

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Benjamin Banneker

(November 9, 1731 - October 9, 1806)

“Farmer, Statistician, Astronomer, Surveyor,
Mathematician, and Author of Banneker’s Almanac”

Benjamin Banneker was born on November 9, 1731, to Robert and Mary Banneky, a mulatto mother and a formerly enslaved father, near the Patapsco River southeast of Baltimore, Maryland, where his father owned a small farm. As a child, Benjamin worked as an indentured servant on the Prince George’s County plantation of Mary Welsh.

Benjamin had better educational opportunities than that of an enslaved child of the time. While attending school with the local Quakers, he showed an exceptional interest in mathematics and construction. When he was 22 years old, Benjamin built a model of the first striking clock carved largely out of wood. He studied the gears of a pocket watch and used that to model the wood box clock. The clock was the first of its kind and brought Benjamin some notoriety.

In 1772, the Ellicott brothers, Quakers from Bucks County, PA, purchased land along the Patapsco River, near the Falls and, near Benjamin’s farm. The Ellicott’s were Quakers who held the same views on racial equality as did many of their faith. Together they built gristmills along the river - facilities powered by water wheels or turbines, that grinds cereal grain into flour, meal, or feed. Benjamin studied the mills and became well acquainted with the owners. They gave Benjamin access to the family library collection, and he was able to study astronomy and surveying. The next year, Benjamin used his math skills, combined with his astronomy studies, to calculate the path of a solar eclipse. In 1790, Benjamin prepared an ephemeris for 1791 - a table or data providing the computed positions, velocities, and trajectories of celestial bodies (planets, the sun, moon, stars, or satellites) at specific, regular time intervals. He hoped the ephemeris would be placed within a published almanac. However, he was unable to find a printer that was willing to publish his work.

In February 1791, Thomas Jefferson, then the U.S. Secretary of State, requested Major Andrew Ellicott, a land surveyor, to survey an area for a new federal district. Andrew contacted Benjamin and hired him to assist with the job, advancing him \$60 for travel expenses (equivalent of approximately \$3,000 in today’s money). Benjamin assisted in the land surveying process that eventually became the original District of Columbia, by making astronomical observations and calculations to establish base points, including one at Jones Point in Alexandria, Virginia, where the survey started and where the south corner stone was to be located. The area they mapped out was a square, measuring 10 miles on each side, totaling 100 square miles. Ellicott’s team placed boundary marker stones at or near every mile point along the borders of the new capital territory. Those markers still exist today (see photo, left). Benjamin left the survey project in April of 1791, to continue his work calculating the ephemeris for 1792 and to tend to his farm for the Spring planting. Andrew Ellicott’s other brothers joined him to complete the survey of the federal district.

Benjamin’s work on the 1792 ephemeris predicted eclipses and planetary conjunctions for inclusion in an almanac. After returning from the surveying of D.C., Andrew Ellicott, a published author himself, submitted Benjamin’s work to an abolitionist who sent it on to a prominent Philadelphia mathematician to review for accuracy. With the support of many scholars, Benjamin’s work was sent to William Goddard, a Baltimore printer who had published “The Pennsylvania”, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia’s Almanacks, and Ephemeris, for every year since 1782. Goddard then agreed to print and distribute Benjamin’s work within an almanac and ephemeris for the year of 1792 - the first in a six-years series of almanacs and ephemerides that were published and sold.

The title pages of two Baltimore editions of Benjamin’s 1795 almanac had woodcut portraits of him as he may have appeared. After his work at Jones Point, Benjamin went back home to work on his farmer’s almanac. He had retired from farming and planned to spend the remainder of his life focused on his studies. Benjamin Banneker died on October 9, 1806. He was 74 years old. Shortly after his death, a fire destroyed most of his possessions, which contributed to the many contradictory stories related to his life. He never married and has no known heirs.

There are numerous commemorations of Benjamin Banneker including a high school in College Park, GA, community centers, memorials, and parks dedicated to him in Maryland and Virginia, including Benjamin Banneker Park in Arlington, which contains one of the boundary stones. A statue of Benjamin Banneker is in the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

