

"Discipline to the Mind": Philadelphia's Banneker Institute, 1854-1872

NINETEEN-YEAR-OLD JACOB C. WHITE, JR., was sure about what was needed, and on a spring day in 1856 he made it clear to his friends: "a library which, if properly kept up, would shed a halo of literary light throughout this city and reflect great credit on those who constitute this association."¹ In his capacity as recording secretary of the Banneker Institute, White outlined this objective in his annual report. The institute had been organized in 1853 by a group of some five dozen African-American men who had titled it "the Alexandrian Institute, a young men's instruction society."² In the ensuing years these men redefined their identity, replacing the classical title with one closer to the members' own heritage and aspirations. African-American mathematician Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806) had been born free in a slave society, had become educated through his own initiative and discipline, and had thereby been able to make a contribution to society, to "reflect great credit on those who constitute this [race]." Banneker had assisted Pierre L'Enfant in the surveying of Washington, D.C., and had published a series of almanacs well-respected in the United States and in Europe. Thomas Jefferson had brought Banneker's work to the attention of the French Academy of Sciences. In addition to these intellectual achievements, Banneker had been an outspoken champion of freedom and political rights for African Americans, having sponsored numerous petitions and pamphlets in their cause.³ Banneker, then, symbolized the

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¹ Minute Book of the Banneker Institute, 1855-1859, April 3, 1856. This document (hereafter, BI Minute Book) is part of a group of records documenting the history of the Banneker Institute. This group of records consists of two minute books (1855-59 and 1865-72), a roll book (1854-72), an order/receipt book, and miscellaneous receipts, broadsides, and ephemera. Preserved among the records of the American Negro Historical Society, they were donated to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter, HSP) by Leon Gardiner.

² BI Minute Book, Sept. 9, 1853.

³ Silvio A. Bedini, *The Life of Benjamin Banneker* (New York, 1972).

aspirations of the ambitious young men who took his name to describe their brotherhood: he had disciplined and developed his mind, he had taken a public stand for his principles, and he had contributed to international intellectual discourse.

The Banneker Institute had indeed set itself an ambitious mission. For nearly two decades the group kept detailed records as it pursued its mission, engaging the energies of scores of young black men in several countries, stimulating the minds of countless other men and women through public programs, and solidifying a network of family friendships that would transmit the institute's values to future generations.

The story of the Banneker Institute is an integral part of the story of the development of nineteenth-century urban discipline, of the development of African-American group consciousness, of industrialization, and of the relationship between these forces. Unremarkable in its time and place, the Banneker Institute is unique and valuable to the historian because of the survival of eighteen years of very meticulous records and because its membership included representatives of black families who were influential in the economic, religious, political, and intellectual sphere of their day and in succeeding generations.

As the urban areas of nineteenth-century England, France, and the United States made the transition to a standardized work day, punctuated by the scheduled hum of factories and routinized public transportation, so too did the nonwork activities of urbanites acquire a higher degree of regimentation and formality. In the increasing economic, ethnic, and racial diversity of such cities as London, Paris, New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, New Orleans, and Port-au-Prince, individuals became acutely conscious of the danger and isolation that could accompany a particular ethnic, class, racial, religious, political, or professional identity. In response, many individuals sought to join with others who shared their background or values. Traditional indicators by which an individual might have recognized identity and status—family membership, neighborhood or religious community, occupational camaraderie, etc.—were replaced by more “objective” measures of worth: economic power, professional or social connections, public visibility, and organizational affiliation.

A wide array of public agencies (hospitals, orphanages, banks, schools) were replacing functions that had previously been located in the informality of family, church, or community, thereby introducing artificial, professional protectors and comrades into situations where the “natural” allies had been friends and family. The resulting dislocations and disorientations

were experienced as much by beneficiaries of the new order as by its casualties. Institutional loyalties replaced personal relationships, and institutional protocol produced group loyalty, discipline, and conformity in an otherwise fragmenting community. Thus, for many and diverse reasons, residents of western cities, besieged by a life of increased speed, greater regimentation, and heightened alienation, found relief by huddling in associations of persons like themselves.⁴

Impermeable—often incomprehensible—to “outsiders,” such groups of self-limiting associates increasingly augmented or replaced the natural, informal medical, financial, educational, or emotional roles formerly filled by family or neighbors. An important distinction, however, between the old natural connections and the consciously created replacements was the introduction of regularized meeting times and agendas designed to coordinate with increasingly routinized schedules. Philadelphia’s own American Philosophical Society, begun by Benjamin Franklin and some of his friends and modeled after the Royal Society of London, joined the proliferation of similar institutions that flourished after the mid-eighteenth century. These groups signaled the heightened value placed on the systematization of the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge.

