

Teacher Page: Resource Sheet #12

Source: Thomas Jefferson's letter to Benjamin Banneker, Philadelphia, Aug. 30, 1791

Jefferson, T. (1791). *Thomas Jefferson Letter to Benjamin Banneker* (Version The Jefferson Collection: The Library of Congress) [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/79.html>

Note: This letter was written in response to a previous letter, from Banneker to Jefferson in a request to view his almanac and accept it as proof that African Americans were capable of educated thought and scientific reason. On August 19, 1791, Benjamin Banneker wrote a lengthy letter to Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State, in which "having taken up my pen in order to direct to you as a present, a copy of an Almanack...I was unexpectedly and unavoidably led to develop a discourse on race and rights." Appealing to Jefferson's "measurably friendly and well-disposed" attitude toward blacks, Banneker presumed that he would "readily embrace every opportunity to eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas and opinions which so generally prevail with respect to us."

Banneker was a resident of Oella, Maryland, a short distance from Ellicott City. His estate is the site of the Banneker Museum and Historical Park, a student friendly historic and cultural experience. Use the link below to access the museum:

http://catonsville.exploremd.us/oella/benjamin_banneker_historical_park

Document Analysis:

1. What proof does Jefferson cite that African Americans are capable of equal talents.
With respect to Banneker, Jefferson cites the almanac as proof that African-Americans may be capable of advanced thought
2. How does Jefferson feel about slavery and its affect on the progress of African Americans?
Jefferson seems to feel that slavery has negatively affected the advancement of African Americans. "...talents equal to those of the other colours of men, & that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence both in Africa & America..."
3. Does Jefferson sound like an abolitionist or slave owner in his letter? Explain.
Jefferson seems to be sounding the call for abolition. He most certainly is seen as an opponent of slavery in this passage. "...nobody wishes more ardently to see a good system commenced for raising the condition both of their body & mind to what it ought to be, as fast as the imbecility of their present existence, and other circumstance which cannot be neglected, will admit..."
4. How has Banneker inspired him to do more? What are Jefferson's plans?
Jefferson plans to send a copy of the almanac to his colleague in France. This proof will champion the cause that Blacks may be capable of much more than once believed.