

EXCERPT FROM BENJAMIN BANNEKER'S LETTER TO THOMAS JEFFERSON, AUGUST 19, 1791

This, Sir, was a time when 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 that your abhorrence 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; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Here was a time, in which your tender feelings for yourselves had engaged you thus to declare, you were then impressed with proper ideas of the great violation 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 these rights and privileges, which he hath 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.

Questions for Excerpt From Benjamin Banneker's Letter to Thomas Jefferson, August 19, 1791

LEVEL 1

General Understanding

- What was happening in 1791 in the United States?
- What was Thomas Jefferson's position in 1791?

Key Details

- Who is Benjamin Banneker?
- Who is Thomas Jefferson?
- What is the Declaration of Independence?

LEVEL 2

Vocabulary

- Identify words that impede your ability to understand the reading.
- Circle all of the words that relate to slavery with a positive meaning in one color. Circle all of the words that relate to slavery with a negative connotation in a different color.
- What doctrine is Banneker referring to?
- What is the criminal act that Banneker refers to in the last sentence?

Structure

- What is the tone of this letter?
- Does Banneker show respect to Jefferson? Why or why not? How does he show respect?

Author's Craft

- Where does Banneker express his feelings or opinion about the Declaration of Independence?
- Are you surprised that Banneker uses sophisticated vocabulary? Why or why not?
- What does Banneker want Jefferson to think about? Remember, Jefferson had signed the Declaration of Independence 15 years before.

LEVEL 3

Author's Purpose

- What was Banneker's goal in writing the letter to Thomas Jefferson? How do you know?
- Find evidence that proves how Banneker felt about slavery.
- What is Banneker accusing Thomas Jefferson of? What evidence supports your claim?
- Does Banneker agree with and/or support the Declaration of Independence?
- Identify where in the letter Banneker states that everyone is equal, based on the quote he uses from the Declaration of Independence.

Intertextual Connections

- Read Thomas Jefferson's letter titled "Philadelphia Aug. 30. 1776." Describe the tone of that letter and the tone of the Banneker letter. Using evidence, describe the goal of each author.

LEVEL 4

Opinion With Evidence or Argument

- The Declaration of Independence states, "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." What would Banneker and Jefferson say about the truth of this statement? Is this more or less true today than it was when these two men were corresponding?

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