An integral part of western industrial society, urban African Americans could not remain aloof from its collateral effects. The hunger for definition-by-association and for the systematization of knowledge was felt among them also. In the wake of the American Revolution, a half-dozen northern states had abolished slavery.⁵ Now, for black residents of northern cities, there was the vague promise of inclusion in American life. Now, like Benjamin Banneker, northern African Americans would be

⁴ The Annales school has had a profound effect on the way historians have interpreted the interaction of historical phenomena, and a number of scholars have chronicled the events of the nineteenth-century cities within this framework of the interaction of “public” and “private” events. Good examples are the work of Sam Bass Warner, Bruce Laurie, David Grimsted, and Billy G. Smith, but it is Arnold Thackray who comes closest to describing a situation analogous to that of the Banneker Institute: Arnold Thackray, “Natural Knowledge in Cultural Context: The Manchester Model,” *American Historical Review* 79 (1974), 672-709. See also, Tamara Hareven, “The Dynamics of Kin in an Industrial Community,” in Naomi Gerstel and Harriet Engel Gross, *Families and Work* (Philadelphia, 1987), 55-84; Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York, 1989); and Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-1989* (Stanford, 1990).

⁵ Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, 1961), 3-14.

born free into a slave society. The Banneker Institute, organized by and for black Philadelphians and their colleagues in British and Canadian cities, sought to maximize these larger modern trends. Publicizing its activities through broadsides and local newspapers, the group met weekly September through June. (Such seasonal scheduling was typical of group activities in Philadelphia. The summer humidity was oppressively unhealthy, and surviving broadsides suggest that Banneker Institute members and their peers fled the city in summer for the ocean air of Cape May and Atlantic City.)⁶ Punctuated by rigid adherence to schedules, assignments, and behavioral codes, the story of the Banneker Institute offers insights into one African-American community's interpretation of the best way to maximize the new opportunities they perceived around them.

By the 1850s, when the Banneker Institute appeared, the tradition of voluntary intellectual organizations was well-established among Philadelphians—including black Philadelphians. An 1841 visitor to the city listed more than a dozen self-help and self-education groups sponsored by the African-American community. One such organization, the Gilbert Lyceum, established in the 1830s “for the encouragement of polite literature,” numbered among its founders Jacob White’s father.⁷ In his involvement with the Banneker Institute, then, Jacob White, Jr., mirrored his father’s aspirations.

If the existence of the Banneker Institute was not its claim to significance, its importance lies in the historical consciousness and scientific method of its record keeping that allows modern researchers to examine its goals and strategies. Statistics, correlations, and comparative analysis of trends are significant markers in the institute’s records, and attempts to mold and shape the organization’s future are clearly based on such predictors.⁸ The organization’s goals and its strategies for effecting those goals were sophisticated and tightly focused.

The catalyst and hub of the organization of the Banneker Institute was Jacob C. White, Jr., and it is White’s energy, enthusiasm, imagination,

⁶ Broadside, Box 13G, Leon Gardiner Collection, HSP.

⁷ Edwin Wolf II, *Philadelphia: Portrait of an American City* (Philadelphia, 1975), 103; [Joseph Willson], *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored People in Philadelphia, by a Southerner* (Philadelphia, 1841), 61-68.

⁸ See, for example, the entries in BI Minute Book, April 3, 1856; Jan. 26, Feb. 23, 1859.

and contacts that sustained the group for nearly two decades. White was only able to do this because he was at the center of an organized and dedicated group of young men who shared his dreams—if not always his convictions about methods. White and his cohorts sought to create what today would be called a “network,” a structure through which a group of individuals could support each other in pursuit of their common goals. White and his colleagues hoped to use the adhesive of intellectual energy to create and cement a unified black consciousness that would, in turn, provide an informed social and political leadership for African Americans.

Seeking to display themselves in the best light, the institute leaders recruited those men who they believed were most likely to share their values and ambitions, values based on the belief that the first step in effective political action was self-education.⁹ Hence, the Banneker Institute’s entrance requirements included some demonstrated intellectual achievement. As with similar organizations, membership was by invitation only; one had to be nominated by people who were already members—a system designed to protect the exclusivity and close-knit structure of the group.

As literacy was a somewhat scarce commodity among nineteenth-century urbanites, the organizers of the Banneker Institute relied heavily for their early recruits upon the most prestigious black educational institution of the day, the Institute for Colored Youth (ICY) which had begun in the 1830s as a trade school. Over the ensuing two decades, the African-American families it served demanded a redefinition of its mission. By the 1850s ICY had a strong liberal arts curriculum and some black teachers on its staff.¹⁰ These factors made ICY a natural recruiting ground for the Banneker Institute.

Jacob C. White, Jr., was himself a graduate of ICY, and he was joined in his mission by other ICY graduates. Octavius Catto, Jesse Glasgow, and Jacob White’s own brother George had all been outstanding students at ICY before becoming leaders in the Banneker Institute. The Banneker Institute’s membership also included Ebenezer Bassett, John P. Burr, Stephen Gloucester, and Nathaniel Depee, all of whom had been associ-

⁹ Emma Lapsansky, “Since They Got Those Separate Churches: Afroamericans and Racism in Jacksonian Philadelphia,” *American Quarterly* 32 (1980), 54–78.

