

Lesson Three: *Life as a Slave*

Objective:

Through various activities, students will learn about the lives of slaves who served in different roles such as town slaves and plantation slaves and research slave culture. They will also create their own Slave Life Alphabet.

Materials : *Plantation vs. Town Slave* (2), *Life as a Slave Vocabulary*, and *Slave Culture: Myths, Legends, Facts* worksheets.

Procedures:

Activity One: *Slave Culture: Myths, Legends, Facts*

1. Discuss the terms and practices on *Slave Culture: Myths, Legends, Facts Worksheet* that were derived during slavery.
2. Divide the class into groups. Using the suggestions on the *Slave Culture: Myths, Legends, Facts Worksheet*, have students create their own interpretation of their meanings and present their creations to the class.

Activity Two: *Plantation vs. Town Slave*

1. Distribute *Plantation vs. Town Slave* worksheets (3).
2. Using the list of duties provided, have students write the name of the duty performed by a plantation and town slave on the appropriate worksheet.

Activity Three: *Life as a Slave Vocabulary* Can be either a class project or assigned as an individual assignment.

1. Have students read and explore the 1846 *Anti-Slavery Alphabet* on the MDAH's Digital Archive website at http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/series/asa.
2. Using the *Life as a Slave Vocabulary Worksheet* and a dictionary of your choice (book, online, or the Vocabulary List at the conclusion of this unit), either break the alphabet up and have students create their own *Life as a Slave Alphabet* book as a class or have each student create an individual alphabet book. As an alternative, students could also create an alphabet book focusing on civil rights or a current liberation struggle.

Extension Activity: *Slave Narratives in Mississippi*

- ☐ Listen to audio recordings of former Mississippi slaves now housed in the archives of the Library of Congress and available online. Follow directions below for access. Then have students write their feelings towards these narratives in an essay.

Search Instructions

1. Go to the Library of Congress website <http://www.loc.gov/index.html>.
2. Type in the "Search Box" at the top right corner "Slave Narratives Mississippi."
3. On the left side underneath the heading "Original Format," click on "Audio."
4. Click on "Interview with Irene Williams, Rome, Mississippi, October 1940 (Part 1 of 3)."
5. Continue with Step 4 for the next section or person. (Note: Audio may take a few minutes to load.)

Narrative One

Interviewee: Irene Williams
Location: Rome, MS
Date: October 1940
Section: Part 1 of 3 (Total time – 3:10 minutes)

Narrative Two

Interviewee: George Johnson
Location: Mound Bayou, MS
Date: September 1941
Section: Part 1 of 6 (Starts with low talking, and interview officially begins at minutes – 2:19.) (*Explicit language: teacher please preview.*) (Total time – 11:57 minutes)
Section: Part 2 of 6 (*Explicit language, teacher please preview.*) (Total time – 13:21 minutes)

Slave Culture: Myths, Legends, Facts Worksheet

Discuss the following terms and practices that arose during slavery with your class. Then, using the suggestions on the following sheet, break students into groups, assign each group one of the terms, and have them create their own interpretation of the term's meanings. Finally, have students present their creations to the class.

Terms

Bogus – A West African term in the Hausa language that means deceit or fraud.

“Go Down Moses” – This is an African American spiritual that is thought to have originated during slavery. As stories of African ancestors disappeared over time, slaves used heroes from the Christian Bible as ancestral equivalents. It became a popular song that was sung while slaves worked and during rest and prayer. Abolitionists sang this song to signal escape or rebellion. The lyrics expressed a determination for freedom. Today, it remains one of the most popular songs sung by gospel groups.

