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TO THOMAS JEFFERSON FROM BENJAMIN BANNEKER, 19 AUGUST 1791

From Benjamin Banneker

Ellicotts Lower Mills

August 19th: 1791

SIR

I am fully sensible of the greatness of that freedom which I take with you on the present occasion; a liberty which Seemed to me scarcely allowable, when I reflected on that distinguished, and dignified station in which you Stand; and the almost general prejudice and prepossession which is so prevalent in the world against those of my complexion.

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 looked upon with an eye of contempt, and¹ that we have long been considered rather as brutish than human, and Scarcely capable of mental endowments.

Sir I hope I may Safely admit, in consequence of that report which hath reached me, that you are a man far less inflexible in Sentiments of this nature, than many others, that you are measurably friendly and well disposed toward 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 founded in truth, I apprehend you will readily embrace every opportunity to eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas and oppinions 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, and that he hath not only made us all of one flesh, but that he hath also without partiality afforded us all the Same Sensations, and endued us all with the same faculties, and that however variable we may be in Society or religion, however diversified in Situation or colour, we are all of the Same Family, and Stand in the Same relation to him.

Sir, if these are Sentiments of which you are fully persuaded, 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 and influence to the relief of every part of the human race, from whatever burthen or oppression they may unjustly labour under, and this I apprehend a full conviction of the truth and obligation of these principles should lead all to.

Sir, I have long been convinced, that if your love for your Selves, and for those inestemable laws which preserve to you the rights of human nature, was founded on Sincerity, you could not but be Solicitous, that every Individual of whatsoever rank or distinction, might with you equally enjoy the blessings thereof, neither could you rest Satisfied, short of the most active diffusion of your exertions, in order to their promotion from any State of degradation, to which the unjustifiable cruelty and barbarism of men may have reduced them.

Sir I freely and Chearfully acknowledge, that I am of the African race, and in that colour which is natural to them of the deepest dye,^{*} and it is under a Sense of the most profound gratitude to the Supreme Ruler of the universe, that I now confess to you, that I am not under that State of tyrannical thraldom, and inhuman 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 favoured and which I hope you will willingly allow you have received from the immediate hand of 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 in order to reduce you to a State of Servitude, look back I intreat you on the variety of dangers to which you were exposed, reflect on that time in which every human aid appeared unavailable, and in which even hope and fortitude wore the aspect of inability to the Conflict, and you cannot but be led to a Serious and grateful Sense of your miraculous and providential preservation; you cannot but acknowledge, that the present freedom and tranquility 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, and in which you had just apprehensions of the horrors of its condition, it was now Sir, that your abhorrence thereof was so excited, that you publicly held forth this true and invaluable doctrine, which is worthy to be recorded and remember'd 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."

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 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 altho 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 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.

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 to you and all others, to wean yourselves from these narrow prejudices which you have imbibed with respect to them, and as Job proposed to his friends "Put your Souls in their Souls stead," thus shall your hearts be enlarged with kindness and benevolence toward them, and thus shall you need neither the direction of myself or others in what manner to proceed herein.

And now, Sir, altho my Sympathy and affection for my brethren hath caused my enlargement thus far, I ardently hope that your candour and generosity will plead with you in my behalf, when I make known to you, that it was not originally my design; but that having taken up my pen in order to direct to you as a present, a copy of an Almanack which I have calculated for the Succeeding year, I was unexpectedly and unavoidably led thereto.

This calculation, Sir, is the production of my arduous Study in this my advanced Stage of life; for having long had unbounded desires to become acquainted with the Secrets of nature, I have had to gratify my curiosity herein thro my own assiduous application to Astronomical Study, in which I need not to recount to you the many difficulties and disadvantages which I have had to encounter.

And altho I had almost declined to make my calculation for the ensuing year, in consequence of that time which I had allotted therefor being taking up at the Federal Territory by the request of Mr. Andrew Ellicott, yet finding myself under Several engagements to printers of this state to whom I had communicated my design, on my return to my place of residence, I industriously apply'd myself thereto, which I hope I have accomplished with correctness and accuracy, a copy of which I have taken the liberty to direct to you, and which I humbly request you will favourably receive, and altho you may have the opportunity of perusing it after its publication, yet I chose to send it to you in manuscript previous thereto, that thereby you might not only have an earlier inspection, but that you might also view it in my own hand writing.—And now Sir, I shall conclude and Subscribe my Self with the most profound respect your most Obedient humble Servant,

BENJAMIN BANNEKER

NB any communication to me may be had by a direction to Mr. Elias Ellicott merchant in Baltimore Town.