¹⁰ Harry Silcox, “Philadelphia Negro Educator: Jacob C. White, Jr., 1837–1902,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter, *PMHB*) 97 (1973), 75–98.

ated with ICY, either through the governing board or faculty. This latter group was associated with the Banneker Institute for only one year, 1856, when they were all designated honorary members. These were all older, well-respected leaders, whose names no doubt offered an aura of respectability to the activities of the leaders-in-training.¹¹

At mid-century Philadelphia had only a few hundred black families with sufficient disposable income to allow them the luxury of sustained discretionary expenditures of time and money. Membership in the Banneker Institute required a 50 cent entry fee and \$2 in yearly dues. Attendance at lectures could cost an additional 5 cents, or perhaps as much as 25 cents. Thus, participation in the Banneker Institute involved a substantial financial commitment, and the 58 members listed on the Banneker Institute's 1856 rolls represented a significant number of those who might have been eligible to join.¹² Taking into account the literacy requirement and the narrow age grouping to which the Banneker Institute limited itself, this organization may be seen as an inclusive assemblage of one stratum of Philadelphia's black elite. From an initial membership of two dozen, the Banneker Institute showed strong growth for several years. After 1858, however, the membership declined and wavered between 32 and 45 members, finally dropping off sharply from 42 members in 1867 to 22 members in 1872, the last year for which records are available. Whether or not the organization dissolved after this time is unclear. It is clear that in this year, Jacob C. White, Jr., who had been the charismatic center of the organization, had many other issues on his mind. In 1872 White was in his sixth year of service as the first black principal of a city public school that faced a number of challenges. As if this were not enough, Octavius Catto, White's dear friend and close associate in organizing the Banneker Institute, had been murdered in a political race riot in the fall of 1871. Coincidentally, 1872 was also the year that Jacob C. White,

¹¹ Charline Conyers, "A History of the Cheyney State Teachers' College" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1960), 100; BI Roll Book.

¹² In 1847 the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends sponsored a "Census of the Colored People of Philadelphia" (hereafter, 1847 Friends Census) that listed names, household size, birthplace and occupation of head of household, value of real and personal property, and more. Of the more than 5,000 households listed in the census, only a few hundred appear to have been in an economic position to sustain membership in the Banneker Institute. See also the discussion of Philadelphia elites in Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia, 1989).

Sr., died, leaving to his son a library, an "electrical machine," and the responsibility for administering a rather large and complex estate.¹³

The small membership and the short life of the Banneker Institute should not mask its importance in cementing enduring relationships and values for nineteenth-century black Philadelphia. In total, some 105 different individuals held membership in the Banneker Institute. In addition, countless others benefitted and offered support by speaking or attending public lectures and by participating in performances, celebrations, or contribution drives. The leadership was provided by Jacob C. White, Jr., but White was assisted and supported by a nucleus of staunch supporters, each of whom brought an energy for reform and exemplary public service that had been nurtured in their own families. Robert Adger, eighteen years old in 1855, was the second child—the eldest son—of Robert Adger, Sr. The elder Adger, a china-store keeper, was a leader in not less than a dozen African-American self-help organizations over a long career that spanned the years from 1839 to 1890. His wife, Mary, a member of the Ladies Union Committee, was a model of public service in her own sphere. By the end of his life, Robert Adger, Jr., had amassed a large library of Afroamericana, 320 volumes of which were later donated to Wellesley College.¹⁴ Adger served on the Banneker Institute's governing board and on many ad hoc committees over the years.

Henry Black brought similar energy to the group. The son of Ebenezer Black, Henry was nineteen in 1855. Ebenezer, who owned significant real estate and personal property, was apparently quite literate; he served, for some years as the corresponding secretary for the First African Presbyterian Church. He also joined the effort to recruit black soldiers for the Union Army. Ebenezer's son Henry served as the Banneker Institute's librarian, lectured on various natural science topics, and served repeatedly on the Banneker Institute's governing board.¹⁵

William Minton joined the Banneker Institute at the age of seventeen in 1857. He was the son of Henry and Emily Minton, natives of

¹³ BI Roll Book; Harry C. Silcox, "Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia Black Militant: Octavius V. Catto, 1839-1871," *Pennsylvania History* 44 (1977), 53-76; Will no. 458 (1872), will book 75, 105; Administration no. 680 (1871), book U, 36; Archives of the City of Philadelphia.

¹⁴ Adger sold these volumes as a unit in 1904 to Mrs. Ella Smith Elbert who later donated them to her alma mater, Wellesley College. For the books and their provenance, see Wendy Ball and Tony Martin, *Rare Afroamericana: A Reconstruction of the Adger Library* (Boston, 1981), xii.

¹⁵ BI Roll Book; BI Minute Books.

