As an optometry student from rural Kentucky now studying in Chicago, I was captivated by the legacy of Bess Coleman, O.D., from the moment I discovered who she was and what she accomplished for the field of optometry. As the first Black woman licensed to practice optometry in U.S. history, her story demonstrates an unwavering commitment to providing access to affordable healthcare and educational resources for those in underprivileged communities, and her dedication to serving those around her is an unparalleled inspiration that should undoubtedly mark her as one of the most influential pioneers in optometric history.

Bess Anderson Francis was born in 1893 in Harrodsburg, Kentucky, a small but lively railroad town located near Lexington, one of the largest cities in the state.1 The oldest of six children, Bess lived with her family right on the dividing line of segregation in the small town and attended the West Side Colored School. Together, her parents owned and operated a barbershop in Harrodsburg, which, at the time, was considered to be a relatively prestigious profession, so they were able to wholeheartedly encourage and financially support Bess and her siblings in their educational endeavors. In 1910, by the time she turned 18, Bess had completed her college education and started teaching at the Brucetown neighborhood of Lexington in the spring of 1935 and establishing herself as the only Black optometrist in that community. However, less than a year later, she left Chicago for her son’s health (while her husband remained to manage the pharmacies) and returned to Kentucky, setting up a practice in Harrodsburg, which, at the time, was considered to be a relatively prestigious profession, so they were able to wholeheartedly encourage and financially support Bess and her siblings in their educational endeavors. In 1910, by the time she turned 18, Bess had completed her college education and started teaching at the West Side Colored School, the same school that she had attended in her youth. Although life would eventually lead her to optometry, her work in advocacy for schoolchildren and educational advancement for all would continue throughout the rest of her life.

In 1923, Bess married John Coleman, a realtor-turned-pharmacist also from Harrodsburg, and after a career in education for 13 years, she left Kentucky and moved with her husband to West Palm Beach, Florida. There, John officially began his career in pharmacy, sparking the interest of Bess in healthcare and what it could mean to play a direct role in providing this service to disadvantaged communities. Just two years later, the Coleman’s journeyed out of the South and up to Chicago, marking their participation in what would later become known in U.S. history as the Great Migration. Becoming increasingly targeted by Jim Crow laws in the Deep South, Black Americans left their homes in these states in search of opportunity, and the bustling neighborhood of Bronzeville became the heart of Black culture in Chicago and, for Bess Coleman, her new home.

Their move to Chicago in 1925 signified a new chapter of life for the Coleman’s.1 Bess became a mother and helped her husband open three pharmacies in Bronzeville, and over the years, they thrived in the professional community of the South Side of Chicago. Although she enthusiastically supported her husband’s career, Bess had a strong aspiration to attend law school; however, for reasons unknown, her husband was opposed to his wife practicing law, so she sought to discover a new career path for herself that would fulfill her desire to serve the community. One day, she attended a visit with her husband to a local optometrist, and as she observed his eye exam, she found herself fascinated. She declared, “I can do this,” and in 1932, she enrolled at the Illinois College of Optometry (NICO), which later merged with the Chicago College of Optometry to become the Illinois College of Optometry. After two arduous years and a whopping $225 paid in tuition and fees each year, she graduated as Dr. Bess Coleman in 1934 at the age of forty, and became the first Black female licensed optometrist in American history.1

Dr. Coleman began practicing at her husband’s pharmacy soon after her graduation from NICO, serving the eye care needs of the Black population in Bronzeville and becoming a pillar of the community. However, less than a year later, she left Chicago for her son’s health (while her husband remained to manage the pharmacies) and returned to Kentucky, setting up a practice in the Brucetown neighborhood of Lexington in the spring of 1935 and establishing herself as the only Black optometrist in that community. She became the primary caretaker for her child, her mother and her father-in-law as she fulfilled a desperate need for eye care in Lexington, and on top of all of these responsibilities, she also made the trip back up to Chicago frequently to keep providing care to Bronzeville residents as well.

As time passed, she established herself as an influential voice in not only the Kentucky optometry community but also the education community as well. She delivered lectures at educational conferences and partnered with local women’s clubs to stress the importance of eye care, especially in children. As the movement for recognition of the profession of optometry gained vital momentum, she rallied Kentucky women together to support the profession as it was being disparaged by other medical healthcare providers, prompting one doctor to describe the endeavor of boosting public opinion about optometry as a “woman-to-woman crusade.”1 In 1941, after years of advocacy for optometry and education in Kentucky, she relocated to Denver, Colorado, later accompanied by her husband who had recently sold his Chicago pharmacy practices. While he opened a new pharmacy in downtown Denver, Bess began to struggle with hypertension and severe anxiety in the form of agoraphobia, and in 1967, she died from a heart attack. A true Kentuckian at heart, she was buried near her family back in Harrodsburg.
Ultimately, there is no doubt that Dr. Bess Coleman has played a monumental role in the history of optometry. An advocate for school-aged children, a pioneer in feminism within optometry, and a trailblazer in Black healthcare, she left behind an incomparable legacy with her dedication to her career. Coming from Kentucky to study optometry in Chicago myself, I can’t help but feel so inspired by her life, and I consider myself fortunate to know her story and share it here.

REFERENCES