



Willa Beatrice Brown

Born January 22, 1906
Glasgow, Kentucky

Died July 18, 1992
Buried in the
Lincoln Cemetery
Chicago, Illinois

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Willa Beatrice Brown: An American Aviator, by Severo Perez.

Producer, writer, director and editor, Severo has produced a video documentary about the life story of Willa Brown and early black aviation. The video includes other extraordinary individuals who helped shape this part of Civil Rights history. Her efforts were directly responsible for the creation of the renowned Tuskegee Airmen, which led to the integration of the U.S. military services in 1948. (www.script-postscript.com)

Sculpture and Artwork of Willa Brown

Bobby Scroggins, Associate Professor, University of Kentucky Art Department, has a Master's Degree in Fine Arts. He has 17 years experience as a university professor and also teaches at the Kentucky Governor's School for the Arts. As a member of the Lyman T. Johnson Monument Committee, Scroggins was commissioned to sculpt a likeness of Mr. Johnson, who was the first African-American student enrolled at the UK School of Law.

Thank you to the Kentucky General Assembly, the members of the Kentucky Black Caucus, Senator, Gerald Neal, Representatives Reginald Meeks and Robert Damron, members of RSETA, Inc., Dr. Anne Butler of Kentucky State University, the Governor's Office of Local Development and the students and scholars who have permitted our organization to do this type of research in the preservation of Kentucky's African-American history.

Honoring one of Kentucky's little known pioneers in black aviation. Dedicated to her profession as a pilot, mechanic, instructor and fighter for equal rights. The first black female to receive a U.S.-issued pilot's license. She instructed approximately 2,000 students as pilots - nearly 200 of which went on to become Tuskegee Airmen cadets and instructors at Tuskegee Institute, Alabama.



**Willa Beatrice
Brown-Chappell
a Kentucky Aviation
Pioneer**

Presented and Produced by
the RON SPRIGGS EXHIBIT OF TUSKEGEE AIRMEN
Historical photos and facts provided by the family of Willa Brown,
Severo Perez, Black Wings website and
the United States National Archives.



Willa Beatrice Brown was born in 1906 in Glasgow, Kentucky. She graduated from Wiley High School in Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1923; attended Indiana State Teachers College; and was, at age 21, the youngest high school teacher in the Gary, Indiana, schools.

In an era harsh for both women and African Americans, she sought great challenge. Influenced by aviatrix Bessie Coleman, in 1934 Willa began flight lessons at Chicago's Aeronautical University. She studied with Cornelius R. Coffey at the racially segregated Harlem Field in Chicago.

By 1935, Willa received her master mechanic's certificate, joined the Challenger Air Pilot's Association, joined the Chicago Girl's Flight Club, and enrolled in a master's program at Northwestern University.

In 1937, airman's certificate No. 43814 made her the first African American woman to be licensed as a private pilot in the United States. She also received her MBA from Northwestern and co-founded, with Coffey, the National Airmen's Association of America to promote interest in aviation... and to help get black aviation cadets into the U.S. Military as pilots.

Willa formed the National Airmen's Association of America, the first black aviators' group in 1940 after receiving her pilot's certificate. With her husband, Cornelius R. Coffey, Willa opened the first flight school owned and operated by blacks – the Coffey School of Aeronautics in Oak Lawn, a Chicago suburb. The school closed after World War II.

In the '20s and '30s, the U.S. armed forces did not allow African-Americans to become pilots. The school helped convince the government that blacks could successfully be pilots. That effort forced the War Department to look differently at the situation.



In 1940, Willa advocated the inclusion of African-Americans in the Civilian Pilot Training Program. In 1941, she was named federal coordinator of the Chicago unit of the Civil Air Patrol civilian pilot training program, the first African-American officer in this integrated unit.

The Coffey School was selected to provide black trainees for the Air Corps' pilot training program at Tuskegee Institute. As school director, Brown was instrumental in training more than 200 students who went on to become the legendary Tuskegee airmen.

At the request of the U.S. military, the school conducted a test program aimed at proving that blacks could become successful pilots and flight instructors. That program led to the creation of the 99th Pursuit Squadron at Tuskegee Institute, the military's first black pilots.

Willa was a great leader in the push to get the ban lifted on African-American pilots in the armed forces. She was also coordinator of war-training service for the Civil Aeronautics Authority. And in 1943, she became the first woman in the United States who possessed both a mechanic's license and a commercial license in aviation.

In 1955, Willa married the Rev. J. H. Chappell, and taught school until 1971. In 1972, she was appointed to the FAA Women's Advisory Board. Her love for aviation continued until her death in 1992 at age 86.

In 2002, Willa was named one of Women in Aviation's 100 Most Influential Women in Aviation and Aerospace. Willa Brown Chappell's accomplishments as aviatrix, business leader, and teacher will continue to inspire generations to come.

In 2003, Willa Brown was inducted into the Aviation Museum of Kentucky's Hall of Fame.



WILLA BROWN VISITS THE CHICAGO DEFENDER

When Willa Brown, a young woman wearing white jodhpurs, jacket and boots, strode into our newsroom in 1936, she made such a stunning appearance that all the typewriters, which had been clacking noisily, suddenly went silent. Unlike most first-time visitors, she wasn't at all bewildered. She had a confident bearing and there was an undercurrent of determination in her voice.

'I want to speak to Mr. Enoch Waters,' she said. I wasn't unhappy at the prospect of discovering who she was and what she wanted. I had an idea she was a model representing a new commercial product that she had been hired to promote. 'I'm Willa Brown,' she informed me, seating herself without being asked.

"In a businesslike manner she explained that she was an aviatrix and wanted some publicity for a Negro air show at Harlem Airport on the city's southwest side. Except for the colorful 'Colonel' Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, who called himself the 'Black Eagle' and who had gained lots of publicity for his exploits, and 'Colonel' John Robinson, a Chicago flyer who was in Ethiopia heading up Haile Selassie's air force, I was unaware of any other Negro aviators, particularly in Chicago.

"There are about thirty of us,' she informed me, 'both men and women.' Most were students, she added, but several had obtained their licenses and one, Cornelius Coffey, was an expert aviation and engine mechanic who also held a commercial pilot's license and was a certified flight instructor. He was the leader of the group. She informed me that she held a limited commercial pilot's license.

"Fascinated by both her and the idea of Negro aviators, I decided to follow up the story myself. Accompanied by a photographer, I covered the air show. About 200 or 300 other spectators attended, attracted by the story in the Defender. So happy was Willa over our appearance that she offered to take me up for a free ride. She was piloting a Piper Cub, which seemed to me, accustomed as I was to commercial planes, to be a rather frail craft. It was a thrilling experience, and the maneuvers—figure eights, flip-overs and stalls—were exhilarating, though momentarily frightening. I wasn't convinced of her competence until we landed smoothly."