

TEACHING GUIDE

Bessie Coleman (1892 – 1926) *Fearless Fly Girl*

By: Sterling T. Ashby
Version 1.0

Suggested for grades 2 - 7
Ages 7 - 12

SUMMARY

Tearing up the skies with her daredevil dives, barnstorming Bessie "Queen Bess" Coleman flew low and zoomed high. Audiences gasped when Bessie performed barrel rolls and the wings of her plane touched the tips of the clouds like a bird on high. Bessie was the first Black woman to earn a pilot's license in America. No flight school would accept her in the U.S. because she was Black, so she learned to fly in France and became the first American woman to hold an international pilot's license. Bessie performed spectacular air shows across the U.S. and her fearless spirit and flare for drama made her queen of the air. Ever focusing on achieving her goals, Bessie never let the barriers of segregation and racism defeat her ambition of becoming a successful pilot.

BIOGRAPHY

- <http://www.hiatoys.com/bessie.html>

THEMES

- Believe in and follow your dreams – even when others laugh.
- Do not be afraid to be the first to accomplish a goal.
- Life holds infinite possibilities for those willing to imagine and pursue them.
- Ordinary people can live super ordinary lives if they challenge themselves and strive to achieve their goals.
- Overcoming adversity, in particular, poverty, racism and discrimination, can be done.

KEY DATES

It is appropriate to teach students about Bessie Coleman year round. However, a few key times to highlight her life and achievements may include:

- Black History Month: February (USA, Canada); October (UK)
- National Women's History Month: March (USA); October (Canada)
- Diversity Awareness Month: October (USA)

- Bessie Coleman's birthday: January 26, 1892

PREPARING TO INTRODUCE THE TOY

The following may help place Bessie Coleman's story in the context of a student's life today:

- What career would you like to pursue when you are older? Why do you want to pursue this career? What would you do if you were told you could not pursue this career because of something you could not change about yourself? What would you do?
- Locate Texas, Illinois, France and Germany on the world map.
- Find a picture of a French Nieuport plane on the Internet.
- Have you every flown in an airplane before? What do you have to learn in order to fly an airplane?
- Do you speak any languages other than your native language? How long did it take you to learn this new language? Do you think it would be difficult to learn how to fly a plane in a language other than your native language?
- What do you think life would be like in the early 1900s? For women? For African-American women? For Native Americans?
- Name three ways your life is different from Bessie Coleman's life in the early 1900's.
- Name three challenges that you must overcome in order to accomplish your career goals.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions can be explored while learning about Bessie Coleman:

- How would you describe Bessie Coleman's life as a child?
- Why did Bessie Coleman's father leave Texas to go to Oklahoma? Why would life have been different for him in Oklahoma than it had been in Texas?
- How old was Bessie Coleman when she first starting working? What type of work did she do?
- What types of jobs did other African-American women in the early 1900s have?
- What types of jobs did other women in the early 1900s have?
- Was it unusual for Bessie Coleman to move to Chicago?
- What role did African-American men play in WWI? Why is this important? What influence did this have on Bessie Coleman?
- Where did Bessie Coleman get the idea to fly?
- Who laughed at Bessie Coleman's dream? Why did they laugh?
- Why did Bessie Coleman have to go to France?
- What challenges would Bessie Coleman have faced in France?
- How do you think Bessie Coleman felt when she returned home from France?
- Why did Bessie Coleman go to Germany?
- Why do you think Bessie Coleman was such a popular pilot?
- Describe Bessie Coleman's personality.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

- Discuss examples of other well-known African-American women who were the first to accomplish a noteworthy goal. What are common challenges they faced? What are common themes their lives highlight?
- Create a "week in the life of Bessie Coleman" journal.
- Discuss examples of other women aviators who have done extraordinary things. What were some of their challenges?
- The Bessie Coleman action figure comes with goggles, scarf, flight hat, and map. What is missing? What else might Bessie Coleman need to have a successful flight?
- Create a passport and travel to France and Germany. Plan your trip. What might you see when you arrive? What might you learn? How would your experience be different if you were Bessie Coleman?
- Take a trip to an aviation museum.
- Create an art project highlighting planes flown in the early 1900s.
- Learn more about the lives of African-Americans in the early 1900s in America and in Europe.
- Learn 10 words related to flying in French.
- Debate the resolution: Bessie Coleman's path to become a licensed pilot was more challenging than Amelia Earhart's.
- Write a 5 page story describing a fictional dinner party you host for Bessie Coleman, Amelia Earhart, Danica Patrick and Mae Jamison.

LEARN MORE ABOUT BESSIE COLEMAN

- PBS, The American Experience: Bessie Coleman:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/flygirls/peopleevents/pandeAMEX02.html>
- Picture of stamp and other information: <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~davide/bessie.html>
- Find-A-Grave profile for Bessie Coleman: <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=coleman&GSfn=bessie&GSbyrel=all&GSdyrel=all&GSob=n&GRid=19750&>
- Bessie Coleman web page: <http://www.bessiecoleman.com/default.html>

LEARN MORE ABOUT FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

- Gwendolyn Brooks - the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize:
<http://www.literaryhistory.com/20thC/BrooksG.htm>
- Cora Brown - the first African-American woman elected to a United States state senate:
http://www.aaregistry.com/african_american_history/837/Cora_M_Brown_motor_city_politician
- Shirley Chisholm - the first African-American woman to campaign for the U.S. presidency: http://www.gale.com/free_resources/bhm/bio/chisholm_s.htm

- Althea Gibson - the first African-American Wimbledon tennis champion:
<http://www.altheagibson.com/biographical.htm>
- Sarah E. Goode - the first African-American woman to hold a patent:
<http://www.famous-inventors.com/sarah-goode.html>
- Madame C.J. Walker - the first African-American millionaire:
<http://lkwdpl.org/wihohio/walk-mad.htm>

LEARN MORE ABOUT FEMALE AVIATORS

- Nancy Bird: http://www.ctie.monash.edu.au/hargrave/nancy_bird_walton_bio.html
- Jackie Cochran:
http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Explorers_Record_Setters_and_Daredevils/cochran/EX25.htm
- Amelia Earhart: <http://www.ameliaearhart.com/>
- Amy Johnson: <http://www.ninety-nines.org/johnson.html>
- Harriet Quimby: <http://www.sonictech.net/customers/gia/>
- 'Baroness' Raymonde de Laroche:
<http://www.ctie.monash.edu.au/hargrave/laroche.html>
- Valentina Tereshkova: <http://www.astronautix.com/astros/terhkova.htm>

ABOUT THE TOY MAKER

Starting at age seven, the Founder of History In Action Toys was an avid collector of comic books. In fact, he loved collecting comic books so much, he braved a 20 minute bus ride with his five year old sister in tow to downtown Philadelphia just to get the latest issue in his favorite series. His fondness for collecting and a Christmas shopping experience inspired him to create his own collectible. In 2003, the Founder was shopping for a Christmas present for a friend's son and wanted to buy an unusual toy. He finally purchased a doll of a famous scientist and was struck by the toy's educational quality.

When the child opened the toy, he looked at his father, asking him who this person was. His father explained that he was a famous scientist and the boy stared at the doll in amazement. Later, he put the toy in a special place in his room. Seeing the excitement and wonder on the boy's face gave the Founder an idea. Using real heroes from history, he created a series of action figures that were fun, positive role models, whose real-life stories would awaken both a child's imagination and appeal to the kid within us all. History in Action Toys was born!

ORDER THE TOY

History in Action Toys
c/o Titus Venture Group, LLC
P.O. Box 11015
Washington, DC 20008
<http://hiatoys.com/index.asp>