

All About Katherine Johnson

Katherine Johnson was an African American physicist and mathematician. She worked to calculate the first mathematical problems to send humans into space. She is famous for her long career at NASA. In 1959, she calculated the flight path for the first American, Alan Shepard, to go into space.



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She was born on August 26th, 1918, in West Virginia. She was the youngest of four children and was always curious. From a young age, her parents encouraged her to focus on her education. When she finished elementary school, she had a hard time finding a place to study. The schools near her were segregated and only accepted white students.

Katherine was a brilliant student and skipped many grades. She was able to attend the high school on the campus of the historically black West Virginia State College. She started college when she was 15. She graduated in 1937 with a degree in Math Education and French. Later, she taught math, French, and music in the public schools of black Americans.

In 1939, Katherine was selected as one of three African American students to attend graduate school at West Virginia University. By that time, the school had begun to desegregate, meaning they let whites and blacks learn together. She decided to leave school before graduating to get married and start a family.

In 1952, she applied for an open position with the West Area Computing section at the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA). The position was at the Langley Research Center. NACA would later become NASA in 1958. There, she worked as a human computer. She solved math problems and checked data for the first space flights. In 1962, she checked the math problems by hand to make sure that John Glenn's orbit around the Earth was correct. Among her many other successes, in 1969, Katherine also calculated the flight path for Apollo 11's flight to the Moon.

When Katherine Johnson started working at NASA, women were not given credit for their work on any written report. In 1961, she became the first woman in her division to receive credit as the author of a research report. She was hired in an all-male division. She faced challenges as an African American woman in both a male-dominated and segregated work environment.

Katherine worked for NASA for 33 years and retired in 1986. Much of her work at NASA was not recognized until much later. In 2015, when she was 97 years old, President Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom. This is the highest civilian honor civilians can receive. She died at the age of 101 on February 24th, 2020.

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Directions: Answer the questions about the text.

1. Why is Katherine Johnson famous?

She was a mathematician and worked at NASA. She calculated the flight trajectory for the first American, Alan Shepard, to go into space.

2. What were some of the challenges Katherine faced?

The schools near her home were segregated and it was a challenge to find a school to attend. She was also not given credit for her work because she was a woman.

3. Where did Katherine study?

West Virginia State College and West Virginia University.

4. What was Katherine's job at NASA?

She was a human computer. She made calculations for astronauts to go into space.

5. What else would you like to know about Katherine Johnson? Share your questions with a friend.

Answers will vary