Lyrics

*When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let my people go.
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go.*

*Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
To let my people go.*

*Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said,
Let my people go.
If not I'll smite your first born dead,
Let my people go.*

*Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
To let my people go.*

*No more shall they in bondage toil,
Let my people go.
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,
Let my people go.*

*Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,*

*Tell old Pharaoh,
To let my people go.*

Gumbo – This term originated in Africa and means “okra.” The term was brought over to the United States by slaves and has entered into the English language. Today, gumbo is a stew-like dish that has a rich flavor and texture that can be made with meat, seafood, tomatoes, sweet bell peppers, okra, roux, and file powder. It is a dish that has become a standard in French, Spanish, Indian, and African cuisines.

Hush Puppies – Today these balls of deep-fried cornmeal are staples in Southern kitchens but their name goes back to the early to mid-1800s when scraps of fried cornmeal would be thrown to barking dogs with the command, “Hush, puppies.” This seems to have been a tactic used by hunters and fishermen to quiet their dogs while preparing their own meals; on plantations where the kitchen was located in a separate building from the main house and food had to be carried through the yard; by slave hunters to quiet their dogs when tracking a runaway slave; by runaway slaves to quiet and distract their master’s dogs and those used by slave hunters; and by Union soldiers to quiet Confederate dogs.

“Jumping the Broom” – This is a ritual that began in Africa, was brought to America, and then passed from generation to generation. It symbolizes sweeping away the old and welcoming the new. During slavery when vows were not legally approved, slaves jumped the broom as a form of sincerity. This ritual took place during the end of the ceremony and still continues today. The straws of the broom represent family, the handle represents the Almighty, and the ribbon represents the tie that binds the couple together. Many believe it to represent the joining of two families and the husband and wife forming a commitment between each other. Some believe it to represent honoring and respecting the legacy of ancestors and family heritage, and others believe it to bring strength, love, respect, loyalty, prosperity, and fertility to the marriage. The practice fell out of favor after the Civil War, as many newly Emancipated African Americans desired to forget about the horrors of slavery, but the practice saw a revival towards the end of the twentieth century.

Negro Spirituals – Spirituals are songs that were originated by African slaves in the American South. An expression of religious faith, they were different from traditional hymns and psalms because their lyrics were connected to the lives of slaves by expressing the hardships they endured. Thus, spirituals also became a method of veiled protest by enslaved Africans against their white owners.

Okay – Several explanations have been suggested for the origins of this term, including that it originated from the Wolof cultural group of West Africa who used a similar word “o ke,” meaning “that’s it” or “all right.” Other theories include okay originating in the Choctaw language and Boston, but in each instance its meaning has remained “yes” or “correct.”

“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” – This spiritual, which helped slaves escape to freedom, was actually written by a freed Choctaw named Wallis Willis in 1862. Some believe the song contains hidden messages in the lyrics as a way of secretly communicating on the Underground Railroad.

Lyrics

*Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.*

*I looked over Jordan and what did I see,
Coming for to carry me home.
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.*

*If you get there before I do,
Coming for to carry me home.
Tell all my friends I'm coming to,
Coming for to carry me home.*

Yam – A plant that is grown in Africa that was introduced into the southern regions of the United States during slavery. The African word “nyami,” meaning the starchy edible root of the plant, was adopted into the English language as yam. Yams in the U.S. are sweet potatoes but with a moist texture and orange flesh.

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Slave Culture: Myths, Legends, Facts Worksheet

Using the Slave Culture terms you just learned, create your own interpretation of their meanings and present your creation to the class. Your creation could be a:

- ☐ Play
- ☐ Radio Show
- ☐ Art Piece
- ☐ Board Game
- ☐ Collage
- ☐ Musical Performance
- ☐ Puppet Show
- ☐ Poem
- ☐ Short Story
- ☐ Poster

Plantation vs. Town Slave Worksheets (1)

Read the excerpts of oral histories by ex-slaves about their experiences as plantation and house slaves. Collected between 1936 and 1941 by the Federal Writers' Project, these interviews were usually conducted by white women who interviewed the aging ex-slaves. For additional oral histories by ex-slaves go to http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/series/436.

