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Benjamin, Farm Boy

It was November 9, 1731. The maple trees of colonial Maryland were wearing yellow and orange when Benjamin Banneker entered the world. Little did his proud and grateful parents know that their child's name would one day be uttered by some of the most famous men in American history.

Abolitionists, people who pushed to end the institution of enslaving others, would shout his accomplishments from the rooftops. Indeed, Benjamin's name would be spoken time and time again as proof that intelligence, genius even, can belong to anyone—no matter the color of their skin. But right now, he was just a newborn, warm and loved on his mother's chest, safe inside his grandmother's home.

Benjamin was the firstborn child of Robert and Mary Banneker. Though the institution of American slavery would not be abolished for more than 130 years, Benjamin's parents were not enslaved. They were free and made their living as tobacco farmers. Because Benjamin's parents were free, Benjamin never had to endure being enslaved. He was born free, as all people should be.

Benjamin's mother was also freeborn. That was because his mother's mother, his maternal grandmother, was a white woman from England. Her name was Molly Welsh. Molly was a poor milkmaid working on an English cattle farm. One day, a dairy cow kicked over her bucket of milk. The cow's owner accused Molly of stealing the milk.

Molly was arrested, tried in court, and convicted as a felon! As punishment, she was forced to board a ship headed for the British colonies in North America. She was to become an indentured servant in what was then called the New World. As an indentured servant, she would have to work without pay for seven years for the person who covered the cost of her passage from England. Around 1683, the ship carrying Molly—and other convicts—landed off the coast of Maryland. Molly ended up laboring for a Maryland tobacco farmer.

After Molly finished her indenture, she continued to farm tobacco in Maryland. She saved up her money and purchased her own farmland. Although she did not agree with the institution of slavery, she eventually went down to the docks on the Chesapeake Bay and purchased two African men who had been stolen from their home country. These men would help her work her farm. She determined to give the men their freedom, just as she was given hers.

felon: someone who has committed a federal crime

One of the men Molly purchased had an African name—it sounded like “Banneker.” Some say his name was Bannaka, but how it was written in his African language and how Molly wrote it out in English are unknown. It took some time, but soon Molly and Bannaka were able to communicate. Bannaka told Molly that he had been a prince from a ruling family in West Africa. A rival tribe had kidnapped him and sold him to those involved in the slave trade.

Based on his name, which may mean “the sweet place” or “belongs to the place,” historians who study words and languages suggest that Bannaka was of the Wolof people of West Africa. Others believe he was of the Dogon people, also of West Africa. Historically, the Dogon people were exceptional farmers who were said to possess an uncanny knowledge of the stars. They were also known to be great mathematicians. One thing we do know is that after Molly gave Bannaka his freedom, the two of them got married. Molly took Banneker as her last name. Benjamin’s mother, Mary, was their firstborn daughter.

Benjamin’s father, Robert, had also been kidnapped from Africa to be enslaved in the colonies. He, too, worked on a tobacco farm in Maryland. His so-called owner taught him about the Bible. After being baptized into the Church of England, Benjamin’s father took on the

uncanny: mysterious

anglicized name Robert. He was also given his freedom at this time. Later, Robert and Mary got married. Robert took on his wife's last name, Banneker.

At first, Robert and Mary lived with Mary's mother, Molly. They helped her on her farm. Benjamin's parents wisely set aside some of their share of the farm's profits each year. Eventually, they were able to purchase twenty-five acres of their own land near Molly's. On that lot, they grew some of the finest tobacco. Within a short while, Robert was able to purchase one hundred acres nearby.

Robert added Benjamin's name to the deed of their land. True, he was only five years old at the time. However, Robert and Mary were likely hoping that by making their son a property owner no one would ever challenge his right to be free.

The Bannekers built a small but sturdy log cabin for their family. They used timbers they'd hewn from trees growing on their own land. They put in a mud-and-stick chimney and a hearth for cooking. There was at least one window with shutters to keep out the rain. Benjamin's dad built the furniture. His mother made their mattresses and clothes. She set up an herb garden—the medicine cabinet of colonial times.

Next, they prepared the land for tobacco. They built

sheds to hang and dry their harvest. They fenced in lots for their animals. They set up vegetable gardens, planted fruit trees, and braided and coiled straw skeps for bees to make honey in.

Soon, Benjamin's family grew. Benjamin had four sisters—Julian, who was born with health problems and didn't live long; Esther, who was better known as Minta; Jemima; and Molly, named after their grandmother. Benjamin's entire family pitched in to help run the Banneker farm.



It was hard work to grow tobacco. First, the Bannekers had to start the seedlings. Then they had to prepare the ground to replant the seedlings. All year, they had to remove by hand all the hungry worms and insects that loved eating tobacco leaves. When it was time to harvest,

skeps: hives

it was all hands on deck. Now it was time to cut the leaves from the plants, bundle them, and hang them to dry. And the leaves had to be harvested and hung in such a way that they did not get wet and moldy.

Once the leaves were cured, the Bannekers twisted them and rolled them into ropes. They packed the rolled ropes into barrels called hogsheads. If they did it right, they could get a thousand pounds of tobacco into one hogshead! As he got older, Benjamin would help his father hitch the hogsheads behind horses or oxen and then take their valuable crop down to the docks to be sold at an auction.

In addition to growing tobacco, Benjamin's family worked together in their vegetable gardens. They harvested fruit from their orchard—cherries, pears, and apples. Benjamin helped with feeding the pigs, gathering eggs from the chickens, milking the cows, and harvesting the honey.

As the only boy, Benjamin probably enjoyed some one-on-one time with his father when they were trapping game that roamed within their woods. They likely fished the waters of the Patapsco River, which flowed into the Chesapeake Bay. All kinds of wild game added to their diet—turkeys, quail, partridges, hares, squirrels, perch, catfish, oysters, crayfish, and many others!

auction: sale at which the person willing to pay the most gets the item

Unfortunately, Benjamin's days with his dad were cut short. Robert passed away when Benjamin was twenty-seven years old. It was written in their family Bible: "Robert Banneker departed this life, July 10th 1759."*

Benjamin Banneker was now the man of the house. One by one, Benjamin's sisters grew up and got married. They began their own families on their own land. It was up to Benjamin and his mother to manage the farm now. Thankfully, they were both healthy and hardworking.

Did You Know?

In the 1600s and 1700s, England's courts sent fifty to sixty thousand convicts to the British colonies in North America to be indentured servants. This practice often spared these so-called criminals' lives. It also provided colonial planters and merchants with an inexpensive labor force.

Census

According to the 1790 census, Maryland's population that year was 319,728. Of that number, 8,043 were free people of color, and 103,036 were people who had been enslaved.

Get This!

Tobacco planters in colonial times were paid in tobacco notes. Benjamin's parents purchased their farm with notes received from selling seven thousand pounds of their high-quality tobacco.

* Martha Ellicott Tyson, *A Sketch of the Life of Benjamin Banneker: From Notes Taken in 1836* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1854), 4.