

Understanding the Convict Lease System: The Longer Life of Alabama Black Enslavement

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Anti-Emancipation in the South

Alabama had the nation's longest-running system of Convict Leasing, made legal from 1846 until 1928. In the decades before the Civil War, the state leased white prisoners to private individuals for profit to the state. Prior to Emancipation, Black men and women were not brought into a formal criminal justice system or prison system. They were either unjustly punished by enslavers or killed for alleged crimes by local mobs. The effects of state prison practices would rise and spread throughout the Southern Black community after Emancipation.

Convict Leasing is one of the least understood and most dangerous systems of Black oppression in the post-Civil War South and was disguised and accepted as a perpetual and necessary source of revenue for local and state governments. In Alabama, profitability sent most forced-work prisoners underground to coal mines with a high chance they would not return alive. During many periods of this long-practiced horror, one in ten men did not survive forced prison work. Understanding this history makes us even more watchful of current prison policy and work practices in a state that incarcerates the third largest prison population in the U.S. with no sign of decrease.

Loop Holes, Black Codes, and a New Imprisonment

A broken, oppressive economic system created a broken civil war and backfired on the former Confederate South – industry and agriculture were in a post-Civil War shambles. All levels of white citizens were in a panic. A war had been fought and lost, but the revolution focused on race had just begun. Reports by Contemporary observers, like social reformer Carl Schur, stated a rising tide of white anger in Mississippi directed to the Black community, the traditional victims of violence and exploitation in the South. The white Southern “Bourbons,” finding a way to rise again after Civil War losses, harnessed the general white anger and helped legalize a system that would suppress Freedmen and all of Black society. There would be no social revolution if men of property could help it. A Constitutional loophole and local Black Codes would be enough to hold society to a *neoslavery* system for decades.

Accepting that Black people could no longer be owned as chattel, white society took advantage of the next available legality: the Thirteenth Amendment loophole. The Thirteenth Amendment (1865) legalized slavery as punishment for criminal convictions. If the Southern legal system could play this opportunity broadly enough, Black citizens could be coerced through local law enforcement to stay “in their place” and “under contract” to their former owners or risk violating hundreds of artificial new laws. Conviction under those new laws opened the opportunity for the state and private individuals or industry to collaborate in convict leasing.

“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction”

— 13TH AMENDMENT OF THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

On the state and local level Black Codes would round out an unjust justice system. The Mississippi Black Code, described as one of the most severe and comprehensive by historians Robert Weise and Edward Ayers, regulated the life and labor of black citizens. These laws were echoed across Southern state governments. The Mississippi codes began by defining responsibility (and penalties) of white citizens, the enforcers, and more – railway employees, sheriffs, justices of peace, clothiers, food service employees, sellers of spirits or firearms. The codes then aimed at “freedman, negro, or mulatto” and the new confinement of their lives within the South. The regulation of labor was foremost. Labor contracts would limit the South’s Freedmen employment to formal written contract work to white employers only. (Regarding the contracts, remember that many Freedmen struggled with literacy, which had been legally forbidden before Emancipation.) County Probate Courts could assign any Black minor to apprentice with their former enslavers if the child lived within a poor family. Note that if they were minors during the first wave of Black Codes would have been mere enslaved children prior to Emancipation. This law was blatantly a “recapture” law for the very young. To leave these apprenticeships with former “masters” prior to age twenty-one would mean recapture or a felony conviction and “hard time” served in the adult prison system (this was prior to the establishment reform schools).

“Freedmen, free negroes and mulattos” over the age of eighteen were subject to arrest for vagrancy, defined as proving no lawful employment, assembling together, walking beside the railroad, speaking loudly in public near white women, and dozens more false offenses. To avoid arrests for vagrancy, many Blacks chose the harsh labor contracts as the lesser of evils. Other laws focused on farm produce. A separate set of laws are described by historian Khalil Muhammed as laws shifting misdemeanors to felony status. Under Pig Laws white farmers accused Black farmers of taking pigs, chickens or farms tools, which likely had been earned by labor provided by the Black farmer.

