

Primary Source (Scaffolded)

Benjamin Banneker's letter to Thomas Jefferson, 1791



How did the principles of the Declaration of Independence contribute to the quest to end slavery from colonial times to the outbreak of the Civil War?

- ☐ I can interpret primary sources related to Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice from the colonial era to the outbreak of the Civil War.
- ☐ I can explain how laws and policy, courts, and individuals and groups contributed to or pushed back against the quest to end slavery.
- ☐ I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.
- ☐ I can analyze issues in history to help find solutions to present-day challenges.

Essential Vocabulary

Endowments	Capabilities
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Building Context

Benjamin Banneker was born free in Baltimore County, Maryland. He was largely self-taught and developed skills in mechanics, astronomy, and mathematics. His intelligence came to the attention of the Ellicott family, Quakers who grew prosperous by setting up grist mills in the Baltimore area. George Ellicott loaned books to Banneker and recommended that he work with his cousin, Andrew Ellicott, in surveying territory for the nation's new capital city, the future Washington, DC. Banneker conceived of the idea of publishing an almanac of his astronomical calculations and was encouraged by leading Quaker abolitionists, who thought such a work would help combat the belief that Blacks were intellectually inferior to whites by nature. (This view was put forth by Thomas Jefferson in his 1785 Notes on the State of Virginia.)

To Thomas Jefferson from Benjamin Banneker, 19 August 1791

Source: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-22-02-0049#TSJN-01-22-0049-fn-0003>

...I suppose it is a truth too well attested to you, to need a proof here, that we are a race of Beings who have long labored under the abuse and censure [criticism or disapproval] of the world, that we have long been looked upon with an eye of contempt, and that we have long been considered rather as brutish than human, and Scarcely capable of mental endowments [capabilities]. . .	Notes
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1. To what stereotype does Banneker refer in this paragraph?

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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, it was now Sir, that your abhorrence [feeling of hatred or disgust] thereof was so excited, that you publicly held forth this true and invaluable doctrine, which is worthy to be recorded and remembered 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 happiness.	Notes
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2. What effect does Banneker’s quoting of the Declaration of Independence have on his argument to Jefferson?

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Here Sir, was a time in which your tender feelings for your selves had engaged you thus to declare, you were then impressed with proper ideas of the great valuation [value or worth] of liberty, and the free possession of those blessings to which you were entitled by nature; but Sir how pitiable is it to reflect, that although 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 [given] 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 [friends] under groaning captivity and cruel oppression....

Notes

3. How does Banneker appeal to the experience of the American Revolution?

4. How is Banneker's letter, apart from the inclusion of his almanac, an argument against the "general prejudice...so prevalent in the world against those of my complexion"?

5. What does Banneker's letter reveal about the conversation regarding slavery and race in the Founding era?