

Read & Write Biographies

Bessie
Coleman

“Never limit yourself because of others' limited imagination; never limit others because of your own limited imagination.”

Mae
Jemison

“I made my mind up to try. I tried and was successful.”

Comparing Two People

Read these biographies of Bessie Coleman and Mae Jemison, then answer the questions on the following page.

Bessie Coleman

Before there was Amelia Earhart, there was Bessie Coleman. Bessie Coleman was the first African American woman to get a pilot's license. She was a pioneering female aviator who became famous for her daring air show stunts in the 1920s.

Bessie Coleman was born on January 26, 1892 in Atlanta, Texas. Bessie grew up in Texas, then moved to Chicago with her family at age 23. She worked as a manicurist in a barbershop. While working in the shop, she overheard stories told by men who had flown planes in World War I. She wanted to try flying for herself. She applied to flight schools, but no one would teach her because she was both a woman and African American. She decided to go to Paris to find a school that would teach her.

After getting her license, Bessie wanted to start a flying school just for African Americans. To raise money to start the school, she began working as a stunt pilot. People would come out to watch her fly planes in all kinds of crazy directions: Figure eights, loop-de-loops, and steep drops. Bessie soon became known as “Queen Bess,” and within five years she was a popular air show performer.

Mae Jemison

Mae Jemison was the first African American woman to go to space. Mae was born on October 17, 1956, the first of three children. Growing up, Mae loved science. She studied medicine in college and started her career as a doctor, going around the world to care for those in need.

In 1983, Mae applied to NASA. Mae was inspired by Sally Ride's first flight a few years before, and also by the character of Uhura from *Star Trek* (the character was an African American translator on a spaceship). Mae's first application was denied, but she didn't give up! She applied a second time and in 1987, she was hired. Five years later, she flew on the STS-47 mission to study life in space. She even brought a picture of Bessie Coleman with her to inspire her on the flight.

Mae retired from NASA in 1993. She went on to start scientific research companies, and she even got to be on an episode of her favorite TV show, *Star Trek*. She accomplished a first there too – the first real astronaut to ever be on the show.

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Venn Diagram

Comparing Two Famous People

One way to compare two people is by using a Venn diagram. A Venn diagram uses circles to represent sets of information. These circles overlap. The overlapping area is used to record things that are the same about the two sets, while the outside areas are used to record things that are different.

Reread the text about Bessie Coleman and Mae Jemison and complete the Venn diagram below.

Bessie Coleman**Mae Jemison**

Both African
American women.
Both flew into
the sky.