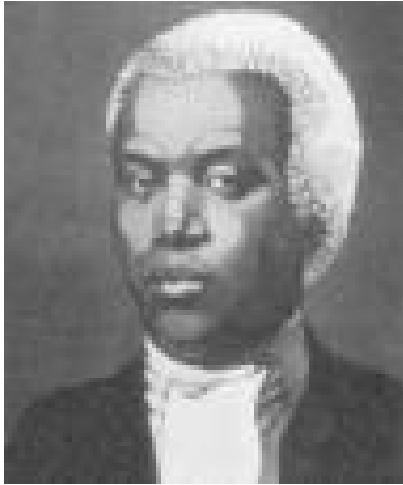


Saint Thomas More Black History Month 2006
African American Achievers Archives
Week 2

Famous African American Scientists and Inventors



1731 – 1806

Benjamin Banneker

Constructed first striking clock in America and helped design Washington, DC

Benjamin Banneker was a mathematician, astronomer and surveyor. He never went to school, but after studying the insides of a friend's watch, he made one of wood that kept the right time for more than 40 years. He taught himself astronomy well enough to predict correctly a solar eclipse in 1789. He was the first African American to publish a scientific book. President George Washington asked him to join the District of Columbia Commission, which designed the shape of Washington, D.C. When the chairman of the committee quit and took the plans with him, Banneker re-drew the plans from memory. When Thomas Jefferson said that Black people were not as smart as white people were, Banneker sent him a copy of his book to prove otherwise.

Norbert Rillieux

Invented sugar refining process

When **Norbert Rillieux (reel•YU)** was a child, sugar was a rare treat. Most of the people who could afford it at all used it only on special occasions. Even then, it took hours of dangerous, backbreaking work to produce sugar. Not only that, the final product was often lumpy, sticky and brown.

Rillieux decided to find a better way to refine sugar. His invention, the "Rillieux System", was a huge success. It produced better sugar than before and was faster, safer and less expensive than earlier ways of refining sugar. Soon, thousands of sugar plantations were using Rillieux's refining machine. Rillieux became one of the richest people in Louisiana.

Nevertheless, many people did not respect him because he was Black. So, Norbert Rillieux decided to leave the United States forever. He returned to France, where he had been educated. Sugar refining was not as big an industry in France as it had been in the United States. Because of this, Rillieux spent the next 10 years translating Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Eventually, he came back to sugar. Rillieux changed his 1846 process to make it work for sugar beets, which the French used instead of sugarcane. Refiners bought his invention, but French experts did not believe his idea was a new one. Rillieux made a lot of money from his invention, but he never got the respect he deserved. When he died in 1894 at the age of 88, a friend said he had died as much from a broken heart as from old age.



1806 – 1894

Famous African American Scientists and Inventors (cont.)

Lonnie Johnson **Invented the Super Soaker**

Lonnie Johnson is an aerospace engineer and inventor. In 1982, when a homemade nozzle at his bathroom sink shot a spray of water across the room, Johnson got an idea for a high-performance, pressurized water gun – the Super Soaker.

In high school, he was told that he was not smart enough to be an engineer and should be a technician instead. He didn't listen.

Instead, in his senior year in high school, he made a remote controlled robot from junkyard scraps and won first place in a national science competition. A scholarship in math took him to Tuskegee University where he earned his degree in Mechanical Engineering. Two years later, he completed a Master of Science degree in Nuclear Engineering.

After college, Mr. Johnson joined the Air Force. He spent nine years with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and received many awards from NASA for his work on spacecraft system design. Today, he has more than 80 patents for his inventions and has many more on the way.



Born: 1950



Dr. Jewel Plummer Cobb **Developing cancer medications**

Dr. Jewel Plummer Cobb has served as a researcher and a college professor and administrator. Much of Cobb's research has focused on melanin, the substance that gives our skin its color. Her most important research has been testing new chemotherapy drugs. Her work has helped the scientific community a great deal. Dr. Cobb has also held many high-level positions at some of the best colleges in the country.

She has always worked very hard to encourage Black people to pursue careers in science. Dr. Cobb has written many articles about discrimination against people of color and women in the sciences, and she has worked to raise money to help more minorities enter the field.

Born: 1924

Famous African American Scientists and Inventors (cont.)



1867 – 1923

Charles Henry Turner

Proved that bugs can hear and roaches can learn

Entomologist **Charles Henry Turner** became the first person to prove that insects can hear and distinguish pitch. In addition, he first discovered that cockroaches could learn by trial and error.

As a young boy, Charles was always asking questions about nature and why animals act the way they do. A teacher finally told him, "If you want to know all those things about them, why don't you go and find out for yourself?" Charles replied, "I will." Thus began a lifelong search for answers to his questions about insects and animal behavior.

Although he held a doctorate from the University of Chicago, Mr. Turner chose to teach at high schools so he could devote more time to studying insects. His research had lasting impact. He published several articles in scientific journals, including "Habits of Mound-Building Ants," "Experiments on the Color Vision of the Honeybee," "Hunting Habits of an American Sand Wasp," and "Psychological Notes on the Gallery Spider."