Forced Labor and Government Money-Making

The states went to work arresting Black citizens. Historians and the Equal Justice Initiative have studied the documented 1908 case of Alabamian Green Cottenham to describe how convict leasing played out. Cottenham received a conviction from the county for vagrancy, with no lawyer present, with sentencing of thirty days of hard labor. Fees were added to be paid to sheriff, court clerk, and witnesses. Cottenham’s inability to pay these fees extended his prison sentence to almost a year. After sentencing, the prisoner, added to a running contract lease, was carried immediately to the Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Company (TCI), Pratt Mine, Slope No. 12 prison mine. The lease amount paid to the Shelby County court. was \$12 per month. Prisoner were under complete authority of the mine bosses.

Most Southern states operated a convoluted prison system. Alabama's was as well. With state district courts operating separately, the counties held tremendous power in local convictions. Over time, fifty-one Alabama county courts would send convicted people to private company prisons. Judges, sheriffs, and jurors could benefit monetarily each time these convictions and sentences were made. This local "fee system" was a base "trick of racial exploitation," in the words of Hugo Black biographer Steve Suitts. Hugo Black's early legal work in Birmingham was surrounded by the effects of this system, which placed the burden of salary and operating cost of the sheriff, deputies, justices of peace, and court clerks on the convicted. This within a city where sixty percent of arrests were Black residents. In 1902-1903, most of those convicted of the 3,000 Jefferson County misdemeanors on record were sent to Sloss-Sheffield mines.



An everyday business scene from the publication "Birmingham: The Other Side of the Story." Black communities in early 20th century Alabama were subject to arbitrary arrests and charges which forced thousands into convict lease imprisonment.

As the extraction industries gained more power, they made their own changes to contracts with local and state authorities, repealing and changing them to serve themselves. In 1904, TCI revised the contract to pay simply for every ton of coal mined by prisoners. Under his office of the Board of Convict inspectors, James Oakley then relocated all "able" state convicts away from the other leasing industries to mine coal.

Private landowners and other growing industry soon set up contracts with states and local governments to receive a flow of captive cheap labor. Throughout the South, prison labor included Florida gum and pine resin work, Georgia railroads and brickyards, Texas and Louisiana sugar plantations and timberwork, and North Carolina's railroad building. Famous Confederate general, KKK leader, slave trader, and suspected war criminal Nathan Bedford Forrest spent his post-war life operating a convict lease farm on President's Island, current-day city of Memphis. In each state, the

Black prisoners were sent to the most dangerous and barbaric locations. The company managers saw Black the prisoners as expendable and replenishable, compared to white laborers. As the system settled in, company "straw bosses" and "whipping bosses" became the prison wardens of the South.

By 1883, about 10% of the Alabama state government's total revenue was derived from convict leasing of prisoners under the state's control. This figure increased to nearly 73% of total revenue by 1898. By this period over 85% of forced laborers were Black.



Visual images of the Southern Convict Lease System are limited due to societal pressure to hide realities of Southern segregation and oppression, so artistic images of Black families, Black business districts, and more help to fill in the historic record of Southern life. North Carolina-born artist Romare Bearden (1911-1988) created a social realism and historical narrative of Black life often told through montage and photo collage. His work is both social expose and testament of Black Southern folk culture.

Mine Work in Context

The detrimental share cropping system in Alabama had driven many rural black families to mining areas for employment as paid workers. The descriptions of free black workers provide context for what the mine and steel work was like. In *Birmingham: The Other Side*, Clarence Dean describes both the coal mine and steelworker experience: “it was a mankiller.” In the hot climate of Birmingham, a worker would be soaked with sweat from clock-in to clock-out. Will Battle describes that in 1906 there were no off days. In 1911, one day off was added. Workers were machines and Black workers were only allowed jobs with no autonomy with no way to rise during an entire career in the early years. Even these conditions of toil, health dangers, and lack of mobility were far superior to the coal industry work experienced by lease prisoners in Alabama. For forced-work leased prisoners, unsanitary conditions, unregulated punishment and confinement, forced runs and marches, and limited or no contact with the outside world were dehumanizing factors on top of the harsh labor conditions.