Virginia, who arrived in Philadelphia to establish themselves as successful restaurateurs. They willed several houses to their heirs. William Minton became treasurer of the Banneker Institute in 1859, the year before his father joined other black leaders in establishing the Civil, Social, Cultural, and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Philadelphia. Designed to "embrace the public interests of the colored citizens of Philadelphia" and to "diffuse a knowledge of the condition and wants of the colored people, and to remove prejudice in any directions where their civil rights are discriminated thereby," the association hoped to use logical and "scientific" arguments in pursuit of their political and social goals.¹⁶ Clearly, Henry Minton and his son had similar intellectual notions. Not only did William Minton remain loyal to the Banneker Institute throughout its existence, but his younger brother, Theophilus, joined the group in 1865 when he was twenty years of age. Theophilus went on to have a distinguished career in providing leadership for the city's first black hospital.¹⁷

Jacob White, Jr., likewise inspired the loyalty of John W. Simpson, a shoemaker who was eighteen years old in 1855. Between 1855 and 1861 Simpson served the Banneker Institute in various capacities: as president, vice-president, secretary, and member of the board of managers. He was an active participant in debates, and he was frequently a member of ad hoc committees to organize such special events as the West India Emancipation Day celebrations held annually on August 1.¹⁸ Three other long-term members—Parker T. Smith, Joel Selsey, and George Burrell—gave loyal service to the institute as lecturers, officers, and members of the board of managers.

Perhaps the most intimate and cherished support to White came from Octavius V. Catto who was only fifteen years old when his father, William T. Catto, became a founding member of the Banneker Institute. Young

¹⁶ Philip S. Foner, "The Battle to End Discrimination Against Negroes on Philadelphia Streetcars. Part I, Background and Beginning of the Battle," *Pennsylvania History* 40 (1973), 261-89.

¹⁷ Between 1968 and 1985 the Philadelphia Social History Project compiled a computerized data base of organizations and members from disparate sources (church records, roll and account books, broadsides, censuses, and contemporary local histories). Some of the biographical data used in this study is derived from this compilation, now housed in the University of Pennsylvania's Van Pelt Library. (Hereafter, PSHP Organization List.)

¹⁸ BI Roll Book; BI Minute Books.

Octavius, then an outstanding student at ICY, had his petition for membership denied because of his youth. The Catto family was connected to the White family through many close and overlapping ties. William T. Catto, long a champion of education and literacy and the author of a history of Philadelphia's black churches, was a close friend of the White family. Jacob C. White, Sr., was director of the Sunday School in the First African Presbyterian Church where the elder Catto served as pastor. The elder Catto was also on the board of managers of the Lebanon Cemetery, the White family business. Nevertheless, these close family connections did not secure young Octavius's membership until after his graduation from ICY. By 1859, however, Octavius was not only a member, but was listed as recording secretary. He remained a loyal supporter of the institute until his death in 1871.¹⁹

Octavius Catto's value to the Banneker Institute cannot be overrated. Echoing his father's passion for literacy, after graduation young Catto took a teaching position at ICY and threw his considerable energies into expanding and improving the curriculum and the physical plant at the school. At the same time, he became deeply involved in efforts to secure political power for the black community.²⁰

Family tradition and cohesion were indeed important to the success of this group. Among the younger White's supporters were Jacob Glasgow and his younger brother, Jesse, Jr. Jesse Glasgow, Sr., was a whitewasher, who, like Jacob White, Sr., had been a founder of an intellectual organization a generation earlier. Like the younger White, the young Glasgows had been among ICY's best students. Also numbered among the founding members of the Banneker Institute was Joseph Brister whose father, in the 1830s, had been a founding member of the ephemeral Rush Library and Debating Society, an organization which, at its peak, boasted three dozen members and a 200-volume library.²¹

That their fathers had been unable to sustain such organizations as legacies to their sons did not seem to daunt these young enthusiasts. Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that these organizations were even conceived as long-lived ventures. That such organizations sprang up, ran a course of years, and then disappeared suggests that they may have been

¹⁹ BI Roll Book; BI Minute Books; PSHP Organization List.

²⁰ Silcox, "Nineteenth-Century Black Militant," 69.

²¹ Willson, "Sketches of the Higher Classes," 102, 109-11.

instituted to serve a limited purpose—as a kind of “finishing school” or fraternity for a group of young men, assisting them until they had established a personal and political persona of their own. The typical Banneker Institute member in 1855 was young, unmarried, just beginning a career. By 1872 these same men were householders with time-consuming commitments to children and to multiple civic responsibilities.²² Whatever their goals, these young men went about the task of reinventing their fathers’ dreams with remarkable energy, dedication, and skill, and with a steady insistence upon high standards of behavior, loyalty, and involvement from which no member, no matter how well-connected, was exempt.

Mid-nineteenth-century Philadelphia saw a proliferation of young men’s clubs catering to specific ethnic, religious, or other special interests. Calling their clubs “library companies,” “fire companies,” or similar labels, they rented rooms in which to hold “meetings,” which were often characterized by gambling, swearing, harassing passersby, and, occasionally, unabashed street brawling.²³ The Banneker Institute, however, posted rules in the meeting room (rented after 1860 at a cost of \$6.25 per month), that were intended to present a disciplined and purposeful air that would place the group a cut above the raucous activities of the more common clubs. The group hired a cleaning woman (at a cost of \$6.00 per year) and installed bookcases and a bust of Abraham Lincoln to symbolize its values.²⁴

In various years, a number of members were fined, suspended, or expelled. In 1856 twenty members—one-third of the membership—was expelled. Though no reason is recorded for these disciplinary measures, the institute had spent 87 cents to frame their list of rules, and the rules were prominently posted in the meeting room. The rules, which included prohibitions against “indecorous language,” and against leaving one’s seat without permission of the chairman, were an integral part of the group’s concern with self-discipline. Presumably, then, the expulsions resulted from infractions of those rules.²⁵

²² 1847 Friends Census; PSHP Organization List.