No, I didn't work in the field. I was raised with white folks right in the house, and ate in their kitvhen. I was taught to keep the house clean and to sew. I learned to spin and help weave the cloth. All our clothes was home spun. Yes, sometimes they would whip me. Mr. Alford believe in making every body doing right, and when you would do right he was kind to you but when you would do wrong he would lay the lash on heavy. If folks would whip more today they would make this world a better world. We could not run wild like the young folks do these days.

Oral history by Ann May, 90s, Mississippi. Interview by Mrs. William F. Holmes.

"My mammy an' pappy was fiel' han's, an' I was mighty little to do so much. I jes minded de cow pen, made fires in de Big House, an' swep' de house. When I made de fires, iffen dere wa'nt any live coals lef', we had to use a flint rock to git it sta'ted.

Oral history by James Singleton, born 1856, Simpson County, Mississippi.

married Jake May. He belonged to Mr. Alford. He worked at the gin. He pressed cotton. The gins then was not like then gings today- They pressed the cotton with their feet. Yes, Jake had big feet. When they ginned the cotton they put it in the press with their hands and Jake would stamp it with his big feet. Then he worked in the field when the gin was not running. Then he would drive the oxtteams to town for Mr. Alford and bring home the year's supply.

Oral history by Ann May, 90s, Mississippi. Interview by Mrs. William F. Holmes.

"De boss den carried me to de plantation ten miles of Columbus, north of town. Dere was old folks what owned de place and dey was good to me. I never slep out doors until after de srender. I was ole Miss' regular marriage driver. I weared special drivers' close. I weared one of des high beaver hats and sot on de outside of de carriage.

"I slept on a trundle bed in her room. I'd pull it out from under her bed when I wanted to go to sleep.

"My only work in dem days was to drive de carriage and wait in de dining room.

Oral History of Jerry Eubanks, age 91, Columbus, Mississippi. Interview by Mrs. Ed Joiner.

I milked the cows, 'tended the sheep and ran the loom in the weaving room. Lots of times I would weave at night. I could weave two and one half yards of cloth a day. We dyed the cloth with maple bark, Red Oak bark and copprice. The bark was boiled to make the dye. Red oak would make the cloth deep blue, so would maple bark, the copprice would make it yellow. Then I carried special messages to Mr. Dave when he'd be out on the plantation. The thread we used to weave the cloth was "souzed" (meaning sized) and wound on a "skittle" (meaning shuttle) and hit with a "slay" (meaning sledge). The "skittle" was about sixteen inches long.

Oral History of George Coleman, age 108, Holly Grove, Mississippi. Interview by Ann C. Ellison.

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Plantation vs. Town Slave Worksheets (2)

Then, using the list below, list the duties performed by a plantation and town slave in the appropriate columns.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Blacksmith | ☐ Harvest Crops |
| ☐ Body Servant | ☐ House Slave |
| ☐ Bricklayer | ☐ Kitchen Maid |
| ☐ Butler | ☐ Lady's Maid |
| ☐ Carpenter | ☐ Nanny |
| ☐ Caretaker | ☐ Parlor Maid |
| ☐ Chop and Haul Wood | ☐ Pick Cotton |
| ☐ Coachman | ☐ Plow Fields |
| ☐ Cook | ☐ Seamstress |
| ☐ Cooper | ☐ Slaughter Livestock |
| ☐ Dockworker | ☐ Stable Boy |
| ☐ Drayman | ☐ Valet |
| ☐ Field Slave | ☐ Washer-woman |
| ☐ Footman | ☐ Weed Garden |
| ☐ Gardener | |

Plantation Slave Duties



Plantation Slave Quarters. *Image courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History.*

Town Slave Duties



Bontura House, Natchez. *Image courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History.*

Plantation vs. Town Slave *Answer Key*

Ask students to identify the difference between a plantation slave and a town slave by writing their slave jobs and roles on the appropriate worksheets. Note that many of the same jobs are performed by both plantation and town slaves.

