

Name: _____ Date: _____

WORKSHEET

Chapter 10: Western Virginia in the New Nation - 1787-1850

Section 1: Virginia Revises Its Constitution

Excerpts from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Page 1)

In her autobiography, Harriet Jacobs spoke candidly about the lives of slaves. She could do so because she had been a slave. She wrote about sexual harassment, the white community's response to Nat Turner's rebellion, cruelty, her hiding for seven years, and her final escape to the North in 1842.

Directions: Read the excerpt from Harriet Jacobs's autobiography below and then answer the questions on the next page.

There was a planter in the country, not far from us, whom I will call Mr. Litch. He was an ill-bred, uneducated man, but very wealthy. He had six hundred slaves, many of whom he did not know by sight. His extensive plantation was managed by well-paid overseers. There was a jail and a whipping post on his grounds; and whatever cruelties were perpetrated there, they passed without comment. He was so effectually screened by his great wealth that he was called to no account for his crimes, not even for murder.

Various were the punishments resorted to. A favorite one was to tie a rope round a man's body, and suspend him from the ground. A fire was kindled over him, from which was suspended a piece of fat pork. As this cooked, the scalding drops of fat continually fell on the bare flesh....

Another neighbor was a Mrs. Wade. At no hour of the day was there cessation of the lash on her premises. Her labors began with the dawn, and did not cease till long after nightfall. The barn was her particular place of torture. There she lashed the slaves with the might of a man. An old slave of hers once said to me, "It is hell in mississ's house. 'Pears I can never get out. Day and night I prays to die...."

Women are considered of no value unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals. This same master shot a woman through the head, who had run away and been brought back to him. No one called him to account for it. If a slave resisted being whipped, the bloodhounds were unpacked, and set upon him, to tear his flesh from his bones. The master who did these things was highly educated, and styled a perfect gentleman. He also boasted the name and standing of a Christian, though Satan never had a truer follower....

I knew an old black man, whose piety and childlike trust in God were beautiful to witness. At fifty-three years old, he joined the Baptist church. He had a most earnest desire to learn to read. He thought he should know how to serve God better if he could only read the Bible. He came to me, and begged me to teach him. He said he could not pay me, for he had no money; but he would bring me nice fruit when the season for it came. I asked him if he didn't know it was contrary to law; and that slaves were shipped and imprisoned for teaching each other to read. This brought the tears into his eyes. "Don't be troubled, uncle Fred," said I. "I have no thoughts of refusing to teach you. I only told you of the law, that you might know the danger, and be on your guard." He thought he could plan to come three times a week without its being suspected. I selected a quiet nook, where no intruder was likely to penetrate, and there I taught him his A, B, C. Considering his age, his progress was astonishing. As soon as he could spell in two syllables he wanted to spell out words in the Bible. The happy smile that illuminated his face put joy into my heart. After spelling out a few words, he paused, and said, "Honey, it 'pears when I can read dis good book I shall be nearer to God. White man is got all de sense. He can larn easy. It ain't easy for ole black man like me. I only wants to read dis book, dat I may know how to live; den I hab no fear 'bout dying...."

You may believe what I say; for I write only that whereof I know. I was twenty-one years in that cage of obscene birds. I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched. And as for the colored race, it needs an abler pen than mine to describe the extremity of their sufferings, the depth of their degradation.

Source: Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861). Reprinted from the 1987 Harvard University Press edition, edited by Jean Fagan Yellin.

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Chapter 10: Western Virginia in the New Nation - 1787-1850
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Excerpts from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Page 2)

Directions: After reading the excerpt from Harriet Jacobs’s autobiography, answer the questions below.

1. Why was Mr. Litch not held accountable to authorities for his mistreatment of slaves? _____

2. How could women slaves increase their value? _____

3. How were slaves punished for teaching other slaves to read? _____

4. How is slavery a “curse to whites”? _____

5. What evidence of personal modesty or humility does Harriet Jacobs show? _____