B B

As an Essay of my calculation is put into the hand of Mr. Cruckshank of philadelphia, for publication I would wish that you might neither have this Almanack copy published nor give any printer an opportunity thereof, as it might tend to disappoint Mr. Joseph Cruckshank in his sale.³

B B

* My Father was brought here a S[lav]e from Africa.²

RC (MHi); at head of text: "Thomas Jefferson Secretary of State"; endorsed by TJ as received 26 Aug. 1791 and so recorded in SJL. Engraved facsimile from FC (PHC); in Banneker's hand; differs from RC in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and other respects (see notes for some examples); at head of text: "Thomas Jefferson Secretary of State"; at foot of text: "Thomas Jefferson Secretary of State Philadelphia." The facsimile also includes the text of TJ's reply of 30 Aug. 1791 and has the following printed note at the foot of the text: "The Letters, from which this facsimile is taken, are in the hand writing of Banneker, who copied them into the volume of Manuscripts, in which they have been preserved. His house and manuscripts were burnt soon after his decease, except this book which was at a neighbor's at the time."

Banneker's accomplishments and the well-known exchange of letters between Banneker and TJ are described in Silvio A. Bedini, *The Life of Benjamin Banneker* (New York, 1972); see also Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968).

The history of TJ's changing attitudes toward Banneker reflects in miniature the contradiction in his views on the vexing issues of slavery and race relations in America. As revealed primarily in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, TJ firmly believed that slavery was a violation of the natural rights of man and hoped for its abolition. Yet he was equally convinced that blacks and whites could not peacefully coexist in freedom because of certain natural distinctions between them, such as color, temperament, and above all intellectual ability. He therefore argued that emancipation must be accompanied by colonization of the freed slaves beyond the limits of the United States.

In a widely read discussion that set the terms of debate on this issue in America for decades to come, TJ oscillated between ascribing black intellectual inferiority to the workings of nature and attributing it to the impact of slavery. Though at times he virtually suggested that blacks were intellectually inferior to whites by nature, in the end he left it to science to determine whether nature or environment was responsible for what he perceived to be a distressing absence of intellectual accomplishment among blacks, especially in the arts and sciences. "I advance it therefore as a suspicion only," he concluded, "that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (*Notes*, ed. Peden, p. 137-43; Jordan, *White over Black*, p. 429-39). Benjamin Banneker was the first and only black man to challenge TJ's suspicion directly during his lifetime.

The eldest child of a free black couple who owned a tobacco farm in Baltimore County, Maryland, Banneker began to emerge from obscurity in 1788, the year after the publication of the first American edition of *Notes on the State of Virginia*. At that time Banneker, then in his fiftyseventh year, borrowed a set of astronomical instruments and four works on astronomy from George Ellicott, a member of a distinguished family of Quaker entrepreneurs who opposed slavery and operated a group of gristmills near Banneker's farm. Banneker applied himself to the study of astronomy and soon became so proficient in it that he conceived the idea of publishing an almanac in order to promote "the Cause of Humanity as many are of Opinion that Blacks are Void of Mental endowments" (Elias Ellicott to James Pemberton, 10 June 1791, PHi: Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers). Encouraged by George Ellicott and his brother Elias, a member of the Maryland Society for the Abolition of Slavery, Banneker prepared an ephemeris for the year 1791 that caught the attention of Major Andrew Ellicott, a cousin of the Ellicott brothers. He was so impressed by Banneker's mathematical achievement that he brought it to TJ's attention and, with TJ's approval, employed Banneker as an assistant during the preliminary survey of the Federal District early in 1791 (Joseph Townsend to James Pemberton, 28 Nov. 1790, PHi: Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers; TJ to Condorcet, 30 Aug. 1791; Bedini, *Banneker*, p. 9-136).

