

Handout 1: Benjamin Banneker's Appeal

Benjamin Banneker was a free Black man from Baltimore County, Maryland. He was an accomplished, self-taught astronomer and inventor who aimed to show defenders of slavery that Blacks had intellectual capacities that equaled those of whites.

Thomas Jefferson was the author of the Declaration of Independence. When Banneker wrote to Jefferson, Jefferson was serving as Secretary of State under President George Washington.

Benjamin Banneker's Letter to Thomas Jefferson (1791)

Sir, Suffer me to recall to your mind that time in which the Arms and tyranny of the British Crown were exerted with every powerful effort in order to reduce you to a State of Servitude.... This Sir, was a time in which you clearly saw into the injustice of a State of Slavery, and in which you had just apprehensions of the horrors of its condition,

suffer me: allow me

apprehension:
understanding

Respond:

1. What is Banneker referring to when he describes “that time in which the Arms and tyranny of the British Crown were exerted...”?

Reflect:

2. Under British rule, Jefferson was not held as a slave or servant. Why does Banneker refer to Jefferson's experience as a “State of Servitude” or a “State of Slavery”?

it was now Sir, that your abhorrence thereof was so excited, that you publicly held forth this true and invaluable doctrine, which is worthy to be recorded and remember'd in all Succeeding ages. "We hold these truths to be Self evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happyness."

abhorrence: hatred or disgust

Respond:

3. Banneker quotes a passage from the Declaration of Independence, which Jefferson wrote. What moral belief(s) does Jefferson express in this passage? Rewrite them in your own words.

Reflect:

4. Why do you think Banneker quotes Jefferson's own writing in his letter?
5. People are not born equal in some respects, like height or music taste. What kind of equality is Jefferson describing?

Sir how pitiable is it to reflect, that altho you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father of mankind, and of his equal and impartial distribution of those rights and privileges which he had conferred upon them, that you should at the Same time counteract his mercies, in detaining, by fraud and violence, so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression, that you should at the Same time be found guilty of that most criminal act, which you professedly detested in others, with respect to yourselves.

Father of mankind:

Christian term for God

his mercies: God's blessings

detest: hate

Respond:

6. To what is Banneker referring when he describes “detaining, by fraud and violence, so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression”?

Reflect:

7. Why does Banneker think that this action conflicts with the moral beliefs Jefferson expresses in the Declaration?

Respond:

8. Why does Banneker think Jefferson is a hypocrite? Fill your answer in the chart below:

Belief	Action

Reflect:

9. Do you agree with Banneker that Jefferson is a hypocrite? Why or why not?