
Dolores Nicholson

Willa Brown
(1906-1992)
Aviator, activist, educator

A pioneering aviator, Willa Brown was the first African American officer in the Civil Air Patrol (CAP). In 1943, she was the only woman in the United States who simultaneously possessed a mechanic’s license and a commercial license in aviation. She was employed as president of the National Airmen’s Association, the Pioneer Branch, located in Chicago. A tireless advocate of aviation, Brown was instrumental in integrating the aviation industry; she is also remembered for training some of the most celebrated African American pilots of World War II.

Willa Beatrice Brown was born on January 22, 1906, in Glasgow, Kentucky, to Eric B. Brown, a minister, and Hallie Mae Carpenter Brown. Her parents moved the family to Indianapolis, Indiana, when Brown was about six years old. They later moved to Terre Haute, Indiana, where Brown received most of her education, graduating from Sarah Scott Junior High School in 1920, and from Wiley High School in 1923. After high school she attended Indiana State Teachers College, where she received a bachelor of science degree in business in 1927. Brown began to teach in Gary, Indiana, immediately after graduating from college. Five years later, she moved to Chicago and began teaching in the city’s public schools. In 1934, Brown began postgraduate studies at Northwestern University. Three years later she obtained a master’s degree in business administration. Brown was married three times, first to Wilbur Hardaway, an alderman in Gary, Indiana; then to Cornelius R. Coffey, a certified flight instructor and an expert aviation and engine mechanic; and finally to the Reverend J. H. Chappell. After marrying Chappell in 1955, she became very active in the West Side Community Church in Chicago. Brown had no children. She retired as a public school teacher in 1971.

In addition to her various teaching positions, Brown secured numerous other jobs in Indiana and Chicago after receiving her college degree. She served as head of the commercial department for Roosevelt High School in Gary, Indiana, (1927-32); secretary to Calar Paul Page, director of the Chicago Relief Administration (1932-33); social service worker, Cook County Bureau of Public Welfare (1933); and cashier for Walgreen Drug Company (1933-35). Brown held two federal civil service positions—clerk-stenographer for the U.S. Department of Immigration and Naturalization (1936-37), and clerk-typist for the U.S. Post Office Department (1936-37). She was also secretary and laboratory assistant to Julian H. Lewis, the first African American to serve on the faculty of the University of Chicago’s medical school, in the Department of Pathology at the University of Chicago (1937-38); secretary and receptionist to Theodore K. Lawless, a dermatologist (1938-39); and secretary to Horace R. Cayton, director of the Works Project Administration (WPA) Sociological Study of the Negro in Chicago (1939).

Brown had begun to pursue her interest in aviation while attending Northwestern University in the mid-1930s. She signed up for flight lessons with a man named Fred Schumacher, who gave lessons at the Harlem Airport in Oak Lawn, a Chicago suburb. She exercised her business acumen there by managing Brown’s Lunch Room, a small sandwich shop. She undertook additional training from Dorothy Darby and Colonel John C. Robinson and received a master mechanic’s certificate in 1935 from the Aeronautical University, located in the Chicago Loop.

Subsequently, she studied aviation with Lieutenant Cornelius R. Coffey (who was to become her second husband), earning her private pilot’s license, which permitted her to carry passengers, on June 22, 1938. She passed her examination with a grade of 96 percent. Brown became affiliated with a flight service located at Harlem Airport, for which she
provided ten-minute entertainment jaunts for curious adventurers who paid a dollar to go up in an airplane. Her involvement with aviation soon expanded into administration and activism. Brown became a member of the Challenger Air Pilots Association, one of the first African American pilot organizations, founded in 1931 by Colonel John C. Robinson. The pilots owned their own hangar, located at the Harlem Airport. Brown served as chairperson of the education committee of the group, which included, among others, some of Robinson's students who graduated from Curtiss Wright Aeronautical University in Chicago. Robinson, one of the first African American graduates of Curtiss Wright Aeronautical University, had earlier succeeded in convincing the school to train African American pilots. The school, recognizing his outstanding record, also agreed to let him teach, with the stipulation that he only have African American students.

