Black Intellectuals

Besides influencing radical political discourse during the revolutionary era, the Enlightenment also shaped the careers of America’s first black intellectuals. Because it emphasized human reason, the Enlightenment led to the establishment of colleges and libraries in Europe and America. These institutions usually served a tiny elite, but newspapers and pamphlets made science and literature available to the masses. The eighteenth century was also an era in which amateurs could make serious contributions to human knowledge. Some of these amateurs, such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, were rich and well educated. They made discoveries in botany and electricity while pursuing political careers. What is striking is that some African Americans, whose advantages were far more limited, also became scientists and authors.

Because they had easier access to evangelical Protestantism than to secular learning, most African Americans who gained intellectual distinction during the late eighteenth century owed more to the Great Awakening than to the Enlightenment. The best known of these is Jupiter Hammon, a Long Island slave who published religious poetry in the 1760s. There were also Josiah Bishop and Lemuel Haynes, black ministers to white church congregations in Virginia and New England. But Phillis Wheatley and Benjamin Banneker, who were directly influenced by the Enlightenment, became the most famous black intellectuals of their time.

Phillis Wheatley

Wheatley came to Boston from Africa—possibly near the Gambia River—in 1761 aboard a slaver. She was seven or eight years old, small, frail, and nearly naked. John Wheatley, a wealthy merchant, purchased her as a servant for his wife. Although Phillis spoke no English when her ship docked, she was soon reading and writing in that language and studying Latin. She pored over the Bible and became a fervent Christian. She also read the fashionable poetry of British author Alexander Pope and became a poet herself by the age of thirteen.
For the rest of her short life, Wheatley wrote poems to celebrate important events. Like Pope’s, Wheatley’s poetry reflected the aesthetic values of the Enlightenment. She aimed to blend thought, image, sound, and rhythm to provide a perfectly balanced composition. In 1773 the Wheatleys sent her to London where her first book of poems—the first book ever by an African-American woman and the second by any American woman—was published under the title *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. The Wheatleys freed Phillis after her return to Boston, although she continued to live in their house until both of them died. In 1778 she married John Peters, a black grocer, but was soon mired in illness and poverty. Two of her children died in infancy, and she herself died in December 1784 giving birth to her third child, who died with her.

Wheatley was an advocate and symbol of the adoption of white culture by black people. Before her marriage, she lived almost exclusively among white people and absorbed their values. For example, although she lamented the sorrow her capture had caused her parents, she was grateful to have been brought to America:

"Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

But Wheatley did not simply copy her masters’ views. Although the Wheatleys were loyal to Britain, she became a fervent Patriot. She attended Boston’s Old North Church, a hotbed of anti-British sentiment, and wrote poems supporting the Patriot cause. In early 1776, for example, she lavishly praised George Washington, “fam’d for thy valour, for thy virtues more,” and received effusive thanks from the general.

Wheatley also became an advocate and symbol of John Locke’s ideas concerning the influence of environment on human beings. White leaders of the Revolution and intellectuals debated whether black people were inherently inferior in intellect to white people or whether this perceived black inferiority was the result of enslavement. Some slaveholders, such as Thomas Jefferson, who held racist assumptions about innate black inferiority, dismissed Wheatley’s work as “below the dignity of criticism.” But those who favored an environmental perspective considered Wheatley an example of what people of African descent could achieve if freed from oppression. She made her own views clear:

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic dye."
Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain,*
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.
Phillis Wheatley wrote the following letter to Samson Occom, an American-Indian minister, in 1774 after her return from England and as tensions between that country and its American colonies intensified. In it, she links divine order, natural rights, and an inner desire for personal liberty. She expresses optimism that Christianity and the emergence of order in Africa will lead to the end of the Atlantic slave trade. And she hopes that God will ultimately overcome the avarice of American slaveholders (“our modern Egyptians”) and let them see the contradiction between their words and deeds.

February 11, 1774

Rev’d and honor’d Sir,

I have this Day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights. Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the Land of Africa; and the Chaos which has reign’d so long, is converting into beautiful Order, and reveals more and more clearly, the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other. Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian Slavery; I don’t say they would have been contented without it. By no Means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance. And by the leave of our modern Egyptians, I will assert that the same principle lives in us. God grant Deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honor upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of their fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Words and Actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the cry for Liberty, and the reverse Disposition for the exercise of oppressive Power over others agree, I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine.

Phillis Wheatley

What Do You Think?

- How does this letter reflect principles associated with the Enlightenment?
- What insights does this letter provide into Wheatley’s views on slavery and its abolition?
Chapter 4

Benjamin Banneker

In the breadth of his achievement, Benjamin Banneker is even more representative of the Enlightenment than Phillis Wheatley. Like hers, his life epitomizes a flexibility concerning race that the revolutionary era briefly promised to expand.

Banneker was born free in Maryland in 1731 and died in 1806. The son of a mixed-race mother and an African father, he inherited a farm near Baltimore from his white grandmother. As a child, Banneker, whose appearance was described by a contemporary to be “decidedly Negro,” attended a racially integrated school. His farm gave him a steady income and the leisure to study literature and science. With access to the library of his white neighbor George Ellicott, Banneker “mastered Latin and Greek and had a good working knowledge of German and French.”

By the 1770s he had a reputation as a man “of uncommonly soft and gentlemanly manners and of pleasing colloquial powers.” Like Jefferson, Franklin, and others of his time, Banneker was fascinated with mechanics and in 1770 constructed his own clock. However, he gained international fame as a mathematician and astronomer. Because of his knowledge in these disciplines, he became a member of the survey commission for Washington, D.C. This made him the first black civilian employee of the U.S. government. Between 1791 and 1796, he published an almanac based on his observations and mathematical calculations.

Like Wheatley, Banneker had thoroughly assimilated white culture and was keenly aware of the fundamental issues of human equality associated with the American Revolution. In 1791 he sent Thomas Jefferson, who was then U.S. secretary of state, a copy of his almanac to refute Jefferson’s claim in Notes on the State of Virginia that black people were inherently inferior intellectually to white people. Noting Jefferson’s commitment to the biblical statement that God had created “us all of one flesh,” and Jefferson’s words in the Declaration of Independence, Banneker called the great man to account concerning slavery.

Referring to the Declaration, Banneker wrote, “You were then impressed with proper ideas of the great valuation of liberty, and the free possession of those blessings, to which you were entitled by nature; but, Sir, how pitiable is it to reflect, that altho you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father of Mankind, and of his equal and impartial distribution of these rights and privileges . . . that you should at the Same time counteract his mercies, in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren, under groaning captivity and cruel oppression.”

Reading Check

The Enlightenment helped to develop the careers of the first black intellectuals. Some African Americans became scientists and authors. Phillis Wheatley and Benjamin Banneker, the most famous intellectuals, contributed the first published works by African Americans. Most African Americans who gained intellectual distinction in this period owed more to the Great Awakening than to Enlightenment.

Reading Check

How did African Americans contribute to the Enlightenment?