

Summer Kids Programming: Eyes on the Sky

Summary: African American pilot Bessie Coleman said, “The air is the only place free from prejudice.” At the dawn of the 20th century, aviation was new to the world and pilots Bessie Coleman and William J. Powell used flying to dispel discrimination. Learn about these two pioneering aviators and explore the ideas of flight with a craft and testing paper airplanes.

Time: 18 min

Suggested Age: 4-10

Supplies: Paper

Objectives: Teach children to admire and appreciate the technical and pioneering works of African Americans. Children will learn about two famous African American aviators, Bessie Coleman and William J. Powell, and their work to break barriers in flying. Children will explore the ideas of flight with paper airplanes and an aviation craft.

0-2min: General organization, welcoming kids and parents, introduce yourself, begin program

2-10 min: Kids learn about pilots Bessie Coleman and William J. Powell. See Appendix A for scrip, Appendix B for pictures

10-17 min: Kids do aviation craft of making and testing paper airplanes. See Appendix C.

17-18 min: Wrap up, invite them to explore the museum, promote next Summer History Adventures, say goodbye.

Appendix A: Script

Hey Historians, I'm Abby (and I'm Sophie). Today, we're going to talk about two aviators who broke barriers in flying. *What's an aviator?* An aviator is someone who flies planes! The two we are talking about today are Bessie Coleman and William J. Powell. They lived when everyone in the world was just beginning to learn about flight, and helped generations of African Americans and women be able to learn how to pilot a plane and eventually go to outer space.

Bessie Coleman was born in Texas in 1892 and had 12 brothers and sisters. Her mom was African American and her dad was Native American. She grew up helping her mom pick cotton and wash laundry for extra money, but did well in school. She decided to go live with two of her older brothers in Chicago for a new start. Her brothers had served in the military in France during WWI and liked to tell her stories all about it. *Do you have older siblings? Do they like to tease you sometimes?* Well, Bessie's brothers liked to tease her about flying. They told her that French women were allowed to learn how to fly, but she couldn't. *Has anyone ever told you that you can't do something? Did it make you want to quit or to try harder?* Bessie decided that she wanted to learn how to fly. She applied to many American flight schools, but every one of them refused to teach her. *Why do you think they all said "no" to Bessie?* They were discriminating against her. *What's discrimination?* Discrimination is when people are treated poorly based on something about them (like if they're a boy or a girl, what the color of their skin is, etc.). The flight schools refused her because Bessie was an African American and a woman.

Do you think Bessie stopped trying to fly? No! A friend told her that if American flight schools wouldn't have her, maybe she should try a school in France. So, Bessie went to night school after work to learn French. She applied to a French flying school and was accepted! In 1921, she became the first American to earn an international pilot's license and the first African American and Native American woman to fly. She became very good at doing tricks with her plane. She flew upside down, and did wing walking. *What do you think wing walking is?* Wing walking is where one person flies the plane and another person walks along the wings of the airplane in the air during the flight. It's a very dangerous trick. Two years after getting her license, Bessie was in a bad plane crash and broke her leg, cut her face, and cracked her ribs. She made a complete recovery and went back to flying.

Bessie returned to America and dreamed of opening her own flight school that would be open to everyone. To make money, she traveled around the country showing films of air tricks, spoke, performed flying shows, and gave lessons. She always encouraged African Americans and women to learn how to fly. She never spoke or performed anywhere that was segregated or discriminated against African Americans. *What is segregation?* Segregation means separation. In this context, segregation means the separation of people based on their skin color. For a long time at Bessie's airshows, the organizers would often want black people and white people to enter through different gates and sit in separate spots. Bessie would refuse to perform her air show unless there was no segregation. She was famous for standing up for her beliefs.

Unfortunately, before she made enough money to open her flight school, Bessie died in 1926. She was a passenger on a test flight and a loose wrench got stuck in the engine. The pilot lost control of the plane and crashed. Even though she wasn't able to do everything she dreamed of, she broke through a barrier of discrimination so other African Americans and women could reach their dreams of flying.

