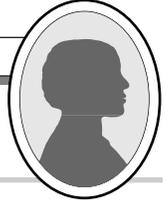


BIOGRAPHY



Benjamin Banneker

Laying out and building the national capital in the District of Columbia was a major priority for the new United States of America. For Benjamin Banneker—scientist, mathematician, philosopher, publisher, and surveyor—it was “the greatest adventure of my life.”

As you read the passage below, think about how Benjamin Banneker’s love of learning enriched his life and contributed to his many accomplishments.

Better than any other lesson to be derived from Benjamin Banneker’s life and work is the one he so admirably exemplified: that the thirst for knowledge is not limited to youth, and that the process of learning recognizes no barriers of race and creed.” This is how Banneker’s leading biographer assesses the major contribution of an extraordinary man.

Satisfying his thirst for knowledge was not easy for Benjamin Banneker, who was born to a former slave and the daughter of a former slave on a tobacco farm in Maryland in 1731. From a very early age, Benjamin worked hard on the farm. He spent what free time he had with his grandmother, who taught him how to read and write. Impressed with his intelligence and remarkable memory, his family managed to send him to a local one-room interracial schoolhouse run by Quakers. The school was open only in the winter, when farm work was slow. One of his classmates said of Benjamin, “all his delight was to dive into books.”

Formal education ended for Benjamin as soon as he was old enough to work full-time on the farm. From then on, he taught himself by observing nature, working mathematical exercises, and by studying the workings of mechanical devices. One of his most remarkable achievements was the construction of a wooden clock, built from plans he devised himself. Using books borrowed from friends, he also taught himself astronomy and how

to survey land. In a rapidly expanding nation, surveying was a skill much in demand.

In 1791 the head of the team assigned to survey the District of Columbia contacted Banneker. He needed someone with a knowledge of astronomy and surveying to join the team as a scientific assistant. The 60-year-old Banneker was thrilled at the prospect of taking part in such an important national project. On February 7, 1791, he arrived at the surveying base in Alexandria, Virginia, accepting the erratic hours (astronomic sightings required much night work), the exposure to bad weather, and the rough living conditions with good grace. A few months later, he returned home. A neighbor noted: “He was in fine spirits, seeming to have been reanimated by the kindness of the distinguished men with whom he had mingled.”

Next Banneker turned to the work that would make him famous. From 1791 to 1797, he wrote and published six almanacs, a remarkable achievement that required advanced knowledge of astronomy and thousands of painstaking mathematical equations. Like Benjamin Franklin, he included in his almanacs bits of wisdom he had gathered through experiences, such as, “Presumption should never make us neglect that which appears easy to us, nor despair make us lose courage at the sight of difficulties.” Benjamin Banneker died in 1806.

Questions to Think About

1. What obstacles did Benjamin Banneker have to overcome to get an education?
2. Why would surveying have been a particularly valuable skill in a new nation?
3. **Recognizing Ideologies** How would you express Banneker’s philosophy of life?