



The Clerk's Black History Series

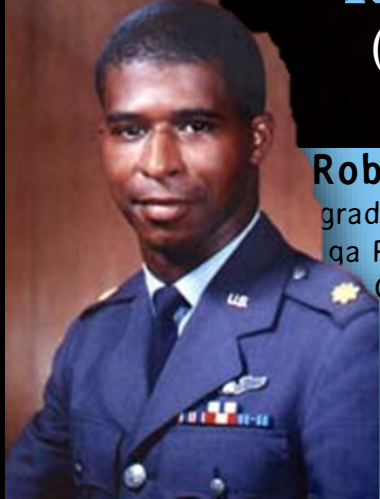
Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



“Robert Henry Lawrence, Jr.”

(October 2, 1935 – December 8, 1967)

“First African-American Astronaut”



Robert H. Lawrence Jr., was born October 2, 1935, in Chicago Illinois. He graduated in the top ten percent of his high school in 1952. And, as a member of Omega Psi Phi fraternity, he graduated from Bradley University with a bachelors degree in Chemistry and was a Cadet Commander in the Air Force ROTC. By the age of 21, Robert completed flight training school to become a U.S. Air Force pilot and by the age of 25, he had completed an Air Force training as an instructor pilot.

By the age of 30, Robert was a senior United States Air Force (USAF) pilot, who had over 2500 hours of flight time, with most of that time spent in Lockheed F-104 Starfighter jets. He tested and compiled data on the gliding flight of unpowered spacecraft returning to Earth from orbit. NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration), commended Robert for his accomplishments and his flight maneuver data that was critical to the development of the Space Shuttle. In 1965, Robert earned a Ph.D. in physical chemistry from The Ohio State University.



In June 1967, Robert completed the U.S. Air Force Test Pilot School at Edwards Air Force Base in California and was selected by the USAF as an astronaut in the Air Force's Manned Orbital Laboratory (MOL) space program. However, the celebration was short-lived, when, just six months later, on December 8, 1967, Robert was flying backseat as an instructor pilot on an F-104 Starfighter trainee mission. The airplane, when coming in for a final landing, struck the ground and its main landing gear failed. The plane caught fire and rolled and although the student pilot ejected from the plane and survived with major injuries, Robert's seat ejected sideways, killing him instantly. The MOL program was cancelled in 1969. Seven of the 16 Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps astronauts, who were under the age of 35, were transferred to NASA. Robert Lawrence would have been one of those transferred, had he survived. All those transferred later flew space shuttle missions.



At the time of his death, the Air Force policy required a flight in space before awarding an “astronaut” rating. However, on Jan. 2, 1997, the Astronaut Memorial Foundation made a formal request for the Air Force to reconsider Robert's case. In light of the significance of his selection, being the first African-American selected for the MOL, and the unfortunate circumstances of his death, the Air Force retroactively designated Robert H. Lawrence, Jr., an astronaut—making him officially, the first, African-American Astronaut.

On December 8, 2017, Robert's name was added to the Space Mirror Memorial - a memorial dedicated to those who died while serving in America's space program.

Recently, an American global aerospace and defense technology company, named their NG-13 Cygnus spacecraft after Robert. When launched, the “S.S. Robert H. Lawrence,” is scheduled for a mission to the International Space Station.

