


## Benjamin Banneker, I Salute You

If I had the choice to travel through time to meet one person, that person would be Benjamin Banneker, America's first black scientist and mathematician. He was born in 1731, when America was just beginning to grow and the practice of owning slaves was a hot topic.

As my knowledge of Benjamin Banneker increases, so does my admiration. The story of his life is quite amazing and profound. It does not begin the day he was born, but two generations before that day. In 1683, his grandmother, Molly Welch arrived in America from England as an exile and an indentured servant. She was a Christian and her ability to read the Bible had saved her from death in England. Later she settled down as a tobacco farmer, in central Maryland, and ended up marrying her former slave, Bannaky, who was an African Prince captured by slave traders. Benjamin Banneker descended from Bannaky and Molly's first child, Mary, who also married a black man who was a former slave. Although his father and grandfather were originally slaves, Benjamin was born free. He had quite a heritage!

Benjamin Banneker was a mechanical genius. This was not well known until the day he borrowed a storekeeper's pocket watch, intrigued by the device. He determined to make one of his own. His scientific mind ticked as he took the watch apart and studied its interior. Using only a pocketknife, Benjamin carved out of wood the intricate gears and mechanisms which operated the watch. He even added a bell to chime on the hour. The result was a large clock that ran in perfect working order the rest of his life. He re-assembled the pocket watch and returned it to his friend in mint condition. The twenty-one year old Benjamin Banneker was famed for this fantastic accomplishment, since clocks and pocket watches were rare marvels in young America at the time. What ingenuity!

Benjamin held a strong belief in God and was a dedicated Christian. His early knowledge of God came from his Christian grandmother, Molly, who taught him to read using the Bible. He wholly acknowledged his Creator. His worldview was apparent in a letter he wrote to President Thomas Jefferson concerning the issue of the Black man's mental capacity. "...one universal Father hath given being to us all; and that he hath not only made us all of one flesh, but that he hath also, without partiality, afforded



us all the same sensations and endowed us all with the same faculties; and that however variable we may be in society or religion, however diversified in situation or color, we are all of the same family, and stand in the same relation to him.”

It is surprising to me that the majority of Banneker's major accomplishments were later in his life. Through a telescope and books given to him by a friend, Banneker became an avid astronomer. He was fifty-eight years old when he decided to write an almanac, the first of six. Writing almanacs required a precise attention to detail and skilled mathematics, both of which Benjamin Banneker possessed. Almanacs determined the seasons, told the time of day, weather forecasts, phases of the moon, and planting/harvesting dates. Banneker was also part of the team which surveyed Washington D.C.

I wish I could sit down with this intelligent man of history. My mind is full of questions... “Mr. Banneker,” I would say, “you are a free black man living in a time when people of your color are subjected to slavery; how does it feel to be in this situation? Unaccepted, lonely, perhaps? Isolated from the world?” Mr. Banneker, “It is clear that you have a faith in God. Did this help you persevere through racial discrimination and injustice?” Perhaps he might reply that throughout the discrimination and injustice which complicated his life, God was sovereign, and still is.

“Mr. Banneker, do you realize how much your work has benefited the common as well as the intellectual man of your time? And did you ever dream that your God-given love of learning and talents would so highly influence the world?”

“Mr. Benjamin Banneker, you are an inspiration to me. I salute you!”