School of Aeronautics Founded

Brown along with her husband Cornelius R. Coffey and journalist Enoc P. Waters, Jr. founded the National Airmen's Association of America in 1939. The same year the association elected her as its national secretary, and she also began to teach aviation subjects for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Adult Education Program (1939-40). She received her Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA, now FAA) ground school instructor's rating in 1940. Also in 1940, Brown and Coffey established the Coffey School of Aeronautics. Brown was director of the school during its first two years of existence. Brown's education in business administration served her well because, in addition to teaching at the school, she handled administrative and promotional responsibilities. The Coffey School of Aeronautics became defunct in 1945 after World War II.

During this same period, Brown taught aviation mechanics for the Chicago Board of Education and was elected president of the Chicago branch of the National Airmen's Association of America and vice-president of the Aeronautical Association of Negro Schools. Brown, an activist for racial equality, used her administrative positions to successfully petition a reluctant U.S. government to integrate African Americans into the U.S. Army Air Corps. She was also an advocate for the inclusion of African Americans in the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP), a government-funded aviation training program initiated in 1939 and designed to prepare a reserve supply of civilian pilots who could be called upon in the event of a national emergency.

Brown was widely respected in the white male-dominated field of aviation. This is attested to by the fact that in 1940 she was chosen by the U.S. Army Air Corps and the Civil Aeronautics Administration to participate in an experimental program for the admission of African Americans to the U.S. Army Air Corps. Admiration for her abilities was demonstrated again when the U.S. government appointed her federal coordinator for two Chicago units of the CPTP. Brown achieved the rank of lieutenant in Squadron 613-6 of Illinois in 1942, making her the first African American officer in the Civil Air Patrol. In her capacity as lieutenant in this squadron, as noted by Jesse J. Johnson in Black Women in the Armed Forces, "she organized more than 1,000 young people who also marched in military and civilian parades. Brown was adjutant of this squadron; Captain Coffey was commander."

The majority of the CPTP government contracts that went to blacks were awarded to black colleges between 1939 and 1943, among them West Virginia State College, Delaware State College, Hampton Institute, Howard University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State College, Lincoln University (Missouri), Lincoln University (Pennsylvania), and Tuskegee Institute, the only school to train African American officers. Brown, however, was awarded contracts to train African American pilots at the Coffey School of Aeronautics and Wendell Phillips High School, two non-college units. As director of the Coffey School of Aeronautics, she administered federal contracts valuing sixty thousand to one hundred thousand dollars annually.

Advocacy Career in Aviation Launched

Inspired by the life of her late predecessor, aviator Bessie Coleman (1896-1929), Brown enlisted the assistance of Chicago Defender editor Robert Abbott when she embarked upon her career as an aviation advocate. During the early 1930s Abbott was financially sponsoring tours of African American aviators to African American colleges and universities, where they encouraged students to get involved in aviation. He was also lobbying Congress to include African Americans in federally sponsored aviation programs. The U.S. military forces were segregated; African Americans were denied enlistment in the Air Corps, and there was no indication that the government would award contracts for the training of African American pilots. Brown also promoted the efforts of Chauncey Spencer (son of Anne Spencer, poet and Virginia's literary salon queen of the Harlem Renaissance), and Dale White, two licensed pilots and members of the National Airmen's Association (a black organization) who flew from Chicago to Washington in an outmoded airplane and lobbied for the inclusion of African Americans in the CPTP. Brown traveled throughout the country encouraging young African Americans to take up aviation, and she also went to Washington, D.C., to persuade the federal government to award CPTP contracts for the training of African American pilots. Chicago Defender city editor Enoc P. Waters, Jr. covered the majority of her recruitment activities and the air shows she performed to stimulate the interest of prospective aviators.

Brown trained some of the most distinguished African American pilots of World War II; several of the men she trained in aviation mechanics went on to become members of the now legendary Tuskegee Airmen of the Ninety-ninth Pursuit Squadron, the military's first African American pilots.