²³ George Rogers Taylor, “‘Philadelphia in Slices’ by George G. Foster,” *PMHB*93 (1969), 23-72.

²⁴ BI Order/Receipt Book, 1867-72, Receipt nos. 31, 33.

²⁵ BI Order/Receipt Book, 1867-72, Receipt no. 29, Jan. 14, 1868; BI Minute Book, May 25, 1854.

The Banneker Institute leaders worked hard, especially in the early years, to reach agreement on policies and procedures. Achieving and sustaining unity was no easy task, however, even among men whose educational background, goals, and ideals were compatible. Over the first several years, a good deal of meeting time was spent in setting protocol. It was necessary to set behavioral limits that would be stringent enough to define the group's specialness without being too rigid. For example, consistent with White's concern for discipline, members were exhorted to take seriously the commitment to prompt, regular attendance at meetings that were scheduled to convene promptly at 8:00 on Thursday evenings, and to adjourn just as promptly at 10:00.

Setting such goals was one thing; finding ways to discipline oneself and one's colleagues to adhere to such guidelines was yet another. Mechanisms for enforcing policies had to be delicately balanced between rules strict enough to define the group as selective, yet not so confining as to invite flagrant violation. Attempts to walk such a fine line sometimes produced stress. In the early years attendance was erratic. More than one member followed the lead of frustrated president Parker T. Smith who resigned from office in 1855 because "strict order and parliamentary etiquette has not been observed . . . [and] strife and contention predominated." In the same year, William H. Smith unseated himself from the same position because he could not meet the "demands of great punctuality."²⁶

Hard pressed to maintain and support an intellectual community in a city that offered African Americans scant opportunity for intellectual exercise—a city which, in fact, constantly ridiculed such efforts²⁷—Banneker Institute members persevered against the constraints of white aggression, uncertain finances, internal dissension, and competing demands on members' energies and resources. They were determined to provide a steady diet of intellectual stimulation and nourishment for black Philadelphia. To that end they employed both the carrot and the stick. Exhortations and fines, appreciation and suspension, accolade and expulsion peppered the career of many a Banneker Institute member. Through a combination of careful screening of potential members, and equally careful monitoring of current members, the group attempted to maintain high

²⁶ BI Minute Book, Oct. 5, 1854, 42-43; Jan. 4, 1855, 49.

²⁷ Lapsansky, "Since They Got Those Separate Churches," 62-66.

standards of programming, participation, behavior, and morale. This self-imposed discipline was the Banneker Institute's version of conformity to what one hopeful black Philadelphian termed "an age . . . fastidious in its taste."²⁸

Apparently members accepted these disciplinary measures without rancor. Though Jacob Glasgow was expelled in 1856, his younger brother Jesse remained an active member. In the early 1860s, when Jesse emigrated to Scotland, he continued his membership as an equally active "corresponding" member until his untimely death from pneumonia in 1863. The elder Jesse Glasgow was, like the elder Catto, a member of the board of managers of the White family's Lebanon Cemetery, and he continued in that role while son Jacob was on furlough from the Banneker Institute. By 1866 Jacob was once again on the rolls, though the terms of reinstatement were never spelled out in the minutes.²⁹

That the process of expulsion was an accepted and impartial part of discipline, engendering little hard feeling, is also suggested by the experience of Robert Adger. A loyal and committed member since the founding of the group, Adger promptly met his obligations to contribute books, time, and committee service, in addition to extra monetary gifts. Yet in 1855 he was expelled. Reinstated by 1858, he was given \$15 from the group's treasury to underwrite his travel to the Equal Rights Convention in Harrisburg in 1865. Later that same year, he was again expelled. Two years later he donated \$9 worth of bookcases.³⁰ The specifics of Adger's erratic relationship with the Banneker Institute are unknown, but the expulsion-reinstatement pattern was a part of many members' stories.

The vigor of the Banneker Institute was the result of the energy and dedication of people such as White, Adger, Simpson, Brister, and the Glasgows, men who seemed to place their commitment to improving the economic, social, and political well-being of the black community above their private tensions and disagreements, and who seemed, by and large, willing to abide by rules. The cohesion and intimacy of the Banneker Institute was aided also by geography; many of these men lived in the

²⁸ William Whipper, "An Address . . . Before the Colored Reading Society of Philadelphia, For Mental Improvement," quoted in Dorothy Porter, *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837* (Boston, 1971), 105-6.

²⁹ BI Roll Book; PSHP Organization List.

