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African American History Internship Project

African Americans in Aviation in Arizona -- Introduction by Harry Lawson

The AHIP program is now in its third year. The projects for 1987 and 1988 were described in our pamphlet, *Dunbar School: Shared Memories of a Special Past* (Lawson, 1988). That pamphlet can be seen at the Arizona Historical Society Library. Our theme for this year was "African Americans in Aviation in Arizona." No one has previously attempted to shed light on this subject. Four interns were trained in oral history techniques and they interviewed four African Americans who now reside in Tucson that either were directly or indirectly involved in aviation. They also collected photographs and other artifacts from the subjects and their relatives. Summaries of the interns' interviews make up the major content of this pamphlet. They did outstanding work. Cassette tapes of the entire interviews are on file at the Arizona Historical Society. A photographic display will initially be shown at the Juneteenth Festival on "A" Mountain on June 16 and 17, 1989. After the initial showing the display will be available at the Historical Society. Each intern will receive a scholarship to either Pima Community College or to the University of Arizona from the Arizona Historical Society. Our subjects were three males and one female, all of whom immigrated to Arizona: two because of the integration of the Air Force--both arrived in 1949, and two for health and weather reasons--one arrived in 1973 and the other in 1980. All four were well involved in aviation prior to coming to Arizona.

[Note: [a photographic exhibit](#) complementing this report is also available]

There are a number of themes that these pioneers stress. First of all they pay respect to the very earliest African Americans-Eugene Bullard during World War I and Bessie Coleman in the early 1920s-who journeyed to France to pursue their flying interests because they were not allowed to in the United States. Secondly, they cite the importance of the Civilian Pilot Training Project (CPTP) that was initiated at six Black colleges in the late 1930s. It was through these programs that many pioneer African Americans learned to fly. They all salute the Tuskegee (Alabama) military training program that prepared Black men to fly in World War II at a time when the War Department put out propaganda alleging that African Americans did not have the mental capacity nor the courage to fly airplanes and do battle in war. The War Department ignored the fact that by 1941 many Blacks were flying airplanes and at least one (Eugene Bullard) had earned numerous decorations for his combat flying with the French in World War I. We must not forget that Jackie Robinson (and many other Blacks) were already playing baseball of major league quality when Branch Rickey "experimented" with integrating baseball. Like these early baseball players, these pioneers in

aviation all met with distinction, but they defied the odds and rose to heights that would be unimaginable to one thinks in stereotypic fashion. They disproved the negative, false hypothesis that Blacks could not fly airplanes; they were persistent in pursuing their goals, and they were positive people. They share part of their struggles in the succeeding pages.

We know that the first Blacks in military aviation set foot on Arizona soil in 1949 when four African American pilots entered the jet training school at Williams Air Force Base in Chandler. We were unable to determine the beginning of African Americans' participation in civilian aviation in Arizona due to the limitation of time and the size of our project. The airlines were sent a questionnaire requesting information on African American pilots with their companies who have flown or currently fly out of Tucson. Not a single company responded. We were also unable to obtain data of this nature from Davis Monthan Air Force Base. We are aware of one African American airline owner in Arizona: Phillip Aaron, president and chief executive officer of Golden Pacific Airline in Kingman (See articles in the Arizona Informant by Brian Keith Johnson on January 25, 1989 and March 1, 1989). According to these articles Mr. Aaron was being forced out of the airline business because of racism. We attempted to include Mr. Aaron in our sample, but he did not respond to a questionnaire that was mailed to him. These are the areas that future investigators can explore.

There is an organization in Tucson called "The Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., Chief Master Sergeant Fred Archer Chapter." The Tucson Chapter is named for the same [Sgt. Archer](#) that is one of the subjects in this pamphlet. One of its major purposes is to encourage more young African Americans to become involved with aviation.

Many persons worked diligently and provided support to make this project a success. I would like to thank all of them: the members of the committee, the staff at the Arizona Historical Society, Pima College for its financial support, Michael Engs, the Liaison for Pima Community College, the Black aviators and those connected with them who shared their time, feelings, and experiences, Sharon Routh who assisted with the editing, and our interns who did most of the work.

Continue with [African American Churches in Tucson](#)