Bessie inspired William J. Powell to be a pioneer in aviation, too. William was born in Kentucky in 1897, but was raised in Chicago. He did go to college, and was accepted into the University of Illinois Engineering program when he was 17. However, William paused his studies to serve as a lieutenant in WWI. He was part of the racially segregated 370th Illinois Infantry. *How do you think segregation changed William's unit?* He only served with other African American soldiers, but the leaders of his unit were white. While he was in France, William survived a poison gas attack. It affected his health the rest of his life and most likely led to his early death.

William went back to Chicago to recover and finish his Engineering degree. He became fascinated by flight and wanted to become a pilot. Like Bessie, he applied to many flight schools and was rejected by all of them because of his race. But in 1928, he was finally accepted into the Los Angeles School of Flight and received his license as a pilot, navigator, and aeronautical engineer. *What does a navigator do?* A navigator plans the path the plane will take, trying to take the safest and quickest route possible. *What is an aeronautical engineer?* An aeronautical engineer designs and builds machines that fly, such as planes. William became a well-known pilot in California.

Like Bessie, William wanted to start a flying school to encourage African Americans to fly. He was able to open a flying club and school in Los Angeles, and as a tribute to the work Bessie Coleman had done, named both businesses after her. Because flying was a new field, William believed that African Americans should become as involved as possible so the whole community could grow as the importance of flying grew. He did everything he could to bring black aviation to public awareness. He wrote books, made a documentary, performed shows, and spoke with important African American political voices. He also promoted black business related to aviation, such as plane mechanics. Unfortunately, his flight businesses collapsed during the Great Depression a few years later. William continued to promote African American flight until his death in 1942.

Bessie Coleman broke through many barriers of discrimination to become the first African American and Native American woman pilot, even though it meant going to France. She was an advocate for everyone one to follow their dreams of aviation, and never tolerated segregation or discrimination. William J. Powell fought discrimination and segregation to become a pilot. He encouraged all African Americans to learn about flying and to show the world their "brains, abilities, and [that they] can carve out their own destinies." Both aviators pioneered the way for African Americans to continue flying around the globe and in space.

Alexander, Kerri Lee. "Bessie Coleman." National Women's History Museum. 2018.
<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/bessie-coleman>.

"Coleman, Bessie." National Aviation Hall of Fame. 2014.
<https://www.nationalaviation.org/our-enshrinees/coleman-bessie/>

Kim, Cresman. "Black Birds in the Sky: The Legacies of Bessie Coleman and Dr. Mae Jemison." *The Journal of Negro History* 82, 1. January 1997.

"Bessie Coleman." American Experience, Public Broadcasting Station. 2010.
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/flygirls-bessie-coleman/>

“William J. Powell Jr.” Pioneers of Flight, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. 2017.
<https://pioneersofflight.si.edu/content/william-j-powell-jr-0>

Elizabeth Winter. “William J. Powell (1897-1942). Black Past. December 2017.
<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/william-j-powell-and-bessie-coleman-aero-1897-1942/>

“William J. Powell: A Pioneer in Aviation.” African American Registry. July 2015.
<https://aaregistry.org/story/william-j-powell-a-pioneer-in-aviation/>

Appendix B: Pictures



Bessie Coleman in publicity for airshow, in her pilot's gear, and with her plane.