³⁰ BI Roll Book; BI Order/Receipt Book, 1865-69.

same neighborhood. Of the seven men who served with Jacob White as the stable nucleus of the institute, only one, Joel Selsey, lived more than a short walk from the rest of the group. The others lived within a three-block radius of the White family's Lebanon Cemetery at Tenth and Bainbridge streets. John W. Simpson who served as president from 1854 to 1861 lived at 420 S. Seventh Street. William Minton lived in one of the two adjoining brick houses owned by his father in the 1100 block of Rodman Street. Henry Black lived at 612 Barclay; George Burrell, whose wife made her own independent monetary contribution to the institute, lived at 1309 Lombard. Robert Adger's address was listed as 835 South Street. George White, the older brother of Jacob White Jr., lived at 1118 Rodman.³¹

Though young, these loyal friends and neighbors were serious about their responsibility to maintain the viability of the club. They served as its officers, staffed its subcommittees, organized its meetings, designed broadsides, and placed newspaper advertisements to publicize its lectures. They kept its records, railed at its shortcomings, donated time and books and bookshelves—and disciplined themselves and each other. Over the course of nearly two decades these eight men were always represented on the nine-member board of managers and always active on the library, debate, and program subcommittees of the organization.³² In addition to their commitment to the institute, these men led full and active lives in many other arenas. Octavius Catto was active in the Pennsylvania Equal Rights League, and he joined White and Adger in organizing the Pythian Baseball League, Philadelphia's first African-American ball club. While operating his china store, Adger worked with Minton, Catto, and White to recruit black troops for the Civil War.³³

Similarly, the wives, sisters, and women friends of Banneker Institute members lent their support to the cause, even though many of these women were busy with their own enterprises. In the spring of 1867 Fanny Jackson, who was soon to become a principal at ICY, presented a lecture that yielded \$8.10 for the institute's coffers. Sarah Mapps Douglass, also

³¹ BI Roll Book.

³² BI Minute Books.

³³ Silcox, "Nineteenth-Century Black Militant," 66-67; Emma Lapsansky, "Friends, Wives and Strivings: Networks and Community Values Among Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia Afroamerican Elites," *PMHB* 108 (1984), 3-24.

a teacher at ICY, lectured on anatomy one rainy evening in 1855, to an audience that was just "tolerable." The club netted a profit of only 45 cents. Douglass's daughter Grace and Caroline Harding, both teachers at ICY, are listed as "contributing members," and in 1855 a "Mrs. Stephens" (presumably the wife of member Alexander Stephens) contributed a volume on the life of Benjamin Franklin.³⁴

As they set about the dual agenda of building internal unity and simultaneously seeking acceptance in the world outside their own community, these strategists knew they faced an uphill battle. In popular culture—in newspapers and on stage, in cartoons and in song—as well as in the system of exclusion of blacks from many educational institutions, white Americans mocked and thwarted their strivings.³⁵ In the spring of 1858 Jacob White petitioned to have the Banneker Institute included in the National Literary Congress, a city-wide consortium of similar organizations. When the Literary Congress lauded the program and format of the Banneker Institute but refused it membership, solely on the basis of race, White was deeply disappointed—but undaunted.³⁶

Derision and exclusion were not the only challenges presented by the environment. Worried that their own social and economic vessels might run aground in the turbulent waters of industrialization, many urban white workers met the aspirations of upwardly mobile blacks with resentment and violence. The persons and property of aspiring blacks were repeatedly the targets of attack in the mid-century urban unrest. White, Catto, and Adger had all been children in Philadelphia during the repeated racial, ethnic, and religious riots of the 1830s and 1840s. Violent attacks on the families and property of their middle-class friends and neighbors were well-known to them. They knew that the meeting hall of the black masons had been destroyed in a streak of violence, and they knew that the city streets were populated with roving gangs that might, at any moment, unleash their frustration on the symbols of African Americans' dreams.³⁷

³⁴ BI Minute Book, 1855-59, 3.

³⁵ Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1974).

³⁶ Silcox, "Philadelphia Negro Educator," 83.

³⁷ John Runcie, "Hunting the Nigs' in Philadelphia: The Race Riot of August, 1834," *Pennsylvania History* 39 (1972), 187-218.

In addition to these external threats, pressures within the group also challenged the institute's stability. Members were expected to make periodic contributions of intellectual fare to stimulate their peers, and there was a strict requirement on the payment of fees. In addition, each member was duty bound to educate himself on some subject and then lecture to the group. Often members were conscientious about living up to their commitments. In January 1859 a gathering of eleven members heard Davis Turner and George Burrell lead a debate on the subject of whether it is right "for lawyers to defend persons whom they know to be guilty of the crimes with which they may be charged?" In March of that same year, Henry Black lectured to eight people on the topic of mineralogy, botany, and Linneaus. A few weeks before, Jacob White, Jr., had used examples from Greek and Arab history to argue for competence in math for bookkeeping, navigation, surveying, and, most importantly, for providing "discipline to the mind." Isaiah Wears held forth on the subject of "Love, Courtship and Marriage" to a "tolerable" audience on a cloudy evening.³⁸

The events in 1859, a year of typical institute activities, provided an intellectual menu that was stimulating and varied. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes possible to see how, even with the best of intentions, the consistent adherence to discipline was not easy. The minutes record only eleven regular business meetings at which the highest attendance was only fourteen of the members. Four meetings were canceled because of low attendance. In early May a meeting was called off because of the school examinations being held in the Institute for Colored Youth building, where the Banneker Institute sometimes met. Another meeting was canceled because it was scheduled for a night when Frederick Douglass was speaking in town. There is no entry or explanation for the other twenty-odd meetings that should have been scheduled.

