

Benjamin Banneker: Man of Many Talents

Benjamin Banneker, scientist and inventor, was a free African American. He was born in 1731 on his family's tobacco farm near Baltimore, Maryland. His mother, Mary, was a free woman, and his father, Robert, was an enslaved African American whom Mary had bought. His grandmother, a free woman who was a former indentured servant from England, had married a slave named Banna Ka. That name was later changed to Bannaky and then to Banneker when Benjamin was in school.

When Banneker was growing up, public education was not readily available to African Americans. His grandmother taught him to read. Later he learned to write and studied mathematics at a Quaker school.

Banneker began to show signs of having extraordinary talent when he was still a young man. In 1753 he built the first striking clock in America. He dismantled a pocket watch to see how it worked and then built wooden copies of its parts. He even included hand-carved gears. The clock kept perfect time for 40 years.

As an adult, Banneker lived in a cabin he built. He borrowed books and equipment from neighbors and taught himself astronomy and advanced mathematics. He even had a skylight in his cabin to help him study the skies. In 1789 Banneker predicted a solar eclipse.

Banneker put his skills to work when he published a series of almanacs in the 1790s. These almanacs included information, based on his calculations, about weather and eclipses. In 1792 he sent the manuscript for his first almanac to Secretary of State (later President) Thomas Jefferson, who had a keen interest in science. The two men began to correspond. Jefferson (a slaveholder) and Banneker (the son of an enslaved African American) discussed how the abilities of African Americans and whites differed.

Perhaps Banneker's most visible legacy may be seen in the layout of Washington, D.C. In 1791 Banneker became part of the team that was designing the new capital city. American soldier and architect Pierre L'Enfant headed the project. Shortly after the initial plans were surveyed and drawn, L'Enfant left the project and took his drawings with him. To keep the project moving, Banneker re-created the team's proposed layout from memory—an amazing feat that took him only two days.

Benjamin Banneker accomplished many feats as a mathematician, an astronomer, and an inventor. He also used his reputation to push for social reforms, including racial equality and peace.

Recalling Facts

1. The relative of Banneker's who was an indentured servant was
 - ☐ a. his father.
 - ☐ b. his grandmother.
 - ☐ c. his mother.
2. Banneker first learned mathematics
 - ☐ a. in a Quaker school.
 - ☐ b. from his grandmother.
 - ☐ c. on his own.
3. Banneker built a wooden clock when he was
 - ☐ a. a child.
 - ☐ b. a young man.
 - ☐ c. an old man.
4. Banneker sent his first almanac to
 - ☐ a. George Washington.
 - ☐ b. Pierre L'Enfant.
 - ☐ c. Thomas Jefferson.
5. Banneker published his almanacs
 - ☐ a. in the 1790s.
 - ☐ b. in the 1770s.
 - ☐ c. in the 1730s.

Understanding Ideas

6. From reading the passage, one can conclude that a child would be free
 - ☐ a. only if both parents were free.
 - ☐ b. if his mother was free.
 - ☐ c. if his father was free.
7. Banneker's work on the design of Washington, D.C., showed his skills as
 - ☐ a. a surveyor.
 - ☐ b. an astronomer.
 - ☐ c. an inventor.
8. One can conclude from the passage that Quakers
 - ☐ a. were willing to educate African Americans.
 - ☐ b. would teach only boys.
 - ☐ c. did not place much importance on education.
9. In publishing his almanacs, Banneker demonstrated knowledge of
 - ☐ a. building clocks.
 - ☐ b. the cycles of the sun and moon.
 - ☐ c. city planning.
10. From the passage, one might infer that Benjamin Banneker and Thomas Jefferson had different ideas about
 - ☐ a. farming.
 - ☐ b. city planning.
 - ☐ c. slavery.

The Education of Free Blacks in Post-Revolutionary War Boston

In 1779 Thomas Jefferson first proposed a system of tax-supported public education. Although the plan failed, it became the basis for a system of public education that came about in the 1840s. Before then opportunities for schooling usually went to boys from wealthy families, funded by private or religious groups.

Boston's free black community saw the need to take care of its children. In 1787 Prince Hall, a prominent African American, asked the state to start a school for black children. They denied both this request and later petitions. Hall then opened his own school in his home in 1798. Ten years later, he moved the school to the local African Meeting House.

In the 1820s, schooling for African American children improved when authorities in Boston started two free schools for them. Then, in 1834, the first school in the country that was just for African American children was built. It was named after white businessman Abiel Smith. Smith had left \$2,000 in his will for the education of black children.

In the late 1840s, some African American parents sued unsuccessfully to compel public schools to admit their children. The courts ruled that the parents' lawyers had not proved that the Smith School was inferior to public schools. Segregation—racial separation—was not outlawed in Massachusetts public schools until 1855.

1. Recognizing Words in Context

Find the word *inferior* in the passage. One definition below is closest to the meaning of that word. One definition has the opposite or nearly the opposite meaning. The remaining definition has a completely different meaning. Label the definitions C for *closest*, O for *opposite or nearly opposite*, and D for *different*.

- _____ a. older
- _____ b. better
- _____ c. worse

2. Distinguishing Fact from Opinion

Two of the statements below present *facts*, which can be proved. The other statement is an *opinion*, which expresses someone's thoughts or beliefs. Label the statements F for *fact* and O for *opinion*.

- _____ a. Abiel Smith was a businessman.
- _____ b. The Smith School was as good as public schools.
- _____ c. The Abiel Smith School was built in 1834.

3. Keeping Events in Order

Number the statements below 1, 2, and 3 to show the order in which the events took place.

- _____ a. Segregation was outlawed in Massachusetts public schools.
- _____ b. A school was established in the African Meeting House.
- _____ c. The Smith School was built.

4. Making Correct Inferences

Two of the statements below are correct *inferences*, or reasonable guesses. They are based on information in the passage. The other statement is an incorrect, or faulty, inference. Label the statements C for *correct* inference and F for *faulty* inference.

- _____ a. Before 1855, Boston public schools could refuse to admit African Americans.
- _____ b. Girls generally received less education than boys in early nineteenth-century America.
- _____ c. The Smith School admitted only boys.

5. Understanding Main Ideas

One of the statements below expresses the main idea of the passage. One statement is too general, or too broad. The other explains only part of the passage; it is too narrow. Label the statements M for *main idea*, B for *too broad*, and N for *too narrow*.

- _____ a. Education was important to African Americans in nineteenth-century America.
- _____ b. Education for Boston's African American children improved in the first half of the nineteenth century.
- _____ c. The Smith School was established in 1834.

Correct Answers, Part A _____

Correct Answers, Part B _____

Total Correct Answers _____