The Campaign to End Convict Lease

The general public and, largely, the white community misunderstood the convict lease system. A quote from *Birmingham and Environs* by George Cruikshanks in 1920 may have been accepted mainstream he states that the imprisoned miners, “nearly all of whom were undergoing punishment for manslaughter or some forms of theft...could not easily escape, and above all they were taught a useful and profitable occupation.”

Behind the scenes, the companies who enslaved these prisoners were primary impetus to the end of the convict lease system. They saw the decline of profitability of bringing so many unskilled workers into the prison mines and other dangerous industries, and the rising liability risks particularly in the repeated mining disasters in Alabama. Reformers were a secondary element to the final end, but their stubborn effort outed the corruption and prisoner endangerment and spoke beyond money and profit. They defined the system as a failure to humanity and converse to the rehabilitation of men regardless of their level of crime.

By 1928, every state had ended the system, encouraged by women’s organizations, religious organizations, educators, suffragists, and government insiders. Throughout the decades, many advocates are documented. The Methodist Missionary Council. Hugo Black. Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs (so named in that era). Amelia Worthington Fisk. Julia Tutwiler. Patti Ruffner Jacobs. W. C. Davis. Henrietta Gibbs. Laura J. Stern. Mary Church Terrell. Elizabeth Johnston Evans.

National Supporters



Mary Church Terrell, national Black activist

National Black advocates Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois raised a call against convict lease. However, it was Memphis-born Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954), one of the earliest national activists for civil rights and Black women’s suffrage, who delivered a remarkable and timeless condemnation of the Convict Lease system. Terrell included accounts of extra-legal debt peonage cases as well as cases of white men and women prisoners being worked to death as well. Terrell emphasized the lengthy convict labor bondage for “walking on the grass, expectorating upon the side walk, going to sleep in a depot, loitering on the streets, or other similar misdemeanors which could not by any stretch of the imagination be called a crime.” The economic and social status of the Black convicted made them unable to employ a lawyer, to assert legal rights, or to fight “the machinery of the law.” She observed that public awareness of this abusive system was low as “intelligent people in this country seem to have [only] a hazy idea of what the convict lease system means.”

Terrell pointed to official reports made of some of the largest landowners and planters in the state engaged in the traffic of selling negroes into voluntary servitude, with the Governor taking no further steps to bring about the conviction of these guilty parties. Sheriffs were free to turn over men held on trumped-up charges directly to anyone who would step in to pay the conviction fines and added court fees. The men who interceded to do this were plantation owners who would then imprison these men and women on their own plantation and work them and provide living conditions however they pleased. Even Terrell was unaware that private plantation owners were covered for this practice by Alabama law.

Insider Efforts

The Physicians. Jefferson County physician Thomas Parke gathered death data, data on the convictions for minor offenses, and wrote blatant reports of the overall mine conditions at Coalsburg and the prison abuses at Sloss-Sheffield (1857-1923). His Convict Lease opposition work totaled twenty-eight years. Due to new state law in 1888, Dr. Russell Cunningham began care of one thousand forced-labor prisoners at Pratt Mines. He improved sanitary and health conditions and reduced their mortality rate during his work until 1914. However, data elsewhere records a continuing dire convict conditions at Pratt Mines, and Cunningham soon steered into top-level politics as state senator and later lieutenant governor (1901-1907).

Dr. Shirley Bragg of the state Board of Inspectors was less politically connected and a stricter voice of opposition. In 1907 he publicly called for a complete end to the county convict system fed by local corruption, in which salaries were made by the number of prisoners sent from each county. Local authorities were even thought to ignore actual kidnapping of Black residents to meet convict lease quotas. Bragg saw no possible reform for this method, in which illegal convictions, sanitation measures, and health of the prisoners are outside the Alabama state authority without a change in legislation. He reprovingly stated "If the state wishes to kill the convicts, it should do it directly and not indirectly." His advocacy was cut short by his death by suicide the following year.

The Forced Laborers. Ezekiel Archey and Ambrose Haskins wrote a letter from inside Pratt Mine Prison to Reginald Dawson, President of the Board of Inspectors of Convicts. They fairly asked for basic prison rights, emphasizing that "our family coming is the next favor to liberty and they are the only comfort we have left." There is no evidence that this letter was answered.

