](#) from the Harvard Graduate School of Education

Depending on your class size, knowledge of class behavior, and your favorite discussion strategies, use the following strategies to help mold conversations about Bessie Coleman as a community innovator in your classroom. Use these in tandem with the background information, the extension ideas, and other resources.

**\*A note on grading strategies:** We'd recommend gauging student engagement in being able to interpret the objects, and potentially connect to their daily lives.

## Option 1. Large Group Discussion: Who was Bessie Coleman?

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- Introduce the topic.
  - Potential introduction: "Today, we are going to explore the story of Bessie Coleman, the first woman of African American and Native American descent to earn a pilot's license in the United States."
- Have students watch the Smithsonian Channel video about Bessie Coleman:
  - [\*The First Female African American Pilot\*](#)
- Afterward, bring up the photo of Bessie Coleman:
  - [\*Bessie Coleman\*](#)
- With the group, use the routine "See/Think/Wonder" to explore the photo of Bessie Coleman. Ask each question one at a time:
  - "What do you **see** in this photograph?"
    - These should only be observations, such as "I see a woman on a plane," or "I see a photograph in only one color".
    - Repeat or rephrase the observations being shared, such as "Student X sees a propeller."
    - Things they may see or notice: time period, clothing (pilot), confident pose, determined look, African American person.
  - "What do you **think** is going on in this photograph?"
    - When a student responds, ask the follow-up, "What makes you say that?"
    - Repeat or rephrase what they think, such as "Student X thinks that in this image, a pilot is getting ready to fly. What makes you say that?"
    - Tell students a little about the photograph after they view it. "This is a photograph of Bessie Coleman, the first woman of African

American and Native American descent to be a licensed pilot, shown here on the wheel of a Curtiss JN-4 "Jennie" in her custom-designed flying suit (circa 1924)."

- "What do you **wonder** about this photograph?"
  - Repeat what students wonder out loud, and make connections between what they wonder now, and what they saw and thought in the image.
  - Tell students a little more about Bessie Coleman, depending upon what they are wondering (refer to the Background Information section for more connections).
- Wrap up the conversation.
  - Potential wrap-up: "Bessie Coleman was a confident, successful flyer; the first woman of African American and Native American descent to earn their pilot's license. In this image, we see a confident professional aviator standing on the wheel of an aircraft. Bessie was not only an aviator but also a community innovator. A community innovator is a person that affects positive, impactful change in their community."

## Option 2. Small and Large Group Discussion: Who is represented?

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- Introduce the topic.
  - Potential introduction: "Today, we're going to view some photographs of aviation clubs that started near the time that the first licensed Black woman pilot, Bessie Coleman, was alive. We'll look closely at the photographs, ask questions, and see if these photographs can tell us more about the time, place, and situation when these photographs were taken."
- Pair students in groups of 2-4, and have them examine this photo of the Bessie Coleman Aero Club:
  - [The Bessie Coleman Aero Club](#)
- Have students use the routine "See/Think/Wonder" to explore the photograph.

- Prompt students with each question, and then have students answer in their small group:
  - "What do you **see** in this photograph?"
    - Have students write down what others in the group saw in the photograph.
    - Things they may notice: time period, clothing (pilots), group of people, some are sitting/standing, some are smiling, different genders, all are African American.
  - "What do you **think** is happening in this photograph?"
    - Have students listen to each other, and the student listening should ask for evidence with the question, "What makes you say that?"
  - "What do you **wonder** about the photograph?"
    - Have students write down their answers for what they wonder individually.
    - After, have the students share what they wondered with their group.
- Ask the small groups to share with the larger group what they **saw, thought, and wondered**, and collect their answers in a large format that everyone can see.
- Ask students to look for similarities and differences they might have noticed.
- After sharing out to the larger group, have students compare the photograph to this photograph of the first meeting of the aviation club The Ninety-Nines:
  - [Charter Members of The Ninety-Nines](#)
  - Give students some background on The Ninety-Nines: "This is a group photograph of many of the charter members of the women pilots' organization The Ninety-Nines, photographed seated at Curtiss Field, Valley Stream, Long Island, New York, on November 2, 1929."
  - Ask the students to contemplate the follow questions, and share with the larger group:

- "What do you **see/notice**?"
- "What similarities do you notice?"
- "What differences do you notice?"
- "What do you **wonder** while comparing the two paragraphs?"
- Things students may notice:
  - Those in both groups were interested in supporting each other and having fun; one photo is of multiple genders and all African American people, and one image is of all white women. Both are from a different time period from today.
- Wrap-up the conversation.
  - Potential wrap-up: "Though there were aviation clubs for both white men and white women, many African Americans weren't welcome. Bessie Coleman inspired aviation clubs to form in different communities across the United States. African Americans of different genders formed these aviation clubs. If you were to start one today, what sort of club would you form to help your community, and who would be the members of your club?"

