

## Two Centuries Later: Rumors Continue to Abound Regarding Benjamin Banneker's Contributions in the Planning of WDC.

By Peggy C. Seats  
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Undoubtedly, Silvio Bedini, author of the *Life of Benjamin Banneker*, is considered one of the consummate authorities on the historical legacy of this colonial American hero. Perhaps the most hotly debated area of contention regarding Benjamin Banneker's extraordinary life is what role he played in helping to produce the plans of Washington, DC. However, it is undisputed that Major Andrew Ellicott is the well documented producer of what is referred to as the "**L'Enfant Plan**," for he is attributed with reproducing, improving upon and delivering the final version of what is termed the **L'Enfant Plan**, which details the lines, major boulevards and streets of the **Federal City**, now commonly referred to as the nation's capitol, a.k.a. Washington, DC. This paper is to validate the role that Banneker played in assisting him. H. Paul Caemmerer states:

But the next year, in 1792, when Andrew Ellicott, city surveyor, prepared the official plan derived from that of L'Enfant but with major modifications, it was embellished with suggestive building plans of considerable monumentality. He also clearly places three public buildings on the Mall, enlarges the "President's House" complex as defined by L'Enfant, and also enlarges on the group which later became the municipal center. One can only conjecture that Jefferson's advice was obtained for these architectural additions since L'Enfant was already in official disgrace and Thornton [Dr. William Thornton, 1793-1802] was not yet in the picture.<sup>1</sup>

The historical reference entitled: *Official City Sites, History of DC*, cites that, "The City was planned and partly laid out by Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a French Engineer. That work was perfected and completed by Major Andrew

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<sup>1</sup>H. Paul Caemmerer, *The Life of Pierre Charles L'Enfant Planner of the City of Washington*, DaCapo Press, New York, Washington, DC 1950, p. 12.

Ellicott and Benjamin Banneker, a freeborn Black man, who was an astronomer and mathematician.”<sup>2</sup>

In an effort to cover up the role Banneker played as one of the **Founding Architects** of DC, it was George Washington who insisted, however, that the **L’Enfant Plan** was named for L’Enfant although, in actuality, it was produced by Ellicott and Banneker. This mandate was made by Washington, in addition to authorizing the raiding of Ellicott’s office for evidence of Banneker’s journals, and astronomical charting, including his prediction of an eclipse, as they were embarrassed by L’Enfant’s inability to technically execute a plan and had to save face. Although a gifted artist/visionary, L’Enfant lacked technical planning skills.

Here, we have reference, and acknowledgment being given to Benjamin Banneker as having played a role in the production of the document commonly referred to as the **L’Enfant Plan**. Research will prove, time and time again, that this is a repeated pattern of reference. In Coolie Verner’s publication, he states:

...Washington appointed the French engineer Pierre Charles L’Enfant to survey the land designated for the city, and to produce a ground plan worthy of the new country, intended to be compared with any of the great European cities. To this end, Jefferson supplied L’Enfant with plans of several European cities, so that he could extract the best feature of each. However, while the survey work continued, L’Enfant proved a difficult character, exasperating both Washington and Jefferson with his headstrong approach to solving problems, and dealing with interests of individuals affected by his grand scheme. One problem was that part of the construction costs were to be met by selling parcels of land within the city boundaries, and yet the sales started before the ground plan had been completed, and the boundaries of these parcels of land properly established on the ground.

In the end, Washington lost patience with L’Enfant, who was dismissed in 1772. L’Enfant was replaced

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<sup>2</sup> **Information Please**, a Division of Family Education Company.

by Ellicott. However, in picque, L'Enfant refused to hand over any of his survey work, so Ellicott was forced to reconstruct the plan from his own working notes and recollections. Ellicott's manuscript plan of the city is in the Library of Congress, although it is credited in the title to L'Enfant.<sup>3</sup>

In his report to Thomas Jefferson, who was appointed by George Washington to oversee the establishment of the new nation's capitol, and to the three Commissioners [**Thomas Johnson, Daniel Carroll and David Stuart**] charged with managing this task [**the first presidential appointed Commission in the history of America**], Major Andrew Ellicott wrote of his disenchantment with L'Enfant and his inability to bring to successful conclusion, due to limited qualifications, the physical execution and/or manifestation of his "lively" and "fancy" visions for the new seat of government.

In his letter from Philadelphia, dated February 23, 1792, Ellicott writes to Jefferson and the Commissioners:

Gentlemen, On my arrival at this City, I found that no preparation was made for an engraving [key word] of the plan of the City of Washington. Upon this representation being made to the President and Secretary of State, I was directed to furnish one for an engraver, which with the aid of my Brother, was completed last Monday and handed to the President.

In this business we met with difficulties of a very serious nature. Major L'Enfant refused us the use of the original! What his motives were, God knows. The plan which we have furnished, I believe will be found to answer the ground better than the large one in the Major's hands. I have engaged two good artists (both Americans) to execute the engraving, and who will begin the work as soon as the president comes to a determination respecting some small alterations.....

