

THE GILDER LEHRMAN  
INSTITUTE *of* AMERICAN HISTORY

*Inside the Vault:  
Highlights from the Gilder Lehrman Collection*

April 1, 2021

*The session will start shortly. Please note:*

- Your video and audio will automatically turn off.
- You can participate through the Q&A function.
- If you have technical difficulties, please email [collectionprograms@gilderlehrman.org](mailto:collectionprograms@gilderlehrman.org) so we can assist you.

## *Our Team*

- Sandy Trenholm - Collection Director
- Keisha Rembert - Assistant Professor of Teacher Preparation at National Louis University
- Warren Egypt Franklin - Marquis de Lafayette/Thomas Jefferson in *Hamilton*
- Zoya Siddiqui - Curatorial Intern
- Allison Kraft - Assistant Curator

# *During the Session*

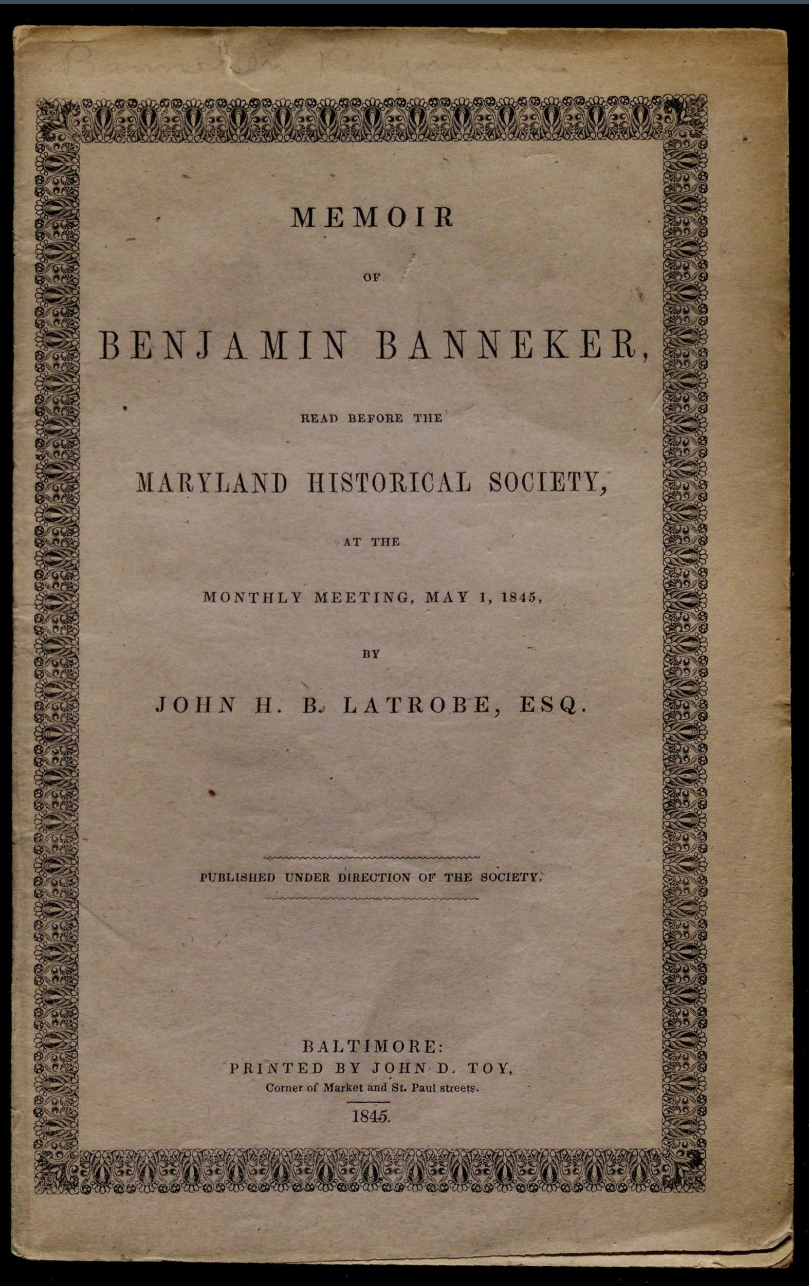


- If you would like to ask a question, you can **use the Q&A feature.**
- We will be asking audience questions throughout the session.

