

Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

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Banneker, Benjamin

Born Baltimore County, Maryland, (USA), November 9, 1731

Died near Ellicott Mills, Maryland, (USA), October 9, 1806

Benjamin Banneker was a mathematician, astronomer, writer, inventor, landowning farmer, and important African American intellectual. His parents were Mary Banneky, a free African American, and Robert, a freed African slave, who adopted his wife's surname upon marriage. (Over the years, the spelling of the surname became fixed as Banneker.) In 1737, Benjamin, their firstborn and only son, was named co-owner of the deed to their 100-acre farm located in the Patapsco River Valley of rural Baltimore County, Maryland. Benjamin had three younger sisters. He never married and had no offspring

Banneker was taught to read and write by his maternal grandmother, Molly Welsh, a white woman who arrived from England as an indentured servant, completed her contract, and managed to assemble sufficient assets to purchase land for a farm on the Patapsco River. Banneker attended a rural Quaker school during the winter months when work on his father's farm was limited, and was otherwise largely self-taught. At the age of 22, Banneker demonstrated his advanced understanding of mathematical principles when he constructed an accurate wooden striking clock using a pocket watch as a model. However, his demanding farm activities and rural surroundings ruled out any pursuit of a formal education. Banneker's three sisters married and moved from the farm; his father died in 1758, leaving Benjamin and his mother as its sole occupants. By all accounts, he was an industrious and successful farmer.

In 1772, the Ellicott brothers, Andrew and George, emigrated from Pennsylvania to Maryland and bought land along the Patapsco Falls, very near Banneker's farm, for the purpose of developing a gristmill. The community of Ellicott Mills attracted Banneker, who was contracted to provide farm produce for the workmen. Soon, a friendship developed between Banneker and the young George Ellicott, who introduced him to the science of astronomy. Ellicott loaned him some astronomy texts and some basic instruments that Banneker used to teach himself mathematical and astronomical principles

With the encouragement of Ellicott, Banneker began calculating an ephemeris patterned after those published in almanacs of the period. He attempted to have his first ephemeris published in 1791, but was unsuccessful.

Banneker's quiet rural life changed at the age of 60 when Major Andrew Ellicott, who had received a commission to survey the Federal Territory (Washington), was in need of competent assistants. Ellicott, who had reviewed Banneker's ephemeris for 1791 and was impressed by his abilities, offered him a position with the survey team, which he accepted. Banneker, whose role was to care for the delicate instruments and assist in making the daily calculations necessary to conduct the survey, spent three months assisting Ellicott

While engaged with the survey expedition and following his return to his farm, Banneker conducted the necessary astronomical observations to calculate an ephemeris for 1792. With the assistance of the Ellicotts, he succeeded in having the ephemeris published in the form of an almanac.

In 1791, Banneker wrote a letter to then US Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson in which he enclosed a manuscript copy of his ephemeris for 1792. His correspondence concerned Jefferson's published opinions on the alleged mental inferiority of Negroes as presented in his Notes on the State of Virginia, which had been published in 1788. Banneker offered his own accomplishments as evidence of the equal mental abilities of Blacks and whites. Banneker's 1793 almanac published a copy of this letter as well as Jefferson's reply. Jefferson, for his part, sent the almanac to the secretary of the French Royal Academy as evidence of the mental abilities of Negroes

From 1792 to 1797, Banneker calculated ephemerides for six separate almanacs that were published in various cities in 28 editions. Pertaining to the mid-Atlantic region, in addition to astronomical observations, these almanacs included practical advice for farmers, notations of holidays, general forecasts of weather trends, and miscellaneous writings by Banneker and his contemporaries

During his later life, Banneker devoted less time to farming and began leasing and selling small plots of his farm. In 1799, he legalized an informal arrangement to sell his remaining land to the Ellicotts in exchange for an annuity and life tenancy on the farm. He continued his astronomical observations and some routine farming chores as late as 1803, despite his failing health. Just shy of his 75th birthday, Banneker died at his farm in Baltimore County, Maryland.

The site of his house, which is said to have burned to the ground on the day of his funeral, has been rediscovered near Oella, Maryland, and preserved by Baltimore County as a park dedicated to his memory.

Robert J. Hurry

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