William J. Powell, Jr. serving in France and in his aviation gear

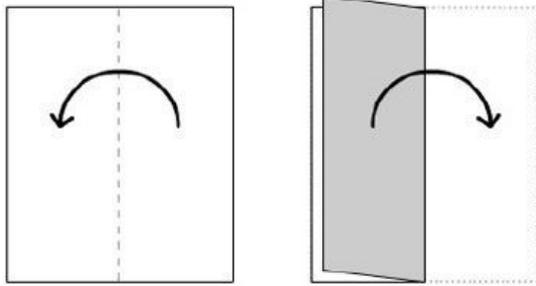
Appendix C: Activities

Paper Airplanes

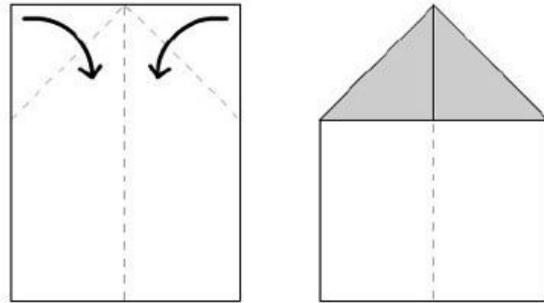
Supplies: Paper, printed instructions

Instructions: Print several copies of the instructions on the next page, then have the kids make paper airplanes. Test their results by having a distance contest. Encourage them to adjust their folding techniques and test for better outcomes. This can last until the program is finished.

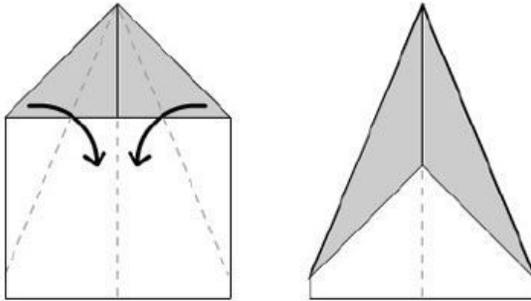
STEP 1: Turn your paper so the printed side is facing down. Fold the paper in half, crease the edge, and unfold.



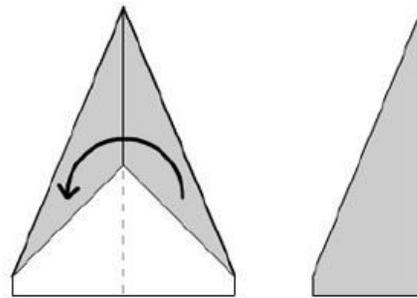
STEP 2: Fold the two upper corners down at a 45-degree angle. Make sure the edges line up with the center crease.



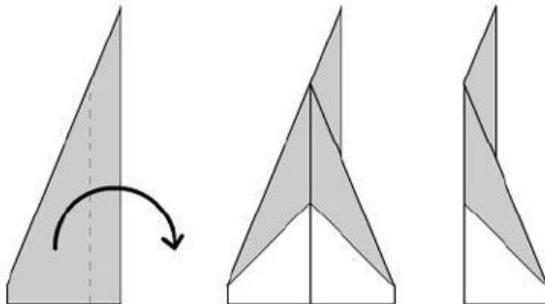
STEP 3: Fold each side again. Make sure the edges line up with the center crease.



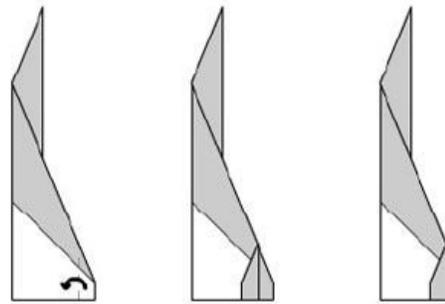
STEP 4: Fold the paper in half along the center crease.

