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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Benjamin Banneker's 1793 Almanack and Ephemeris

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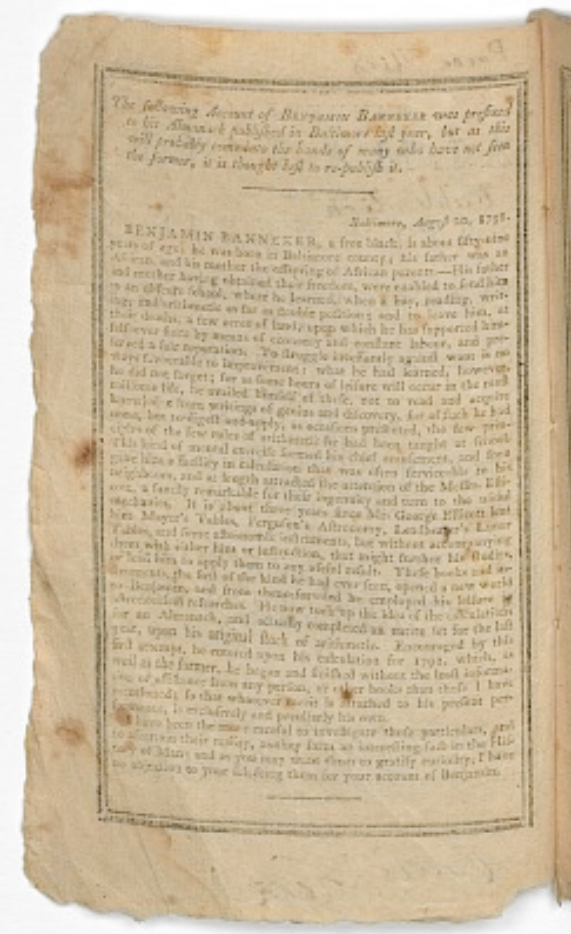
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The following Account of BENJAMIN BANNEKER was prefixed to his Almanack published in Baltimore last year, but as this will probably come into the hands of many who have not seen the former, it is thought best to re-publish it.

Baltimore, August 20, 1791.

BENJAMIN BANNEKER, a free black, is about fifty-nine years of age; he was born in Baltimore county; his father was an African, and his mother the offspring of African parents. - His father and mother having obtained their freedom, were enabled to send him to an obscure school, where he learned, when a boy, reading, writing, and arithmetic as far as double position; and to leave him, at their deaths, a few acres of land, upon which he has supported himself ever since by means of economy and constant labour, and preserved a fair reputation. To struggle incessantly against want is no ways favourable to improvement: what he had learned, however, he did not forget; for as some hours of leisure will occur in the most toilsome life, he availed himself of these, not to read and acquire knowledge from writings of genius and discovery, for of such he had none, but to digest and apply, as occasions presented, the few principles of the few rules of arithmetic he had been taught at school. This kind of mental exercise formed his chief amusement, and soon gave him a facility in calculation that was often serviceable to his neighbours, and at length attracted the attention of the Messrs. Ellicott, a family remarkable for their ingenuity and turn to the useful mechanics. It is about three years since Mr. George Ellicott lent him Mayer's Tables, Ferguson's Astronomy, Leadbeater's Lunar Tables, and some astronomic instruments, but without accompanying them with either hint or instruction, that might further his studies, or lead him to apply them to any useful result. These books and instruments, the first of the kind he had ever seen, opened a new world to Benjamin, and from thenceforward he employed his leisure in astronomical researches. He now took up the idea of the calculations for an Almanack, and actually completed an entire set for the last year, upon his original stock of arithmetic. Encouraged by this first attempt, he entered upon his calculation for 1792, which, as well as the former, he began and finished without the least information of assistance from any person, or other books than those I have mentioned; so that whatever merit is attached to his present performance, is exclusively and peculiarly his own.

I have been the more careful to investigate those particulars, and to ascertain their reality, as they form an interesting fact in the History of Man; and as you may want them to gratify curiosity, I have no objection to your selecting them for your account of Benjamin.



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