

Thomas Jefferson's Letter to Henri Gregoire (1809)

Henri Gregoire, a French Catholic priest and Revolutionary leader, sent Thomas Jefferson a copy of his 1808 book titled De la littérature des Nègres, which sought to highlight the works of black writers so as to counter the impression that Africans were intellectually inferior. Jefferson had written in his book Notes on the State of Virginia, published in 1785, that the state's African-American slaves were "in reason much inferior."

Washington Feb. 25. 09.

SIR

I have received the favor of your letter of August 17th, and with it the volume you were so kind as to send me on the "Literature of Negroes." Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves. My doubts were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State, where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable, and those of exercising it still less so. I expressed them therefore with great hesitation; but whatever be their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others. On this subject they are gaining daily in the opinions of nations, and hopeful advances are making towards their re-establishment on an equal footing with the other colors of the human family. I pray you therefore to accept my thanks for the many instances you have enabled me to observe of respectable intelligence in that race of men, which cannot fail to have effect in hastening the day of their relief; and to be assured of the sentiments of high and just esteem and consideration which I tender to yourself with all sincerity

TH: JEFFERSON