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A

SKETCH OF THE LIFE

OF

BENJAMIN BANNEKER;

FROM NOTES TAKEN IN 1836.

READ BY J. SAURIN NORRIS, BEFORE THE

MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

October 5th, 1854.

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PRINTED FOR THE MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

BY JOHN D. TOY.

At the time of reading the following paper to the Maryland Historical Society, Mr. Norris remarked that "it came from a lady, who, from motives of delicacy, had chosen to withhold her name, and, therefore, a word of explanation might be proper to relieve it from the appearance of an anonymous communication. The Authoress was an immediate descendant of that branch of the Ellicott family, of Ellicott's Mills, from whom Banneker received much assistance in the prosecution of his studies; and who, at the time of his death, owing to the circumstances related in this paper, became the sole possessor of the few memorials left of his labors. She has a personal recollection of the subject of her memoir; and, eighteen years ago, devoted much care, under the superintendence and with the assistance of Mrs. Elizabeth Ellicott, (recently deceased, at the advanced age of ninety-two years,) to the collection of the material from which the following pages have been compiled. Nearly every paper left by Banneker, is now in her possession; and this sketch has been prepared with the single object of preserving a correct and faithful record of the origin, life, habits, appearance, labors and attainments of one, who, under the peculiar circumstances of his position, was undoubtedly a very remarkable character."

SKETCH OF THE LIFE

OF

BENJAMIN BANNEKER.

From the interest, which has been manifested by the members of the Maryland Historical Society, in all that relates to Benjamin Banneker, they are herewith presented with two of his autograph letters, accompanied by a brief account of him, compiled from notes taken in 1836, from the reminiscences of aged persons then living, who had been intimately acquainted with him, and from other authentic sources, which were then accessible. All were designed for the use of one of our citizens, a writer of acknowledged merit, who believed that the astronomer's example of mental application, and subsequent attainments, might have a useful influence on his brethren, both in the United States, and in our African Colonies, and therefore wished to draw up a narrative of his life. But, discouragements in the prosecution of the plan, having occurred, the work was abandoned, and its intended author died in 1849.

The notes have since been returned to the writer of the present "Sketch," who knowing them to contain reliable information not heretofore published, has arranged them for the perusal of those who, having read the memoir prepared by J. H. B. Latrobe, may be willing to hear what still remains untold of the history of one, whose peculiar circumstances entitle him to our notice.

In preparing an account of an humble individual, it is rarely deemed necessary to furnish a long line of ancestry. The first member of the family of the subject of our notice, of whom we shall speak, is his maternal grand-mother, Molly Welsh,[1] a native of England, who came to Maryland, (at that time an English Colony,) with a ship load of other emigrants, and, to defray the expenses of her voyage, was sold to a master with whom she served an apprenticeship of seven years.

After her term of service had expired, she bought a small farm, (land having then merely a nominal value,) and purchased as laborers, two negro slaves, from a slave ship, which lay in the Chesapeake Bay. They both proved to be valuable servants. One of them, said to have been the son of a king in Africa, a man of industry, integrity, fine disposition and dignified manners, she liberated from slavery and afterwards *married.* His name was Bannaker, which she adopted as her sir-name, and was afterwards called, Molly Banneker.

They had four children of whom we will mention alone, Mary, their oldest child. She also married a native of Africa; but, of his history, tradition gives no disclosure, except, that he embraced the Christian religion and was baptized by the name of Robert. On his marriage he took *his wife's* sir-name. Benjamin Banneker, was their only son. The date of his birth is preserved in an old Bible, in which the event is chronicled with other details in the following order.

"I bought this book of Anora Buckanan, the 4th day of January, 1763."

"Benjamin Banneker was born, November the 9th day, in the year of the Lord God, 1731."

"Robert Banneker departed this life, July $\frac{e}{y}$ 10th 1759."

According to the testimony of John Henden, a son of the oldest sister of Banneker, (who in 1836, though far advanced in years was still of sound mind,) Benjamin was a great favorite with his grand-mother, who taught him to read and

[1] According to the testimony of one of her grand-children, she was not only a *white woman*, but had a remarkably fair complexion.

took great delight in his learning. She much desired to see him grow up to be a religious man, and encouraged him to read the Holy Scriptures. For the advancement of this object, whilst he was yet a boy, she wrote to her native country, for a large Bible, from which he used to read to her on each sabbath day. She also sent him to a school which was taught near her residence where a few white and two or three colored children received together the instructions of the same master. Here his devotion to books first discovered itself, and Jacob Hall,[1] an old servant of the Hall family of Baltimore county, who had known Banneker from his childhood, used to relate, that whilst all the rest of the boys loved play and were seeking amusement, Benjamin's only delight was to "dive into his books."

