

Benjamin Banneker:

America's First Black Astronomer

At a time when very few African Americans were able to read or write, Benjamin Banneker distinguished himself as one of the nation's foremost astronomers and mathematicians.

Benjamin Banneker was born a freeman in the slave state of Maryland in 1731. His grandmother was an English-born white woman who first freed and then married one of her slaves. The English woman and her former slave husband had three daughters. One of these daughters was Benjamin Banneker's mother, who also married a freed slave.

The Banneker family farmed tobacco on the grandmother's farm. In 1737 Banneker's father purchased his own 100-acre tract for 7,000 pounds of tobacco. Young Benjamin, who was then only six years old, was listed on the deed as co-owner of the property. Banneker attended a racially integrated school and received the equivalent of an eighth-grade education.

Banneker continued with his studies from borrowed textbooks, teaching himself advanced mathematics and astronomy. He was able to

earn a living as a gentleman farmer from the land his father had purchased. With his basic needs cared for, Banneker was free to fol-

low intellectual pursuits. He is said to have built the first clock made in America. In 1773 he began astronomical calculations. In 1789 he correctly predicted a solar eclipse. From 1791 to 1802 Banneker published the annual astronomical almanac: the *Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia Almanac and Ephemeris*.

In 1790 Banneker was appointed by President George Washington to a six-man team to survey the boundaries for the District of Columbia. The surveyors, under the command of Andrew Ellicott, were charged with carving

out a 100-square-mile federal district from the Maryland and Virginia countryside. Availing themselves of Banneker's expertise in astronomy, the surveyors used the stars to mark the boundaries. Large stone markers were dragged through the woods and placed at one-mile intervals.

In 1846 the federal government returned the Virginia portion of the district to that state. Today, most of the original markers remain in place in both Maryland and Virginia. Recently, a team of surveyors using sophisticated Defense Department mapping satellites rechecked the original boundaries and found them to be remarkably accurate.

In 1791 Banneker submitted his almanac to then Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. In an accompanying 12-page letter, Banneker urged Jefferson, who had previously expressed doubts of the mental capabilities of the black race, to examine

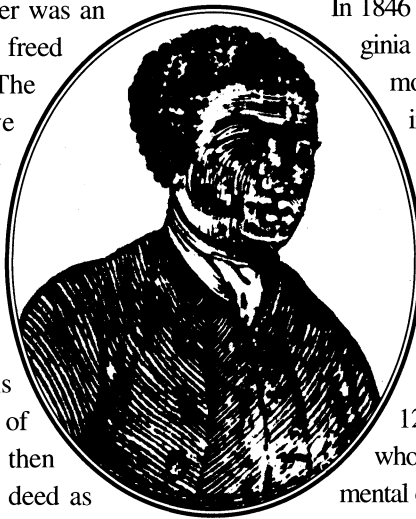
his work as evidence of Negro intellectual prowess. Jefferson sent an immediate reply: "No body wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit that nature has given to our black brethren equal to those of other men and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely

to the degraded condition of their existence."

Evidently, Jefferson was merely humoring this remarkable black man.

Later, in a letter to a European acquaintance, Jefferson, who remained a slaveowner, wrote: "We know he had spherical trigonometry enough to make almanacs but not without the suspicion of aid. I have a long letter from Banneker which shows him to have had a mind of very common stature indeed."

Benjamin Banneker died on his farm on October 9, 1806. Precisely at the time Banneker was being lowered into his grave on his farm, his house caught on fire. Nearly all of his worldly possessions, including his manuscripts and notes, were destroyed.



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—Thomas Jefferson