## **For Security and Privacy**

- Your microphone is automatically muted.
- Your camera is automatically turned off.

## *Today's Documents*



- An 1845 memoir about the life of Benjamin Banneker
- Benjamin Banneker's 1791 letter to Thomas Jefferson
- Thomas Jefferson's response

# Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806)

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- Born on November 9, 1731, in rural Maryland in an area now known as Oella.
- His father was born in Senegal and was royalty.
- His family lineage were believed to be scientists.
- Benjamin was born free.
- He attended school for a short time.
- In his 20s, after taking apart a pocket watch, he carved a working wooden clock.
- He spent most of his life working on his parent's 100-acre tobacco farm.



Library of Congress

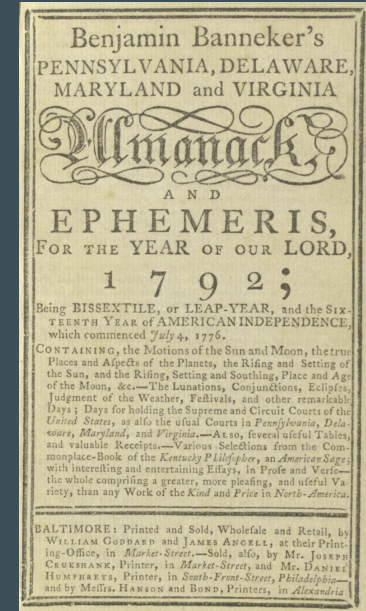


# Banneker: Scientist, Astronomer and Almanack Author

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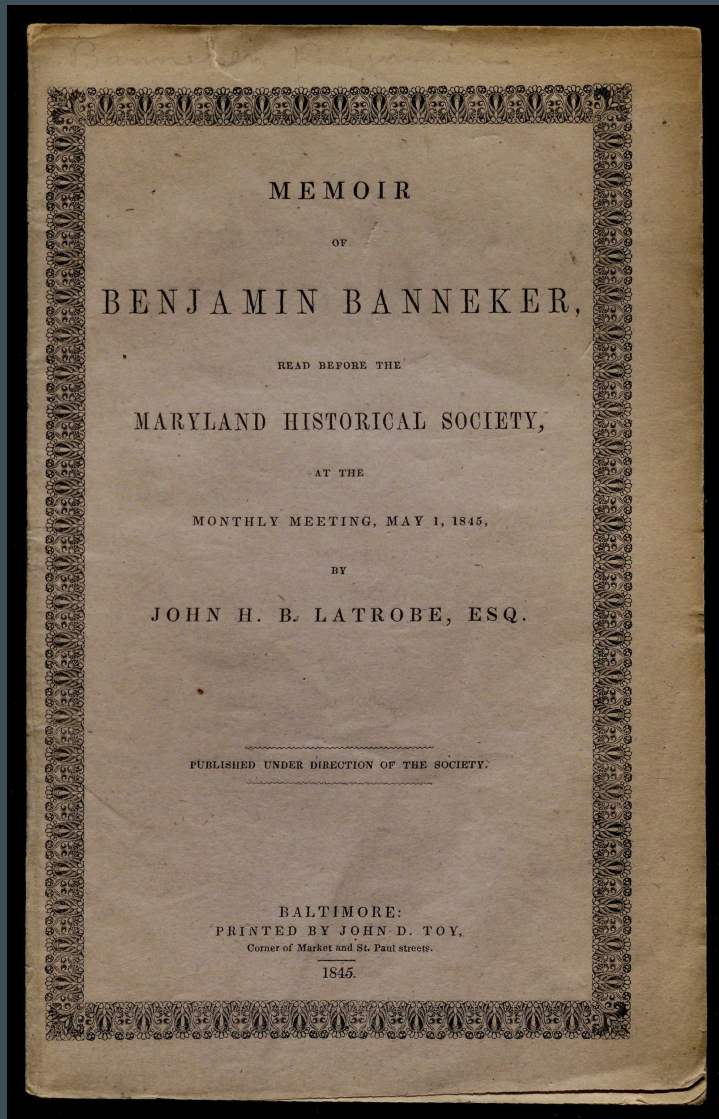


