

# Benjamin Banneker

November 9, 1731 – October 19, 1806

## Critical Thinking



“The colour of the skin is in no way connected with the strength of the intellectual powers.” Benjamin Banneker

**B**enjamin Banneker’s mark was made with the development and publishing of his almanacs, which he published annually for six years, 1792 to 1797. The almanacs, considered among the first in the United States, included astronomical calculations he created as well as literature, medical information and tidal information. These almanacs became useful to fisherman and farmers, as well as those throughout the area. He also published information about insects, such as bees and the 17-year locust cycle. The 1793 almanac included correspondence with then Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson, along with a letter illuminating the abuse and censure of “beings,” meaning, slaves for which he requested help. Thomas Jefferson responded to him with a letter that is now stored in the Library of Congress.

Benjamin Banneker was born a free black man to an ex-slave named Robert and his wife, Mary Banneky. Mary was the daughter of an English-woman, Molly Welsh, a former indentured servant and her husband Bannka, an ex-slave whom she freed. Bannka claimed to have come from tribal royalty in West Africa.

Young Banneker was taught to read by his grandmother and attended a local Quaker school for a short time. He was primarily self-educated, borrowing books and reading voraciously. Banneker engaged his **soft skill of critical thinking** even as a young man by creating an irri-

gation system for his family’s farm and created a wooden clock that kept perfect time until his death. Banneker was particularly interested in astronomy and the forecast of eclipses. Through all of his learning, he continued to run the farm for many years, selling tobacco grown on the farm.

Recognizing Banneker’s intelligence, George Ellicott, a developer of grist mills in Baltimore with a large personal library, loaned Banneker books on astronomy and other interests. In 1791, a member of Ellicott’s family hired Banneker to assist in surveying the territory that would later become Washington D.C. However, Banneker became ill suddenly, halting his ability to continue his work.

Banneker sold most of his farm to the Ellicotts and lived in the log cabin on the remaining property. After a walk on October 19, 1806, just before his 75th birthday, Banneker passed away. All of the items Banneker borrowed were returned along with this astronomical journal, allowing others to have a small glimpse of his accomplishments. On the day of his burial on the property, mourners watched as his house burned to the ground. The one document in the Ellicott’s possession was one of only a few records of a portion of his life’s work.

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