



Photo: Blackpast.org



Willa Beatrice Brown

January 22, 1906 – July 18, 1992

Willa Beatrice Brown was born in Glasgow, Kentucky. In 1927, she graduated from Indiana State Teachers College with a degree in business and later received an MBA from Northwestern University in 1937. She began her professional career as a high school teacher at Roosevelt High School in Gary, Indiana. While teaching, she felt her talents were not being used to their greatest ability. She decided to learn to fly and attended at one of Chicago's racially segregated airports. In 1937, she became the first African American woman to earn a commercial pilot's license in the United States. (Mentor and fellow aviatrix, Bessie Coleman had to go to France for her license in 1921.)

Two years later, Brown married Cornelius Coffey, under whom she studied aviation. They co-founded the Cornelius Coffey School of Aeronautics, the first black-owned and operated private flight training academy in the United States. By 1941, hundreds of men and women trained under Brown, including many of the men who would later become members of the famed Tuskegee Airmen, of which her husband was one. That same year, she became the first African-American officer in the U.S. Civil Air Patrol when she was commissioned as a Lieutenant. In 1943, she earned her mechanic's license, becoming the first woman in the United States to have both a mechanic's license and a commercial pilot's license.

In 1946, Brown also became the first African American woman to run for Congress. Although she lost to the Democrat incumbent, she remained politically active. She supported various causes throughout her political career, including the racial and gender integration of the U.S. Army Air Corps.

In 2003, Willa Brown was inducted into the Aviation Hall of Fame.

- For more information about Willa Brown, go to: <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/brown-willa-b-1906-1992>.
- For more information about *Writing Her Story*, go to: <http://www.in.gov/icw/2440.htm>.

Additional and more detailed references available at the end of Women's History Month