Banneker soon won the support of several leading Quaker abolitionists in Maryland and Pennsylvania who were eager to take advantage of his scientific work to refute the growing belief in American society that blacks were intellectually inferior to whites by nature (Banneker to Andrew Ellicott, 6 May 1790; Joseph Townsend to James Pemberton, 14 and 28 Nov. 1790, all in *PHi: Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers*; Bedini, *Banneker*, p. 94–102; Jordan, *White over Black*, p. 445–8). Buoyed by the prospect of further support from key figures in the Maryland and Pennsylvania antislavery movements, Banneker finished a second ephemeris in June 1791. Members of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery recommended its publication in Philadelphia after David Rittenhouse, the foremost American scientist of the day, and William Waring, a noted Philadelphia astronomer, vouched for the accuracy of Banneker's work. It was thus against this background of careful and intense preparation that Banneker wrote the above letter and sent a copy of his ephemeris for 1792 to the man who was not only a distinguished statesman, scientist, and critic of slavery in his own right, but also the author of the recent pessimistic analysis of black intellectual capabilities (Elias Ellicott to James Pemberton, 10 June and 21 July 1791, *PHi: Pennsylvania Abolition Society Papers*; *Notes*, ed. Peden, p. 137–43; Bedini, *Banneker*, p. 137–52; Jordan, *White over Black*, p. 429–39, 455).

TJ's polite response was heartening to Banneker and his supporters. He expressed hope for the appearance of "such proofs as you exhibit" that nature had endowed blacks with "talents equal to those of the other colors of men" and that their apparent absence among blacks was only the result of "the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa and America." He also informed Banneker that he was sending his ephemeris to Condorcet, the noted philosophe, ardent opponent of slavery, and secretary of the Académie Royal des Sciences in Paris, so that it could be used to redeem blacks "against the doubts which have been entertained of them" (*TJ to Banneker, 30 Aug. 1791*; see also *TJ to Condorcet, 30 Aug. 1791*, wherein TJ was more specific about the significance of Banneker's accomplishments).

At Banneker's suggestion and with the strong agreement of his Quaker supporters, the exchange of letters with TJ was published in 1792 in a variety of forms for the express purpose of advancing the antislavery cause by demonstrating that black failure to match the intellectual achievements of whites was the result of slavery rather than nature (Bedini, *Banneker*, p. 158, 163, 166–8, 183–8). But the correspondence soon became little more than a weapon in the hands of TJ's political enemies, who tried to use it to prove that he was a crypto-abolitionist. In the electoral campaigns of 1796 and 1800, southern Federalists cited his reply to Banneker as evidence that he favored "a speedy emancipation of the ... slaves" (William Loughton Smith, *The Pretensions of Thomas Jefferson to the Presidency Examined ...* [United States, 1796], p. 9–10 [*Sowerby*, No. 3174]; see also William Henry Desaussure, *Address to the Citizens of South Carolina, on the Approaching Election of President and Vice-President of the United States* [Charleston, S.C., 1800], p. 16 [*Sowerby*, No. 3228]; and Bedini, *Banneker*, p. 280–1). Even after TJ's reelection to the presidency, Thomas Green Fessenden, a Federalist satirist from New Hampshire, ridiculed TJ for allegedly abandoning the racial views set forth in *Notes on the State of Virginia* simply because of the "wonderful phenomenon of a Negro Almanac, (probably enough made by a white man)" (Thomas Green Fessenden, *Democracy Unveiled, or, Tyranny Stripped of the Garb of Patriotism*, 2 vols. [New York, 1805], II, 52n.).

TJ continued to think about Banneker. He might have first viewed Banneker's accomplishments as evidence of natural intellectual equality of blacks, but the absence of sufficient additional evidence and a later incorrect suspicion that Banneker had not worked independently led TJ to disparage Banneker's achievements (*TJ to Condorcet, 30 Aug. 1791*; TJ to Henri-Baptiste Grégoire, 25 Feb. 1809; and TJ to Joel Barlow, 8 Oct. 1809; Bedini, *Banneker*, p. 202–34; and Richard B. Davis, ed., *Jeffersonian America: Notes on the United States of America Collected in the Years 1805–6–7 and 11–12 by Sir Augustus John Foster, Bart.* [San Marino, Cal., 1954], p. 148–9). Nor can there be much doubt that he experienced increasing difficulty in reconciling his ownership of slaves with his libertarian political principles. Thus TJ was an early exemplar of the classic American dilemma of whether the equalitarian ideals of the Declaration of Independence were intended to apply to all members of American society or to whites only (see Jordan, *White over Black*, p. 429–81; David

Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* [New York, 1975], p. 169–84; and John C. Miller, *The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* [New York, 1977], p. 3–103, for analyses of TJ’s racial attitudes).

1. Preceding thirteen words are missing from FC.
2. This note is not in FC.
3. The second postscript is not in FC.

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