### Option 3. Large Group Discussion: What are the qualities that make a community innovator?

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- Introduce the topic.
  - Potential introduction: "A community innovator is a person that affects positive, impactful change in their community. Change can come in a variety of forms, including social, environmental, political, and more. Bessie Coleman was one such community innovator. We're going to take a closer look at an article written in an African American-run newspaper about Bessie Coleman and explore how she is presented as a community innovator."

- Hand out copies of the newspaper article: "Aviatrix Must Sign Life Away to Learn Trade," *Chicago Defender*, October 8, 1921
- While reading this article, have students think about the following questions:
  - "What are some of the words or attributes used to describe Bessie and her life as a pilot?"
  - "What are some ways that you would describe Bessie?"
- After reading, have students write attributes and descriptions on post-it notes, and post them in a central space.
  - Students may notice the following descriptions/attributes in the article: risk-taking, determined, successful, not satisfied, courage, nerve, ambition, charming, responsible.
- Have students read the attributes listed, and answer the following questions as a group:
  - "Are these attributes that make a successful community innovator? Why or why not?"
  - "Are there attributes that are not currently represented that you think would describe a community innovator? Why or why not?"
  - Potential extension question: "Who wrote this article, and who was the intended audience? Would the attributes be different if this article was published in a white newspaper?"
- After discussing the attributes and descriptions of Bessie Coleman as a group, have students think individually about who a community innovator might be today. This community innovator could be a person from anywhere, and the student does not have to know the person. Ask them to list the attributes they think make them a community innovator.
- Then, have the students gather in groups of 2 to 4 and share who they chose, and the reasons they picked them as a community innovator. In small groups, students should ask each other:
  - "What made you choose those attributes?"

- "Is the way they are affecting change in their community good? Bad? Why?"
- "How would you affect change if you were in their place?"
- Wrap-up the conversation.
  - Potential wrap-up: "Bessie Coleman helped innovate her community by taking risks, being determined and brave, and never being satisfied until African Americans were able to fly as easily as white people in America. Many different attributes can help change your community, and not everyone does things the same way."

## Extension Ideas

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- After using either Option 2 or Option 3, or both options, have students explore how they can create change in their communities:
  - Have students pick one topic that they are passionate about.
  - Research if that topic is discussed, presented, or represented in their community
  - Have students ask the 3 Y's:
    - "Why might this [topic, question] matter to me?"
    - "Why might it matter to people around me [family, friends, city, nation]?"
    - "Why might it matter to the world?"
  - Plan what tools (media, outreach, speaking, conversations) could be used to spread the word about the chosen topic.
  - Present their plan to fellow students, and have students critique their plan.
- Explore the story of Mae Jemison, the first African American woman to go to space.

- Ask, "What are the similarities and differences to Bessie's story?" "What changed between Bessie's time and Mae's?" "Have things changed since then, why or why not?"
- Explore the stories of women and femmes of color in aviation and aerospace, and look for attributes that made them successful, or that people describing them thought made them successful.
  - Ask, "Are they the same as Bessie's? Different?" "Do all successful community innovators have to have the same attributes? Why?"
- Bessie Coleman died at a young age, doing what she loved. Even though it is challenging to consider, have students write a letter to a family member or friend, answering the question:
  - If you died today, what would you want your legacy to be?

## Supplemental Resources

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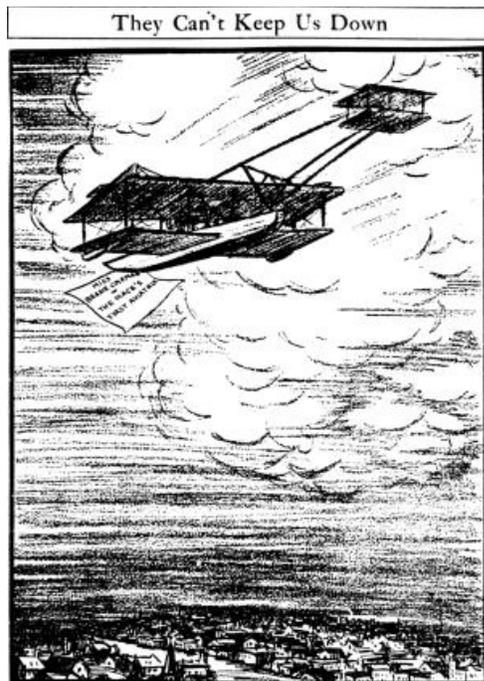
- Related Smithsonian Learning Lab collections:
  - [\*\*Athletes and Aviators: Women Who Shaped History\*\*](#)
  - [\*\*Let Women Fly: Female Aviators and Astronauts\*\*](#)
  - [\*\*Scientists, Inventors, and Entrepreneurs: Women Who Shaped History\*\*](#)
- National Air and Space Museum Resources:
  - [\*\*"Teacher Guide: African American Pioneers in Aviation, 1920-Present"\*\*](#)
- Articles:
  - [\*\*"Overlooked No More: Bessie Coleman, Pioneering African-American Aviatix"\*\*](#) from *The New York Times*
  - [\*\*Bessie Coleman\*\*](#) from the Barry Hilton Pioneers of Flight Gallery at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum

