



Benjamin Banneker cartoon
by [Charles Alston](#), 1943.

BENJAMIN BANNEKER

My name is Benjamin Banneker and I was born November 9, 1731

I am not a slave. Most people assume that any man of color that they see in the United States is a slave. My proudest possession is my freedom and it is a possession I have never been without. Watching the stars and charting their path across the heavens is a great accomplishment, but freedom is more precious. Helping to survey the site of the Federal City, Washington, D.C. was an honor, but freedom is a crown. Calculating and publishing almanacs was my most important scientific endeavor, but having the freedom to pursue that goal was more important. The clock I made amazed many, but the freedom to learn was the cornerstone of my life.

My story rightly begins with my grandmother Molly. Molly Welsh was a farm girl, a milkmaid on a dairy farm in Wessex County, England. Twice a day she milked the cows. One morning while milking a cow, the cow shifted, kicked over the bucket and changed my grandmother's life forever. The owner accused her of stealing the milk and she was arrested, tried and found guilty. The penalty for stealing in England at that time could be death. There was one hope: if you could prove that you had a special skill, instead of death your sentence could be being sent to the English Colonies in America. A condemned prisoner could "call for the Book." Reading could save your life.

Instead of being hung, grandmother Molly's punishment was to be sent from home forever and to spend the next seven years as an indentured servant in America. When the seven years ended, she established a farm of her own in Maryland where she grew tobacco and corn. She was a good farmer and had successful crops and saved her money. If the farm was to prosper, she knew she needed help. Grandmother Molly used the money she had saved to buy two slaves to help her with the farm work. One of the new slaves proved to be a good farmer. The other, while willing to hunt and fish to provide meat for the table, showed little interest in farm work. He called himself Bannka. Bannka was the son of an African King. He was an intelligent and thoughtful man.

Some years later Molly wrote out a deed of manumission, a legal document that granted freedom, for both men. Bannka and Molly were married soon afterward. Mary, my mother, was the first child of Molly and Banneky, as he came to be called. The Bannekys of Banneky Springs had one of the most successful farms in Baltimore County. When Mary was old enough to marry, she and her mother got in the family wagon and went to buy her a husband. My father, Robert, was also an African who had become caught up in the triangular trade-- Rum, Slaves, and Molasses. I am Robert and Mary's first child.

I grew up in the wild country along the Patapsco River in Baltimore County, Maryland. Even as a boy, learning was always a passion with me. My first teachers were both women, my grandmother and Mother Nature. One of my earliest remembrances is of my grandmother reading to me from the Bible. Gradually I began to sound out the words with her and that is how I learned to read books. Mother Nature also taught me many things.

Mary and Robert Banneker felt that I was the smartest child they had ever seen. They wanted me to be able to go to school, but this was a very difficult proposition. There were no schools in the wilds of Baltimore County, and even if there were, would they accept a student of African heritage?

One day word came that a new farmer had moved into the valley. His name was Peter Heinrich and it was said that he planned to open a school. Sessions at the school would last from harvest in the fall until the time for planting the next spring. Mother and father wasted no time in trying to get me enrolled. Peter Heinrich was not at all disturbed that one of his students' fathers was from Africa and had been a slave. Mr. Heinrich was a Quaker, a member of a religious group that did not believe in slavery. They called themselves Friends. Peter Heinrich proved to be a great friend to me. Through him I met many other friends--not people, but books, which had many things to teach me. With books to guide me and my own keen sense of discovery, I was able to travel the world without ever leaving the valley of my birth.

THE WOODEN CLOCK

On one of our rare visits to Joppa Town I made a discovery that would change my life. A merchant there allowed me to examine his pocket watch. What a marvelous thing, intricate and precise. I vowed to have one of my own. A watch cost much more than I could afford. It was a luxury far beyond our means, but oh, the wonder of it! It fascinated me to be able to hold time in the palm of my hand.

The merchant was kind enough to allow me to borrow his watch. I took it home and took it apart to see what mysteries were contained within the case. It had a main spring, cogs, levers, a stem for winding--it was a marvel. Carefully, I reassembled the watch, took it apart, and reassembled it again and again until I was certain that even though the watch was still marvelous, its workings were no longer a mystery. I felt that I could build my own watch. Well, maybe not a watch, because the parts were so small, and the tolerances so exact, that it required tools I did not have. A clock ten times its size could be made with tolerances that I could manage. Calculating the gears took skill and patience. My plans were drawn precisely and I would make my clock of wood.