- 1771 - The Ellicotts, a Quaker family, moved into the area.
- George Ellicott shared books with Banneker, including works on mathematics and astronomy.
- 1789 - Banneker forecast his first eclipse.
- Made numerous observations of the natural world.
- 1791 - Assisted Andrew Ellicott in surveying Washington D.C.
- Published almanacs from 1791 to 1802
- Sold most of his land so he could retire and pursue his scientific interests
- Died in 1806
- During his funeral, a fire destroyed his home and most of his papers.



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- On May 1, 1845, abolitionist John H. B. Latrobe gave a speech about Banneker's life at the Maryland Historical Society.
- 16-page pamphlet about Banneker's life

# *Description of Banneker*

“His manners were those of a perfect gentleman; kind, generous, hospitable, humane, dignified and pleasing, abounding in information on all the various subjects and incidents of the day; very modest and unassuming, and delighting in society at his own house. I have seen him frequently. His head was covered with a thick suit of white hair, which gave him a very venerable and dignified appearance.

His dress was uniformly of superfine drab broad cloth, made in the old style of a plain coat, with straight collar and long waistcoat, and a broad brimmed hat. His colour was not jet black, but decidedly negro. In size and personal appearance, the statue of Franklin at the Library in Philadelphia, as seen from the street, is a perfect likeness of him.”





# *Observing the velocity of sound*

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have used occasionally as a common-place book. For instance, under date of the 27th August, 1797, he writes: "Standing at my door I heard the discharge of a gun, and in four or five seconds of time, after the discharge, the small shot came rattling about me, one or two of which struck the house; which plainly demonstrates that the velocity of sound is greater than that of a cannon bullet." It must have been a philosophic mind, which observing the fact as here stated, drew from it the correct conclusion, and then recorded it in appropriate terms as a simple and beautiful illustration of the law of nature, with which, in all probability, he first became acquainted through its means.

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# Brood X Cicadas



Biodiversity Heritage Library

“The first great locust year that I can remember was 1749. I was then about seventeen years of age, when thousands of them came and were creeping up the trees and bushes. I then imagined they came to eat and destroy the fruit of the earth, and would occasion a famine in the land. I therefore began to kill and destroy them, but soon saw that my labour was in vain, and therefore gave over my pretension. Again in the year 1766, which is seventeen years after their first appearance, they made a second, and appeared to me to be full as numerous as the first. I then, being about thirty-four years of age, had more sense than to endeavour to destroy them, knowing they were not so pernicious to the fruit of the earth as I imagined they would be.”

## *Brood X Cicadas*

“Again in the year 1783, which was seventeen years since their second appearance to me, they made their third; and they may be expected again in the year 1800, which is seventeen years since their third appearance to me. So that if I may venture to express it, their periodical return is seventeen years: but they, like the comets, make but a short stay with us. The female has a sting in her tail as sharp and hard as a thorn, with which she perforates the branches of the trees, and in the holes lays eggs. The branch soon dies and falls. Then the egg, by some occult cause immerges a great depth into the earth, and there continues for the space of seventeen years as aforesaid. I like to forgot to inform, that if their lives are short they are merry. They begin to sing or make a noise from first they come out of the earth till they die. The hindermost part rots off; and it does not appear to be any pain to them, for they still continue on singing till they die.”