The Major has both a lively fancy and decision, but

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<sup>3</sup> Coolie Verner, **Surveying and Mapping the New Federal City: The First Printed Maps of Washington, DC**, *Imago Mundi*, XXIII, 1969, p. 59ff.

unfortunately no system, which render the other qualifications much less valuable, or in some cases useless. I suspect that measures are now taken, which will either reduce the Major to the necessity of submitting to the legal arrangement, or deserting the City. I am gentlemen with great respect your  
Hbl Sevt. Andrew Ellicott<sup>4</sup>

In reference to the on-going debate as to what role Banneker played in the production of the actual finished plan, Silvio Bedini cites, in his biography on Banneker, *The Life of Benjamin Banneker*, "It was only through the intercession of President Washington, during his visit to the site a week later, that Ellicott and his assistants were returned to service on April 3, after a reorganization of the Surveyor's Office. In the course of this development, the Commissioners ordered the confiscation of all of Ellicott's papers from that office, an action that led to another eruption between them and Ellicott. Ellicott angrily described the incident in a letter to his wife. ....

They admitted the seizure of the surveyor papers in connection with his accusations against Dermott. The matter of the confiscation and the restoration of the papers, as well as the eventual loss of some of them, is intimately connected with the problem of documenting Banneker's presence at the Territory, and for that reason has been given in some detail.<sup>5</sup>

Bedini states further, in reference to this occurrence, "The second incident in which Ellicott's papers were seized is of particular significance, or it may explain the total absence to the present time of his field notes, journals, and diaries. Ellicott made further reference to the loss in a communication to Robert Patterson published several years later, in which he commented: 'A number of the eclipses of the first Satellite of Washington, were privately taken from my lodgings in Georgetown, otherwise they should have appeared in this paper.'" <sup>6</sup>

It is well documented that the role Banneker played in the survey and design of the nation's capitol was to make astronomical observations and calculations,

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<sup>4</sup> Major Andrew Ellicott, February 23, 1792, Letter to the Commissioners on *Engraving the Plan of the City*.

<sup>5</sup> Silvio Bedini, *The Life of Benjamin Banneker*. Second Edition, **Maryland Historical Society Publishers**, p. 144 [excerpt from letter to Andrew Elliott's wife dated February 14, 1791].

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

providing the culled information to Ellicott which he then used to draw the lines for the **Federal City** in astronomical accord with the desired celestial influences of note. It is well documented that Banneker correctly predicted an eclipse while working to help establish the nation's capitol. David Ovuson, from his book **Secret Architecture of the Nation's Capital**, writes:

As Banneker witnessed the predicted eclipse, he would have known full well that the ancients had always insisted that such a cosmic event would have a profound influence upon earthly events. He would have known, too, that the nature of that influence would depend upon the planetary patterns in the skies at the time when the eclipse took place. The eclipse of 1791 was in Aries -- a certain portent that the destiny of Washington, DC, would be filled with pioneering endeavor and excessive (not to say belligerent) enthusiasm.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, it is oftentimes argued that Benjamin Ellicott, brother of Major Andrew Ellicott was the person who assisted him with finishing and producing the final rendition of the so-called "L'Enfant Plan." However, it is clear that Benjamin Ellicott helped to finish with the engraving of the document, not the astronomical content or planning aspects of the document. It is arguably clear too that: **1)** Major Andrew Ellicott completed and produced the **L'Enfant Plan** after Major Peter, a.k.a. Pierre Charles L'Enfant, was terminated for his inability to produce a finished document. It should also be noted that L'Enfant was not an astronomer, nor was he a surveyor, and consequently, as espoused by Ellicott in his February 23, 1792 letter to Thomas Jefferson and the three Commissioners, was unqualified to execute his vision, however, opulent and wonderful it was conceptually; and **2)** Benjamin Ellicott has never been attributed to helping to survey and design the nation's capitol, except by those nay sayers who desperately refute Banneker's role in the process of helping to create and salvage the plans for the establishment of a new seat of government, for a new country that would, in short order, become the global capitol, regardless of the biased misinformation that attempts to prove otherwise. Unfortunately, even in 2004 there are those who cannot fathom a person of African descent receiving credit for making extraordinary discoveries and contributions. Yet, that does not discount and/or cancel the truth.

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<sup>7</sup> David Ovuson, *The Secret Architecture of Our Nation's Capital*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1999, p. 7.