Eleven public lectures were scheduled, of which only eight actually occurred. Octavius Catto twice refused to speak, once complaining that he had not been given enough notice, and once saying that he felt the audience was too small. William Johnson had to be rescheduled twice, once because he had forgotten it was his turn to lecture and a second time because he refused to speak before a small audience. When, however, his

³⁸ BI Minute Book, Jan. 26, March 23, Feb. 16, Dec. 4, 1859.

lecture praising Napoleon III opened the fall season, it was well- received. Two members, Ralph Gilmore and the usually loyal George Burrell, failed to show up at all for their scheduled lectures. For one meeting all but one member arrived more than an hour late.

For the months of January-June, recording secretary Parker T. Smith meticulously kept track of attendance, topics, weather, and, sometimes, the gross income from the lecture events. But when William Minton took over as secretary after the summer hiatus, he adopted a terse style of record keeping that included neither attendance nor weather.³⁹

If adherence to schedules and timing was a challenge, other rules presented equally difficult situations. By 1855 Robert Adger had made the first of two gifts of bookshelves, but the books to fill these shelves came slowly. Librarian Henry Black reported in January 1855 that only twelve volumes had been deposited in the previous twelve months. At that point a volume of French literature, given by member T.J. Harmon, sat on the shelves alongside a biography of John Quincy Adams, contributed by George Burrell, a biography of George Washington, added by Alexander Stephens, and the biography of Franklin, donated by "Mrs. Stephens."⁴⁰

It was a struggle, but the fact that things often went smoothly seemed to make it worth the effort. In the winter of 1855 Parker T. Smith lectured to a full house on "The History of Women," and William Wells Brown talked about "Mahomet and Confucius." Such titles, along with Parker T. Smith's discussion of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, make us wish that the speakers had complied with the secretary's request to deposit a transcript of their talks in the library.⁴¹ The 1855 attempts to engage Massachusetts abolitionist senator Charles Sumner were unsuccessful, as was William Minton's 1869 telegram inviting Stephen Douglas to address the group (declined because "other engagements stood in the way"). On the other hand, the proceeds from an 1866 lecture by the Honorable J.M. Forney netted more than \$170, and over the course of nearly twenty years White, Simpson, Selsey, Burrell, and their friends arranged more than

³⁹ BI Minute Book, 1855-59, 2-30.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁴¹ BI Minute Book, Jan. 4, 1855, 49.

200 events that brought public attention and/or economic benefit to themselves and their audiences.⁴²

Though the participation of individual members fluctuated somewhat, the institute's rhythm and programming remained firm throughout. Regular scheduling of events, September through June, remained the standard, even as the membership waned and the calendar could not always be filled. Likewise, the topics on the agenda showed a certain consistency. A group such as this had a wide range of options for topics and the formats it might use for presentation. Poetry, drama, sports, social welfare, art, philosophy, politics, or natural science were all popular with the intellectuals of the day. The list of topics for lecture and debate suggests that much planning went into choosing topics. They should be stimulating but not offensive, controversial but not divisive, and within the scope of the constituency's experience and comprehension but not to the point of being pedestrian or repetitive.

Topics in both programming and in the library collections seemed to cluster around four areas: math/natural sciences, philosophy/history, business skills, and predictably, a variety of race-related issues. Jacob White recorded a "house crowded to overflowing" for Jeremiah Asher's discussion entitled "Does the Bible Sanction Slavery?" Pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church, Asher was actively involved in the underground railroad through William Still's "vigilance committee." He remained active in the black community throughout his lifetime, recruiting soldiers for the Civil War and preaching resistance rather than patience from his pulpit. An equally timely debate, led by Jacob White, Joel Selsey, George Burrell, and William Johnson, on the relative merits of slavery, brought a large crowd to partake of the spirited discussion. Johnson took the position that slavery was beneficial because it introduced "civilization" into Africa. White concurred, adding that slavery had brought Africans "under discipline." Turner took the other side, arguing that there could be no justification for the millions of people "sent to eternity" as a result of the slave system.⁴³

The Banneker Institute's leaders clearly took seriously their self-imposed duty to find topics that would interest and edify the African-

⁴² BI Minute Book, 1855-59, 45; BI Order/Receipt Book, 1855-68, Aug. 8, 1860; Jan. 18, Nov. 8, 1865; Aug. 10, 1869.

⁴³ BI Minute Book, Feb. 2, 1859; PSHP Organization List.