The Alabama Humanitarians: They "Wanted to Get Something Done"

Julia Strudwick Tutwiler (1841-1916), born into genteel white society in Havana, Alabama, has a rare distinction in Alabama as being a household name for accomplishing actual radical reform in women's higher education and technical training in nineteenth-century Alabama, a time when most women faced criticism and ridicule for these goals. University of West Alabama, Montevallo, University of Alabama, and both the Boy's and Girl's Industrial schools were either formed by or benefitted from her work. Tutwiler also stretched the limits of many white reformers, maintaining a passion to protect the Black community through legislative progress for prison health, safety, and convict schools as early as the 1880s. Less widely noted today, Tutwiler joined with her Alabama suffragist partners during the final years of her life to work for the end of convicting leasing. She wanted Alabama to face the facts that the

prison system was falling backward. In 1915, Tutwiler stated her humiliation that prison classrooms she had put in place in Pratt and Coalsburg mines had been eliminated from contracts with the state. Even though state-owned, Speigner Cotton Mill was allowing beatings of the women prison laborers and their training and education was being ignored. An initial agreement to remove state prisoners from coal mine prisons in 1895 had long-since passed. Tutwiler would die the following year leaving more unfinished work for the reformers who followed her.

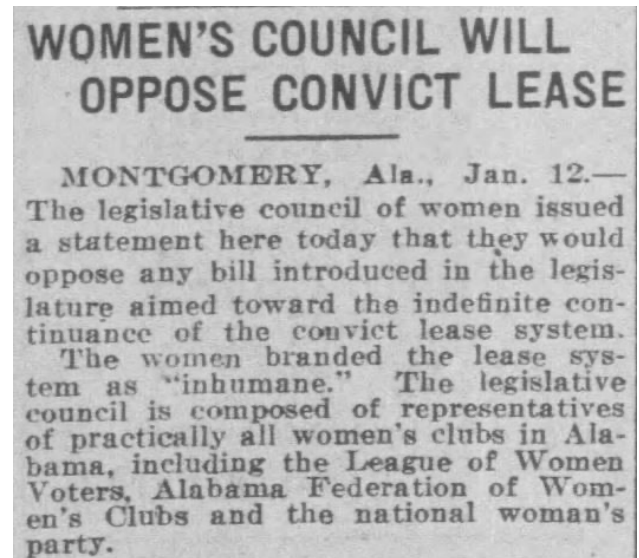
Montgomery advocates and suffragists Henrietta Gibbs (1879-1960) and Laura Jenkins Stern (1868-1923) worked their own aspects of Alabama's prison reform. We find Henrietta Gibbs honored today in the Alabama Women's Hall of Fame, and Gibbs' lifelong work noted within the Montgomery Missionary Society, the Baptist Convention, and Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Through the Alabama Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, her work turned to advocacy to end Convict Lease and to establish safer alternatives for young blacks with criminal convictions. She led in building the reform schools at St. Meigs.

Laura Stern led the Montgomery Equal Suffrage Association (ESA) in the critical womens' activist years of 1914-1920. Stern kept the Alabama ESA informed of legislative plans such as the controversial abolition of the Office of Prison and Factory Inspection in 1915. Even earlier, in 1913, among dozens of Alabama men, suffragists Stern, Carolina Haralson, Julia Tutwiler, and Dannie Bossie Hundley, served on the Alabama Committee to Abolish the Convict Lease System, led by former U.S. Senator Frank White.

Along with her suffrage work, Laura Stern was also chair of the Montgomery Federation of Women's Club committee on investigating abuses of the leased prisoners. In this role, she reached out to Black leadership for help to provide a factual case for reform. She asked for information and advice from Tuskegee University President Booker T. Washington. Washington replied to her in a May 12, 1913 letter full of the statistics pertaining to incarcerated Black Alabamians. Washington's data showed the troubling fact that in one year's census data, 60% of incarcerated state black prisoners were age 25 and under. Other data year sets showed prisoners as young as ten years old. Professor Washington also referred Stern to data compiled by another Black Alabama advocate studying Convict Lease, the Rev. Dr. Charles O. Boothe (born 1845) of Birmingham (also a former pastor of Dexter Avenue Church, Montgomery). The information gained from Washington and Boothe likely influenced Stern's work throughout the rest of her career.

