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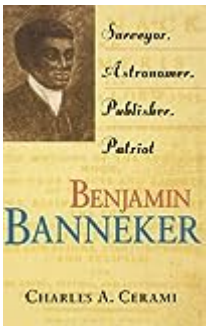

Charles A. Cerami. *Benjamin Banneker: Surveyor, Astronomer, Publisher, Patriot.* New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002. xiii + 257 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-471-38752-7.

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Benjamin Banneker: Fabled Genius Considered

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Formerly the principal editor of Kiplinger Washington Publications and the author of more than ten books on the economy, Charles A. Cerami takes a stab at historical biography with *Benjamin Banneker: Surveyor, Astronomer, Publisher, Patriot.* With earnest conviction, Cerami seeks appropriate recognition of Benjamin Banneker by the public. Few are aware of his accomplishments, even though schools, museums, and other public places throughout the District and Maryland bear his name. Perhaps people know that Banneker, born a free black in 1731, participated in the survey of the District of Columbia. In addition, Banneker developed an extraordinary command of mathematics, science, and literature, and created clocks, compiled almanacs, and advocated abolition in his writings. Banneker's genius challenged prevalent assumptions regarding the inferior intellectual capabilities of men and women of African descent. Cerami maintains that, in fact, Banneker surpassed Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington as a thinker.

Cerami effectively explains how Banneker developed his intellect without formal education. His family undoubtedly provided Banneker his educational foundation in the sciences and letters. Cerami discovers little about Benjamin's father Robert, a first-generation slave who fled his owner and then married a freeborn woman, Mary. Instead, he emphasizes the role of Mary's parents, Irish-born Molly Welsh and African-born Banneka, in the early education of Benjamin. Molly and Banneka first met when she purchased him to help establish her farm. A member of the Dogon tribe, known for their knowledge of astronomy and physics, Banneka cleared Molly's land, solved irrigation problems, and implemented a crop rotation for her. Soon thereafter, Molly freed and married Banneka, who in turn shared his knowledge of engineering and astronomy with her. Though born after Banneka's death, young Benjamin acquired much of his grandfather's knowledge via Molly, who taught him how to read, farm, and interpret the sky just as Banneka had taught her.

Several well-respected and wealthy men appreciated Banneker's talents and, in turn, nurtured his intellect. As a young teenager, Banneker met and befriended Pe-

ter Heinrichs, a Quaker farmer who established a school near the Banneker farm. Heinrichs shared his personal library with Banneker and provided his only classroom instruction. He voraciously read and absorbed the language of the classics so that he could later converse comfortably with educated gentlemen. During a chance meeting in Baltimore, Joseph Levi, a European trader, showed the twenty-two-year-old Banneker a watch, the first clock he had ever seen. Impressed by Banneker's curiosity and intuitive understanding of the mechanism, Levi gave his watch to Banneker. In subsequent months, Banneker took the watch apart, reassembled it perfectly, and then built his own wooden clock.

Banneker's clockmaking abilities led to his most important friendship, with the Ellicotts, a Quaker family whose extensive commercial, manufacturing, and agricultural enterprises transformed the Patapsco River region in the late eighteenth century. Introduced to his prominent neighbors in the early 1770s, Banneker's scientific abilities particularly impressed George Ellicott, an astronomer twenty years younger than Benjamin. George asked Banneker to fix a grandfather clock that had stumped all of the Ellicotts. After three months of hard work, Banneker solved the problem. The friendship with George, in particular, inspired Banneker to continue his studies and, in the end, led him to compile his own almanac which included charts showing the position of the moon, stars, and planets. Between 1791 and 1797, Banneker published his almanac annually.

Cerami takes an especially balanced view of Banneker's contributions to the survey of the newly-designated District of Columbia in 1791. Andrew Ellicott led a team of surveyors, including Banneker as the principal assistant surveyor, in defining the boundaries of the District. Many have contended that Banneker, in this position, assumed the leading role in the design of the capital. More recently, Sylvio Bedini has found that Banneker worked on the survey two months, a finding which has led many, though not Bedini himself, to diminish the importance of Banneker's contribution.[1] Cerami accepts the facts without dismissing Banneker's role and points out that he held unique qualifications and performed an essential task for the survey. During those months, Banneker slept only a couple of hours at a time, as he took notes on the position of the stars to ensure the accuracy of the survey.