In writing about the influences dominating the establishment of DC, David Ovuson, aka, Fred Gettings, in deferring to the role Banneker played as one of the **Founding Architects** of the nation's capitol writes:

The chart offers us an insight into the fact that star lore was still important at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the grand schema for what became Washington, DC, was visualized, and laid out on the Earth. It is this, as much as the fact that the rising and setting of stars were linked with weather predictions, which explains why the astronomer Benjamin Banneker should have included so many references to the major fixed stars in his own almanacs.<sup>8</sup>

While it is also well documented that after two months Banneker departed from his original appointment to serve as assistant to Major Ellicott in surveying the nation's capitol, it is not far fetched to speculate that he continued to work with Ellicott on salvaging the design and planning of the nation's capitol from locations other than the camp site. Major Ellicott was unequivocally very supportive of Banneker's goal to begin producing his own almanacs. As a close neighbor of the Ellicott family, and close friend of George Ellicott, who recommended Banneker to his cousin Andrew for the appointment, he was also the first signee on the **Public Notice** included in Banneker's first almanac of 1792. It is without question that Ellicott and Banneker maintained communication with one another, especially in light of the fact that, from the outset, Ellicott, working in collaboration with other Abolitionists such as Pierre Charles L'Enfant and French General Marquis de LaFayette, convinced Banneker to let himself be used as an example that Blacks are not mentally inferior to other human beings. Banneker reluctantly agreed to do this at great personal risk and sacrifice. Major Ellicott also resided in Philadelphia, one of five states that Banneker's almanacs were first distributed for sale. The following attestation, which was written on Banneker's behalf by Ellicott et al., authenticating Banneker's first almanac, reads:

To the Public – In order to clear up any doubt that may arise as to Benjamin Banneker [a Black man whose Father came from Africa] being the author of the Prefixed Almanac., we whose names are herein prefixed annexed, do certify that we for several years have been acquainted with him and that his knowledge in astronomy and the mathematicks

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 273.

was of his own acquiring assisted only by astronomical tables which he with much difficulty procured. Andrew Ellicott, James Gillingham, Daniel Carroll, Elias Ellicott, Wm. Dillworth, Joseph Evans, Machael Pue, M.D., George Ellicott, Gerard Hopkins, Jonathan Ellicott, Jame Carey.<sup>9</sup>

In her account of Banneker, Martha E. Tyson, wrote in her biographical book on him:

Major Ellicott selected Benjamin Banneker as his Assistant upon this occasion, and it was with his aid that the lines of the Federal Territory, as the District of Columbia was then called, were run.

It was the work, also of Major Ellicott, under the orders of General Washington, then President of the United States, to locate the sites of the **Capitol**, **President's house**, **Treasury** and other public buildings. **In this, also, Benjamin was his assistant.**<sup>10</sup>

Benjamin Banneker played a critical role in not only helping to survey the nation's capitol, but also in helping to determine astrological influences upon the capitol by virtue of the timing of certain dominating astronomical, astrological influences and strategic metaphysical influences as implemented in concert with the stars which directly impacted the selection for the placement of key buildings and grand boulevards such as 16<sup>th</sup> St., NW. Consequently, he also served as one of the planners and designers of the nation's capitol. As such, he helped to salvage, reconstruct, and modify the **L'Enfant Plan**, along with his professional colleague, Major Andrew Ellicott. These services could not have been carried out by someone with little to no astronomical aptitude and ability. To dispute Banneker's role in redeeming the effort to establish the nation's capitol is to dispute Major Andrew Ellicott's role in producing the document deferred to as the **L'Enfant Plan**, and Major Ellicott's handwriting is as plain as day on the final draft of the plan of the **Federal City**. For the placement and planning of major buildings and centers of influence are not just about aesthetics, but also about

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<sup>9</sup> Silvio Bedini, *The Life of Benjamin Banneker*, Maryland Historical Society Publishers, Second Edition, p. 175.

<sup>10</sup> Martha E. Tyson, *A Sketch of the Life of Benjamin Banneker*, From Notes Taken in 1836, pp11-12 (Chapter V, pp 136-137).

heavenly influences. And it was **Benjamin Banneker's** role to determine those influences.

Isn't it high time we began to honor Banneker instead of discrediting his memory as one of the greatest contributing pioneers in American history? Benjamin Banneker's many gifts to this country are without question. For his legacy to have been documented at all in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as he labored, side by side, with the leading minds of the country, who were slave owners themselves, yet they deferred to Banneker as ***The Venerable Mr. Banneker***, is a testament to the caliber of his genius and sterling character as a human being. If slave owners could find it within themselves to address a man of African descent with esteem and honor, why is it that contemporary people, who wish to be respected as fair, open-minded and non-racist citizens, cannot accept the facts. Benjamin Banneker was a great colonial American hero, and nothing can be done to diminish that fact, for the facts speak for themselves. The following are the last eight lines of the last stanza of the poem written in 1776 in tribute to Benjamin Banneker by **Susanna Hopkins Mason**, wife of minister, **George Mason**. The entire last stanza of the poem, however, turned out to be quite prophetic; and is to be placed on the pedestal base of the **Banneker Memorial** in the nation's capitol:

On record now thy name's enrolled,  
And future ages will be told,  
There lived a man called 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,  
Or cast a shade upon thy merit  
Or blast the praise thou might'st inherit:  
For folly in an orb so bright,  
Will strike on each beholder's sight:  
Nay, stand exposed from age to age,  
Extant on some historian's page.  
Now as thy welfare I intend.  
Observe my counsel as a friend.  
Let fair examples mark thy round  
Unto thine orbit's utmost bound.  
"The good man's path," the scriptures say.  
Shine more and more to perfect day."