Plantation Slaves

- ☐ Blacksmith
- ☐ Body Servant
- ☐ Butler
- ☐ Caretaker
- ☐ Chop and Haul Wood
- ☐ Coachman
- ☐ Cook
- ☐ Field Slave
- ☐ Footman
- ☐ Gardener
- ☐ Harvest Crops
- ☐ House Slave
- ☐ Kitchen Maid
- ☐ Lady's Maid
- ☐ Nanny
- ☐ Parlor Maid
- ☐ Pick Cotton
- ☐ Plow Fields
- ☐ Slaughter Livestock
- ☐ Stable Boy
- ☐ Valet
- ☐ Washer-woman
- ☐ Weed Garden

☐ **Town Slaves**

- ☐ Blacksmith
- ☐ Body Servant
- ☐ Bricklayer
- ☐ Butler
- ☐ Caretaker
- ☐ Carpenter
- ☐ Coachman
- ☐ Cook
- ☐ Cooper
- ☐ Dockworker
- ☐ Drayman
- ☐ Footman
- ☐ Gardener
- ☐ Kitchen Maid
- ☐ Lady's Maid
- ☐ Nanny
- ☐ Parlor Maid
- ☐ Seamstress
- ☐ Slaughter Livestock
- ☐ Stable Boy
- ☐ Valet
- ☐ Washer-woman
- ☐ Weed Garden

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Life as a Slave Vocabulary Worksheet

Read the 1846 Anti-Slavery Alphabet on the MDAH's Digital Archive website at http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/series/asa. Then, using the suggested slave vocabulary below and a dictionary, create your own Life as a Slave Alphabet book. Like the Anti-Slavery Alphabet, write your poems in the four-line Quatrain Style so that the second and fourth lines rhyme.

Abolitionist	Errand	Middle Passage	Slave Revolts
Agriculture	Experience	Mistress	Slave Tags
Apprentice	Expose	Mule	Spinning
Attire	Field Slave	Mutilate	Stable Boy
Auction	Flog	Negro Spirituals	Station Master
Auction Block	Footman	North Star	Status
Bale	Forks of the Road	Nutrition	Sugarcane
Big House	Free Blacks	Occupation	Superior
Blacksmith	Freedom	Okay	"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"
Body Servant	Fugitive	Opposition	Textile
Bogus	Gardener	Oppress	Till
Bondage	Gathering	Overseer	Tobacco
Breeches	"Go Down Moses"	Oxen	Toil
Bricklayer	Gold	Parlor Maid	Town Slave
Brutality	Gumbo	Petticoat	Trousers
Butler	Harvest	Plantation	Unjust
Caretaker	Horse-whip	Plantation Slave	Underground Railroad
Cargo	House Slave	Planter	Unsanitary
Cart-whip	Hush Puppies	Plow	Valet
Carpenter	Illiterate	Posse	Vegetables
Carriage	Importation	Punishment	Voodoo
Chain	Inferior	Quakers	Wagon
Chastisement	Jail	Quilt	Washer-woman
Coachman	Journey	"Quittin' Time"	Weave
Community	Jumping the Broom	Rations	Wept
Conductor	Kill	Respect	Whip
Cook	Kitchen Maid	Responsibility	Work
Cooper	Knit	Runaway	Xenophobe
Cording	Labor	Rye	Xylophone
Cotton	Lady's Maid	Safe House	Yeoman farmers
Cotton Gin	Lashes	Sanitary	Yam
Cowhide	Livestock	Sell	Yoke
Culture	Lumberjack	Slaughter	Zeal
Dockworker	Malnutrition	Slave	Zealously
Domestic	Manacles	Slave Codes	Zombie
Dray	Manure	Slave Horn	"Zorters"
Drayman	Market	Slave Patrols	
Economy	Master	Slave Quarters	
Emancipation	Mend	Slave Resistance	