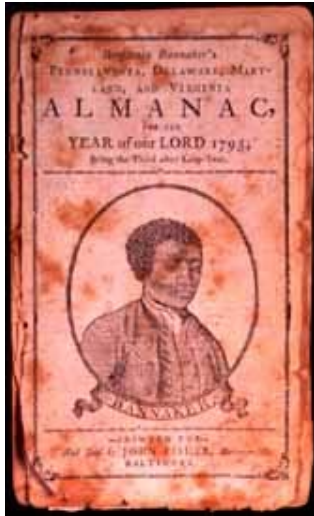


Who Was Benjamin Banneker?

1731 – 1806



Benjamin Banneker's Almanac
1795

Benjamin Banneker -- author, scientist, mathematician, farmer, astronomer, publisher and urban planner -- was born in Maryland on November 9, 1731. His father and grandfather were former slaves. His grandmother, Molly Welsh, was an English dairy maid who was falsely convicted of theft and indentured to a Maryland tobacco farmer. After working out her indenture, Welsh rented and farmed some land, eventually purchasing two African slaves whom she freed several years later.

In violation of Maryland law, Welsh wed one of her former slaves, Banneker or Bannaka, said to be the son of a chief. Their daughter Mary also married an African -- a man from Guinea who had been enslaved, baptized as Robert, and freed -- who took Banneker as his surname upon their marriage. In 1731, they named their first child Benjamin.

Young Benjamin grew up in Baltimore County, one of two hundred free blacks among a population of four thousand slaves and thirteen thousand whites. He was taught to read by his grandmother Molly, and briefly attended a one-room interracial school taught by a Quaker. He showed an early interest in mathematics and mechanics, preferring books to play.

A farmer of modest means, Banneker nevertheless lived a life of unusual achievement. In 1753, at the age of 22, the young man borrowed a pocket watch from a well-to-do neighbor; he took it apart and made a drawing of each component, then reassembled the watch and returned it, fully functioning, to its owner.

From his drawings Banneker then proceeded to carve, out of wood, enlarged replicas of each part. Calculating the proper number of teeth for each gear and the necessary relationships between the gears, he constructed a working wooden clock that kept accurate time and struck the hours for over 50 years.

Banneker became friendly with the Ellicott brothers, who built a complex of gristmills in the 1770s. Like Banneker, George Ellicott was a mathematician and amateur astronomer. In 1788, with tools and books borrowed from Ellicott, Banneker nearly accurately predicted the timing of an eclipse of the sun, discovering later that his minor error was due to a discrepancy in his expert sources rather than a miscalculation on his part.

In 1791, Banneker accompanied Major Andrew Ellicott to the banks of the Potomac to assist him in surveying the new federal city that would become the nation's capital. A notice first printed in the Georgetown Weekly Ledger and later copied in other newspapers stated that Ellicott was "attended by Benjamin Banneker, an Ethiopian, whose abilities, as a surveyor, and an astronomer, clearly prove that Mr. Jefferson's concluding that race of men were void of mental endowments, was without foundation."

At age 58, Banneker began the study of astronomy and was soon predicting future solar and lunar eclipses. In 1792, Banneker published an almanac, based on his own painstakingly calculated ephemeris

(table of the position of celestial bodies), that also included commentaries, literature, and fillers that had a political and humanitarian purpose. The previous summer, he had sent a copy of the ephemeris to Thomas Jefferson, along with a letter in which he challenged Jefferson's ideas about the inferiority of blacks. The "Sable Astronomer" was often pointed to as proof that African Americans were not intellectually inferior to European Americans. Thomas Jefferson himself noted this in a letter to Banneker.

Banneker published six almanacs in twenty-eight editions for the years 1792 through 1797. "Benjamin Banneker's Almanac" was a top seller from Pennsylvania to Virginia and even into Kentucky.

He continued to live alone, selling off and renting his land, then giving the rest to the Ellicotts in exchange for a small pension. Banneker died on Sunday, October 9, 1806 at the age of 74. On the day of his burial, his house and its contents (including his clock) caught fire and burned to the ground. A few small memorial traces still exist in the Ellicott City/Oella region of Maryland, where Banneker spent his entire life except for the Federal survey. It was not until the 1990s that the actual site of Banneker's home was determined.

In 1980, the U.S. Postal Service issued a postage stamp in his honor.

Image Credit: Maryland Historical Society