

Thursday 4th February 2021

LI: I understand the purpose and structure of a biography

Groundbreaking
Engineering &
Computing Career

Who Was Mary
Jackson?

Early Years

Retirement and Community
Engagement

Working Through
Segregation

A:

Though President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802 prohibited discrimination in the defence industry, Virginia state law still enforced segregation in the workplace. All work facilities had separate restrooms and cafeterias designated "white" or "coloured." In the company cafeteria, white people could select their food choices and sit in a lunchroom. Black people had to make their food requests to a cafeteria attendant and then go back to their desks and eat, an experience Jackson considered an indignity.

B:

Mary Winston Jackson was born on April 9, 1921, in Hampton, Virginia, the daughter of Ella and Frank Winston. She attended Hampton's all-Black schools and graduated with high honours from George P. Phoenix Training School in 1937. Five years later, she earned dual bachelor's degrees in mathematics and physical science from Hampton Institute.

C:

Mathematician Mary Winston Jackson excelled academically in a time of racial segregation. Her math and science skills earned her a position as a "human computer" for NACA, and she later became NASA's first Black female engineer. Along with serving a vital role in the development of the space program, she helped other women and minorities advance their careers. Jackson died in February 2005 at the age of 83. The story of her ground-breaking contributions to NASA was later dramatised in the 2016 film 'Hidden Figures'.

D:

In 1985, Mary Jackson retired from NASA at the age of 64. She lived for another 20 years, working in her community and continuing her advocacy and community engagement.

Among her many honours were an Apollo Group Achievement Award and being named Langley's Volunteer of the Year in 1976. Commendably, she was also a Girl Scout troop leader for more than three decades!

Mary Jackson died on February 11th, 2005, at the age of 83. In 2016, she was one of three main women profiled in Margot Lee Shetterly's book 'Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Who Helped Win the Space Race', and its subsequent film adaptation.

E:

Mary Jackson began her engineering career in an era in which female engineers of any background were a rarity; in the 1950s, she very well may have been the only black female aeronautical engineer working in the field in the USA.

After several months of "separate and unequal" accommodations at the NACA, Jackson had had enough. She considered resigning, but a chance encounter with a supervisor changed her mind. After hearing her complaints, he invited her to work for him and she accepted. He quickly saw her potential and encouraged her to take engineering classes. In time, she was promoted to aeronautical engineer, making her NASA's first Black female engineer, and developed expertise working with wind tunnels and analysing data on aircraft flight experiments.