After passing his minority, he continued to reside with his mother on the farm purchased by his father Robert Banneker, (recorded as *Banneky*,) of Richard Gist, and occupied it during the remainder of his life.

Banneker, whilst in the vigor of manhood was an industrious and thriving farmer; he kept his grounds in good order, had horses, cows, and many hives of bees; cultivated a good garden, and lived comfortably. During the winter months, and at other seasons of leisure, his active mind was employed in improving the knowledge he had gained at school. He thus became acquainted with the most difficult portions of arithmetic; he also read all the books on general literature which he could borrow and occasionally diverted his mind with an ingenious effort in mechanics. His *wooden clock*, afterwards his only time piece, was his greatest *mechanical* achievement, and was completed long previous to 1772; for, on the emigration of some families from Pennsylvania to his neighborhood during that year, it was considered from the regularity of its movements, and also from being the unassisted production of a black man, one of the curiosities of that wild region, until recently a wilderness, where, amid

[1] Jacob Hall was favorably known to many and died in 1843. He had for thirty years, the charge of the Burial Ground of the Friends of Ellicott's Mills.

the thick forests which shaded the banks of the Patapsco River, the howl of the wolf, and the cry of the panther and of the wild cat, nightly disturbed the repose of the settler in his cabin on the adjacent hills. The valley where Ellicott & Co. built their manufactories for flour in 1773, was, until the sound of their axes, and hammers were heard, a favorite resort of deer, wild turkeys and other game. A laboring man, familiarly known as "Bill Johnson," who, in 1789, planted the sycamores, which are still growing near some of the old family residences, was fond of speaking of his exploits as a hunter, and boasted of the great number of fine deer he had seen killed on the site where the Patapsco Mill now stands. From a long acquaintance with the haunts of deer and other wild beasts, he had, from his youth, been employed by his father, and sometimes by amateur sportsmen from remote districts, to rouse up the game for their rifles.

Banneker was often a spectator of the building of the mills, and became acquainted with their proprietors. With many others who witnessed their operations, he considered their project must eventually end in utter discomfiture. Tobacco was the principal product of the surrounding country; very little wheat was grown, and there were no roads in the vicinity, for a distance of several miles for the accommodation of wagons.

After the completion of the mills, Banneker took great pleasure in watching the operations of the machinery, which furnished good examples of mechanical ingenuity and power. He continued to make them frequent visits, after their operations had ceased to be a novelty, and became known to many strangers. A great change had been effected in a few years; the district had become famous for its abundant crops of grain, roads had been made, bridges built, and intercourse with distant neighborhoods established. The store erected by Ellicott & Co., was, after a post office was opened in one of its chambers, a place of resort by the planters and other gentry of Elkridge, who assembled for the sale of their grain, to pur-

chase merchandize, to receive their letters and newspapers, and discuss the news of the day.

Here, in conversation with those who valued attainments so unusual in a man of color, accompanied, also, by general good conduct, Banneker was sometimes induced to overcome the modest reserve for which he has always been represented, as having been conspicuous, and speak, from the volumes of his traditionary lore, of the occupation of Maryland by our first colonists, their disappointments and difficulties. Occasionally, he would be led to mention his own labors in the pursuit of knowledge, without the aid of those auxiliaries which had since been presented to him. By this time he had become very expert in the solution of difficult mathematical problems, which were then, more than in this century, the amusement of persons of leisure; and they were frequently sent to him from scholars residing in different parts of our country who wished to test his capacity. He is reported to have been successful in every case, and sometimes, he returned with his answers, questions of his own composition conveyed in rhyme.

A gentleman who had frequently seen Banneker at Ellicott's Mills at this period describes him, as "of black complexion, medium stature, of uncommonly soft and gentlemanly manners and of pleasing colloquial powers."

