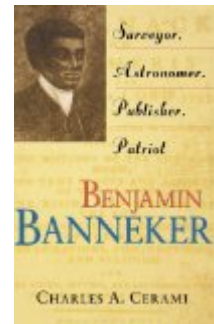


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Charles A. Cerami. *Benjamin Banneker: Surveyor, Astronomer, Publisher, Patriot*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002. xiii + 257 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-471-38752-7.

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Published on H-DC (February, 2003)



Foiling the Arsonists

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To the ten books he has already written, Charles Cerami, a former editor of Kiplinger Washington Publications and an economist, now adds his masterful biography of Benjamin Banneker (1731-1804). Cerami has gleaned the facts of Banneker's life from a scant historical record consisting of local archives, correspondence, a few journals, reminiscences, and an earlier biography (Shirley Graham's 1949 *Your Most Humble Servant*). He has interwoven his tale with enough historical information as well as social and political context for the reader to readily understand the relative influence of these factors on Banneker's life along with the magnitude of his achievements. These facets include George Washington's political genius and challenges; race and racism in the eighteenth century; astronomy; the building of America's capital city; and a number of Banneker's more famous contemporaries. The book contains eighteen chapters and ends with two appendixes—one on Banneker's probable Dogon ancestors in Africa and one on Benjamin Franklin and his almanac—source notes for each chapter, a bibliography, and an index.

Banneker's grandmother, Molly Welsh, was a dairy maid in England accused of stealing a pail of milk she had accidentally spilled. She could have been executed for the presumed crime, but was instead transported to the North American colonies. In 1683, she wound up in Annapolis, Maryland, indentured for seven years to an honorable tobacco farmer who released her with fifty acres of arable land near Elkridge, Maryland and a small

amount of cash, which she used to purchase two slaves. One turned out to be of royal heritage, perhaps from the Dogon people, who called himself Banneka. After several years, when the three had established a small farm, Mary freed Banneka and married him. A devoted couple, they eventually had four daughters, but Banneka died before he was fifty.

Their daughter Mary either married a slave and freed him, or married a former slave. Regardless, this man accepted the name Robert Banneky, and on November 9, 1731, Benjamin Banneker was born. Benjamin's intellect was recognized from the beginning and by the age of six he was helping neighboring farmers with their accounts. Methodical and analytical, he kept a journal for most of his life, recording his thoughts, ideas, and dreams, in addition to practical farming information. He analyzed farming and broke it into thirty-six distinct steps; not surprisingly, the Banneker farm was known for its fine crops.

Between 1759 and the early 1770s, Banneker underwent some life-altering change that caused him to stop writing, except for the recording of his dreams. An early biographer assigned the cause to a disappointed love affair; however, Cerami's theory, although less romantic, seems more likely: though free, Banneker recognized the limitations of his possibilities as an uneducated black farmer living in a backwater, rural slave society. A turning point came, however, when he met the Ellicotts.

In 1772, the Ellicotts, a well-to-do Quaker family of farmers who had never owned slaves, moved to the

Elkridge area and soon began building millworks and fitting them out with machinery. Fascinated, Banneker spent more and more time watching the progress. Eventually he met George Ellicott, the son of Revolutionary War Major Andrew Ellicott III. Ellicott had received an excellent formal education, was a prodigious amateur scientist and astronomer, and owned a large library. Recognizing a kindred spirit, he readily lent his books to Banneker, and the two exchanged and discussed ideas for the rest of Banneker's life (Ellicott was more than twenty years younger).

Banneker's genius came to light in many ways. Banneker took apart a pocket watch and, after studying the works, in 1753 made a wooden clock, which ran well for at least twenty years. In the 1780s, Ellicott lent Banneker a copy of Gibson's *Treatise of Practical Surveying*, from which he mastered surveying. Banneker's real love, however, was astronomy, and he spent vast amounts of time watching the night sky. Another indication of Banneker's genius was his theory that each of the stars is a central sun and that many have planets circling them. It was a revolutionary idea and Banneker worked it out in isolation from other thinkers and with minimal equipment.

In 1790, when Banneker was almost sixty, Congress granted President George Washington the power to choose a location for a permanent national capital. Washington selected a ten-mile square site in Virginia and Maryland that was named the District of Columbia in September, 1791. To survey the site, he named the best surveyor he knew and trusted, Andrew Ellicott III. Part of the agreement stipulated that Ellicott could choose his own staff; as principal assistant to survey the city, Ellicott chose Benjamin Banneker, based on an assessment of his talent and character. The job of drawing the four ten-mile boundary lines entailed crossing rivers and slog-ging through as well as camping in miles of overgrown, wooded, rocky, swampy wilderness to drive markers into the ground. Only by aligning the markers with the stars could the surveyors be certain that neither Virginia nor Maryland gave more land to the project than each had promised. For this, Banneker's knowledge of astronomy was critical, and it meant that, in addition to the hardships of surveying during the day, the sixty-year-old was awake most nights for more than two months. Banneker then declared that his services were no longer needed and returned to his farm, eager to work on new projects.

One of Banneker's longtime ambitions had been to write an almanac, a guide that not only published the alignment of the stars and the timing of the tides for the

coming year, but also offered practical advice, recipes, and humor. The first issue of *Banneker's Almanac* was published in 1791, and it continued to appear annually until 1797.

Throughout his life, Banneker had declined to allow abolitionists to use him as an example to promote the end of slavery. However, after completing the survey and his almanac, Banneker apparently changed his mind. Perhaps with encouragement from the Ellicotts, Banneker sent Thomas Jefferson a 10,000-word letter pointing out the discrepancies between the Declaration of Independence's assertion of the equality of all men and the institution of slavery. He encouraged Jefferson and other national leaders to devote their efforts to end slavery and "to wean yourselves from those narrow prejudices," and "Put your Souls in their Souls' stead" (p. 166). Banneker's letter, soon made public, exposed him to physical violence from pro-slavery Marylanders, some of whom occasionally vandalized Banneker's farm or fired shots at his cabin.

These three accomplishments—Banneker's participation in the survey of the capital city, the publication of his first almanac, and his letter to Jefferson along with Jefferson's reply—made 1791 Banneker's defining year, his *annus mirabilis*.

Benjamin Banneker died on October 6, 1806. Two days later, while he was being buried, arsonists burned his cabin to the ground and with it most of his papers and journals and his wooden clock. The fire burned manifestations of Banneker's genius and of his original and independent thinking, hindered biographical research and writing, and generally impeded recognition of the accomplishments of a colonial genius. Not until the early 1970s was there a small public funding in Maryland to memorialize Banneker's remarkable career. In the mid-1980s the Baltimore County Department of Recreation and Parks purchased the former Banneker Farmstead and surrounding land in Oella, outside Ellicott City, and established the Benjamin Banneker Historical Park. Now, nearly two hundred years later, Charles Cerami has foiled the arsonists. Historians had never completely lost sight of Banneker (for example, the Maryland Historical Society sponsored lectures on him in the late 1800s and early 1900s), but now, as evidenced by the number of sites that can be found on the Web, interest in this colonial genius has renewed. At the same time, Banneker's only other full-length biography, Shirley Graham's 1949 book, is usually dismissed as a "romanticized biography." Cerami's biography is a welcome and long overdue addition to this sparse record.

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Citation: Winfield Swanson. Review of Cerami, Charles A., *Benjamin Banneker: Surveyor, Astronomer, Publisher, Patriot*. H-DC, H-Net Reviews. February, 2003.

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