As with Tutwiler and Gibbs, Laura Stern did not see an end to the Convict Lease before her death but she affected some hope for juvenile offenders. Stern's legacy included work as one of two officers of the new Montgomery County Juvenile Court in 1916, a position she shared with African American Lillian Dungee. On the property of Stern's home, she and the Federation of Women's Clubs established the Child Protection Home at Fern Hill (now Brantwood Children's Home). While the Convict Lease system trudged on, both Gibbs and Stern were able to remove more young Alabamians from its danger.

More LWV Advocacy. All reform efforts became heightened leading up to the quadrennial legislative sessions – Alabama met only every four years in that era. The years 1915, 1919, and 1923 offer the best historical sources on the Convict Lease issue. The collective work of the Equal Suffrage Association, which re-established as the Alabama League of Women Voters in 1920, occurred in these years. With separate prison reform groundwork laid by member Julia Tutwiler and continued by Laura Stern, the 1923 LWV actively campaigned and investigated. After Patti Ruffner Jacobs visited prison mines, she, Amelia W. Fisk and others reported to the Legislature, calling for leased prisoner earnings reserved in part for their families and for establishment of an unpaid prison commission. Even with their detailed research, this LWV report didn't go far enough however. LWV state president Elizabeth McDuffie Bricken's public message had more bite: a call for complete removal of prisoners from the mines. The League did work in coalition with the Federation of Women's Clubs and others to keep pressure on Governor Brandon who had already gained a continuance of convict leasing, regardless of appeals by previous Governor Kilby.



1923 One of many battles of frustration: the Alabama Legislative session would extend Convict Lease to 1927.

Caught in the Middle of Labor and Coal Companies

Not only was government/industry profit a driver in continuation of the system, leased convict labor also was also tool used by companies to fight growing labor union power. By the early 1900s, the most profitable Convict Lease prisons were a part of the powerful coal industry. It is hard to express the importance of the coal and steel industries and their influence in the Birmingham, Alabama, region. After the Civil War, in a stricken economy, industrialists moved into Jones Valley, influenced completion of the L&N Railroad, and began mining the minerals to produce iron, all naturally sourced within a thirty-mile radius. Coal mines were opened, the city of Birmingham established in 1871, and in 1880 the first blast furnaces were running, with more iron-making innovations quickly following. Sloss and other iron industry leaders were considered no less than heroic for the central Alabama economy. The 1904 iron-cast statue of Vulcan, Roman god of the forge, reflects a region under the power of an industry. Under this spell, the companies in iron and steel production carried the power and political influence to extended the practice of convict leasing as long as possible. By 1908, Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company (TCI, which would become a subsidiary and operate under its primary rival United States Steel), Sloss, and Republic were refusing to bargain with United Mine Workers, controlling important assets: their own furnaces fueled by their own coal mines and convict labor as captive coal miners.



Banner Mine, near Littleton, Jefferson County. The 1911 explosion is one of the worst in U.S. mining history. The dead prisoners were replaced by other prisoners immediately after the burials.

The general volatility of the Birmingham coal field region created a conflict which was hard to allay. Economic, class, and race conflict were bound within the labor wars, as the United Mine Workers was the only large interracial organization in the South in that era. In the wider South, the Unions stood against the business powers and used strategies to gain public favor, such as introducing the “union label” on goods, distinguishing that they were free-made, not prison-made. The industries continued to stand their ground. The push of the coal and steel industries to keep leased prisoners as their anti-strike weapon would lengthen the end of the convict lease system, in spite of all those working to end it.

Deaths and the End of Denial: The System Finally Breaks

Mining Accident Deaths by the Hundreds. Inundating untrained forced labor workers into the mines surely weakened mine safety and, combined with other factors, resulted in hundreds of needless deaths. The 1911 Banner Mine disaster is the more famous today and resulted in the deaths of one hundred twenty-eight prisoners, all but five were Black in a mine filled with men with only misdemeanor offenses. The Banner disaster was not rare. Mine dangers in Alabama are easy to read in accessible history documentation. A source list of newspaper reports of Alabama mine disasters compiled by the Birmingham

Public Library presents a heartbreaking, decades-long timeline of lives lost, most within Convict Lease mines filled with wrongly-sentenced Black Alabamians.

