



Three Legendary Women

Article

RED BANK, New Jersey (Achieve3000, March 24, 2020). American women have faced many closed doors. But these three legends were determined to burst through theirs.

Bessie Coleman (1892–1926)

Bessie Coleman told her brother that she wanted to be a pilot. He laughed and said that African American women would never fly planes. Well, that didn't stop Coleman.

American aviation schools rejected Coleman. But then she learned that French schools accepted women, as well as students of any race. Great—*except she didn't speak French*. Coleman didn't give up, though. She took a second job. That way, she could afford French lessons.

Her hard work paid off. By 1920, she was a student at an aviation school in France. And on June 15, 1921, Bessie Coleman became the first African American woman to earn a pilot's license.

"Brave Bessie," as she was called, amazed audiences with her daring stunts. But Coleman refused to perform at places that forced African Americans to use a separate gate. She dreamed of opening an aviation school for African Americans.

Tragically, Coleman died in a flight-related accident in 1926. But her dream lived on. In 1929, the Bessie Coleman Aero Club opened. By 1931, African American pilots were soaring over American skies.

Wilma Mankiller (1945–2010)

Wilma Pearl Mankiller knew her last name sounded fearsome. But it didn't mean what people thought. "Mankiller" is a Cherokee title for someone who guards a village. And after a career focused on working to protect the Cherokee Nation, her name fit her perfectly.

In the 1950s, Mankiller's family was among the many Native Americans who were relocated from their native lands throughout the U.S. to San Francisco, California. There, the civil rights movements of the 1960s inspired Mankiller. She wanted to make a difference in her peoples' lives. In 1977, she returned to her family's lands and began new programs that encouraged tribal self-reliance. The programs improved living conditions for Native American communities.

Although some opposed her because she was a woman, Mankiller was elected the first female deputy chief of the Cherokee Nation in 1983. She proved to be a strong leader. And when the principal chief left midterm, Mankiller took over. She became the first woman ever to lead the Cherokee Nation.

In 1987, Mankiller was officially elected principal chief. Under her 10-year guard, the Cherokee Nation became self-governing. It also greatly increased its wealth and size.

Victoria Woodhull (1838–1927)



Photo credit: Left to right: George Reinhart; Courtesy of Mankiller family; Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library

From left to right: Bessie Coleman, the first African American woman to earn a pilot's license; Wilma Mankiller, the first woman elected chief of the Cherokee Nation; and Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for president of the United States.

In 1868, 30-year-old Victoria Woodhull met Cornelius Vanderbilt. At that time, Vanderbilt was the richest man in the United States. He helped her invest in Wall Street. By 1870, Woodhull had started the first brokerage firm run by a woman, and it was very successful.

With her new wealth, Woodhull achieved another first for women: She published a weekly newspaper and wrote articles about equal rights and other topics. Then, on January 11, 1871, Woodhull became the first woman to speak before the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C.

Woodhull argued persuasively in support of women's rights, but the House disagreed with her. That didn't silence her, though. In 1872, before women could legally vote, Victoria Woodhull became the first woman to run for president. Her bid was unsuccessful. However, it paved the way for similarly determined women to follow in her footsteps.

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Dictionary

broker (*noun*) a person who helps other people to reach agreements, to make deals, or to buy and sell property (such as stocks or houses)

invest (*verb*) to use money to earn more money: to use your money to purchase stock in a company, to buy property, etc., in order to make future profit

movement (*noun*) a series of organized activities in which many people work together to do or achieve something

persuasive (*adjective*) able to cause people to do or believe something: able to persuade people

self-reliant (*adjective*) confident in your own abilities and able to do things for yourself: not needing help from other people