

Ellicott City Semiquincentennial Essay Contest

High School Division 1

Division High School: 8-10 pages

Grade 10

Ellicott City Semiquincentennial Essay Contest

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The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly; The History of African Americans in Ellicott City

Ellicott City, MD is known for its antiques, sightseeing, and shopping, but how often do people stop and think about what caused Ellicott City to look this way, who shaped it, who did they buy this land from? Finding out who bought Ellicott city can just be googled and will pop up that 250 years ago in 1772, the three Ellicott brothers bought the land from Emanuel Teal, and are now celebrating its semiquincentennial anniversary (happy anniversary Ellicott City!). Your google search is complete and now you know probably all you wanted to know before delving into your next shopping spree. As someone heads to the ‘ Forget Me Not’ store, a person wonders who built this building, maybe who built this town, and who shaped this land? However, do you really know?

The answer is probably not. You might have heard of Benjamin Banneker the black astronomer and mathematician born in Ellicott City. But I am not here to write about the known people. I am here to write about the unknown builders and shapers of the land known as Ellicott City. I am here to talk about the unknown relationship throughout the years between Ellicott City and its African American Citizens.

Andrew Ellicott was one of three founders of Ellicott City. He was the brother of John and Joseph Ellicott. The three brothers being Quakers, their Quakers' beliefs told them to love

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everyone equally, making them anti-slavery. Supposedly. There is a primary source suggesting that Andrew Ellicott supported slavery, he argued that slavery should be protected by the United States. However, there are a vast majority of sources (however mostly secondary) suggesting that all three of the brothers were anti-slavery. Ellicott city did eventually have slaves but when did slavery in the city start? And were the brothers, especially Andrew, actually anti-slavery like many Ellicott City ‘historians’* suggest.

How were African Americans treated throughout Ellicott City’s history? In Ellicott City African Americans were treated in various degrees, and the treatment towards them got worse after the death of Andrew Ellicott in 1820.

The early decisions of the Founders of Ellicott City would directly effect African American families for years to come, since farms and mills were built someone needed to work them, this period shows us the stance the founders took on slavery. Ellicott City was founded in 1772 by the aforementioned three Ellicott brothers; John, Joseph, and Andrew Ellicott. The city was started when the brothers floated mill equipment down the Patapsco River. This mill equipment would eventually be used to build; a sawmill, a grist mill, a granite quarry, farms, and a small village. The mills were mostly industrial, unlike the farms (and plantations) which the standard farm would not be industrialized until the 1840s. The most powerful mill was the flour mill, known as Ellicott Mill, which was considered one of the largest “industrial empires within the Patapsco watershed”. Ellicott Mill** The economy was booming; in fact, almost the entirety of Maryland's economy was booming from the many plantations producing tobacco. Many people in Maryland were pro-slavery since it meant they could afford to put food on the table,

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**Does not always meet the Oxford Dictionary definition of historian an expert in or student of history.*

***Previous name of Ellicott City'*

provide shelter, and send their kids to school. So when the question arose upon the arrival of American offices in Natchez County Missouri whether or not slavery should still be allowed in the state (which, by opening a standard history book in 2022 one can tell that pro-slavery won until the civil war). Many people took a strong stance about whether or not slavery should be allowed. One of which was the one and only Andrew Ellicott. Stated in the document written by John Craig Hammond, in 2012. Andrew Ellicott, who was reported to be for the united states to protect slavery, "issued a decree pledging that the United States would protect slavery" (Hammond, John Craig). Andrew later went on to frantically write letters to Phildeapha congressmen and officials pleading to them to take the same stance. The president at the time, John Adams agreed with, Andrew and permitted slaves in the territory of Missouri. "President John Adams endorsed Ellicott's decision, recommending that Congress permit slavery in the Mississippi Territory in their report to Congress"(Hammond, John Craig). Andrew Ellicott did not own slaves himself nor did the other brothers (according to the census of 1792), but supported the ideas of slavery. This could simply be the fact that slavery was helping the economy of Maryland along with, at the time, colonies. Which would help the economy of Ellicott City along with attracting people to come live in their small but growing town. It could also be the fact that Quakers were prohibited from owning slaves, but not prohibited from promoting pro-slavery beliefs. It is not clear whether slavery was disallowed or allowed in Ellicott city however African Americans did eventually live there.

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While Ellicott City had slavery, Andrew Ellicott did work with an African American to survey land. The African American was a son of a slave and a free African American. The African American mathematician and astronomer who would later become the well-known Benjamin Banneker. Benjamin Banneker and Andrew Ellicott surveyed the land that would eventually become the nation's capital city. Benjamin Banneker was, obviously, not always a surveyor or an astronomer. He was once a child like everyone. Banneker was lucky compared to most African American children during the times he was born free. Benjamin was mostly self-educated since the first colored school in Ellicott City did not open until 1880 and Maryland did not require schools for African Americans until 1879. As Banneker grew up his talents caught the attention of the Ellicott brothers leading to the aforementioned job surveying with Andrew for three months due to sudden illness. He published for six consecutive years, almanacs, containing his astronomical calculations along with some opinion pieces, medical and tidal information, and literature. These almanacs became Banneker's true claim to fame. However, not all individuals of African descent were as lucky in Ellicott City, especially after the death of Andrew Ellicott.

