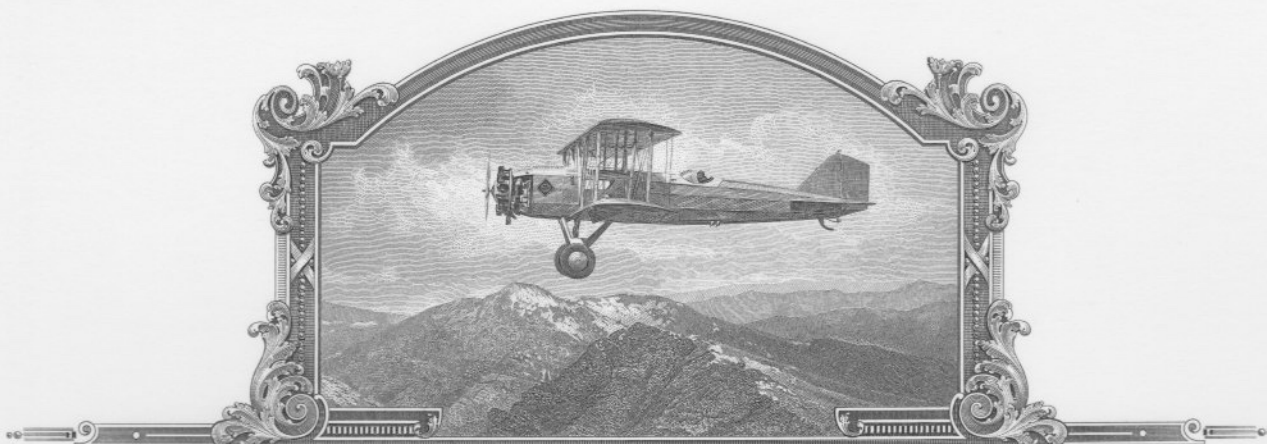




AMERICAN COMMEMORATIVES



BESSIE COLEMAN

Bessie Coleman, the first African American to earn an international pilot's license, was born in Texas in 1892. Even though she had little formal education, Miss Coleman's quick mind and ambitious spirit made her determined to "amount to something."

She saved her earnings from work as a laundress to put herself through a year of college, and in 1915, she moved to Chicago and discovered her love for aviation. There were no black aviators in the area, and when no white pilots would teach her to fly, she enrolled in an aviation school in France.

Miss Coleman received her F.A.I. (Fédération Aéronautique Internationale) license in 1921. After six months in Holland, France, and Germany learning aerobatics, she returned to the United States with a vision of opening an aviation school for all races. "Queen Bess," as the black press called her, thrilled spectators with stunt flights and parachute jumps; however, it was during practice for a 1926 exhibition in Jacksonville, Florida, that Miss Coleman was killed. As she and fellow pilot William Wills flew over the area in her worn-out JN4 "Jenny" from World War I, Miss Coleman leaned out to pick the site for her next-day parachute jump. Suddenly, the plane dived and then flipped over, throwing her out. Moments later the plane crashed to the ground killing Wills also.

Thousands of people attended a memorial service for Miss Coleman in Chicago, and over the years, her reputation has

grown as a heroine of African American women as well as early aviation. The vintage plane shown top center was engraved in 1929 by Harold Osborn. The allegorical vignette depicting a more modern form of aviation was engraved by Jaroslav Kisely in 1967. Bessie Coleman is honored in these stamps, engraved by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, and issued on April 27, 1995, at Midway Airport in Chicago, Illinois. Stamp artist Chris Calle of Connecticut based his illustration on a photograph of Bessie Coleman's French pilot's license.

