

Benjamin Bradley (No Image Found)

Benjamin Bradley invented a steam engine for powering a small boat, or cutter, to carry provisions for a "sloop of war." However, U.S. law at the time prevented Bradley from obtaining a patent on his invention. He did, however, attain his freedom in exchange for proceeds from his work.

Little is known about Benjamin Bradley's personal life. He was born into slavery and lived in Annapolis, Maryland, for some, or possibly all, of his life. His date of birth is not recorded, although estimates place it to be about 1830. Owned by a man living in Annapolis, Maryland, Bradley was working in an Annapolis printing shop when he was about 16. Already manifesting both singular mechanical ability and ingenuity, he used what were probably scraps of material lying about the shop—a piece of a gun barrel, some pewter, pieces of round steel, and a few other materials—to fashion a working model of a steam engine.

Shortly thereafter, Bradley's master found him a position at the Naval Academy in Annapolis as a helper in the department of natural and experimental philosophy, where physics, chemistry, and other sciences were taught. Surrounded by sailors, Bradley saw an opportunity to turn his invention to profit and sold his steam engine model to a midshipman at the Academy. Bradley's master allowed him to keep \$5 (today about \$150) each month for himself. To this amount, Bradley added the proceeds from the sale of his model so he could build a full-scale engine able to drive a cutter at the rate of 16 nautical miles per hour.

The Naval Academy professor for whom Bradley set up laboratory demonstration experiments remarked on his intelligence and aptitude for the work. The professor noted, "he looks for *the law* by which things act." Ultimately, Bradley succeeded in buying his freedom through proceeds from his inventions and his work for hire, even though U.S. law prevented him from patenting his steam engine. The year of his death is unknown.

References and Further Information

"Benjamin Bradley." The Black Inventor On-Line Museum. Available online. URL: <http://www.blackinventor.com/pages/benjaminbradley.html>. Downloaded January 13, 2017.

Haskins, James. *Outward Dreams: Black Inventors and Their Inventions*. New York: Walker, 2003, pp. 23–25.