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.

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
Born January 22, 1906
Glasgow, Kentucky

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

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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.
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 Airplane line, joined the Chicago Girl’s Flight Club, and enrolled in a master’s program at Northwestern University.

In 1937, airmen’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 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, Willa opened 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 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.

In 1942, 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.