This Day in History… November 9, 1731

Birth of Benjamin Banneker



Banneker was the third honoree in the Black Heritage Series.

On November 9, 1731, Benjamin Banneker was born on a farm in Baltimore County, Maryland. He later built a wooden clock, made astronomical calculations, published almanacs, and helped survey the boundaries of the new federal district.

Banneker was born free. His mother, Mary, was born to a free Black woman and a formerly enslaved man. His father, Robert, had also been enslaved before gaining his freedom. The family farmed their land in Baltimore County. Banneker's grandmother taught him to read and write, and he briefly attended a nearby school. He left school to help with farm work, but continued learning on his own. He studied mathematics and science through books and careful observation.

In 1753, at age 22, Banneker built a striking clock from wood. He had studied a pocket watch and used his observations to design the clock's parts. It kept time for decades. In 1772, the Ellicott family established mills near the Banneker farm. Banneker became friends with George Ellicott, who shared his interest in astronomy and lent him books, tables, and scientific instruments. Banneker used these materials to deepen his studies.



America's first heat sensitive stamp was issued to honor the 2017 total solar eclipse.

In 1789, Banneker forecast the timing of a solar eclipse. His prediction differed from those of several better-known astronomers and came close to the event's actual timing. He later used astronomical calculations in his almanacs, which included information about the Sun, Moon, planets, eclipses, and weather.

In 1791, surveyor Andrew Ellicott hired Banneker to assist with the survey of the federal district that would become Washington, DC. Banneker spent about three months at Jones Point, near Alexandria, Virginia. There, he made astronomical observations that helped establish the survey's starting point. He returned home because of health problems.

Banneker continued preparing an almanac at home. On August 19, 1791, he sent Thomas Jefferson a letter and a manuscript of his forthcoming almanac. Banneker challenged Jefferson's views about Black people's intellectual abilities and pointed to the contradiction between those views and the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson replied on August 30. He praised Banneker's work and said he had sent the almanac to French scientist and philosopher Marquis de Condorcet.



Issued for the 200th anniversary of Washington, DC.

Banneker's first almanac appeared in 1792. It contained astronomical tables, sunrise and sunset times, phases of the Moon, eclipses, weather predictions, court dates, practical tables, essays, and poems. He published additional editions through 1797. The almanacs circulated in the Mid-Atlantic states and included both useful reference material and writing on public issues.

Banneker later sold or rented much of his land. He died on October 9, 1806, at age 74, one month before his 75th birthday. During his burial, a fire destroyed his home and many of his belongings, including the wooden clock. Copies of his almanacs and some of his papers survived.

In the years since his death, many streets and buildings have been named in Banneker's honor. There's also a Benjamin Banneker Historical Park and Museum in Oella, Maryland and the Banneker-Douglass Museum in Annapolis, Maryland.

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