



Barbara Bancroft (d. 2004)

### **Florida's Trailblazing Aviatrix: Barbara Bancroft Soars into the Record Books**

In the early spring of 1929, when most young women her age were learning social graces, 19-year-old Barbara Bancroft of Melbourne, Florida, was learning how to handle a roaring airplane engine. Under the guidance of Captain A. B. McMullen at Tampa's McMullen Aviation School, Bancroft became one of Florida's earliest female pilots – an audacious trailblazer who shattered expectations in the golden age of flight.

After only six hours and 40 minutes of instruction, Bancroft made her first solo flight over Tampa's municipal airport. Newspapers called her "an earnest young lady from Melbourne" who was "certain to succeed, barring unforeseen accidents." She earned national attention as the 13th woman in the United States to receive a limited Commercial Pilot's License. The Tampa Tribune marveled at her confidence and superstitions, noting that she wore 13 bracelets and lived in apartment number 13 – turning what many considered unlucky into her charm of courage.

Bancroft's passion extended far beyond the cockpit. When she wasn't in the air, she could be found in greasy overalls, wrench and pliers in hand, studying carburetors, valves, and propeller shafts. "She isn't afraid of oil or grease," the Tribune wrote admiringly. Her mechanical curiosity reflected a new vision of womanhood – one that valued technical mastery as much as daring spirit.

By April, she had signed up for a 50-hour advanced course, and later that month, she completed her first cross-country flight, flying her Travel Air biplane from Tampa to Melbourne. The Orlando Evening Star hailed her as the first girl pilot on Florida's east coast, performing passenger and stunt flights over her hometown. Audiences were thrilled to see the confident teenager loop and dive across the Florida skies.

In the fall of 1929, Bancroft joined Captain McMullen and fellow pilot I. A. Yarnell Jr., the state's youngest certificated male aviator, for three days of aerial performances during Gainesville's Armistice celebration. Both had been trained by McMullen and were

recognized by the Department of Commerce for their exceptional ratings. She became known as Florida's "licensed girl pilot," a living symbol of Tampa's growing aviation industry.

Bancroft's achievements were more than personal triumphs – they marked the rise of women in a field still largely closed to them. Inspired by the exploits of Amelia Earhart, she proved that a Florida girl could match any man's skill at the controls. Her instructors praised her steady nerves, quick reflexes, and instinct for flight. "Endowed with a sturdy body and a brain that functions quicker than the flash of a spark plug," one reporter wrote, "she has that inherent knack of measuring distance and balance that instructors declare is above normal."

In just a few months, Barbara Bancroft went from a student pilot to one of the South's most admired young aviators. Her story – captured in the enthusiastic pages of 1929 Florida newspapers reveals not only the birth of modern aviation in Tampa but also the fearless energy of a young woman determined to rise above limitations. Nearly a century later, her flights remain a powerful emblem of courage, curiosity, and the unbreakable American urge to fly.

By Susan Musacchio, *Chicago Area Chapter*  
*Ninety-Nines* magazine, January 2026



## **99 Charter Biography File**

**Maiden Name:** Barbara White

**Married Name(s):** Bancroft

**Date of birth:** December 7, 1906

**Birthplace:** Cleveland, Ohio

**Date of death:** May 13, 2001

**Death place:** Melbourne, Florida

**Occupation(s):** pilot, real estate broker

**License(s):** 6200

**Known stats:** only flew for about three years

**Publications:** none found

**Award(s):** none found

**Miscellaneous information:**

1. Unknown spouse's name

**File contents:** No photos or artifacts.