When we look back upon the individuals who thus cherished his talents, and encouraged all his efforts for improvement, with judicious kindness, we are at a loss to conjecture how it could occur, that no one amongst them became the biographer of this sable genius. He appears to have been the pioneer in the movement in this part of the world, toward the improvement of his race; at a period of our history when the negro occupied almost the lowest possible grade in the scale of human beings, Banneker had struck out for himself a course, hitherto untravelled by men of his class, and had already earned a respectable position amongst men of science. But from those who were the witnesses of his success, we cannot now ask information concerning him. All

the men of that generation have, like him of whom we write, long since departed to the land of spirits.

The late George Ellicott, whose habits of enquiry made him familiar with almost every department of English literature and science, had a just estimate of the powers of Banneker's mind; he frequently visited him, and wishing to make his attainments more generally known, urged him to commence the calculation of Almanacs. Some time afterwards, and during the spring of 1789, Banneker submitted to this friend, his first projection of an eclipse; it contained a trifling error which he frankly pointed out, and received the following letter in reply:

Letter of Benjamin Banneker to George Ellicott.

"Sir,—I received your letter at the hand of Bell but found nothing strange to me In the Letter Concerning the number of Eclipses, tho according to authors the Edge of the penumber only touches the Suns Limb in that Eclips, that I left out of the Number—which happens April 14th day, at 37 minutes past 7 o'clock in the morning, and is the first we shall have; but since you wrote to me, I drew in the Equations of the Node which will cause a small Solar Defet, but as I did not intend to publish, I was not so very peticular as I should have been, but was more intent upon the true method of projecting a Solar Eclips—It is an easy matter for us when a Diagram is laid down before us, to draw one in resemblance of it, but it is a hard matter for young Tyroes in Astronomy, when only the Elements for the projection is laid down before him to draw his Diagram with any degree of Certainty.

"Says the Learned Leadbetter, the projection, I shall here describe, is that mentioned by Mr. Flamsted. When the sun is in Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio or, Sagitary, the Axes of the Globe must lie to the right hand of the Axes of the Ecliptic, but when the sun is in Capricorn, Aquarius, Pisces, Aries, Taurus, or Gemini, then to the left.

"Says the wise author FERGUSON, when the sun is in Capercorn, Aquarius, Pisces, Aries, Taurus, and Gemeni, the Northern half of the Earths Axes lies to the right hand of the Axes of the Ecliptic and to the left hand, whilst the Sun is on the other six signs.

"Now Mr. Ellicott, two such learned gentlemen as the above mentioned, one in direct opposition to the other, stagnates young beginners, but I hope the stagnation will not be of long duration, for this I observe that Leadbetter counts the time on the path of Vertex 1. 2. 3 &c. from the right to the left hand or from the consequent to the antecedent,—But Ferguson on the path of Vertex counts the time 1. 2. 3 &c. from the left to the right hand, according to the order of numbers, so that that is regular, shall compensate for irregularity. Now sir if I can overcome this difficulty I doubt not being able to calculate a Common Almanac.—Sir no more

"But remain your faithful friend,

"B. BANNEKER.[1]

"Mr. GEORGE ELLICOTT, *Oct. 13th*, 1789."

Banneker who was now fifty-eight years of age had, from his uncommon circumstances, become quite celebrated, and no strangers who visited his neighborhood, were willing to depart without conversing with him, or visiting his cottage. It was in this retired abode that the writer's mother, accompanied by several of her friends, paid him a visit in 1790. So closely was his mind occupied, that they entered his door, which stood wide open, without being perceived. Immediately on observing them he arose, and received them with great courtesy. He alluded to his love of astronomy and his deep interest in mathematical pursuits, and regretted his slow progress therein, from the laborious nature of his agricultural engagements, which obliged him to spend a great part of his time in the fields. Whilst they were conversing his clock struck the hour, and at their request he gave an interesting account of its construction. With his imperfect tools, and

[1] The orthography of the original is strictly preserved.

with no other model than a borrowed watch, it had cost him long and patient labor to perfect it, to make the variation necessary to cause it to strike the hours, and produce a concert of correct action between the hour, the minute, and the second machinery. He confessed that its regularity in pointing out the progress of time had amply rewarded all his pains in its construction. As his mother had died some years before, Banneker was, at this period, the sole occupant of his dwelling. He regarded her memory with great affection. She was a very active woman, of *bright mulatto* complexion and slender person, and had an abundant suit of strait black hair, which led persons unacquainted with her origin to suppose she was an Indian. Being much attached to her son, she had watched over his best interests with prudent care; a care, which we regret to record, became necessary, from one great weakness that occasionally appeared in this, in other respects fair character. Inebriety was the ruling vice of the day, and he had sometimes been the victim of its influence.

