

Benjamin Banneker's Biography



Benjamin Banneker was a largely self-educated mathematician, astronomer, compiler of almanacs and writer.

Who Was Benjamin Banneker?

A free Black man who owned a farm near Baltimore, Benjamin Banneker was largely self-educated in astronomy and mathematics. He was later called upon to assist in the surveying of territory for the construction of the nation's capital. He also became an active writer of almanacs and exchanged letters with Thomas Jefferson, politely challenging him to do what he could to ensure racial equality.

Early Years

Born on November 9, 1731, in Ellicott's Mills, Maryland, Banneker was the son of an ex-slave named Robert and his wife, Mary Banneky. Mary was the daughter of an Englishwoman named Molly Welsh, a former indentured servant, and her husband, Bannka, an ex-slave whom she freed and who asserted that he came from tribal royalty in West Africa.

Because both of his parents were free, Benjamin escaped the wrath of slavery as well. He was taught to read by his maternal grandmother and for a very short time attended a small Quaker school. Banneker was primarily self-educated. His early accomplishments included constructing an irrigation system for the family farm and a wooden clock that was reputed to keep accurate

time and ran for more than 50 years until his death. In addition, Banneker taught himself astronomy and accurately forecasted lunar and solar eclipses. After his father's passing, he ran his own farm for years, cultivating a business selling tobacco via crops.

Interests in Astronomy and Surveying

Banneker's talents and intelligence eventually came to the attention of the Ellicott family, entrepreneurs who had made a name and fortune by building a series of gristmills in the Baltimore area in the 1770s. George Ellicott had a large personal library and loaned Banneker numerous books on astronomy and other fields.

In 1791, Andrew Ellicott, George's cousin, hired Banneker to assist in surveying territory for the nation's capital city. He worked in the observatory tent using a zenith sector to record the movement of the stars. However, due to a sudden illness, Banneker was only able to work for Ellicott for about three months.

Popular Almanacs

Banneker's true acclaim, however, came from his almanacs, which he published for six consecutive years during the later years of his life, between 1792 and 1797. These handbooks included his own astronomical calculations as well as opinion pieces, literature and medical and tidal information, with the latter particularly useful to fishermen. Outside of his almanacs, Banneker also published information on bees and calculated the cycle of the 17-year locust.

Later Life and Death

Never married, Banneker continued to conduct his scientific studies throughout his life. By 1797, sales of his almanac had declined and he discontinued publication. In the following years, he sold off much of his farm to the Ellicotts and others to make ends meet, continuing to live in his log cabin.

On October 9, 1806, after his usual morning walk, Banneker died in his sleep, just a month short of his 75th birthday. In accordance with his wishes, all the items that had been on loan from his neighbor, George Ellicott, were returned by Banneker's nephew. Also included was Banneker's astronomical journal, providing future historians one of the few records of his life known to exist.

On Tuesday, October 11, at the family burial ground a few yards from this house, Benjamin Banneker was laid to rest. During the services, mourners were startled to see his house had caught on fire, quickly burning down. Nearly everything was destroyed, including his personal effects, furniture and wooden clock. The cause of the fire was never determined.