

The Women Who Have Helped Build NASA

Katherine Johnson

Katherine Johnson is a very important woman in recent history. She is special because she led the way in showing what women and black people could achieve during a time when people were not treated equally.

What Was Katherine's Early Life Like?

Katherine Johnson was born in 1918 in West Virginia. It was clear from the start that Katherine was very good at mathematics. When she turned 18, she went to West Virginia State College and studied mathematics and French. She graduated in 1937 and began to teach in a school in Virginia.



In 1939, Katherine was one of only three black students who went to West Virginia University. In the early 1900s very few women went to university, especially black women.

What Career Did Katherine Have?

Katherine began working for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1953. She impressed her boss so much that she was asked to work on a special project about space flight research. Her job was to study information from a test flight into space, and to investigate what caused a plane crash.



In 1957, Russia sent a satellite called Sputnik into space. America then began to take space travel much more seriously.



Katherine was asked to use her amazing mathematical skills to plan routes into space. She planned the path for America's first human spaceflight in 1961 which was an important step in America's history. This was a huge responsibility because the astronauts could die if her calculations were wrong.

In 1986, after 33 years working with NASA, Katherine Johnson retired.

Did You Know...?

As well as working for NASA, Katherine Johnson also had three daughters: Constance, Joylette and Katherine.

What Awards Has Katherine Been Given?

In 2015, Katherine Johnson was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Barack Obama, the US president of the time. These medals are given to people like Katherine, who have helped America progress in the world.

In 2016, she received a Silver Snoopy Award which is given to those who have made an outstanding contribution to flight safety and mission success. A building at NASA has been named after her and a Hollywood film has been made about her career.