

BLACK HISTORY MONTH



LONDON HOLMES
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE CADET



REMOSHAY NELSON
FIRST BLACK WOMAN THUNDERBIRD PILOT



KIMBERLY FORD

FIRST BLACK WOMAN TO FLY THE C-17 IN THE USAF & FIRST BLACK WOMAN 737 FIRST OFFICER, ALASKA AIRLINES

Celebrating 100+ Years of Black Women in Aviation

By Lisa Taylor

The WASP Museum is elated to announce the opening of a new permanent exhibit, Celebrating 100+ Years of Black Women in Aviation, on April 30. Written by retired Air Force pilot, author, and historian Monica Smith, this special display will tell the truth of the troubled and broken road Black, female pilots have had to climb in order to make a place for themselves in aviation.

In 1942, when women were given the opportunity to participate in an experimental program to see if they could fly military aircraft, Black women were denied entry. The Museum is mindful and saddened by that decision and the pervasive racial culture that accepted it and turned a blind eye. As Smith's exhibit shows, however, this decision was not the final word. Although Black pilots were denied entry, they did not accept rejection from aviation and some found success. Their grit and determination were unstoppable. While the exhibit does not shield one from the pain, it also shines a beautiful light on the accomplishments of these women.

The Museum cannot change the fact that Black women were barred from the first generation of military pilots, but it is now growing to include stories of successive generations of all ethnicities. In 2021, the Museum opened a legacy pilot exhibit that highlights Black, Chinese, and Hispanic American female pilots. In 2022, the Museum is excited to add Smith's display to its collection.

The National WASP Museum opened its doors in 2005. What took so long to add these exhibits? With a very tight budget in its early days, the Museum made the decision to focus on the facts of the WASP program, not the universal truths contained in the legendary stories of the women pilots. When a young person walked through the Museum, there were no images to identify with, WASP or otherwise. As the Museum grew in support and finances, it began to think about featuring individual WASP stories.

It wasn't until 2019 that a serendipitous event occurred. A young Black family came to visit the airfield where the WASP trained. The youngest daughter, who I would later learn is Peyton Smith, had studied about the WASP in Scholastic Magazine and had asked her grandmother to make a three-hour drive to the Museum. Before they began the tour, she nervously looked at her grandmother who responded, "It's okay. Go on and ask." I was immediately filled with dread because I knew the question that was coming and I didn't like the answer I was going to give.

"Were there any Black pilots in the WASP?" Peyton asked.

"No," I said. Sadly, I found no words to make the situation better.

I knew in that moment the Museum could not simply showcase individual WASP. The legacy must belong to everyone. It was time for radical change. Change is not retroactive, but it can move the trajectory of the future.

There will be more young, Black students who walk through this Museum. They will want to know, "Could I have been included? Were there Black pilots in the WASP?" I will answer, "We fell short of who we could be."

Going forward, everyone is included. The doors of the future are open.

Everyone is included. Let's walk through them together."



PEYTON SMITH



MONICA SMITH

PILOT, AUTHOR, AND HISTORIAN
Photo by: Donna Parry Photography

ABOUT PEYTON

"I am Peyton Smith. I am 10 years old and turning 11 on April 25, 2022. My favorite thing to do is play volleyball and long jump. I love the outdoors. I hope to one day do something in aviation, maybe air traffic controller, ground control or data control. My favorite subjects in school are reading and history. I attend Snow Heights Elementary in North Richland hills and I have two brothers and two sisters."





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WOMEN IN AVIATION



WILLA BROWN

FIRST BLACK WOMAN TO EARN
HER PILOT'S LICENSE IN THE UNITED STATES

In 1938, Willa Brown became the first Black American woman to earn her pilot's license in the United States. In 1936, she was responsible for the first African American air show at Harlem Field in Chicago. Willa became the director of the Coffey School. With the success of Coffey, Black candidates were admitted into the Army Air Forces through the War Training Service Program (WTS).

Willa became a founding member of the National Airmen's Association of America (NAAA), the first Black aviators' group, whose main objective was to pursue the participation of African Americans in aviation and aeronautics, as well as bringing African Americans into the armed forces.



BESSIE COLEMAN

FIRST BLACK WOMAN & FIRST
NATIVE AMERICAN TO HOLD A PILOT LICENSE

"I knew the Race needed to be represented along this most important line, so I thought it my duty to risk my life to learn aviation."

-Bessie Coleman

Bessie was born on January 26, 1892 in Atlanta, Texas. At the age of 29, Bessie became the first Black and Native American female to earn her wings. Because Black women were denied flight instruction in America, Bessie earned her wings from Fédération Aéronautique Internationale in France in 1921.



To learn more
incredible stories
and to support a
Black women
aviation
organization,
please visit

www.sistersoftheskies.org



THE NATIONAL WASP WWII MUSEUM CELEBRATES

Photo by: Alabama Today



BLACK HISTORY MONTH MEN IN AVIATION



Photo by: National Air and Space Museum,
Smithsonian Institution | SI 83-99

TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

FIRST BLACK MILITARY AVIATORS
IN THE UNITED STATES ARMED FORCES

President Roosevelt passed the Selective Service and Training Service Act in September 1940. This act was the first peacetime draft. One of the bill's provisions was that "Within the limits of the quota determined...any person regardless of race or color...shall be afforded an opportunity to volunteer for induction." The first 13 cadets arrived at the Tuskegee Institute on July 19, 1941. Cadets that were successful at Tuskegee Institute transferred to Tuskegee Army Air Field (TAAF) to complete their training.

The Tuskegee Airmen flew 1,378 combat missions and 179 bomber escort missions. They destroyed 112 enemy aircraft, 950 rail cars and motor vehicles and 40 boats. They were the second group to receive a Congressional Gold Medal, after the Navajo Code Talkers.



"They said Blacks couldn't be pilots and wouldn't make good military men. We proved them wrong. We distinguished ourselves in every way possible. We made that red tail famous."

-Lt. Col. Hiram Mann

JAMES BANNING

FIRST BLACK AVIATOR
TO FLY COAST-TO-COAST

Mainstream America had used the voice of prejudice and hatred to decide that African Americans shouldn't be allowed in the sky.

Information from: jhbanning.com

America decided to judge James Banning's ability on the basis of his skin color. James didn't listen. He heard a completely different voice, one that said, "You can fly!"

In 1932, James Banning and African American navigator, Thomas Allen, made history as the first Black pilot to fly across the country. The plane itself was barely airworthy with unreliable instruments and a compass that was perpetually off by around 30 degrees. While the plane technically operated with a 100-horsepower engine, Banning quipped, "I have reason to believe that some of the horses are dead." Nonetheless, he solidified his place in aviation history.

Information from: jhbanning.com & headlines.flydayton.com

To learn more
incredible
stories and
to support a
Black aviation
& aerospace
organization,
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