



Bessie Coleman

January 26, 1892 - April 30, 1926

Died: Jacksonville, Florida

Interment: Lincoln Cemetery, Blue Island, Illinois

Bessie Coleman died on April 30, 1926, when a Jenny she was testing over Jacksonville, Florida, threw her from the open cockpit at about two thousand feet. She was thirty-four. The mechanic, William Wills, stayed with the plane and died in the wreck. She had not been wearing a seat belt; she needed to lean out to study a field for the next day's show. Born in Atlanta, Texas, on January 26, 1892, one of thirteen children in a family that picked cotton, she saved for Chicago and then discovered that no American flight school would take a Black woman.

Robert Abbott of the Chicago Defender told her to learn French. She did, sailed, and in 1921 earned an international pilot's license from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale at the École d'Aviation des Frères Caudron in Le Crotoy - the first Black woman in the world to hold one. She came home to barnstorming because airlines and the Army were closed. She refused to perform for segregated crowds when she could set terms, talked of a school for Black aviators, and bought the surplus biplanes that killed as many early pilots as they made famous.

Chicago was the city she claimed between shows: Bronzeville halls, the Defender's pages, a sister's spare room. Jacksonville was a booking, not a home. The wreck burned. Her body came north by train.

Thousands filed past at a Chicago funeral. She is buried in Lincoln Cemetery in Blue Island, Illinois. The school she wanted was built by other hands, later.

Services

Died in an air crash at Jacksonville, Florida, on April 30, 1926. Funeral in Chicago. Interment at Lincoln

Cemetery, Blue Island, Illinois.

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