

TEACHING GUIDE

Benjamin Banneker (1731 – 1806) *Stargazer*

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Version 1.0

Suggested for grades 2 - 7
Ages 7 - 12

SUMMARY

Tick tock went the clock --- for 40 years the clock Benjamin Banneker built kept perfect time. But time didn't stop this genius from becoming a famous mathematician, astronomer and surveyor. Considered America's first African-American scientist and civil engineer, Benjamin Banneker surveyed the city of Washington, DC with Pierre L'Enfant, published a widely read Almanac and challenged Thomas Jefferson on the issue of slavery. Born a free man during a time when African-Americans in United States were enslaved, Banneker was a self taught man who was always studying and never stood still.

BIOGRAPHY

<http://www.hiatoys.com/banneker.html>

THEMES

- Life holds infinite possibilities for those willing to imagine and pursue them.
- Believe in and follow your dreams.
- Ordinary people can live super ordinary lives if they challenge themselves and strive to achieve their goals.
- Do not be afraid to stand up for your rights and the rights of others.
- Education is a powerful tool; never stop learning.
- Overcoming adversity, in particular, poverty, racism and discrimination, can be done.

KEY DATES

It is appropriate to teach students about Benjamin Banneker year round. However, a few key times to highlight his life and achievements may include:

- Black History Month: February (USA, Canada); October (UK)
- Diversity Awareness Month: October (USA)
- Benjamin Banneker's birthday: November 9, 1731

PREPARING TO INTRODUCE THE TOY

The following may help place Benjamin Banneker's story in the context of a student's life today:

- What career would you like to pursue when you are older? Why do you want to pursue this career? What if you did not have the formal education to pursue that career? What would you do?
- Study an early map of Washington, DC.
- Locate and read a copy of the letter Benjamin Banneker wrote to Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Jefferson's letter in response.
- Remove the face of clock and draw its interior.
- How many years do scientists today go to school? How difficult do you think it would be to learn to be an astronomer? Mathematician? Surveyor? What talents must you have to do these jobs well?
- What do you think life would be like in the 1700s? For slaves? For African-Americans born free?
- Name three ways your life is different from Benjamin Banneker's life in the 1700's. How is it different due to changes in the law? How is it different due to changes in technology?
- Name three challenges that you must overcome in order to accomplish your career goals.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions can be explored while learning about Benjamin Banneker:

- How would you describe Benjamin Banneker's life as a child?
- How would his life have been different from most other African-American children born in the 1700s? How would it have been the same?
- What formal education did Benjamin Banneker receive? What did he learn?
- How did Benjamin Banneker learn to make clocks? Why was this unusual? How do people usually learn how to make clocks? Was this method successful?
- How was Benjamin Banneker able to predict the weather? How did Benjamin Banneker learn to do this? Was he successful?
- What contribution did Benjamin Banneker make to the planning of Washington, DC? How was his skill at predicting the weather useful in this task?
- Why was the Benjamin Banneker almanac important? How would it have been used?
- Why do you think Benjamin Banneker wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson? Why would he include a copy of his almanac with his letter?
- Why was Benjamin Banneker's letter to Thomas Jefferson significant? What did Thomas Jefferson's reply to Benjamin Banneker indicate?
- Why was Benjamin Banneker's letter to Thomas Jefferson persuasive?
- Describe Benjamin Banneker's personality.
- Why would Benjamin Banneker be described as "America's Pragmatic Observer"?

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

- Discuss examples of other well-known African-American men who were the first to accomplish a noteworthy goal. What are common challenges they faced? What are common themes their lives highlight?
- Write a letter to a high ranking person in government arguing in support of a position the majority does not support. How will you attempt to persuade him/her to think differently about something he/she might not see as an issue?
- Discuss examples of other African-American scientists who have done extraordinary things. What were some of their challenges?
- The Benjamin Banneker action figure comes with a watch, telescope, and almanac. What is missing? What else might Benjamin Banneker need to complete his work?
- Create a two week journal. Observe the night sky at a specific time each night and record what you see and how it changes. Include drawings in your journal. Based on what you have observed, make predictions about what will happen from night to night.
- Create a map of your town or neighborhood.
- Answer a prepared list of questions using a collection of different Almanacs.
- Learn more about the lives of African-Americans in the 1700s.
- Debate the resolution: Benjamin Banneker's scientific contributions to America were more significant than Benjamin Franklin's contributions.
- Debate the resolution: An almanac, such as the one written by Banneker, was more important to the work of a farmer in the 17th Century than the computer and internet combined are to an owner of an IT company (i.e. AOL, IBM, Sapient, etc.) today.
- Write a 5 page story describing a fictional dinner party you host for Benjamin Banneker, Benjamin Franklin, Carl Sagan and Guion Bluford.

LEARN MORE ABOUT BENJAMIN BANNEKER

- Benjamin Banneker Historical Park & Museum: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cocoon/legacies/MD/200003116.html>
- Benjamin Banneker's biography: <http://www.notablebiographies.com/Ba-Be/Banneker-Benjamin.html>
- O'Connor, John J., and Edmund F. Robertson. "Benjamin Banneker": <http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Biographies/Banneker.html> (MacTutor History of Mathematics archive)
- Benjamin Banneker: <http://www.math.buffalo.edu/mad/special/banneker-benjamin.html>

LEARN MORE ABOUT FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN

- Ralph Bunche, the first African-American to win a Nobel Peace Prize: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1950/bunche-bio.html
- Frederick Douglass, the first African-American nominee for Vice President of the United States: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1539.html>
- Thomas L. Jennings, the first African-American to hold a patent: <http://www.blackinventor.com/pages/thomasjennings.html>

- Jack Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight boxing champion:
<http://www.pbs.org/unforgivableblackness/about/>
- Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States: <http://www.thurgoodmarshall.com/home.htm>
- Douglas Wilder, the first elected African-American governor:
<http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/wilder.htm>

LEARN MORE ABOUT AFRICAN-AMERICAN SCIENTISTS

- Charles Drew: <http://www.blackinventor.com/pages/charlesdrew.html>
- George Washington Carver:
<http://www.blackinventor.com/pages/georgewashingtoncarver.html>
- Ernest Everett Just: <http://www.time.com/time/2007/blackhistmth/bios/08.html>
- Percy Lavon Julian: <http://www.blackinventor.com/pages/percyjulian.html>
- Garrett Morgan: <http://www.blackinventor.com/pages/garrettmorgan.html>
- Granville Woods: <http://www.blackinventor.com/pages/granvillewoods.html>

ABOUT THE TOY MAKER

Starting at age seven, the Founder of History In Action Toys was an avid collector of comic books. In fact, he loved collecting comic books so much, he braved a 20 minute bus ride with his five year old sister in tow to downtown Philadelphia just to get the latest issue in his favorite series. His fondness for collecting and a Christmas shopping experience inspired him to create his own collectible. In 2003, the Founder was shopping for a Christmas present for a friend's son and wanted to buy an unusual toy. He finally purchased a doll of a famous scientist and was struck by the toy's educational quality.

When the child opened the toy, he looked at his father, asking him who this person was. His father explained that he was a famous scientist and the boy stared at the doll in amazement. Later, he put the toy in a special place in his room. Seeing the excitement and wonder on the boy's face gave the Founder an idea. Using real heroes from history, he created a series of action figures that were fun, positive role models, whose real-life stories would awaken both a child's imagination and appeal to the kid within us all. History in Action Toys was born!

ORDER THE TOY

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