

## Biographical Briefing on Benjamin Banneker

**Directions:** The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Benjamin Banneker and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Benjamin Banneker, born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1732, was an African American who believed that slaves and free blacks should be granted full rights as citizens under the Constitution. Banneker's mother and father were free, and they sent Benjamin to school at an early age. He soon began to teach himself astronomy and mathematics. He became an accomplished astronomer, and in 1791 and 1792 he published almanacs. He was also a good surveyor, and the new federal government consulted with him on the design of several new buildings.

*Stop here  
and discuss*



- **Where and when was Benjamin Banneker born?**
- **What did Banneker do for a living?**
- **How did Banneker feel African Americans should be treated under the Constitution?**

Feeling that the prejudice against African Americans was unfair, Banneker took it upon himself to convince Thomas Jefferson that African Americans had also won freedom and citizenship during the American Revolution. He argued that they were more than qualified to become full citizens. Banneker wrote in a letter to Jefferson, "We have labored under abuse.... We have been looked at with contempt, we have been viewed (as having) little intelligence, not capable of intellectual achievements.... I hope you are...friendly and willing to lend your aid to our relief.... I hope you will work to eradicate [eliminate] the false ideas and opinions toward us...." Banneker was trying to convince the future president that African Americans deserved to be treated as equals in America.

*Stop here  
and discuss*



- **Why did Banneker write letters to Thomas Jefferson?**
- **According to Banneker, how had African Americans been treated?**

Banneker reminded Jefferson of a time when the colonists considered themselves "slaves" under the rule of Great Britain. "Were you not grateful when freed?" Banneker asked Jefferson. "That was a time when you clearly saw the injustice of slavery...." In addition, Banneker pointed to the language of the Declaration of Independence, which Jefferson wrote, to urge Jefferson to attempt to bring about equality for African Americans. "Because you abhorred [slavery]...you publicly held forth this true and invaluable doctrine: '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.'" In his plea, Banneker wrote to Jefferson, "If your love for yourselves and

your laws is sincere; then every individual, of whatever rank or distinction, might receive your blessings.” Banneker proposed that Jefferson and his fellow patriots “put your souls in their [the slaves’] souls and judge for yourselves if slavery was fair.”

*Stop here  
and discuss*



- **Why do you think Jefferson referred to the colonists as “slaves” under British rule?**
- **Why do you think Banneker reminded Jefferson of what was written in the Declaration of Independence?**
- **Why do you think Banneker asked Jefferson and other Patriots to “put your soul in their [ ‘the slaves’] souls”?**

For Jefferson, Banneker’s letter was convincing. In reply to Banneker, Jefferson wrote, “Nobody wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren [brothers], talents equal to those of others colors of men, and that the appearance of a want [lack] of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence both in Africa and America. I can add with truth, that no body wishes more ardently to see a good system commenced to raising the condition both of their body and mind to what it ought to be, as fast as the imbecility of their present existence [slavery], and other circumstances which cannot be neglected, will admit.”

Despite this moving passage from Jefferson, little was done to erase the injustice of slavery during Banneker’s lifetime nor Jefferson’s presidency. Nevertheless, the spirit of Jefferson’s words and the efforts of individuals like Banneker was the basis for the beginning of the abolitionist movement—the effort to abolish slavery—which was important in eventually ending slavery. Banneker continued working for equal rights for African Americans and writing about mathematics, history, and the rights of African Americans until his death in 1806.

*Stop here  
and discuss*



- **What did Jefferson think of Banneker’s ideas?**
- **Were any important gains made in African American rights during Jefferson’s presidency?**
- **How did Banneker’s work influence the abolitionist movement?**