- [“Bessie Coleman: Barnstorming Through Barriers”](#) from the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum
- [“She Had a Dream: Mae C. Jemison, First African American Woman in Space”](#) from the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum
- [“Black Wings: The Life of African American Aviation Pioneer William Powell”](#) from the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum
- Websites:
  - [The Ninety-Nines](#)
  - [Black Wings: African American Pioneer Aviators](#) from the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum
- Books:
  - [Queen Bess: Daredevil Aviator](#) by Doris L. Rich (1993)

*This conversation kit was authored by Rebecca Ljungren at the National Air and Space Museum. Learn more at [womenshistory.si.edu](http://womenshistory.si.edu) and [airandspace.si.edu](http://airandspace.si.edu).*

## Supplementary Materials: "Aviatrix Must Sign Away Life to Learn Trade," *The Chicago Defender*, 1921

**Activity 1: CARTOON — THEY CAN'T KEEP US DOWN**



**Please note:** This newspaper article has been re-typeset to improve readability. No wording or punctuation has been altered in the process. The original article appeared on page 2 of the *Defender*. It was centered just under the masthead.

**THE CHICAGO DEFENDER**

### AVIATRIX MUST SIGN AWAY LIFE TO LEARN TRADE

**Miss Bessie Coleman Walked Nine Miles Each Day While Studying Aviation**

Miss Bessie Coleman, 4533 Indiana Avenue, the only feminine aviatrix of the Race in the world, arrived in Chicago Saturday direct from France where she has just completed a ten months' course in aviating.

Miss Coleman was seen by a *Defender* reporter at her home. When asked why she took up the game of flying, she said: "Well, because I knew we had no aviators, neither men nor women, and I knew the Race needed to be represented along this racist important line, so I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviating and to encourage flying among men and women of the Race who are so far behind the white men in this special line, I made up my mind to try. I tried and was successful.

**Not Satisfied Yet**

"But I shall never be satisfied until we have men of the Race who can fly. Do you know you have never lived until you have flown? Of course, it takes one with courage, nerve and ambition to fly. And, too, age and health are to be given great consideration. But I am thankful to know we have men who are physically fit: now what is needed is men who are not afraid to dare death."

Miss Coleman paused a moment and with a charming smile, she continued: "I first went to Paris and decided on the school. But the first to which I applied would not take women because two women had lost their lives at the game, so I went to another school in the Somme Crotcy, the city where Joan of Arc was held prisoner by the English. There I finished my course, took the examination and passed; then afterwards I still I still kept flying to perfect myself. Later, I left the school in the Somme and attended another in

Paris where I had lessons under an 'ace' who had brought down thirty-one German planes during the world war. Here I decided on my plane, which is a Neuport de Chasse, 130 horse-power, and with which I shall give exhibition flights in America and other countries."

**Japs Buy From France**

When asked how did the darker races of China and Japan compare with the races of other countries in aviating, Miss Coleman replied: "Japan is greatly interested in the air. She is buying planes from England and France. China also is doing her bit in this direction, but both countries are far behind the others. 'I saw France's fine Goliath airplanes, the largest built in the House of Fairman, equipped with two Samson motors which carry fourteen people. They are not built as passenger carrying planes; they are fitted out as fighting planes. Only people who are flyers are permitted to see them. Flying is as popular in Europe as automobiling is in America. Kings own their own their private planes just as our President owns his car."

**Better to Fly High**

When asked how she felt while flying so high, Miss Coleman replied that she felt more safe in an aeroplane than an automobile. "I have flown as high as 5,000 feet. Of course, 1,000 feet is high enough for traveling if you are sure of your motor, but the higher you fly the better chance you have in case of accident. In school I saw a pupil killed instantly; it was a terrible shock to my nerves, but I never lost them; I kept on going. "When you first enter the aviation school there you must sign away your life, that is, you must sign a contract agreeing to assume all responsibility and risk. They are not responsible for your life; however, I signed the contract and my determination to complete the course impelled me to walk nine miles a day every day to school for ten months. "We must have aviators if we are to keep pace with the times" Miss Coleman concluded. Any one desiring information concerning aviation or aviation schools may see Miss Coleman.

## Article Transcription, "Aviatrix Must Sign Away Life to Learn Trade," The Chicago Defender, 1921

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**Description of political cartoon accompanying the article:** Airplane flying through the clouds. Seemingly attached to the bottom of the airplane are the words on a piece of paper that read: "Miss Bessie Coleman – the Race's First Aviatrix". The caption above the cartoon reads "They Can't Keep Us Down."

**Please note:** *This newspaper article has been re-typeset to improve readability. No wording or punctuation has been altered in the process. The original article appeared on page 2 of the Defender. It was centered just under the masthead.*