# Banneker and Jefferson

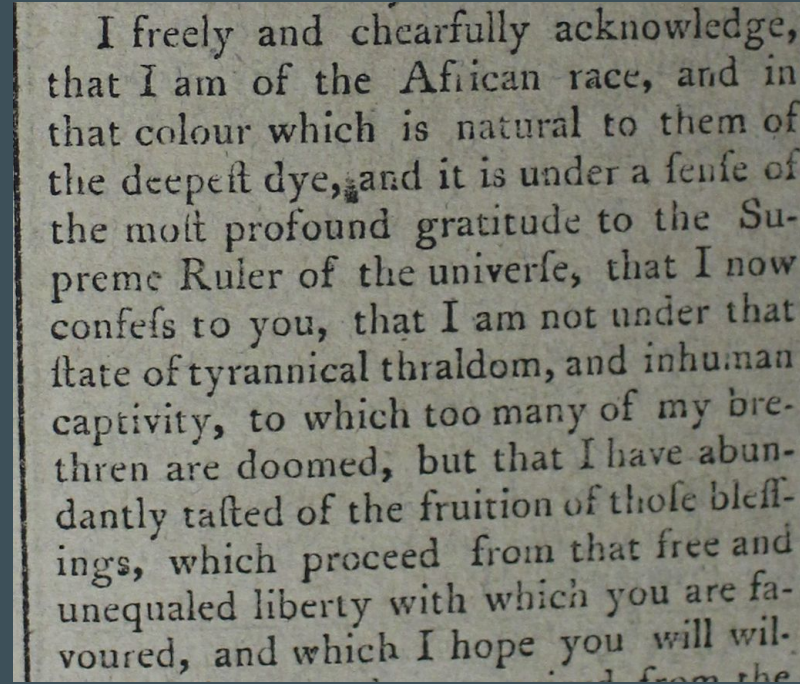
From the VIRGINIA GAZETTE.  
Mr. DIXON,  
*You are requested to insert the following  
letter from Benjamin Banneker, a Black  
Man, to the Secretary of State, with his  
answer thereto, and you will oblige a number  
of your readers.*  
*Maryland, Baltimore county, near Ellicott's  
Lower Mills, Aug. 19, 1791.*  
To THOMAS JEFFERSON, Esq.  
Sir

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- In August 19, 1791, Banneker wrote to Thomas Jefferson.
- Responding to Jefferson's belief that Black people were inferior to White people.
- Uses the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence to argue that slavery is wrong.
- Jefferson responded on August 30, 1791.

# Introducing himself to Jefferson

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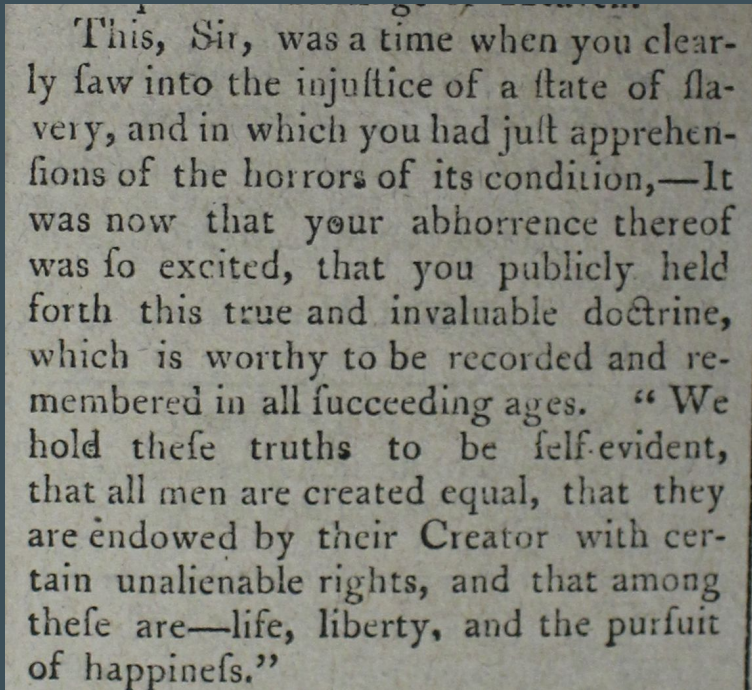


