

# A Letter from Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson

## Historical Contextualization and Author's Point of View with your Gale in Context Resources

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Subject/Content:** U.S. History

**Summary of Lesson:** Students will use *Gale In Context: U.S. History* or *Gale In Context: High School* to read a primary source and then place that source within the proper **Historical Context** and with a **Perspective** and **Point of View**.

**Focus Questions:** What is the overall meaning of Benjamin Banneker's letter to Thomas Jefferson? What historical events and personal experiences influenced Banneker's writing? How do we place it in its proper historical context?

**Resource:** *Gale In Context: U.S. History* or *Gale In Context: High School*

**Time Frame:** 45 minutes

**Learning Expectation:** Students will use their close reading skills to analyze a primary source. Students will provide proper historical context and perspective on their primary source using research skills and appropriate sources.

### Assessment Types:

**Informal Assessments:** Students will be assessed informally through the introduction discussion and through debrief discussion through informal questioning

**Formal Assessment:** Students will be assessed formally through a formative assessment of questioning as they read the primary source and research on Benjamin Banneker and Thomas Jefferson's views on slavery.

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### Procedures:

#### Steps/Activities by the Teacher:

- Introduce the idea of Historical Context and Point of View with your students.
- Ask students why understanding Historical Context and Point of View is important to understand historical events or primary sources.
- Facilitate a class discussion on how misunderstanding of historical context and Point of View can lead to misrepresentation and misunderstanding of Primary Sources.
- Pass out or digitally distribute copies of the attached worksheet, Historical Context and Point of View with "A Letter from Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson".
- (Optional) Send direct links to the students to the Primary Source and supplemental resources using the **Get Link** tool.
- Allow time for students to read the primary source and research the life of Benjamin Banneker and Thomas Jefferson's remarks on slavery.

- Debrief after the assignment to clear up any lasting questions over the document, the historical context, Benjamin Banneker, Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence or the assignment and revisit the focus question and learning expectations of the lesson.

### Ideas for Further Discussion:

- Jefferson responded to Banneker. Students can discuss how they think Jefferson would respond to the letter or if Jefferson would choose to respond. After the students give their hypothetical responses, read and analyze that response together. This second letter in the correspondence can be found in both *Gale In Context: U.S. History* or *Gale In Context: High School* as "A Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Banneker (1791)" or Gale Document Number: EJ2152000011

### Sources:

Banneker, Benjamin. "A Letter from Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson (1791)." *The African-American Experience*, Primary Source Media, 1999. American Journey. *Gale In Context: U.S. History*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EJ2152000003/UHIC?u=[LOCATION\_ID]&sid=bookmark-UHIC&xid=1d2b44fa. Accessed 4 Oct. 2022.

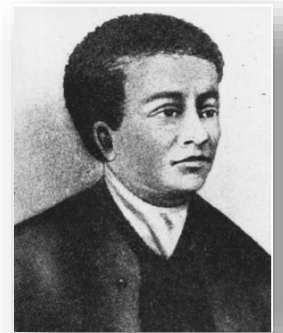
Finkelman, Paul. "Slavery and Race." *Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*, edited by Mary Kupiec Cayton and Peter W. Williams, Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001. *Gale In Context: U.S. History*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BT2350030049/UHIC?u=[LOCATION\_ID]&sid=bookmark-UHIC&xid=ad167cd0. Accessed 4 Oct. 2022.

Jefferson, Thomas. "A Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Banneker (1791)." *The African-American Experience*, Primary Source Media, 1999. American Journey. *Gale In Context: U.S. History*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EJ2152000011/UHIC?u=[LOCATION\_ID]&sid=bookmark-UHIC&xid=d72df929. Accessed 4 Oct. 2022.

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**Directions:** Today's activity focuses on the correspondence between Benjamin Banneker and Thomas Jefferson. For the first part of the activity, using either *Gale in Context: U.S. History* or *Gale in Context: High School*, search for the primary source document of "A Letter from Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson (1791)" using the search below. Once you have found the document, read the Historical Context part of the article and the sourcing information, and answer the questions below before continuing.



Benjamin Banneker, who wrote to Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson asking him to help bring an end to slavery.

Library of Congress



**Basic Search:** Benjamin Banneker and open the Primary Source "A Letter from Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson (1791)"

**Advanced Search:** Gale Document Number: EJ2152000003

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

**Historical Context:** Before diving further in the letter, let us analyze what some of the background from when Banneker is writing. Using your Gale In Context resource use the search below to find 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.




**Basic Search:** Slavery and the Declaration open topic overview "Slavery and Race" by Paul Finkelman

**Search:** Gale Document Number: BT2350030049


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, and purpose to find a deeper meaning and reasoning for the view he was taking.



GALE IN CONTEXT  
U.S. HISTORY



GALE IN CONTEXT  
HIGH SCHOOL

**Basic Search:** Benjamin Banneker and open the Primary Source “A Letter from Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson (1791)”

**Advanced Search:** Gale Document Number: EJ2152000003

8. Do you think it’s 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 3 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:
  - a. Sets the tone for how to read the document, to know it's a correspondence, that they are writing directly to someone
3. August 19, 1791
4. A copy of the almanac he had written
5. "All men are created equal"
6. Blacks were inferior to whites, that Roman slaves still had achievements in science, art, or literature and Jefferson did not think that lacks could achieve such things because of their race.
7. It allowed them to coexist. (Or something similar)
8. Answer will vary
  - a. Banneker is addressing that Jefferson thought Banneker's race was incapable of scientific knowledge
9. Answer may contain: they are both human, created in God, they are the same family.
10. He is free. He states that he is not in captivity like so many other of his race.
11. He uses the example of breaking away from the tyranny of Britain for freedom.
12. Answers will vary, but he seemed to want to prove that he was capable of study and scientific achievements since Jefferson had made contradictory statements.
13. Answer will vary, but some possible ideas are that Banneker was trying to convince Jefferson to change his ideas on the inferiority of African Americans. That he was trying to use himself and his scientific achievements as an example to disprove Jefferson's public thoughts.

### Extension:

Students should highlight 3 portions and use the notes to annotate the meaning. They can export these into a Google Drive, Microsoft One Drive, Email, PDF, or Copy them onto a document.