ACTIVITY 1

SLAVE LIFE

DIRECTIONS: In this activity try to develop an understanding of the life of a slave in the United States. In the documents below, former slaves and those who interviewed them describe the slaves' experiences. After reading the documents, write several sentences which capture the slaves' attitudes.

Document 1a-1
The following account tells about a man who was brought to America as a slave.

"...the man had not taken his food and refused taking any. Mild means were then used to divert him from his resolution, as well as promises that he should have anything he wished for; but he still refused to eat. They then whipped him with the *cat, but this also was ineffectual. He always kept his teeth so fast that it was impossible to get anything down...In this state he was four or five days, when he was brought up as dead to be thrown overboard; but Mr. Wilson, finding life still existing, repeated his endeavours though in vain, and two days afterwards he was brought up again in the same state as before. He then seemed to wish to get up. The crew assisted him and brought him aft to the fireplace, when in a feeble voice in his own tongue he asked for water, which was given him. Upon this they began to have hopes of dissuading him from his design, but he again shut his teeth as fast as ever, and resolved to die, and on the ninth day from his first refusal he died (Lester 26-27)."

* a whip with nine lashes

Document 1a-2
The following statement comes from Father Henson's Story of His Own Life by Josiah Henson.

"Slavery did its best to make me wretched...(115)"
Seven years before the Civil War erupted, Solomon Northrup's book entitled *Twelve Years a Slave* stated the following:

"They are deceived who flatter themselves that the ignorant and debased slave has no conception of the magnitude of his wrongs. They are deceived who imagine that he arises from his knees with back lacerated and bleeding, cherishing only a spirit of meekness and forgiveness. A day may come - it will come, if his prayer is heard - a terrible day of vengeance, when the master in his turn will cry in vain for mercy (129)."

The following passage is taken from Mr. William Still's book entitled *The Underground Railroad*. Mr. Still was a free black man in Philadelphia who helped slaves escape when they arrived in his city. Still interviewed the escaping slaves with whom he came in contact and published his accounts in 1872. Henry Gorham passed through Wilmington, Delaware, on his way to Philadelphia.

"Henry Gorham was thirty-four years of age...He admitted that he had never felt the lash on his back, but, nevertheless, he had felt deeply on the subject of slavery. For years the chief concern with him was as to how he could safely reach a free state. Slavery he hated with a perfect hatred. To die in the woods, live in a cave, or sacrifice himself in some way, he was bound to do rather than remain a slave...Accordingly, he left and went to the woods; there he prepared himself a cave and resolved to live and die in it rather than return to bondage. Before he found his way out of the prison-house eleven months elapsed.

No rhetoric or fine scholarship was needed in his case to make his story interesting. None but hearts of stone could have listened without emotion (395)."

Assignment: Now that you have reviewed the documents, write several sentences explaining what life was like for a slave in the United States. Use quotations from the documents to support your description. Record your answer on your own paper.