Fall of rock, gas explosion, electrocution, loose mine rail carts, and gas poisoning were combined daily dangers in the mines. In the November 1922 Dolomite Mine disaster, (Pleasant Grove near Ensley and Bessemer), a string of coal dumps (carts) broke loose and dropped eight hundred feet down the slope mine’s incline, which severed an electric cable and ignited an explosion killing over eighty men. The crash and explosion then created an afterdamp (from the Germanic word "dampf" or vapors) which asphyxiated sixty more men. Sixty-four of the eighty-four killed were black miners.

Murder Investigations. As mine disaster deaths continued, a turning point contributing to the end of convict leasing occurred in the early 1920s. Finally, the white community took broader notice of death investigations concerning forced convict labor. White North Dakotan Martin Tabert, age 22, convicted of riding a Florida train without a ticket, was found to have been worked in harsh swamp conditions and

beaten to death in a Florida lumber prison-lease camp, although he was officially reported to have died by fever. Tabert's 1923 case was reported across Southern newspapers and made it hard for the public to deny the lethal Convict Lease system still remaining in many Southern states. Florida ended Convict Lease two years after. Prisoner deaths came in question next in the Alabama coal mines.

Flat Top Prison Mine warden Charles R. Davis, Sr., and several staff were charged with the death of James Knox. The staff was prosecuted for the man's beating, forced drowning in a vat, and injection with poison to simulate suicide. Notably, Flat Top Mine, through 1923 state legislation, had just been leased by the state and was now a *state-operated* mine. In February 1926, as the Knox case was building, Colbert Countian J. W. Taylor requested the investigation of his son's death at Flat Top, listed as a death by heart attack. Will Hootie Taylor had died only eight days after being imprisoned there. Taylor suspected his son was beaten to death by Black trustees ordered to punish him. Taylor also reported that his son was partially blind and had use of only one hand, so his sentence to Flat Top coal mine was wholly without explanation. Additionally, in May 1926, W. A. Bates, former deputy warden, was indicted for the 1924 Flat Top death of Black convict Frank Harper.

Charles R. Davis, Sr. was found not guilty and all other cases regarding the Flat Top death investigations were dismissed in 1926 and 1927. But the attention of the public toward these graphic deaths remained, especially with the accompanying violent incidents of others connected to these cases. Attorney General Harwell Davis, who had investigated Flat Top, was hospitalized after a daytime beating by Charles Davis, accompanied by Davis's lawyer, on a Birmingham street corner. In 1927, retired state prison physician-inspector Frank Blair, who had sided with the defense and completed a report that James Knox had died of natural causes, was found dead of gunshot along with his wife Augusta Faulk Blair in their Birmingham home. The deaths were reported as double suicides.

The Final Days

The system came to an end in varying years, state by state, through different methods. For example, in December 1912, Arkansas Governor George Donaghey, having served out his term, condemned the long-running convict leases and the local magistrates who were complicit in wrongful convictions, and then pardoned 316 state and 44 county leased prisoners. Convict Lease in Arkansas ended in 1913. For states who did not pardon those serving time, the actual structure of Convict Lease thankfully ended, but many prisoners were only transferred to state-owned work farms, such as Parchman Prison Farm in Mississippi, which still is known for inhumane conditions. In Tennessee, prisoners of the state continued to work in coal mines until 1966. Prisoners were back under complete state oversight, but work conditions could still be commonly defined as "hard time." In July 1928 over eight hundred Alabama leased Black prisoners finally left the coal mines and were transferred to state highway department project camps and the Atmore state prison.

