



# Smithsonian

## *National Air and Space Museum*

### William J. Powell Collection, 1917-1942

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National Air and Space Museum Archives  
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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	National Air and Space Museum Archives
<b>Title:</b>	William J. Powell Collection
<b>Date:</b>	1917 - 1942
<b>Identifier:</b>	NASM.1999.0049
<b>Creator:</b>	Powell, William J., 1899-1942
<b>Extent:</b>	0.31 Cubic feet (1 shared legal-size box 1 flat box 1 oversize folder)
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	The William J. Powell Collection consists of materials concerning the career and personal life of African-American entrepreneur and pilot William J. Powell, including his service in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in World War I, his automobile business in Chicago, and his advocacy for African-American aviation as the founder of Craftsmen of Black Wings, Inc., author of <i>Black Wings</i> , and a primary organizer of the Bessie Coleman Aero Club and the "Five Blackbirds" demonstration team. Materials include identification and membership cards, flight logs and officer records, newspaper clippings, advertisements, and photographs.

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## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Note

Donated by William H. Powell, III, gift, in 1999. Materials found in the collection seem to indicate that some photographs have come from individuals other than Powell.

### Processing Note

Researchers may wish to consult other collections in the NASM Archives: William J. Powell (Craftsmen of Black Wings, Inc.) Photograph Collection (Accession 1996-0008).

Arranged, described, and encoded by Elizabeth C. Borja, 2017.

### Preferred Citation

William J. Powell Collection, Accession 1999-0049, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

### Restrictions

No restrictions on access

### Conditions Governing Use

[Permissions Requests](#)

## Biographical Note

William J. Powell (1899-1942) was a prominent African-American entrepreneur and pilot who urged African-Americans to become part of the future aviation industry.

Powell was born in Henderson, Kentucky, on July 29, 1899. He moved to Chicago at the age of eight. He entered the University of Illinois in 1916. He went to Officers' Training Camp in Fort Des Moines, Iowa, in June 1917, and was commissioned as a First Lieutenant in the American Expeditionary Forces at the completion of training camp. He served with the 317th Engineers and 365th Infantry during World War I. After his honorable discharge in 1919, he returned to the University of Illinois, graduating with honors and a degree of Bachelor of Science in electrical engineering in 1922.

He worked as an electrical engineer and electric welding instructor for Rock Island Railroad for two years. In 1924, he opened his first filling station and in two years' time, he had built a successful automobile business in South Chicago before moving to Los Angeles in 1928.

During the late 1920s and 1930s, Powell worked tirelessly to promote air-mindedness in the black community. Under his umbrella organization, Craftsmen of Black Wings, Inc., Powell wrote a thinly disguised autobiography, *Black Wings*, in 1934; wrote and directed a 1935 documentary film, *Unemployment, the Negro and Aviation*; and published a trade journal entitled *Craftsmen Aero News* (1937-1938). Powell was also instrumental in organizing the Bessie Coleman Aero Club and the "Five Blackbirds" demonstration team. William J. Powell died in July 1942.

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## Scope and Contents

This collection contains materials concerning the career and personal life of African-American entrepreneur and pilot William J. Powell, including his service in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in World War I, his automobile business in Chicago, and his advocacy for African-American aviation as the founder of Craftsmen of Black Wings, Inc., author of *Black Wings*, and a primary organizer of the Bessie Coleman Aero Club and the "Five Blackbirds" demonstration team.

The following types of materials are included: AEF identification card and records book, advertisements for his automobile business, his 1938-1939 flight logs, legal documents, marriage license, diploma, membership cards, burial and funeral records, and newspaper clippings. The collection also includes photographs from his time with the AEF and Bessie Coleman Aero Club, as well as portraits of Powell and his family. Materials found in the collection seem to indicate that some photographs have come from individuals other than Powell.

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## Arrangement

The collection is arranged into three categories: Aviation Career (American Expeditionary Forces and African-Americans in Aviation), Personal Materials (marriage and death records, automobile business, and memberships), and Photographs (AEF, aviation, portraits and family, and albums). Within these categories, materials are arranged chronologically.

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## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Aeronautics

Aeronautics -- Societies, etc.  
African Americans in aeronautics

Types of Materials:

Clippings  
Logs (records)  
Photographs

Names:

"Five Blackbirds" Demonstration Team  
Bessie Coleman Aero Club  
Craftsmen of Black Wings, Inc.  
Powell, William J., 1899-1942  
United States. Army. American Expeditionary Forces

Preferred Titles:

*Craftsmen Aero News (journal)*

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## Container Listing

Box 62 (Shared), Folder 1	<a href="#">Honorable Discharge, 17th Provisional Training Regiment, October 14, 1917</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 2	<a href="#">American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) Identification Card, 1917</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 3	<a href="#">American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) Officer's Record Book, 1917 - 1919</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 4	<a href="#">Legal Documents for the "Five Blackbirds", November 1931</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 5	<a href="#">Pilot's Flight Log, 1938 - 1939</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 6	<a href="#">Advertisement, Craftsman Aero News, circa 1937</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 7	<a href="#">Newspaper Clippings, African-American pilots, undated</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 8	<a href="#">Marriage License [reproduction, original in Shared Box 132], February 12, 1921</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 9	<a href="#">Diploma, University of Illinois [reproduction, original in Shared box 132], June 14, 1922</a>
Box 1, Item 1	<a href="#">University of Illinois yearbook, The Illio, 1923</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 10	<a href="#">Advertisement, Powell's Service Station, in The Heebie Jeebies, January 31, 1925</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 11	<a href="#">Advertising Brochure, Powell's Service Station, circa 1926</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 12	<a href="#">Newspaper Clippings, Powell's Service Station, 1920s</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 13	<a href="#">Membership Cards, 1933 - 1938</a>
Box 62 (Shared), Folder 14	<a href="#">Service Award, Los Angeles Fellowship League, 1936</a>

Box 62 (Shared),  
Folder 15

[Burial Record and Funeral Card, July 1942](#)

Box 62 (Shared),  
Folder 16

[Photographs, American Expeditionary Force, 1917 - 1919](#)

Box 62 (Shared),  
Folder 17

[Photographs, Aviation, 1920s and 1930s](#)

Box 62 (Shared),  
Folder 18

[Photographs, Portraits and Family, 1920s](#)

Box 62 (Shared),  
Folder 19

[Photographs, Delores Brown Album, undated](#)

Box 62 (Shared),  
Folder 20

[Photographs, Pamela Jean Murphy Album, undated](#)