At nearly sixty years of age, men are generally inclined to desire a relaxation from the positive necessities of daily labor. Banneker was habitually industrious, and deriving his support from his farm, was much interested in agriculture;—but he sighed for leisure to perfect his knowledge in studies, to which his other engagements made him unequal. He hesitated a long time ere he decided in favor of a plan, which was best adapted to his condition. This determination being made, he conveyed his ground to Ellicott & Co., reserving to himself a life estate in it, and a payment therefrom of £12 per year. With the love of computation, observable in many of his transactions, he had estimated this yearly payment, by the probable duration of his own life; and, in conference with the assignees, remarked;—"I believe I shall live fifteen years, and consider my land[1] worth £180 Maryland Currency; by receiving £12 a year, for fifteen years I shall in the contemplated time, receive its full value; if on the contrary I die before that day, you will be at liberty to take possession."

[1] Being his portion of his father's estate, situated ten miles from Baltimore, and one mile from Ellicott's Mills.

His computation was not correct;—He lived several years beyond the calculated period, and the annuity continued to be paid with regularity; any delicacy which he felt on the subject, being softened away by the favorable representations of his friends, of the increasing value of the property around him.

On making this change in his affairs, he deemed an apology necessary for its apparent selfishness. He spoke of his desire to increase his knowledge on subjects, to which his attention had been directed from his youth; and of his inability from personal infirmities to bear much laborious exercise; his land would necessarily be poorly cultivated, and poverty would increase upon him—an evil he greatly dreaded. If he had attempted to divide his small property by will, in equal bequests amongst his near relatives, the parcels would have been too small to be of service to any one of them;—on the contrary, if he gave all to two or three, the legatees would become the objects of envy to the discarded. Under the pressure of these conflicting views, he felt himself excusable for making an appropriation exclusively with a view to his own benefit.

Being now relieved from the constant toils of his former life, Banneker wrapped up in his cloak, and lying prostrate on the ground, generally passed the night in the contemplation of the heavenly bodies. After sun-rise he retired to rest, and spent a part of the day in repose; but he does not appear to have required as much sleep as ordinary persons. He still cultivated sufficient ground to occupy him with outdoor labor; was often seen hoeing in his cornfield, trimming his fruit trees, or engaged in watching the flight and habits of his bees; and again, he would be found, seated in his dwelling beside a large oval table, covered with books, papers and mathematical instruments, occupied with reading or calculation.

Banneker was but once absent, at any distance, from his domicil. An appointment having been made after the adoption of the Constitution, in 1789, of commissioners, to run the lines of the District of Columbia—then called the "Federal Territory," they wished to avail themselves of his talents, induced him to accompany them in the

work, and retained him with them until the service was completed. Banneker's deportment throughout the whole of this engagement, secured their respect, and there is good authority for believing, that his endowments led the commissioners to overlook the color of his skin, to converse with him freely, and enjoy the clearness and originality of his remarks on various subjects. It is a fact, that they honored him with an invitation to a daily seat at their table; but this, with his usual modesty, he declined. They then ordered a side table laid for him, in the same apartment with themselves. On his return, he called to give an account of his engagements, at the house of one of his friends. He arrived on horseback, dressed in his usual costume;–a full suit of drab cloth, surmounted by a broad brimmed beaver hat. He seemed to have been re-animated by the presence of the eminent men with whom he had mingled in the District, and gave a full account of their proceedings. With his usual humility, he estimated his own services at a low rate, but remarked that he had not during his absence from home, tasted wine or spirituous liquors, adding "I feared to trust myself even with wine, lest it should steal away the little sense I have." His moral rectitude and improvement in self-discipline, led him to be fearful of himself in this respect; for, as we have previously hinted, he had not always refrained with prudence from intoxicating liquors. No one appeared to be more sensible of their debasing effect, than the subject of our notice; and, as to "know ourselves diseased is half a cure," he lamented his weakness, and gradually relieved himself of its fetters, not however, until excess had impaired his strength, given him the appearance of premature old age, and produced the diseases which shortened his days.