American population. However, owing to White's moderate, religious, and noncombative attitude toward racial injustice, perhaps controversial current events were approached infrequently, obliquely, and in a controlled, somewhat dispassionate format. The Banneker Institute's minutes show no response to the widely debated trial of escaped slave Anthony Burns, to the birth of the Republican party, to the Dred Scott case, or to the dramatic escape of Henry "Box" Brown who was uncaged, in Philadelphia, from the small box in which he had fled from Virginia slavery. In 1867 Octavius Catto and his fiancée, Caroline LeCount, were in the vanguard of the battle to end discrimination on Philadelphia streetcars. This battle went on *outside* the confines of the Banneker Institute meetings.⁴⁴

Insulated from some of the political/racial activity of the time, the Banneker Institute was bold about promoting discussion of other issues. In November 1855 a crowded house greeted Mary Ann Shadd, the controversial African-American teacher who had recently begun her own newspaper. Member Isaiah Wears appeared on the platform with Miss Shadd, and together they led a discussion on the merits of emigrating to Canada, which Shadd had done several years before. And, within weeks of John Brown's 1859 attempt to muster a slave army at Harper's Ferry, the Banneker Institute had twice gathered to consider the implications of such a bold move. For each discussion strict discipline was kept, and the meetings adjourned promptly at 10:00.⁴⁵

The library of the Banneker Institute reflected this same air of caution. There is a record of a subscription to *The Nation*, but there is no evidence that the group owned a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, nor is there any indication that the institute subscribed to the *Liberator*, the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, or to Frederick Douglass's paper. Even the black Philadelphia paper, *The Christian Recorder*, is not listed among the group's reading matter.

What might be inferred about the *unspoken* agenda of the Banneker Institute? Perhaps some clues may be found by examining the young men who *might* have been members but who were not. There were other groups of African-American intellectuals active in the city—most notable among

⁴⁴ Silcox, "Nineteenth-Century Black Militant," 65-66.

⁴⁵ Dorothy Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1984), 164-75; BI Minute Book, Nov. 6, 1855, Oct. 6, Dec. 20, 1859.

these being the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons. This rival group included wealthy coal-and-lumber dealers William Still and William Whipper and dentist James McCrummell. These men, though neighbors of White, Adger, and Catto, were generally somewhat wealthier and favored a political alignment with William Lloyd Garrison and his associates. This political alignment sought a strategy of "moral suasion" to accomplish a society in which there would be no "complexional institutions," that is, no segregated institutions. Jacob White and several of his associates in the Banneker Institute were quite outspoken about their more conservative approach, advocating alliances with white institutions but avoiding mergers. Presaging the later strategies of Booker T. Washington, White was more concerned with political rights than with immediate access to social rights.⁴⁶

Consistent with this approach, the Banneker Institute maintained cordial diplomatic relations with the Library Company of Colored Persons but declined to merge with them. They cooperated in a number of joint projects—including the joint rental of a meeting room which they occupied on alternate evenings. On several occasions the two groups cosponsored public programs, sharing equally in production and publicity costs and in profits. A fall concert presented at the Franklin Institute and several celebrations of West Indian Independence day are typical of such collaborations.⁴⁷

Banneker Institute members, however, remained firmly opposed to moving from collaboration to merger.⁴⁸ Perhaps they were concerned that their agenda would be engulfed in the ideas of their more powerful and wealthier neighbors. Perhaps the political/strategical differences seemed insurmountable, even on the presumably neutral ground of intellectual inquiry. Whatever the impetus, the Banneker Institute members exercised their right to separateness.

With the coming of the Civil War, the energies of many Banneker Institute members were redirected into the war effort. They helped to recruit troops, fund and staff freedmen's education and relief efforts, and mapped out strategies to secure the vote. Also, even as public responsibilities tugged at the attention of this small cadre of activists,

⁴⁶ PSHP Organization List; Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York, 1969), 105.

⁴⁷ BI Minute Book, Jan. 29, 1855; BI Order/Receipt Book, Receipt no. 31, Feb. 1, 1868.

⁴⁸ BI Minute Book, 1855-59, April 3, 1856.

private lives brought increasing distractions. Demanding careers, teenagers to be educated, and the other tasks of adult life seemed to drain the vitality from the group.

Over the years, as membership waned, so too did the vigor with which high standards of participation were upheld. By the late 1860s expulsions dwindled, and so did attendance and record keeping. What became of the group after 1872 is unknown. Certainly, individuals from the group maintained their friendships and their business connections. Most of the members continued their active and visible leadership roles in the community: working to secure the vote, to establish an industrial school, to start newspapers, hospitals, and loan associations, and, in 1897, the Negro Historical Society, through which the records of the Banneker Institute survived. These men passed on their ideals to their sons and daughters who preserved their libraries, carried on their businesses, and founded twentieth-century institutions with goals similar to those of the Banneker Institute. Through its efforts to create and support a self-conscious and cohesive black intellectual community, through its internalization of the "need" for bureaucratic institutions, procedures, and disciplines, and through its adaptation of these structures to incorporate an agenda specific to their aspirations of "reflecting great credit," the Banneker Institute has much to tell us about the dreams of an urban black elite to construct a supportive community in a chaotic world. The modernization of the western metropolis came to Philadelphia—and African Americans were in a unique position to use its structures to socialize and inspire its next generation of leaders.

Haverford College

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