One of the unlucky individuals was Tom Randall, and Joe Nick. Tom Randall was born in 1856 in a shack on a new cut road in Ellicott City Maryland. His mother Julia Bacon was a cook at the Howard house. His mother was owned as a slave by the saloon or tavern keeper* of Ellicott City, a man by the name of O'Brien. Tommy recalled a colored man by the name of Joe Nick, who was owned by the lawyer and farmer Ruben Rogers. Joe was literate and was an excellent mechanic which made him extremely valuable to Rogers farm. His valuable use of the farm caused a one hundred dollar reward (three thousand three hundred and sixty-three dollars

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and 90 cents) on his head when he ran away to supposedly join the Union army. His running away caused several 'slave hunters' to go find the runaway enslaved man, Joe Nick. When Joe returned he was arrested for being a fugitive slave until his 'master' was arrested and reprimanded by the federal judge. Many slaves were escaping from the bonds of slavery though **The role of O'Brien was not specified in the relocation of Randall during an Interview in 1937* out Maryland. Whether they were running away from their enslavement in Maryland or escaping from enslavement further south through the underground railroad. Ellicott City saw many run-away slaves throughout the period of the underground railroad.

In a Mexican import shop, El Porton has a tunnel in the basement of the shop; this tunnel is believed to be a passage for the Underground Railroad. "There have always been suspicions that there was an Underground Railroad connection in Ellicott City," Bonacci said. "But no one has ever found it." (Bonacci Rachelina to Dorsey, Gary). The town's geographic characteristics have always shown to be a likely place for enslaved people to travel on their way to, hopefully, freedom. As further proof, another possible underground railroad tunnel was revealed during the horrendous flooding on July 30th, 2016. The tunnel/cave was found underneath Junk Girl, causing its unfortunate destruction. The debate whether the tunnel/cave was part of the Underground railroad or used to hold bootleg whiskey is still up in the air. However the location of the tunnel is close to the tunnels found years prior under El Porton, the Mexican import shop. Both shops were located on Main street, El Porton closed, and unfortunately, Junk Girl was lost in the 2016 flood. The underground railroad ran through many parts of Howard County, along with the rest of Maryland, helping free about one hundred thousand enslaved individuals. The

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underground railroad eventually came to an inevitable end, and eventually, one of the bloodiest battles in American history would happen in Maryland during the horrid Civil War.

Ellicott City during the civil war was divided. "Ellicott's Mills was divided in its politics, and those deeply held divisions resulted in neighbors fighting and dying on both sides" (Radinsky, Mike to Holzberg, Janene). Ellicott City had the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) railroad run through it during the years of 1828 to 1987. The B&O railroad was affected by many attacks and raids throughout the civil war, starting with the John Brown's Raid. The raids happening from both sides, the federacy and the confederates, caused the city to be divided and people did not know who to trust. "You couldn't trust the people you'd grown up with. You either ended up not speaking or on bitter terms"(Radinsky, Mike to Holzberg, Janene). Not trusting people in the town beat up Ellicott City's previously strong sense of community, which luckily has been repaired today.

Ellicott City's first colored school opened in 1880 to fulfill the 1879 Maryland state law requiring that counties provide education facilities for African American children. Comparing the school to the lavishly built Patapsco Female Institute, one can see the racial bias compared to white and black children. Ellicott City's Coloured School was a one-room structure that lacked running water, a central heating system, and running water. Eventually, after 14 years of parents of children attending the school, petitioning the school board, a well was dug and a water pump was installed outside of the building in 1950 (Visit Howard County). When the school eventually closed in 1953, students would attend the newly constructed Fells Lane Elementary School, which operated until 1965 at the end of segregation. They would go on to attend Howard County's public school. In fact, the Howard County public school system was formed in Ellicott

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City once it was named a primary school district since it had many schools varying in status. The integration and the creation of the Howard County Public School System Ellicott City started to take shape into the city that Maryland now has a deep love for. The school district name of Ellicott Mills influenced the naming of Ellicott Mills Middle school located near the Montgomery road entrance of Old Ellicott City.

Ellicott City is now fully integrated with 29.80% of the city's population being African Americans, still leaving Caucasian/White people in the majority but people of color, such as African Americans and Asians, population are starting to rise in numbers and causing the City to become more diverse. As Well as the Country remembering Benjamin Banneker's legacy as the "First African-American Man of Science" according to Science of Atlanta. As one now enters any of the various shops, people may now think about how an underground railroad tunnel may be running under the shop they're in, or the disputes over race that may have happened on the various stores' steps and tiny patios, or the Black women signing petitions in the streets for their children to get running water in schools. Take a moment to reflect on whose land you stole, who died trying to gain rights just for you to be here reading this essay. Without the people who fought for the Union during the civil war, or the mothers nationwide who fought for the children to go to school with equal education as white people; I , a Black teenager, would not be writing this essay today. Showing the leaps in history that it took for Ellicott City to reach its Semiquincentennial Celebration.

Even with Ellicott City's indifferent treatment of African Americans upon Andrew Ellicott, one of three of the founders, death in 1820 African Americans are treated almost as equally people of European descent.

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The History of African Americans relations with Ellicott City is my favorite piece of history in Ellicott City because it shows what a society chooses to remember about African Americans throughout the making of modern America. With the majority of African Americans' struggles throughout America being forgotten or destroyed with reckless abandon, it puts Ellicott City in a spotlight of knowledge. In Ellicott City much is known about past African American civilians but also much is unknown. With new history being discovered and made every day I hope to watch the history of Ellicott City grow, starting with the Semiquincentennial celebration of Old Ellicott City and the hopes of seeing the Tricentennial , along with all of the history inbetween . Thank you for taking the time to read my essay, and make sure to enjoy the history being made during these truly, once in a lifetime celebrations.

“The colour of the skin is in no way connected with strength of the mind or intellectual powers.” –Benjamin Banneker

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