To Redress and Aton

How do we clarify and document the history of the thousands of men and women and families affected by Convict Lease, the majority in Southern Black communities? Some current work should be noted, which welcomes community support. Integrated work is taking place to mark and commemorate lives

and deaths, fueled by the history work of Douglas Blackmon. Additionally, the Texas Convict Leasing and Labor Project is currently seeking acknowledgement and inclusion in textbooks, formal apology, and restitution for the long-existing system. Texas House Representative Ron Reynolds seeks proper marking of discovered convict worker burial sites, such as those at the Imperial Sugar Company state prison farm. Educator Christine Adrian calls attention to similar unmarked graves at the former U.S. Steel Birmingham prison mine site. In 2019, the Jefferson County Memorial Project marked and memorialized the Sloss-Sheffield mine workers who were lynched on company property and the thousands of workers who suffered under the Convict Lease system. More markers are planned for Irondale, Bessemer, and Pratt City. Writer Vicki Turner Goodwin is currently researching and writing history to encourage more personal stories of Black Alabama miners.

A Question for Today: Was Convict Lease Abolished or Simply Reformatted?

Over-reaching county control of a prisoner's fate, the largest conduit to corruption and prisoner mistreatment in the past, was largely ended in 1928, however, for decades, other issues have continued in prison systems. State incarcerations rise among numerous problems as justice organizations work continually for state penal reform. We are more aware than ever of individual rights violations regarding health and sanitation, overcrowding, understaffing and endangerment, sexual abuse, abuse of mentally ill prisoners, and increased drug and weapon contraband. And the problems of prison work pay continues ninety years after the historic focus of this article.

Soon after the official Convict Lease end in 1928, Federal New Deal warranting of Federal Prison Industries (PIE, now UNICOR), which did not necessarily endanger or exploit prisoners, reignited the profit motive of prisons. The *correctional industries* opened up further in 1979 with more federal legislation and authorized private prisons. Texas private prisons began in the 1980s and the model has expanded to most states in the U.S. Since then the prison populations have doubled, which has returned us to the condition of private industry making substantial money employing convicted offenders. The private industry-state relationship is again in a confusing status, as it was to the public during all those years of Convict Lease. Alabama stands currently with a proposed governor's plan to lease three privately built prisons, while the Alabama legislature asks for clarification of the future role of the Department of Corrections in overseeing the ongoing operations of these prisons.

Prison employment through correctional industries is also a large part of the new prison labor system. All prisoners in this case create consumer goods and services. Although most incarcerated workers are housed in main prisons and work "facility jobs" for zero pay (the case in Alabama), smaller numbers of incarcerated people work correctional industry production jobs and earn around a dollar an hour at best. Even smaller numbers of prisoners are in Work Release Programs or Transitional Work Programs in facilities in the communities. State conditions and programs vary. In Texas, only a tiny percentage of any state prisoners receive pay for work within one of the most profitable prison industries in the U.S. Louisiana pay and work conditions, such as those at Angola, are questioned for many civil rights issues. The Southern Poverty Law Center is examining situations that too closely resemble the local abuses of the historic Convict Lease system, such as localities where pretrial defendants are forced to work in lieu of posting bond.

Prison industry program development by states offer an amount of what journalist Vicky Camarillo calls idealistic goals and do provide the benefits of self-actualization through work. However, the debate and the slow progress to standardized and protected fair pay for incarcerated workers means that, for now, the public condones that these workers are paying their debt to society multifold in time served, free labor or miniscule wages (along with stiff deductions), denial of citizen and labor rights, and withheld opportunity for education toward truer workforce development.

Call to action

Read knowledgeable information and reporting on the past and present conditions on prison labor, forced labor, and the prison economy. Please contact me for more on sources not noted in the article sarah.r.carmack@gmail.com

Among numerous sources available:

For highlight details of the Convict Lease system in the U.S.

<http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/slavery-timeline/>

One timeline available online, while not nearly complete to convict lease and subsequent current prison goods/services economy, provides more of a visual of the develop

<https://www.endslaverynow.org/blog/articles/state-imposed-forced-labor-history-of-prison-labor-in-the-us>

<http://www.bplonline.org/resources/government/MineAccidentsBibliography.aspx>

<https://www.bizjournals.com/birmingham/news/2019/09/09/new-memorial-at-sloss-furnaces-will-recognize.html>

<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/04/10/wages/>