Having surmounted the difficulties alluded to in the letter we have presented dated Oct. 13th, 1789, Banneker completed and published his first Almanac in 1792. He sent a copy in his own hand-writing to Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State, accompanied by a letter in which he feelingly alludes to the degradation of his own people. The reply of the Secretary was well calculated to arouse ennobling feelings in the breast of his

humble correspondent, for he assures him, "I have taken the liberty of sending your Almanac to M. de Condorcet, Secretary of the Academy of Sciences at Paris, and member of the Philanthropic Society; because I considered it a document to which your whole color had a right for their justification against the doubts which have been entertained of them."—Jefferson, at the same time, expressed sentiments involving a problem, that may well demand the serious consideration of the thoughtful legislator, the metaphysician and the philanthropist;—which still remains to be wrought out, and demonstrated by the test of experiment, viz. "Whether there has been given to our black brethren," as he says, "talents equal to the other colors of men, and that the appearance of a want of them, is owing only to the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa and in America?"

The decision respecting the capacity of the African mind, is still left with succeeding generations.—From a future so far removed from us, we cannot overhear the verdict.

Banneker never married, was a great lover of retirement, and possessed a remarkably mild and philosophic disposition.[1] His equilibrium was seldom disturbed by the petty jealousies and inequalities of temper of the ignorant people, with whom his situation obliged him frequently to come in contact.[2]—

[1] His cotemporaries loved to dwell on his kindness to those, who, were in the habit of robbing his orchard. His cherries and pears were of peculiar excellence, sweet, juicy, and in high favor with the boys, who, in his later years, were quite numerous in his neighborhood. They would call respectfully at his door, ask and obtain permission to partake of some of the fruit, and afterwards retire; then when the astronomer was shut up in his house, immersed in calculations, they would return and strip his trees; thus he was often deprived of his fruit, before it reached maturity. For this he has been heard to remonstrate with his youthful visitors, and offer them one-half, if they would leave him in quiet possession of the other half, but all without effect. To a friend who once visited him in summer, he expressed his regret, that he had no fruit to present him, worthy of his acceptance, adding, "I have no influence with the rising generation. All my arguments have failed to induce them to set bounds to their wants."

[2] On a leaf of one of Banneker's Almanacs, we find the following in his own writing:

"Evil communications corrupt good manners, I hope to live to hear, that good communication corrects 'bad manners.'"

His genius, and the nature of his contemplations, rendered him in a great measure, superior to such perplexities ; and the pacific principles which he admired, taught him forbearance, and the forgiveness of injuries. Although he made no profession of religion, he loved the doctrines and mode of worship of the Society of Friends, and was frequently at their meetings. We have seen Banneker in Elkridge Meeting house, where he always sat on the form nearest the door, his head uncovered. His ample forehead, white hair, and reverent deportment, gave him a very venerable appearance, as he leaned on the long staff (which he always carried with him) in quiet contemplation.

The situation of Banneker's dwelling was one which would be admired by every lover of nature, and furnished a fine field for the observation of Celestial Phenomena. It was about half a mile from the Patapsco River, and commanded a prospect of the near and distant hills upon its banks, which have been so justly celebrated for their picturesque beauty. A never failing spring issued from beneath a large golden willow tree, in the midst of his orchard. Of the large number of strangers, whom curiosity or feelings of benevolent interest led to visit his humble abode, only one author has preserved an account of an interview with its remarkable occupant.— We cannot resist the inclination to make a short extract from the work to which we allude :—

" We found the venerable star-gazer under a wide spreading pear tree, laden with delicious fruit ; he came forward to meet us, and bade us welcome to his lowly dwelling. It was built of logs,one story in height, and was surrounded by an orchard. In one corner of the room, was suspended a clock of his own construction, which was a true herald of departing hours.

" He took down from a shelf a little book, wherein he registered the names of those, by whose visits he felt particularly honored, and recorded my mother's name upon the list ; he then, diffidently, but very respectfully, requested her acceptance of one of his Almanacs in manuscript. "[1]

[1] " Memoir of Susanna Mason," by her daughter.

In the course of a few days, S. Mason sent him a poetical letter, which subsequently appeared in the newspapers of the day. We will extract from it a sufficient portion, to evince her interest in his welfare :—

"*An Address to* BENJAMIN BANNEKER, *an African Astronomer, who presented the Author with a Manuscript Almanac, in* 1796."