Banneker's participation in the survey and subsequent publication of his almanac in 1791 called his genius to the attention of white contemporaries, a position that he used to challenge slavery in the new republic. Cerami maintains that the emergence of Banneker as an abolitionist represented an about-face for him, as he did not promote abolition during the Revolution. Throughout his almanacs, Banneker interspersed his meteorological and astronomical predictions with short statements of his anti-slavery philosophy. Banneker sent the first edition of his almanac with a letter of several pages to Thomas Jefferson. Written with the sanction of the Ellicotts and listing Elias Ellicott as the return address, Banneker in his letter directly questioned the moral foundations of slavery in the new republic and challenged Jefferson's racial views, particularly his assumptions regarding the limited intellectual capabilities of the entire African race (pp. 163-167).

In his carefully worded response to Banneker, Jefferson did not concede racial equality and instead revealed his own ambivalence towards race. Jefferson promptly thanked Banneker for the almanac and promised to forward it to the Academy of Sciences at Paris "because I consider it a document to which your color had a right for their justification for the doubts which have been entertained them." Jefferson wrote of his ardent desire to see a "good system" emerge that would raise the condition of the entire African race "to what it ought to be, as fast as the imbecility of their present existence, and other circumstances which cannot be neglected, will admit" (pp. 168-169). As Cerami correctly points out, Jefferson assumed the degraded condition of the African race and hoped not for civil or economic rights within the prevailing order, but for the emergence of some other system to allow Africans and African-Americans to fulfill their potential, separate from Euro-American society.

Banneker paid the price for his prominence. After the publication of the almanacs ceased in 1797, Banneker went back to his land. Too old to work the farm, Banneker first tried to rent out his land, but proved ill-suited to the task. Instead, Banneker sold his land to the Ellicotts who agreed to purchase his farm on a deferred basis; that is, the Ellicotts paid Banneker in annual installments, but allowed him to live there until he died. During these years, Banneker lived comfortably, but endured several threats to his life and property. At the age of 74 in 1806, Banneker died peacefully in the company of friends. As hundreds of friends and admirers laid his coffin to rest, his house burned to the ground. This fire destroyed all of his writings, his clocks, and other instruments, except those held by the Ellicott family.

Cerami constructs a credible narrative of Banneker's

life, but fails to document his research. He provides an apparently thorough list of repositories consulted, including the Archives of the State of Maryland, the Maryland Historical Society, the Howard County Historical Society, the Historical Society of Washington, and others (pp. 229-230). Yet he eschews footnotes and endnotes, and instead provides one or two paragraphs on the sources of each chapter. Often, these descriptions are imprecise. "Microfilms of Banneker's diaries and notes, supplied by the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., and additional microfilm from the Historical Society of Maryland, Baltimore, Maryland" enabled Cerami to date Banneker's construction of a wooden clock (pp. 232-233). Obviously, such a note cannot point the reader to more information about this clock. If an isolated instance, this flaw would hardly be worth noting. Yet it is impossible to reconstruct the sources for many, if not most, of Cerami's assertions.

This documentation style enables Cerami to offer unsupported conjecture instead of interpretation based upon historical facts. This tendency undermines some of his most interesting discussions, in particular the reception of Banneker as surveyor of the District of Columbia. Local white residents regarded Banneker as a reflection of all African Americans. Impressed by Banneker's contributions, *The Georgetown Weekly Ledger* called Banneker "an Ethiopian, whose abilities as a surveyor and astronomer clearly prove that Mr. Jefferson's conclusion that this race of men were void of mental endowments was without foundation" (p. 136). Unfortunately, this newspaper is the only primary source cited as Cerami maintains that most white observers, in particular George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, regarded Banneker's abilities as an anomaly at best. Washington hired Ellicott and presumably was aware of Banneker's work, though Cerami uncovered no documentary evidence of their encounter. Nonetheless, Cerami claims that Washington "must have been thunderstruck to find an African American on the team," and that Banneker's competence ultimately led to his acceptance by the President (p. 129). With the absence of direct documentation, Cerami could have instead provided evidence found in credible primary and secondary sources of Washington's treatment of slave and free black workers to discern his attitudes toward Banneker.