From 1935 when Willa Beatrice Brown joined other supporters in organizing a memorial flight to Bessie Coleman to pay homage to the first internationally licensed American pilot until her death, she was an advocate for aviation. After the closing of the Coffey School in 1945, she established
children’s flight clubs to stimulate interest in careers in aviation. For many years she remained active in the National Airmen’s Association, the Civil Air Patrol (Illinois wing), Women Flyers of America, the National Aviation Training Association, the International Women’s Air and Space Museum, the OX-5 Pioneer Aviation Club, and the Tuskegee Airmen’s Association. In addition to her other efforts, Brown was the first African American woman to run for a U.S. congressional seat, making an unsuccessful bid as a Republican in 1946 and then again in 1948 and 1950. In 1947, Brown campaigned for the position of Chicago alderman, also unsuccessfully. Remarkably, she continued to teach in the Chicago Public School System until 1971. In 1972, she was appointed to the Federal Aviation Administration’s Women’s Advisory Board in recognition of her contributions to aviation in the United States. Brown was proud of her accomplishments, and she clearly had a very positive effect on African Americans in the field through her achievements as aviator, aviation instructor, and aviation activist.

Brown died of a stroke at the University of Chicago’s Bernard Mitchell Hospital on July 18, 1992. She was eighty-six years old. She is survived by three brothers, one of whom remained by her side until her death.

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Elizabeth Hadley Freyberg

Marie Bryant
(1919-1978)
Dancer, singer, choreographer, dance instructor

Mississippi-born Marie Bryant was one of the most vivacious black dancers in the United States. Her career soared just before and during the early years of World War II, a period in entertainment characterized by exciting bands playing in big cities like Los Angeles and New York. Bryant did not become a superstar, but not for lack of talent, drive, or ambition. She and Lena Horne are examples of Cotton Club performers of the 1940s whose screen careers were limited by Hollywood. At that time, the film industry was afraid to use black actors in large parts for fear of displeasing white audiences, particularly in the South. Blacks were given parts as domestics, slapstick comedians, or solo performers whose spots could easily be eliminated in areas where their presence might offend. Along with her work as a Cotton Club performer, Bryant had a very successful career as a singer and dancer in such musical shows as Jump for Joy and Beggar’s Holiday. Other aspects of Bryant’s talent are preserved in the many film performances of stars whom she worked with as teacher, coach, and choreographer.

Marie Bryant was born in 1919, in Meridian, Mississippi, where she spent the first six years of her childhood. Her father, John R. Bryant, was a railroad chef. The Bryant family left Meridian for New Orleans, where Bryant grew up surrounded by the sights and sounds of jazz. It is no wonder that she learned to sing and dance at a very early age. Singing in church and at socials gave Bryant the practice and exposure she needed to excel. At age ten, she made her debut at a church social doing an impersonation of her idol, Josephine Baker. Baker later became Bryant’s good friend, confidante, and mentor. Mary Bruce was her dancing teacher, and as a child she danced in Bruce’s annual Regal Theater show in Chicago.

Cotton Club Performances Begin

In 1934, at age fifteen, Bryant made her professional debut with Louis Armstrong at Chicago’s Grand Terrace Cafe. The Grand Terrace was to Chicago what the Cotton Club was to New York, and she became a featured performer in the spectacular floor shows that were the club’s major attractions. In 1935, singer-dancer Bryant was appearing regularly in a Los Angeles club, making seventeen dollars a week. She was working with the then-unknown Lionel Hampton. Her dancing, singing, and acting made her one of the most versatile performers in show business. Bryant was a
Exactly How "Black" Are Black Americans? According to Ancestry.com, the average African American is 65 percent sub-Saharan African, 29 percent European and 2 percent Native American. Advertisement. And for our African-American male guests, there has been still another astonishing fact revealed about their paternal ancestry— their father's father's father's line—through their y-DNA: A whopping 35 percent of all African-American men descend from a white male ancestor who fathered a mulatto child sometime in the slavery era, most probably from rape or coerced sexuality. And no matter what your features are—your shade of brown, your hair texture, the