Marley Blanchard

Race Timeline Element

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**The Peak of the Convict Lease System in the South, 1880-1910**

Convict leasing began in the South in 1866 because of the labor shortage after emancipation of slaves. Before the Civil War, Southern blacks received punishment from their masters; therefore, they did not make up a significant portion of the prison population. With the enactment of the Black Codes, blacks started to outnumber whites in prisons for the first time.[[1]](#footnote-1) In many Southern states, such as Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, Texas, and South Carolina, the passage of Black Codes allowed newly freed African Americans to be arrested for petty, and often false, claims of vagrancy, larceny, and loitering.[[2]](#footnote-2) In 1893, Ida B. Wells pointed out that 90 percent of prisoners in Georgia were African American. This same type of discrimination was present in other states’ penal systems as well.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The work and living conditions of the convict lease system proved hazardous, unsanitary, and brutal. Wells wrote that in some camps in the South, the mortality rate of convict workers topped 10 percent each month.[[4]](#footnote-4) Often, convicts were not allowed to bathe or change clothes after work. Wells continued to describe the lashings convicts received for offenses. For example, a guard at the Coal Creek prison in Tennessee testified to witnessing a convict being beaten for not producing enough coal for a day’s work. The guard stated that the convict’s feet and hands were bound by planks, and the convict was bent over a barrel and whipped with a leather strap. One to eight convicts received this type of punishment on a daily basis. Clothes and linens were never washed, and food rations were small and unsanitary, with one convict receiving pea soup made from peas containing weevils.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Mining conditions proved to be some of the most hazardous of all fields of convict labor. Coal mining was most prevalent in Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee during this time period, and convicts performed a significant portion of mining work. Wells wrote that convicts working in the mining industry stood in six inches of water for weeks in the mines, and only one quarterof required oxygen to sustain human life was present. In many cases, convicts consumed the water available inside of the coal mines, which was unsanitary and toxic.[[6]](#footnote-6) This contributed to the high levels of sickness and disease present among the convicts and inside the prison camps. In addition to the mining industries, there were large amounts of convict labor present in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi repairing levees, picking fruit and processing turpentine in Florida, harvesting cotton in black belt regions, rice in South Carolina, tobacco in the Upper South, and sugarcane in Louisiana. Furthermore, the convict labor system provided the workers that built a large amount of the railroad system throughout the South to meet the demands of the Industrial Revolution.[[7]](#footnote-7) Death rates among convicts leased to railroad companies were highest. Between 1877 and 1879, 16 percent of leased railroad workers died in Mississippi, 25 percent in Arkansas, and 45 percent in South Carolina.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Many Southern states chose to partake in the convict lease system because the cost of building and maintaining prison facilities was expensive. Furthermore, cheap labor would increase the revenue of the state. Contractors could rent laborers for around 30-40 cents per day; however, this caused great competition with other businesses employing free people. In most cases throughout the South, a lease arrangement was formed between the state and privately owned companies. This type of agreement gave the business owner full control of the system, which consisted of the convicts, guards, facilities, and work. The lease arrangements proved to be more brutal because it completely eliminated state control and supervision of the system.[[9]](#footnote-9) During the first year of the convict lease system implementation in Alabama, a $12,000 profit was made from convict labor alone. Millions of dollars in industrial profit were made on the backs of convicts, mostly African American, and the prison mining industry made Alabama $1 million profit in 1912.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The convict lease system of the South was a successful attempt to maintain racial subordination in the region after the end of slavery. Leasing convicts for work proved to be cheaper than buying and owning slaves. However, many saw the convict lease system as a new form of slavery. The convict lease system allowed Southern industries to advance with the rest of the country into the Industrial Revolution while clinging to a model of the previously known “caste system” present in the Old South.[[11]](#footnote-11) As people learned of the harsh brutalities of the convict lease system, efforts were made to reverse and eliminate this system. Initial attempts to abolish this system took place during the Progressive Era. The first states to outlaw the systems were Tennessee, South Carolina, and Louisiana during the 1890’s, and remaining states gradually got rid of the practice until 1928.

1. Carleton, Mark T. *Politics and Punishment: The History of the Louisiana State Penal System*. Chapel Hil, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Browne, Jaron. "Rooted in Slavery: Prison Labor Expolitation." Urban Habitat. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wells, Ida B. *The Reason Why The Colored American is not in the World's Columbian Exposition*. Chicago: Urbana and Chicago, 1893. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Carleton, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Browne. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Curtin, Mary E. Encyclopedia of Alabama. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mancini, Matthew J. "Race, Economics, and the Abandonment of Convict Leasing." *The Journal of Negro History* 63, no. 4 (1978): 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)