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 1b-1

We called the slave houses quarters. They were arranged like streets about two hundred yards on the north side of the great house.
Our food was pretty good. Our white folks used slaves, especially the children, as they did themselves about eating. We all had the same kind of food. All had plenty of clothes but only one pair of shoes a year. People went barefooted a lot then, more than they do now. We had good places to sleep, straw mattresses and chicken feather beds, and feather bolsters. A bolster reached clear across the head of the bed.
We worked from sun to sun, with one hour and a half to rest at noon or dinner time. I was so small I did not do much heavy work. I chopped corn and cotton mostly. The old slaves had patches they tended, and sold what they made and had the money it bought. Old Missus wouldn’t allow us to eat rabbits, but she let us catch and eat possums. Missus didn’t have any use for a rabbit...
We thought well of the poor white neighbors. We colored children took them as regular playmates. Marster’s boys played with them too, and Marster gave them all the work he could. He hired both men and women of the poor white class to work on the plantation. We all worked together. We had a good time. We worked and sang together and everybody seemed happy. Just a good time in general. We sang the songs “Crossing Over Jordan,” and “Bound for the Promised Land.”

Elias Thomas, Raleigh, North Carolina.


Document 1b-2

As to my own treatment while I lived on Colonel Lloyd's plantation, it was very similar to that of the other slave children. I was not old enough to work in the field, and there being little else than field work to do, I had a great deal of leisure time. The most I had to do was to drive up the cows at evening, keep the fowls out of the garden, keep the front yard clean, and run of errands for my old master's daughter, Mrs. Lucretia Auld.
The most of my leisure time I spent in helping Master Daniel Lloyd in finding his birds,
after he had shot them. My connection with Master Daniel was of some advantage to me. He became quite attached to me, and was a sort of protector of me. He would not allow the older boys to impose upon me, and would divide his cakes with me. I was seldom whipped by my old master, and suffered little from any thing else than hunger and cold.

Source: Frederick Douglas, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, An American Slave*. Chapter V. 
http://sunsite3.berkeley.edu/Literature/Douglass/Autobiography/05.html. (Accessed on February 13, 2008.)

**Document 1b-3**

It is truly marvelous to see how sudden a man's mind can be changed by the charms and influence of a female. The first two or three visits that I paid this dear girl, I had no intention of courting or marrying her, for I was aware that such a step would greatly obstruct my way to the land of liberty. I only visited Malinda because I liked her company, as a highly interesting girl. But in spite of myself, before I was aware of it, I was deeply in love; and what made this passion so effectual and almost irresistible, I became satisfied that it was reciprocal. There was a union of feeling, and every visit made the impression stronger and stronger. One or two other young men were paying attention to Malinda, at the same time; one of whom her mother was anxious to have her marry. This of course gave me a fair opportunity of testing Malinda's sincerity. I had just about opposition enough to make the subject interesting. That Malinda loved me above all others on earth, no one could deny. I could read it by the warm reception with which the dear girl always met me, and treated me in her mother's house. I could read it by the warm and affectionate shake of the hand, and gentle smile upon her lovely cheek. I could read it by her always giving me the preference of her company; by her pressing invitations to visit.


**Document 1b-4**

Christmas is a day of feasting, both with white and colored people. Slaves, who are lucky enough to have a few shillings, are sure to spend them for good eating; and many a turkey and pig is captured, without saying, "By your leave, sir." Those who cannot obtain these, cook a possum, or a raccoon, from which savory dishes can be made. My grandmother raised poultry and pigs for sale and it was her established custom to have both a turkey and a pig roasted for Christmas dinner.

Though born a slave, and laboring under the disadvantages to which my unfortunate race is subjected, my father was a man respected for his industry and integrity, as many now living, who well remember him, are ready to testify. His whole life was passed in the peaceful pursuits of agriculture, never seeking employment in those more menial positions, which seem to be especially allotted to the children of Africa. Besides giving us an education surpassing that ordinarily bestowed upon children in our condition, he acquired, by his diligence and economy, a sufficient property qualification to entitle him to the right of suffrage. He was accustomed to speak to us of his early life; and although at all times cherishing the warmest emotions of kindness, and even of affection towards the family, in whose house he had been a bondsman, he nevertheless comprehended the system of Slavery, and dwelt with sorrow on the degradation of his race. He endeavored to imbue our minds with sentiments of morality, and to teach us to place our, trust and confidence in Him who regards the humblest as well as the highest of his creatures.

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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.