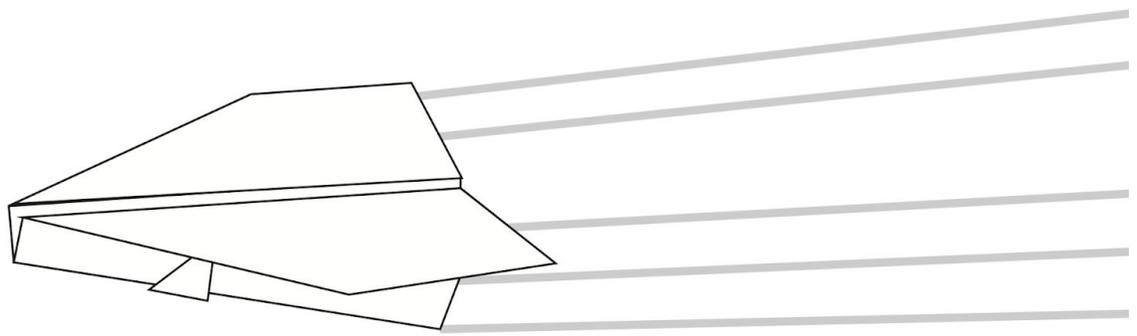
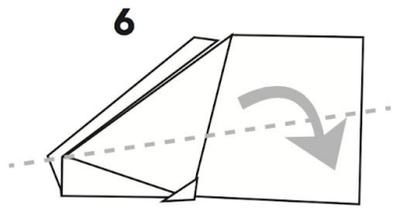
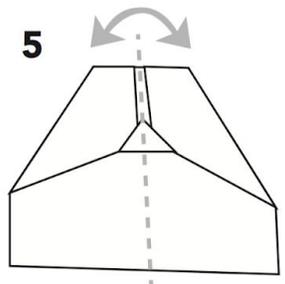
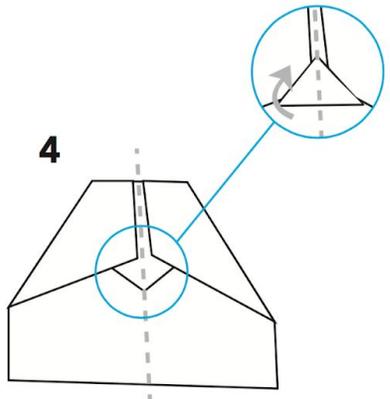
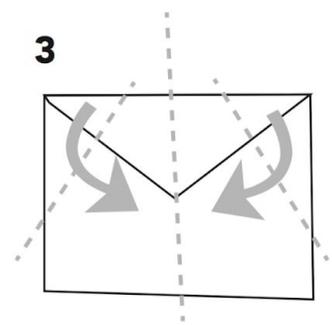
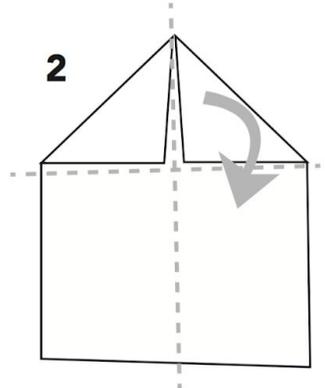
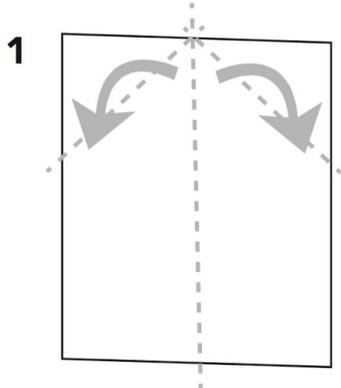


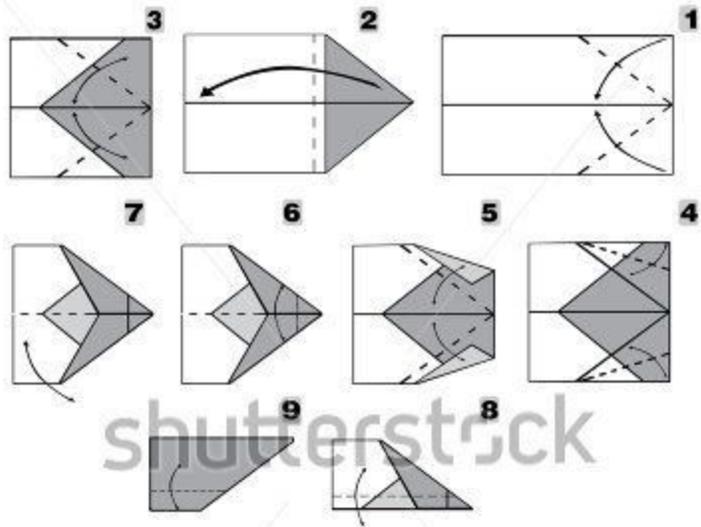
STEP 5: Fold the wing along the line shown. Repeat on the other side.



STEP 6: Fold the wing fin along the line shown. Repeat on the other side. Open the wings and fly!







The Dart

