

# Letter from Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson

Maryland, Baltimore County  
Near Ellicott's Lower Mills,  
August 19, 1791

Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of State.

Sir:

I am fully sensible of the greatness of that freedom which I take with you on the present occasion...

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 laboured under the abuse and censure of the world, that we have long been considered rather as brutish than human and scarcely capable of mental endowments.

Sir, I hope... that you are a man far less inflexible in sentiments of this nature than others, that you are a measurably friendly and well disposed towards us, and that you are willing and ready to lend your aid and assistance to our relief from those many distresses and numerous calamities to which we are reduced.

Now, Sir, if this is found in truth, I apprehend you will readily embrace every opportunity to eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas... which so generally prevails with respect to us and that your sentiments are concurrent with mine which are that one universal Father hath given Being to us all... that He hath made us all of one flesh... that He hath afforded us all the same sensations and endowed on us all with the same faculties and that however variable we may be in society or religion however diversified in situation or color, we are all of the same family and stand in the same relation to Him.

Sir... I hope you cannot but acknowledge that it is the indispensable duty of those who maintain for themselves the rights of human nature and who profess the obligations of Christianity to extend their power... to the relief of every part of the human race from whatever... oppression that they may unjustly labour under...

Sir, I freely and cheerfully acknowledge that I am of the African race and in that color which is natural to them of the deepest dye, and it is under sense of the most profound gratitude... that I now confess to you that I am not under that state of... inhumane captivity to which too many of my brethren are doomed; but that I have abundantly tasted of the fruition of those blessings which proceed from that free and unequalled liberty with which you are favored and which I hope you will... allow you have received from... that Being from Whom proceedeth every good and perfect gift.

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 to reduce your country to a State of Servitude. Look back I entreat you... and you cannot but acknowledge that the present freedom... which you enjoy you have mercifully received and that it is the peculiar blessing of Heaven.

This, sir, was a time in which you clearly saw into the injustice of a state of slavery... that you publicly held forth this true and valuable doctrine... "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Sir, I suppose that your knowledge of the situation of my brethren is too extensive to need a recital here; neither shall I presume to prescribe methods by which they may be relieved otherwise than by recommending... as Job proposed... "put your souls in their souls' stead..."

And now, sir, I ardently hope that your candour and generosity will plead with you in my behalf... I direct to you as a present a copy of an almanac which I have calculated for the succeeding year...

This calculation, sir, is the production of my arduous study... although you may have the opportunity of perusing it after its publication yet I chose to send it to you in manuscript previous thereto that you might also view it in my own handwriting.

And now, sir, I shall conclude and subscribe myself, with the most profound respect, Your most Obedient humble Servant.

*Benjamin Banneker*

# Thomas Jefferson's Reply to Benjamin Banneker

Philadelphia, Aug. 30, 1791

Mr. Benjamin Banneker

Near Ellicott's Lower Mills, Baltimore County

Sir, I thank you sincerely for your letter of the 19<sup>th</sup> instant and for the Almanac it contained. Nobody wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit that nature has given to our black brethren talents equal to those of the other colours of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing only to the degraded condition of their existence both in Africa and America. I can add with truth that no one wishes more ardently to see a good system commenced for raising the condition both of their body and mind to what it ought to be as fast as the imbecility of their present existence and other circumstances which cannot be neglected will admit.

I have taken the liberty of sending your almanac to Monsieur de Condorcet, Secretary of the Academy of Science at Paris and a member of the Philanthropic society because I consider it a document to which your whole colour have a right for their justification against the doubts which have been entertained of them.

I am, with great esteem, Sir, your most obedient servant.

Thomas Jefferson