"Transmitted on the wings of Fame,
Thine *eclat* sounding with thy name,
Well pleased, I heard, ere 'twas my lot
To see thee in thy humble cot.
That genius smiled upon thy birth,
And application called it forth;
That times and tides thou could'st presage,
And traverse the Celestial stage,
Where shining globes their circles run,
In swift rotation round the sun;
Could'st tell how planets in their way,
From order ne'er were known to stray.
Sun, moon and stars, when they will rise,
When sink below the upper skies;
When an eclipse shall veil their light,
And, hide their splendor from our sight."

After continuing for some time in the same strain, the authoress proceeds to give an admonition to the Astronomer:—

"Some men whom private walks pursue,
Whom fame ne'er ushered into view,
May run their race, and few observe
To right or left, if they should swerve,
Their blemishes would not appear,
Beyond their lives a single year.—
But thou, a man exalted high,
Conspicuous in the world's keen eye,
On record now, thy name's enrolled,
And future ages will be told,—
There lived a man named BANNEKER,
An African Astronomer!—
Thou need'st to have a special care,
Thy conduct with thy talent square,
That no contaminating vice,
Obscure thy lustre in our eyes."

In about a year after Banneker had received this communication, he sent her the folllowing letter, which is copied *verbatim* :—

"*August 26th*, 1797.

"DEAR FEMALE FRIEND :—

"I have thought of you every day since I saw you last, and of my promise in respect of composing some verses for your amusement, but I am very much indisposed, and have been ever since that time. I have a constant pain in my head, a palpitation in my flesh, and I may say I am attended with a complication of disorders, at this present writing, so that I cannot with any pleasure or delight, gratify your curiosity in that particular, at this present time, yet I say my will is good to oblige you, if I had it in my power, because you gave me good advice, and edifying language, in that piece of poetry which you was pleased to present unto me, and I can but love and thank you for the same ; and if ever it should be in my power to be serviceable to you, in any measure, your reasonable requests, shall be armed with the obedience of,

Your sincere friend and well-wisher,

BENJAMIN BANNEKER."

"MRS. SUSANNA MASON."

"N. B. The above is mean writing, done with trembling hands. B. B."

This letter was directed to the care of "Cassandra Ellicott," afterwards married to Joseph Thornburg, of the house of Thornburg, Miller & Webster, of Baltimore.

The common place book of Banneker, now in our possession, gives every assurance, that his love for scientific calculations, had not diminished his prudence, in regard to the common affairs of life, as a few extracts from its contents will show :—

"Sold on the 2nd of April, 1795, to Buttler, Edwards & Kiddy, the right of an Almanac, for the year 1796, for the sum of 80 dollars, equal to £30.

"On the 30th of April, 1795, lent John Ford five dollars. £1 17s. 6d.

"12th of December, 1797, bought a pound of candles at 1s. 8d.

"Sold to John Collins 2 qts. of dried peaches 6d.

"1 qt. mead 4d.

"On the 26th of March, came Joshua Sanks with 3 or 4 bushels of turnips to feed the cows.

"13th of April, 1803, planted beans and sowed cabbage seed."

These domestic mementos occupy a strange proximity with entries of more dignified character. His last recorded astronomical observations, for the entire month of January, 1804, appear on the same page, with an account of money loaned to individuals.

Being without any data for the purpose, we cannot speak with certainty of the year when Banneker's death took place, but believe it was in 1804. It was during the season of autumn that, on a very bright day, he had walked out on the neighboring hills to enjoy the air. There he met an acquaintance, to whom he complained of feeling unwell. After conversing a short time, they returned together to his cottage, where on lying down on his couch, he immediately became speechless, and died soon afterwards.

He had been extremely ill a few years before, and, in anticipation of his death, had given particular directions to his sisters respecting his personal property. He ordered that all the articles which had been presented to him on their first acquaintance, by George Ellicott, to assist him in his studies, comprising books and mathematical instruments, and the table on which he made his calculations, were to be returned to him, as soon as he should be no more. At the same time, he requested his acceptance, as an acknowledgment of a debt of gratitude for his long continued kindness, of a volume of his manuscripts containing all his Almanacs, his observations on various subjects, his letter to Th. Jefferson, and the reply

of that statesman. All the interesting matter contained within its pages was published in 1845, in the memoir of Banneker, by J. H. B. Latrobe.[1]

Banneker left to his sisters, Minta Black, and Molly Morten, every thing else that he died possessed of. Faithful in the fulfilment of his instructions, on the day he died, all the things we have enumerated were sent in a cart, attended by one of his nephews, to their place of destination, where their arrival gave the first intelligence of his death to the inhabitants of Ellicott's Mills. To the promptness observed in obeying his orders, we are indebted for the preservation of the manuscripts we have spoken of. He was buried two days afterwards; and, whilst the last duties were performing at the grave, his house took fire, and burnt so rapidly nothing could be saved! His clock, and every other specimen of his ingenuity or scholarship, were consumed in the flames!

