

LESSON 6

Museum Connection: Art and Intellect

Lesson Title: Banneker, Jefferson, and the Declaration of Independence

Purpose: In this lesson students will read letters written by Benjamin Banneker, a black freeman, and Thomas Jefferson, Secretary of State at the time and a slave owner, on the issue of slavery. From the correspondence, students will learn that the reality of freedom was different for the two races.

Grade Level and Content Area: Elementary, Social Studies

Time Frame: 2 class periods

Correlation to State Social Studies Standards:

USH 2.3.5.4 Examine the gradual institutionalization of slavery in America, including the various responses to slavery and how slavery shaped the lives of colonists and Africans in the Americas.

Social Studies: Maryland College and Career Ready Standards

2.B.1.b (Grade 4) Describe the contribution of individuals and groups such as Francis Scott Key, Benjamin Banneker, Mary Pickersgill, Clara Barton and Freedmen's Bureau.

5.B.2.c (Grade 5) Describe the different roles and viewpoints of individuals and groups, such as women, men, free and enslaved Africans, and Native Americans during the Revolutionary period.

5.C.4 (Grade 4) Explain how the institution of slavery impacted individuals and groups in Maryland.

Correlation to State Reading and English Language Arts Maryland College and Career Ready Standards:

1.E.1.a (Grades 4 and 5) Listen to critically, read, and discuss texts representing diversity in content, culture, authorship, and perspective, including areas such as race, gender, disability, religion, and socio-economic background.

Objective:

Students will identify and compare the views of slavery held by a black freeman and a white slave owner.

Vocabulary and Concepts:

Declaration of Independence – On July 4, 1776, the thirteen colonies issued the Declaration of Independence, the formal statement or announcement by the thirteen of their freedom from the obligations and prohibitions of British rule.

Emancipation – Emancipation means freedom from slavery or oppression by law or proclamation.

Equality – To have equality is to have the same rights and responsibilities as others.

Free Blacks – African Americans who had been freed or emancipated from slavery were known as free Blacks. Free Blacks could also be those African Americans who had completed their indentures and those born free because of the free status of their parents.

Inalienable rights – Rights are inalienable if they are unquestionable and cannot be given or taken away.

Indenture – An indenture—a type of written contract—binds one person to work for another for a given length of time.

Manumission – The formal release of a slave from slavery—called manumission—could be performed by an individual or officially by state law.

Rights – Rights are privileges and opportunities bestowed by law or custom.

Slavery – Slavery is a system in which people are owned by other people and can be sold at the will of their owners.

Materials**For the teacher:**

Pre-made “K-W-L” chart on board, transparency, or chart paper

Teacher Resource Sheet 1 – Answer Key

Pinkney, Andrea. *Dear Benjamin Banneker*. New York: Voyager Books, 1994.

For the student:

Student Resource Sheet 1 – Benjamin Banneker

Student Resource Sheet 2 – Letters between Banneker and Jefferson

Student Resource Sheet 3 – Two Views of Slavery

Student Resource Sheet 4 – Letter to Banneker template

Resources

Books:

Bedini, Silvio A. *The Life of Benjamin Banneker: The First African-American Man of Science*. Baltimore: The Maryland Historical Society, 1999.

Christian, Charles M. *Black Saga: The African American Experience*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995.

Ferris, Jeri. *What Are You Figuring Now? A Story About Benjamin Banneker*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, Inc., 1998.

Pinkney, Andrea D. *Dear Benjamin Banneker*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.

Web sites:

Understanding Primary Sources: Benjamin Banneker's Letter to Thomas Jefferson
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h71t.html>

Banneker Historical Park & Museum, Catonsville, Maryland
<https://benjaminbanneker.wordpress.com/>

Teacher Background

Free Blacks:

Freedom did not come easily for slaves in North America. Manumission, the formal release of a slave, was the most common route to emancipation. Those former slaves who had been manumitted either privately by an individual or officially by a state law were known as free Blacks. Not all free Blacks, however, were formally manumitted. Some free Blacks had the means to purchase their freedom. Thousands of others gained their freedom only after running away from their owners. Thousands more failed to gain their freedom at all. They were captured by white bounty hunters and either returned to their owners or executed.

Free Blacks were first documented in Northampton County, Virginia, in 1662. By 1776, 60,000 African Americans—approximately eight percent of the new nation's black population—were free. In the decades that followed, the number of free Blacks rose steadily, which intimidated those Whites who favored slavery. Between 1800 and 1810, the free Black population increased from 108,395 to 186,446. By 1810 four percent of all African Americans in the Deep South (South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana), ten percent in the Upper South (Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky), and 75 percent in the North (Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and the states of New England) were free.

