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### **William J. Powell**

*There is a better job and a better future in aviation for Negroes than in any other industry, and the reason is this: aviation is just beginning its period of growth, and if we get into it now, while it is still uncrowded, we can grow as aviation grows.*

—William J. Powell, *Black Wings*

Born in 1897, William J. Powell earned an engineering degree from the University of Illinois. In 1917 he enlisted in officer training school and served in a segregated unit during World War I. During the war, Powell was gassed by the enemy, and he suffered health problems throughout his life.

After the war, Powell opened service stations in Chicago. He became interested in aviation, but the only school that would train him was located in Los Angeles. He sold his businesses in Chicago and moved to the West Coast. After learning to fly, Powell dreamed of opening an all-black flight school.

By the 1930s Los Angeles had become an important center for black aviation. Powell organized the Bessie Coleman Aero Club to promote aviation awareness in the black community. On Labor Day 1931, the flying club sponsored the first all-black air show held in the United States, an event that attracted an estimated fifteen thousand spectators. Through the efforts of the Bessie Coleman School, the number of black aviators increased dramatically despite the economic hardships of the Great Depression.

William Powell used many methods to attract African Americans to the field of aviation. He made a film about a young man who wanted to be a flyer, and for two years he published the *Craftsmen Aero-News*, a monthly journal about black aviation. He offered scholarships with free technical training in aeronautics for black youth. He invited celebrities, such as jazz musician Duke Ellington and boxer Joe Louis, to lend their names—and their funds—to his cause.

Powell published *Black Wings* in 1934. Dedicated to Bessie Coleman, the book entreated black men and women “to fill the air with black wings.” A visionary supporter of aviation, Powell urged black youth to carve out their own destiny—to become pilots, aircraft designers, and business leaders in the field of aviation.