

Primary Sources: Benjamin Banneker's Letter to Thomas Jefferson

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Benjamin Banneker. Wikimedia Commons

Editor's Note: Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806) was an African-American mathematician, surveyor, and astronomer. He also wrote a popular almanac. Banneker was born a free man. He wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson on August 19, 1791. Jefferson was not president then. He was the secretary of state. Banneker argued in this letter against slavery. He pointed that slavery went against the principles of the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights.

Sir,

I know it is bold of me to write to a person as important as you. My boldness is perhaps particularly great given the low opinion many hold of my race.

We are a race that has long suffered from the hate of much of the world. We have long been considered more like animals than men. Many people think we have very little intelligence.

"One Lord Has Created Us"

Sir, I have reason to believe that you think differently. I have heard reports that you do not share these terrible and prejudiced ideas. I have heard that you are willing and ready to help fight against our unjust treatment.

Now, sir, if this is true, I trust you will take every opportunity to fight against the false ideas so many hold about us. I hope you believe as I do that one Lord has created us all. I trust you believe that he has given us all the same feelings and abilities. We are all of the same family, however different we may look.

"I Have Enjoyed The Sweet Fruits Of Liberty"

Sir, let us suppose you do indeed hold these ideas to be true. Then, I hope you will admit it is a Christian's duty to help every part of the human race. The duty to help those in need extends to all who suffer. It should not matter the color of their skin.

Sir, I freely and cheerfully admit that I am a black American of the African race. I am proud of my dark skin.

Unlike so many of my fellow black men and women, I am fortunate enough not to be a slave. I am not owned by a master and forced to labor in the fields like a farm animal. I cannot be bought and sold. Like you, I have enjoyed the sweet fruits of liberty.

"You Clearly Saw The Injustice Of Slavery"

Sir, may I remind you of America's own struggle for freedom during the Revolutionary War. During that time the British tried to rob you and your fellow white Americans of your liberty.

Through weapons and various other forms of power, the British tried to control you. They tried to rob you of your rightful freedoms and your right to rule yourselves.

Look back on the dangers you faced. Remember how help seemed all but impossible to find.

At that time, sir, you clearly saw the injustice of slavery, and clearly understood its horrors. It was then that you spoke those great and noble words which shall be remembered for all time:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

"Try Walking In Their Shoes"

You were justly outraged by the attack on your own liberty. You were fully convinced that God has given the same rights to all men. You believed it was wrong to rob any man of his liberty.

Yet even as you declared your own right to be free, you still thought it proper for most black Americans to be enslaved. How unfortunate that you should want to rob others of their liberty. You were responsible for the very crime you claim to hate in others.

I shall not dare to tell you what you should do to help those who are now enslaved. I will merely suggest that you "put your soul in their souls' stead."

Try walking in their shoes and seeing the world through their eyes. Your heart will be enlarged with kindness toward them. Then it will become clear to you what must be done.

Yours truly, with the greatest respect,

BENJAMIN BANNEKER.

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article BEST supports the idea that Jefferson would agree with Banneker?
- (A) I know it is bold of me to write to a person as important as you.
 - (B) I have heard reports that you do not share these terrible and prejudiced ideas.
 - (C) I hope you believe as I do that one Lord has created us all.
 - (D) Then, I hope you will admit it is a Christian's duty to help every part of the human race.
- 2 Select the sentence from the section "Try Walking In Their Shoes" that shows what Banneker wants Jefferson to do.
- (A) You were justly outraged by the attack on your own liberty.
 - (B) How unfortunate that you should want to rob others of their liberty.
 - (C) I shall not dare to tell you what you should do to help those who are now enslaved.
 - (D) I will merely suggest that you "put your soul in their souls' stead."
- 3 Which selection BEST shows Banneker's point of view about slavery?
- (A) My boldness is perhaps particularly great given the low opinion many hold of my race.
 - (B) Unlike so many of my fellow black men and women, I am fortunate enough not to be a slave.
 - (C) At that time, sir, you clearly saw the injustice of slavery, and clearly understood its horrors.
 - (D) Yet even as you declared your own right to be free, you still thought it proper for most black Americans to be enslaved.
- 4 What is Banneker's MAIN purpose in including information about the Revolutionary War?
- (A) to convince Jefferson that the many slaves who helped America fight for its freedom in the war should be freed
 - (B) to appeal to Jefferson's sense of justice by connecting America's struggle for freedom with slavery
 - (C) to remind Jefferson of the horrors of war and threaten him with another war if he does not help
 - (D) to suggest that life in America would have been better if the British had won the war