The status and treatment of free Blacks before the Civil War varied from region to region. Those in the North were excluded from most public schools, prohibited from interstate travel, barred from voting in many states, and often harassed by hostile white

mobs. Finding a decent job was extremely difficult, and the few jobs that were open to free Blacks were limited to domestic service and subsistence farming. Few free Blacks in the North could make a living as skilled artisans.

A significant proportion of free Blacks in the Deep South were wealthy and light-skinned, and they were commonly referred to as Creoles or mulattoes. Some Creoles looked down on dark-skinned free Blacks, and many despised the stigma that was associated with being black. Whites in the Deep South employed the few free Blacks primarily as day laborers and domestic servants. Other free Blacks worked as carpenters, masons, mechanics, and tailors.

Free Blacks in the cities of the Upper South, such as Baltimore and Washington, D.C., tended to be poorer and less educated than free Blacks in other regions. Nevertheless, they had less trouble finding employment than those in the North. Most free Blacks in the Upper South worked alongside slaves as farmhands, casual laborers, dockworkers, and factory hands. Thousands more found work as blacksmiths, barbers, and shoemakers. Because they worked closely with slaves, free Blacks working in the Upper South felt a psychological and geographic connection with them. As a result, in 1800 free Blacks in the Upper South supported a planned slave rebellion organized by Gabriel Prosser, a black slave in Virginia.

Benjamin Banneker

Benjamin Banneker was born a freeman on November 9, 1731, to Mary and Robert Bannaky in an area of Baltimore County, Maryland, between Oella and Ellicott City. Banneker's white grandmother, Molly Walsh, had been sent to America from England as an indentured servant, and she had worked on a farm for seven years before she was given her freedom. Molly Walsh worked very hard and saved her money so that she could buy her own farm. She hired two black slaves to help her on the farm. Later, after she had set both men free, she married one of them, Bannaka, who later changed his name to Bannaky. Molly and Bannaky had three children, the oldest of whom was Mary. Mary married a free black man named Robert, who took Mary's last name of Bannaky. Mary and Robert had three daughters and a son named Benjamin.

Much of Benjamin's early life was greatly influenced by the strength and determination of his grandmother. Molly Walsh taught Benjamin how to read from the only book available, the Bible. When he became a proficient reader, Benjamin was sent to a Quaker school, where he was introduced to arithmetic and learned how to write. Reportedly it was his Quaker schoolmaster who changed Benjamin's last name from Bannaky to Banneker.

Benjamin Banneker enjoyed the outdoors. He also enjoyed playing the flute and violin when not working on his parents' farm. With his strong mathematical skills and interest in learning, Banneker grew up to be an excellent farmer. When he took his goods to sell at the local store, he also enjoyed meeting and speaking with travelers. One day at the store, Banneker met a man who showed him a pocket watch. He was so consumed by the concept of time that he borrowed the watch, took it apart very carefully, and

made notes as he studied each piece. Using a pocketknife, he carved each gear out of wood and put the wooden gears together, creating the first striking clock made completely out of wood. Banneker was only 22 years old at the time and was admired by many.

When Banneker was 28 years old his father died, which left him responsible for looking after the family farm, his mother, and his sisters until they married. Thirteen years later, a new family moved into the area adjoining his farm. The Ellicott family, originally from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, moved to the Patapsco River area in order to build a flour mill. George Ellicott soon became a major influence in Banneker's life and loaned Banneker the books and instruments he used to learn about astronomy.

One of George Ellicott's cousins, Andrew Ellicott, was commissioned as a surveyor to help construct the boundaries of what is now Washington, D.C. He was charged with the responsibility of hiring competent assistants. His cousin George was unavailable and suggested that he ask Benjamin Banneker to assist him. Banneker was 60 years old at the time, but he was excited by the opportunity and agreed to help. The winter of 1791 was cold and harsh, but Banneker worked into the early hours of the morning making all the necessary calculations. The task was finally completed in April, and Banneker returned to his farm, where he finished the astronomical predictions for his 1792 almanac.

During the colonial period, an almanac was very important, and most families owned one. It provided information about when the sun and moon would rise and set and also about the weather during different seasons. Banneker spent several months making the calculations for his first almanac. Using his keen mathematical sense, Banneker predicted eclipses and computed detailed information about the rising and setting of the sun. Yet he had difficulty getting his almanac published.

