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Benjamin Banneker, a brilliant African American, was born on November 9, 1731, near Baltimore, Maryland. During this time period, African Americans were brutally oppressed as slaves, often on large cotton plantations in the South. They had none of the rights that white citizens had, including the right to vote and were viewed by many as many as inferior. Despite this, Benjamin Banneker overcame the inequality and was able to make extraordinary achievements in the areas of mathematics, inventing, astronomy, and surveying.

He was born a free African American to Mary and Robert Bannak (the name was later changed to Bannaker). He learned to read at an early age and went to a Quaker school, where he excelled in mathematics. At about the age of nineteen, he designed and carved the first clock in the United States out of wood; its completion took nearly two years, but it kept almost exact time for over 40 years. He also made significant achievements in the area of astronomy, correctly calculating a solar eclipse on April 14, 1789, despite differing predictions by two other astronomers. In 1791, after a decision to transfer the capital of the United States from Philadelphia to Washington D.C., President Washington put Bannaker on a team of civil engineers designing the new capital. When the head of the group of engineers, Pierre Charles L'Enfant, abandoned the project and took the plans for the city with him to France, Bannaker was able to recover the work from memory. Starting in 1792, Banneker wrote almanacs that included the dates of holidays and eclipses, information about medicine and the weather, and the times of sunrise and sunset. The almanacs also included poems and essays opposing slavery, demonstrating his sympathy towards humans as well as his scientific genius. Bannaker also used his almanac to prove that African Americans could be just as intelligent as anyone else if they were educated. In addition, he proposed other governmental reforms apart from the abolition of slavery, including the abolition of the death penalty, free education for all children, and the formation of a Department of Peace. After his death on October 25, 1806, his advancements in science and mathematics and calls for positive social reforms lived on.

Benjamin Banneker, despite the oppressive treatment of African Americans in his society, was able to achieve several accomplishments in science, mathematics, and justice. His suggestions for social reform, especially for the abolition of slavery, showed his wisdom and compassion towards others. These demonstrate his belief that African Americans were equal and that he was able to overcome the difficulties felt by his race. Several of his achievements, including his assistance in the design of Washington D.C., still impact us today. Had Benjamin Banneker been a white man, he probably would be better known today; his life deserves wider recognition and appreciation.

Altman, Susan. Extraordinary Black Americans. Chicago: Childrens, 1989.