I freely and chearfully acknowledge, that I am of the African race, and in that colour which is natural to them of the deepeft dye, and it is under a fenfe of the moft profound gratitude to the Supreme Ruler of the univerfe, that I now confefs to you, that I am not under that ftate of tyrannical thraldom, and inhuman captivity, to which too many of my brethren are doomed, but that I have abundantly tafte of the fruition of thofe bleffings, which proceed from that free and unequaled liberty with which you are favoured, and which I hope you will wil-

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“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 unequaled liberty with which you are favoured** .....

# *Citing the Declaration of Independence*



This, Sir, was a time when 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 that your abhorrence thereof was so excited, that you publicly held forth this true and invaluable doctrine, which is worthy to be recorded and remembered in all succeeding ages. “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.”

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“This [the American Revolution] , Sir, was a time when **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 that your abhorrence thereof was so excited, that you publicly held forth this true and invaluable doctrine, which is worthy to be recorded and remembered in all succeeding ages. ‘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.’”



# Confronting Jefferson's Hypocrisy

Here was a time in which your tender feelings for yourselves had engaged you thus to declare, you were then impressed with proper ideas of the great violation 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 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 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.

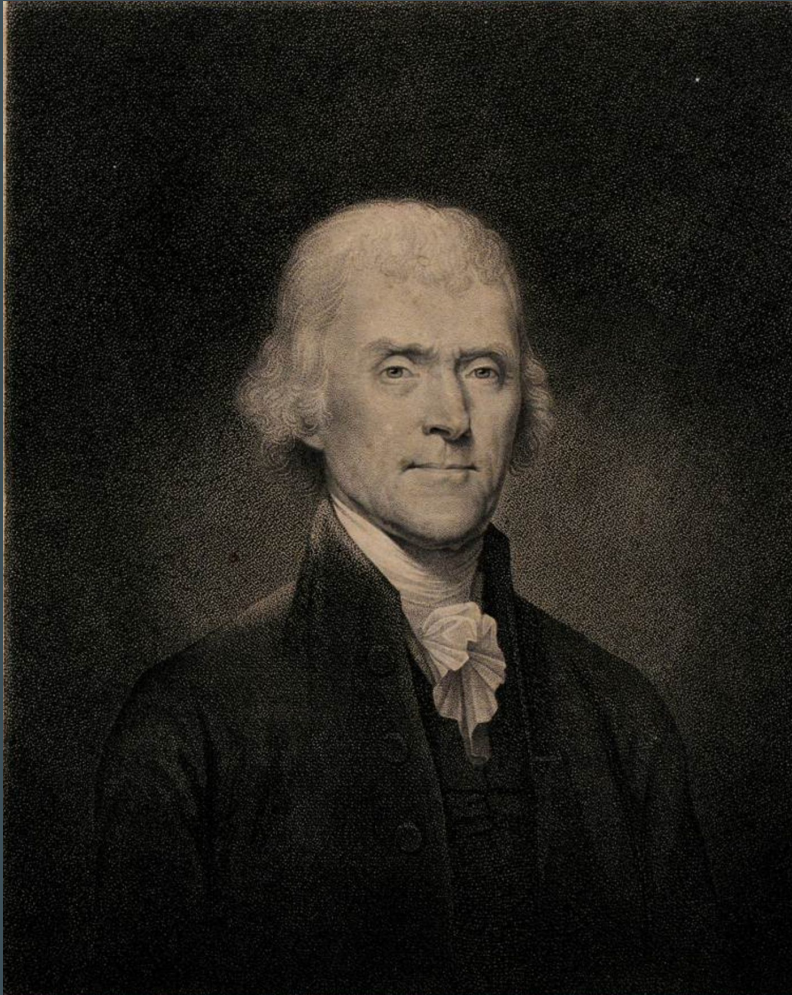
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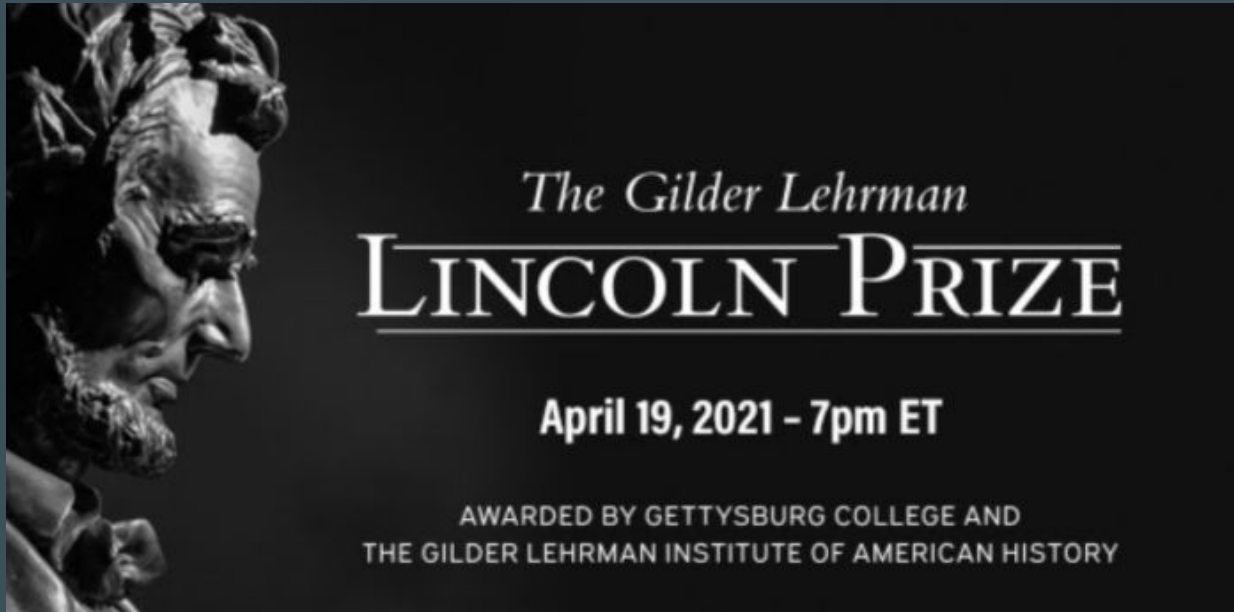
# *Jefferson's response*



“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 colours of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence both in Africa and America.... I considered it [Banneker's almanac] as a document to which your whole colour had a right for their justification, against the documents which have been entertained of them.”

# Upcoming Programs

- *Inside the Vault*, Thursday, April 15 at 7 pm ET (4 pm PT)
  - We will be discussing the occupation of Alcatraz in the 1970s.
- *Book Breaks*, April 4 at 2 pm ET (11 am PT)
  - Mia Bay will discuss her book *Traveling Black: A Story of Race and Resistance*.
- Pace—Gilder Lehrman MA in American History Capstone Open House, April 13 at 7 pm ET (4 pm PT)
- Visit [gilderlehrman.org](https://gilderlehrman.org) for free resources for students, teachers, families, and history enthusiasts of all ages.



- Honoring 2020 & 2021 Lincoln Prize winners - Elizabeth Varon, for *Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War*, and David S. Reynolds for *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times*
  - Teachers who bring 10 or more students will receive a free copy of one of the winning books.
    - Students can register themselves or teachers can register students as their guests.