

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

KATHERINE GOBLE JOHNSON

mathematician, activist

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Page | 1



COURTESY OF NASA/DONALDSON COLLECTION,
VIA GETTY IMAGES

Background Information

Born: August 26, 1918

Johnson's father moved to Institute, West Virginia, so she and her siblings could attend school past eighth grade. Since her father loved math, he motivated Johnson to excel in school and inspired her own love of math. Johnson received a Bachelor of Science in mathematics and French from West Virginia State College in 1937. After graduation, she taught at an all-Black school in Virginia. She took a break from teaching to start a family. When she heard about job openings at the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA), which later became NASA, she and her family moved to Newport News, and she began working there in 1953¹.

Johnson's Resistance

Johnson was one of the few women working at NACA and one of the even fewer Black women. Coming to work every day was a fight against segregation to prove that she was just as capable as any of the White men. The simple things that we would never consider were struggles that she had to deal with every day. People did not take her seriously, she worked longer hours and had to work twice as hard as everyone else.

Johnson was an essential contributor to U.S. achievements in space. She provided math for the 1958 document "Notes on Space Technology." In 1960, Johnson coauthored a report that described an orbital spaceflight landing and was the first woman to receive credit as an author of a research report. Johnson was a crucial member of the team that programmed the orbital mission of John Glenn in 1962. She had gained a significant amount of trust for her math skills.

Achievements

In 2015, President Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom². Johnson stands as an example of resistance due to her work against gendered, racial norms that often stand in the fields of science, mathematics, engineering and technology.

¹ Loff, S. (2016, November 22). Katherine Johnson Biography. Retrieved from <https://www.nasa.gov/content/katherine-johnson-biography>.

² Smither, W. (2019, August 29). Katherine Goble Johnson (1918-). BlackPast. Retrieved from <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/johnson-katherine-g-1918/>.

Essential Questions

1. How did Johnson fight against segregation in her daily life?
2. How were her actions acts of resistance? What was it that she was working against/to resist?
3. What is an injustice that you face? What is a small change you could make to fight injustice in your daily life?
4. ***"I don't have a feeling of inferiority. Never had. I'm as good as anybody, but no better."***
 - a. Given what you know about Johnson, how does this quotation symbolize her resistance? Why is it important to be confident and proud of yourself without putting other people down or making others feel inferior?