Several months previous to his death, he had given to one of his sisters the feather bed on which he generally slept, which, after his death, she carefully preserved as her only memorial of him. Some years afterwards she was induced to open it, from feeling something hard amongst the feathers, and found a purse of money; a circumstance which would perhaps be unworthy of notice, except as a hint respecting his pecuniary affairs. In the absence of other evidence, we are thus tacitly assured, that his careful manner of living left him something to spare, and that the evening of the life of the "African Astronomer" was not overshadowed by extreme poverty.

Since the preceding sketch was written, we have obtained the following communication, from one of the first agriculturists in our state. He received a mercantile education at Ellicott's Mills, enjoyed many opportunities of seeing Banneker, and

[1] See J. H. B. Latrobe's Memoir of Banneker, published then by the Maryland Historical Society, and in the Maryland Colonization Journal.

has, therefore been able to furnish information of great value to the interest of our narrative.

"In the year 1800, I commenced my engagements in the store of Ellicott's Mills, where my first acquaintance with Benjamin Banneker began. He often came to the store to purchase articles for his own use; and, after hearing him converse, I was always anxious to wait upon him. After making his purchases, he usually went to the part of the store where George Ellicott was in the habit of sitting, to converse with him about the affairs of our Government and other matters. He was very precise in conversation and exhibited deep reflection. His deportment whenever I saw him, appeared to be perfectly upright and correct, and he seemed to be acquainted with everything of importance that was passing in the country.

"I recollect to have seen his Almanacs in my father's house, and believe they were the only ones used in the neighborhood at the time.[1] He was a large man inclined to be fleshy, and was far advanced in years, when I first saw him. I remember being once at his house, but do not recollect anything about the comforts of his establishment, nor of the old clock, about which you enquired. He was fond of, and well qualified, to work out abstruse questions in arithmetic. I remember, he brought to the store, one which he had composed himself, and presented to George Ellicott for solution. I had a copy which I have since lost; but the character and deportment of the man being so wholly different from anything I had ever seen from one of his color, his question made so deep an impression on my mind I have ever since retained a perfect recollection of it, except two lines, which do not alter the sense. I remember that George Ellicott, was engaged in making out the answer, and cannot now say that he succeeded, but have no doubt he did. I have thus, briefly given you my

[1] Several copies of these Almanacs are preserved in the Library of the Maryland Historical Society.

recollections of Benjamin Banneker. I was young when he died, and doubtless many incidents respecting him, have, from the time which has since elapsed, passed from my recollection: "

CHARLES W. DORSEY, *of Elkridge.*

The following is the question:—

A Cooper and Vintner sat down for a talk,
Both being so groggy, that neither could walk,
Says Cooper to Vintner, "I'm the first of my trade,
There's no kind of vessel, but what I have made,
And of any shape, Sir,—just what you will,—
And of any size, Sir,—from a ton to a gill!"
"Then," says the Vintner, "you're the man for me,—
Make me a vessel, if we can agree.
The top and the bottom diameter define,
To bear that proportion as fifteen to nine;
Thirty-five inches are just what I crave,
No more and no less, in the depth, will I have;
Just thirty-nine gallons this vessel must hold,—
Then I will reward you with silver or gold,—
Give me your promise, my honest old friend?"
"I'll make it to-morrow, that you may depend!"
So the next day the Cooper his work to discharge,
Soon made the new vessel, but made it too large;—
He took out some staves, which made it too small,
And then cursed the vessel, the Vintner and all.
He beat on his breast, "By the Powers!"—he swore,
He never would work at his trade any more?
Now my worthy friend, find out, if you can,
The vessel's dimensions and comfort the man!

BENJAMIN BANNEKER.

We are indebted to Benjamin Hallowell, of Alexandria, for the mode of solving this question, and its answer. The greater diameter of Banneker's tub must be: 24.746 inches. The less diameter: 14.8476 inches.

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