Cerami likewise fails to document adequately Jefferson's racial views. Jefferson's letter to Banneker is the only primary source cited by Cerami in his long and somewhat muddled discussions of Jefferson's racial views. Given the extent of the historical literature on Jefferson, this shallow presentation is especially puzzling. In addition, Jefferson's response to Banneker parallels his perplexed reaction to Phillis Wheatley, an African-born poet whose sophisticated verses impressed him and challenged his racist views. Jefferson's attempts to reconcile Wheatley's literary talents with his racist views is well-documented and accessible and would have helped clarify Cerami's thinking. Likewise, Cerami does not explore Jefferson's moral sense of philosophy, originally articulated during the Scottish Enlightenment and noted by scholars as the source of his racial views.[2]

With even less basis, Cerami asserts that Banneker's intellect surpassed all of the Framers, except Benjamin Franklin. Posited in the introduction, Cerami claims that the Framers "were brilliant men and some multifaceted, but unlike Banneker, they were not geniuses with the rare innate ability to discover truths for themselves and make them seem obvious to others" (p. x). Cerami compares Banneker to Benjamin Frankin and explores their intellectual affinity in an appendix (pp. 221-228). Both men explored the physical sciences, authored almanacs, and wrote prolifically. Their personal styles, the graciousness of Franklin and the gentleness of Banneker, attracted men to them. Of Thomas Jefferson, Cerami wrote, "[h]is array of talents would appear to have been more a matter of intellectual interest and facility in taking up many subjects with an amateur's enthusiasm" (p. 222).

Cerami's judgments are perplexing. His esteem for Banneker is well-placed, but the comparison to the Framers is misguided. The Framers held unsurpassed social and economic advantage, whereas Banneker faced obstacles common to free blacks in eighteenth-century Maryland. Cerami should have compared Banneker to other free blacks, since their opportunities mirrored his. Most freeborn blacks of his generation descended from unions between African men and indentured servant women. Like Banneker, they depended upon the patronage of propertied white men to secure a livelihood. During Banneker's lifetime, free blacks encountered increased restrictions in association, diminished economic opportunities, and mounting hostility from their white neighbors. Without this context, readers cannot fully appreciate how Banneker created the opportunities that enabled him not only to cultivate his intellect but also to impress so many others.[3] Few free blacks of his generation benefited so greatly from their patrons that they could communicate their views to the public. By focusing his appreciation on Banneker's brilliance, Cerami misses an opportunity to convey the fortitude of his generation of African Americans. This is unfortunate, as certainly

Banneker deserves our honor and respect, not in isolation, but as an outstanding representation of his community.

In writing this book, Cerami establishes Banneker as a seminal figure of the early national period, but his awkward attempts to establish Banneker as a genius unsurpassed even by the Framers diminishes the significance of Banneker and the earliest generations of African Americans. Moreover, Cerami's book is not the ideal starting point to begin working on an interpretation of Banneker as a freeborn black of the eighteenth century, as his documentation is sloppy.

Notes

[1]. Silvio A. Bedini, "The Survey of the Federal Territory: Andrew Ellicott and Benjamin Banneker," *Washington History* 3:1 (Spring/Summer 1991), pp. 76-95.

[2]. David Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism and Phillis Wheatley's 'Sable Veil,' 'Length'ned Chain,' and 'Knitted Heart'," in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), pp. 338-444.

In March 2002, Henry Louis Gates delivered an address entitled "Mr. Jefferson and the Trials of Phillis Wheatley" as the Jefferson Lecture sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The text of the address is not available in published format, but see his "Phillis Wheatley and the African Muse," in *Critical Essays on Phillis Wheatley*, William H. Robinson, ed. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), pp. 215-282. In addition, see the documents related to Phillis Wheatley posted by the Library of Congress on its American Memory website, =<http://memory.loc.gov>. On the Scottish Enlightenment, see Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

[3]. On the evolution of African American society in Maryland, see especially Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). For more on the transformations of free black status, see Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), pp. 15-50. Also see Allan Kulikoff *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

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