

A Letter from Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson

Directions: Today's activity focuses on the correspondence between Benjamin Banneker and Thomas Jefferson. For the first part of the activity, log in to **Gale In Context: High School** and then click on the link to access the primary source document "A Letter from Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson (1791)". **Be sure to log in to Gale In Context High School BEFORE clicking any links.** Read the sourcing information and Historical Context part of the article and answer the questions below before continuing.



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1. What is the document type listed in the sourcing information?
2. Why do you think it is important to know prior to reading the document?
3. What date was this written?
4. What did Banneker send with the letter?

Historical Context: Before diving further in the letter, analyze the historical context, or background, from when Banneker was writing. Using *Gale In Context: High School*, read the article over slavery and race. The answers to the following questions can be found in the introduction section and the heading "Race and the Defense of Slavery." Answer the following questions.

Slavery and Race by Paul Finkelman

5. What quotation from Jefferson was articulated in the article from the Declaration of Independence?
6. What type of "scientific" rationales were used by Jefferson for racially based slavery?

7. According to the reference, how does this view of racist science fit with Jefferson's views expressed in the Declaration of Independence?

Point of View: Using what you have now read about Thomas Jefferson's views on race and slavery, return to the letter Banneker wrote Thomas Jefferson. During this reading, use the author's point of view, or perspective, as well as his purpose to analyze his letter.

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8. Do you think it is important that Banneker addressed that his race was "scarcely capable of mental endowments"? Why or why not?
9. What does Banneker state that he has in common with Jefferson?
10. Was Banneker enslaved or free?
11. What tyrannical rule does Banneker bring up to parallel slavery to link the injustice of slavery?
12. Banneker then switches to discussing the Almanac that he is sending to Jefferson based on Jefferson's request. He mentions he was able to produce it based on his "arduous study", why do you think he included that statement?
13. What do you think the main point of the document is?

Extension: Using the **highlight and notes** tool, highlight three lines you think are the most powerful. In the note portion, write what you think Banneker's overall meaning of this letter is and why. (**Listen for directions from your teacher on how to attach or turn in these highlights and notes**)

Answer Key

1. Letter.

2. Answers will vary.

Example: Sets the tone for how to read the document, to know it is a correspondence, they are writing directly to someone, etc.

3. August 19, 1791.

4. A copy of the almanac he had written.

5. "All men are created equal".

6. Black people were inferior to white people, that Roman slaves still had achievement in science, art, or literature, and Jefferson did not think that black people could achieve such things because of their race.

7. It allowed them to coexist (or something similar).

8. Answers will vary.

Example: Banneker is addressing that Jefferson thought Banneker's race was incapable of scientific knowledge.

9. Answers may contain: they are both human, created in God, and/or they are the same family.

10. He is free. He states that he is not in captivity like so many others of his race.

11. He uses the example of breaking away from the tyranny of Britain for freedom.

12. Answers will vary.

Example: Banneker wanted to disprove Jefferson's beliefs.

13. Answers will vary.

Example: Banneker was trying to convince Jefferson to change his ideas on the inferiority of black people. That he was trying to use himself and his scientific achievements as an example to disprove Jefferson's public statements.

Extension: Students should highlight three portions and use the notes function to annotate the meaning of the passage. They can export these into Google Drive, Microsoft OneDrive, Email, PDF, or Copy them into a document. If you need help using Gale's Highlights and Notes feature, view this [tutorial](#).