

Benjamin Banneker and His AMAZING Clock

In the days of slavery, he became America's first Black scientist.

By Linda Trice, Ph.D.

Until he was about 20 years old, Benjamin Banneker had never seen a watch or clock. Born in 1731 in Maryland (one of 13 colonies ruled by England), he worked as a farmer and lived by sunrise and sunset. He didn't need to know the exact time. One day, he saw a watch and was fascinated with it. Today, no one knows whose watch it was, but he borrowed it and studied how it worked.

Then, he built a clock!

He whittled gears and most other working parts out of wood. For the few metal parts he needed, he used iron or brass.

“Never abandon your vision. Keep reaching to further your dreams.”
—Benjamin Banneker

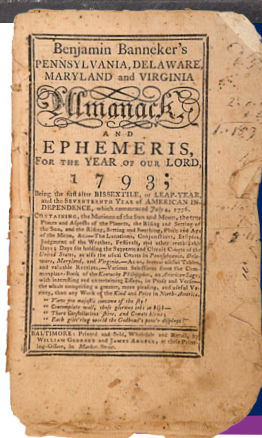


What a clock it was! Not only did it tell the time, but its bell rang every hour. People traveled miles to see Benjamin's clock. They were impressed by the young Black man who created it.

At the time, most Black people in the colonies were slaves. Benjamin and his family were free. He was educated at a time when few people of any race knew how to read or write. And at the age of 22, he had designed and built a working clock without having a single lesson or book on the subject.

A Love of Math

From the time he was a boy, Benjamin loved to learn, and he especially loved math. His grandmother taught him to read and write using the one book she had, the Bible. He attended school in the winters. Years later,



ABOVE: A replica of Benjamin Banneker's wooden clock.

LEFT: His almanac was a success.

his lifelong friend Jacob Hall recalled that Benjamin often stayed in the schoolhouse while the other students played outdoors. “All his delight was to dive into his books,” Jacob said.

Benjamin worked on his family's farm and studied when his work was done. He became known as a man of learning. He made calculations and wrote letters for neighbors who could not do those things.

Making History

In 1980, the United States Postal Service issued a first-class stamp in honor of Benjamin Banneker. This clothing is typical of Banneker's time, but no one knows what his face looked like.



Over the years, his parents died, and his sisters married and moved out. As the only son, Banneker took on responsibility for the farm. At night, he often relaxed outside with his sisters and their families. He played his flute or violin while they sang. Perhaps he looked up at the stars and wondered about them.

Becoming a Scientist

One of Banneker's neighbors shared his interest in the stars and planets. This friend lent him measuring instruments, a telescope, and books. Banneker studied the books and learned how to use the telescope and other instruments.

He became an astronomer. He could calculate where and when the Sun, Moon, and planets would appear for each day of the year. Tables of this information are called ephemerides (ef-uh-MAIR-rih-deez). They were published once a year in books called almanacs.

Banneker wrote his own almanac using his ephemerides.

Benjamin's farm in Maryland is now the Benjamin Banneker Historical Park and Museum.



A replica of Banneker's cabin.

In 1791, he sent a copy of his tables to Thomas Jefferson. By then, the United States had won independence from England. Maryland was now a state, not a colony. Jefferson had been a leader in the Revolution and later would become the nation's third President. He might have learned about Banneker's talents when Banneker was helping to survey land for a city that later became the nation's capital, Washington, D.C.

Jefferson was impressed with Banneker's ephemerides. He told Banneker that he would send the tables to France's Royal Academy of Sciences, and he did.

The almanac was published in America, and it was a success. Once again, people came from miles around to meet Banneker. He wrote new almanacs for the next five years.

Benjamin Banneker died on October 9, 1806. During his funeral, his cabin burned down. His wonderful clock was destroyed. It had rung the hour for more than 50 years. **H**

Jefferson and Slavery

When Benjamin Banneker wrote to Thomas Jefferson, Jefferson had not yet been elected President. However, he was known for writing the Declaration of Independence, which explained why the colonies demanded independence. He had written that “all men are created equal” and have the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

In his letter to Jefferson, Banneker wrote: “This, Sir, was a time in which you clearly saw into the injustice of a State of Slavery.” He pointed out that many Black people were denied those rights because they were slaves.

But Banneker's letter did not persuade Jefferson to help end slavery or improve the lives of Black people, slave or free. And Jefferson did not free his own slaves. (He had more than 600 slaves during his lifetime.)

Still wishing for an end to slavery, Banneker included his letters to and from Jefferson in his almanacs, hoping to sway public opinion. But slavery continued for another seven decades and finally ended in 1865.