After reading Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Banneker wrote a letter to Jefferson (who was then Secretary of State) contesting the author's views on the inferiority of Negroes. Along with the letter Banneker sent a draft of his almanac. Within 10 days, Jefferson had replied to Banneker and in his letter complimented Banneker on his work. Banneker's almanac, which would be the first of six, was printed soon after this recognition.

Benjamin Banneker died on his farm on October 9, 1806, and he was buried in the family burial plot two days later. Tragically Banneker's log house, along with all of his papers, books, notes, and wooden clock, burned to the ground during the funeral service.

Lesson Development:

1. **Motivation:** Distribute Student Resource Sheet 1, Benjamin Banneker K-W-L chart, to assigned pairs of students. Have students brainstorm with partners to complete columns K and W of the K-W-L chart with information that they know and/or want to

know about Benjamin Banneker. Record their responses on the board or pre-made K-W-L chart.

2. Read the book *Dear Benjamin Banneker* to the class. Have students record new information that they learned about Banneker in the L column of the K-W-L chart. Discuss the new information, and record it on the class K-W-L chart. (Note: Make sure that the students list the fact that Banneker was a free Black, and discuss how this status differed from that of blacks who were enslaved.)
3. Distribute Student Resource Sheet 3, Two Views of Slavery. Have students read the three phrases from the Declaration of Independence in the middle column. Discuss the Declaration of Independence phrases.
4. Distribute Student Resource Sheet 2, Letters from Banneker and Jefferson, and tell students that they will identify Benjamin Banneker's attitudes as a free Black toward the three phrases of the Declaration of Independence.
5. Have students compare Thomas Jefferson's beliefs as a slave owner with Banneker's. Model completion of the first phrase for the students. Have students continue to work as a class in a teacher-guided discussion to complete columns 1 and 3. Refer to *Dear Benjamin Banneker* in order to help students understand the language of the time period used in the letters.
6. **Assessment:** Have students write an essay comparing Benjamin Banneker's views and beliefs on slavery with Thomas Jefferson's. Remind students to include details from the letters.
7. **Closure:** Revisit the K-W-L chart to summarize these points:
 - Not all Blacks were enslaved during this period of United States history. Those not enslaved were known as free Blacks.
 - Benjamin Banneker was a free Black who challenged Thomas Jefferson's position on slavery.
 - Benjamin Banneker was a prosperous free Black who published an almanac during a time when few Blacks were allowed to learn how to read or write.

Thoughtful Application:

How has the status of African Americans changed since the time of Benjamin Banneker and Thomas Jefferson? Are all groups considered "equal"? Why or why not?

Lesson Extensions:

- Visit the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture.
- Visit the Banneker Historical Park & Museum in Catonsville, Maryland.
- Identify other free Blacks from this period in history. Compare the life of one of these Blacks to that of Benjamin Banneker. Prepare a report that highlights the similarities and differences in their lives.

Answer Key

Reread the letters written by Banneker and Jefferson. Insert the parts of the letter that explain how each author felt about slavery as it relates to the <i>Declaration of Independence</i>.		
Two Views of Slavery		
Benjamin Banneker	Declaration of Independence	Thomas Jefferson
I am fully sensible of the greatness of that freedom which I take with you on the present occasion...	We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal...	No body 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 colors of men
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 those rights...	...that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...	Not stated
...in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression...	...that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.	I can add with truth, that no body wishes more ardently to see a good system commenced for raising the condition both of their body & mind to what it ought to be

Student Resource Sheet 1

Benjamin Banneker		
K (What I Know)	W (What I Want to Know)	L (What I Learned)

Student Resource Sheet 2

Letter From Benjamin Banneker	Reply From Thomas Jefferson
<p>Maryland, Baltimore County, Near Ellicott's Lower Mills August 19th, 1791</p> <p>Thomas Jefferson Secretary of State,</p> <p>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 the 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....</p> <p>...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....</p> <p>And now, Sir, I shall conclude, and subscribe myself, with the most profound respect, Your most humble servant,</p> <p>Benjamin Banneker.</p>	<p>Philadelphia, August 30.1791.</p> <p>Sir, I Thank you, sincerely, for your letter of the 19th instant, and for the Almanac it contained. No body 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 colors of men; and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the dreaded 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, for raising the condition, both of their body & mind to what it ought to be, as far as the imbecility of their present existence, and other circumstances, which cannot be neglected, will admit....</p> <p>I am with great esteem, Sir, Your most obedient Humble Servant,</p> <p>Thomas Jefferson.</p>

Courtesy of University of Virginia

Student Resource Sheet 4

Dear Benjamin Banneker,

Sincerely,
