

Article

“Slaves of the State”: Christianity and Convict Labor in the Postbellum South

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Abstract: In the wake of the Civil War, southern states incarcerated record numbers of black men and women, closed their prisons, and sent convicted criminals to convict lease camps. Inside these camps, convict laborers worked for businesses, for individual entrepreneurs, on plantations, and on public works projects contracted to private businesses. Due to the Thirteenth Amendment’s “slaves of the state” clause, these laborers were legally classified as slaves and treated as such by labor camp operators. Conditions inside these camps were quite harsh, and in most camps, state-sanctioned Protestant socialization efforts were the laborers’ primary source of leisure. This essay provides a preliminary overview of the convergence of Protestant Christianity and convict lease camps as it calls scholars to explore this convergence in greater detail in future scholarship.

Keywords: slavery; slave religion; black religion; African American religion; the South; convict lease system; religion

Green Cottenham, a black American born to former slaves, was arrested in Alabama in 1908 for the crime of vagrancy.¹ This crime was one of the many laws that emerged in the wake of the Civil War that did not explicitly mention race or criminalize blackness, but that resulted in the disproportionate arrest and conviction of African Americans. A judge sentenced Cottenham to thirty days hard labor, a sentence the judge extended by almost a year after Cottenham could not afford to pay related fees. A day after the sentencing—forty-three years after the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlawed race-based slavery—the State of Alabama leased Cottenham to the U.S. Steel Corporation for \$12/month, where he worked in a mine called Slope no. 12. Inside the mine, Cottenham spent his nights chained in a wooden barrack and he spent almost every waking hour inside the mine where he had to remove at least eight tons of coal daily. Failure resulted in the lash or another form of corporal punishment.

Journalist Douglas Blackmon described the conditions in Slope no. 12 and the laborers’ alleged perception of the mine when he wrote, “The lightless catacombs of black rock, packed with hundreds of desperate men slick with sweat and coated in pulverized coal, must have exceeded any vision of hell a boy born in the countryside of Alabama—even a child of slaves—could have ever imagined” (Blackmon 2008, p. 2). The conditions in Slope no. 12 were so deplorable that by year’s end, almost sixty men died from disease, accident, murder, and suicide. Mine administrators either buried the deceased’s bodies in graves along with the mine’s waste or incinerated them in ovens that otherwise processed coal. Cottenham soon joined their ranks when he died in August 1908, less than six months after he arrived at Slope no. 12.

Cottenham and the roughly thousand other black men who labored daily in Slope no. 12 followed the path of perhaps several hundred thousand Americans (primarily African-Americans) in the wake

¹ Information about Green Cottenham taken from Blackmon (2008). Green Cottenham is the primary subject of Blackmon’s book, which uses Cottenham to explore the larger history of the convict lease system.

of the Civil War who were forced back into legal slavery in state-sanctioned and privately administered convict lease systems, where individual states and counties leased convict laborers to corporations, farmers, plantation owners, and individual entrepreneurs. As this suggests, the fact remains that for almost sixty years after the Civil War, African-Americans and white convicts were legally leased across the south.

The convict lease system in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries caught the attention of prominent black reformers like W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, who criticized the system for reproducing and perpetuating the oppressive forces of slavery. For most of the twentieth century, however, scholars overlooked the convict lease system, often treating it as a footnote in the larger histories of slavery, incarceration, and race relations in the postbellum South. In 1976, historian William Cohen noted the dearth of academic attention to this topic when he called for historians to pay more attention to the convict lease system. Cohen wrote, “While historians of the South have devoted much attention to the oppressive effects of sharecropping, tenantry, the crop-lien system, and peonage, few have addressed themselves to the larger system of involuntary servitude within which these factors operated” (Cohen 1976, p. 31). This “larger system,” he argued, included the convict lease system.

Historians responded to Cohen’s criticism, particularly in the 1990s, when they produced comprehensive studies of the convict lease system. While historians increasingly focused on the convict lease system, scholars of American and African-American religion, however, have largely omitted the topic in their histories of slavery, African-American religion, and religions of the African diaspora. Albert Raboteau’s classic book *Slave Religion*, for example, contains no mention whatsoever of the convict lease system (Raboteau 2004). More recently, Sylvester Johnson’s sweeping history of African-American religion—*African-American Religions, 1500–2000*—mentioned the convict lease system only once, noting correctly that the convict lease system was “actual, literal slavery” (Johnson 2015, p. 240). The resulting lacuna presents a significant hole in the historiography, as history persuasively demonstrates that Protestant Christianity was a perennial fixture in convict lease camps, where camp administrators, camp-sponsored chaplains, and even the laborers themselves encouraged convict Protestantism.

This article provides an introductory and cursory overview of Protestant Christianity in convict labor camps, focusing specifically on camps in the states of Alabama and Florida.² Specifically, this article recognizes that Protestant Christianity was an integral part of the convict lease system and it situates Protestantism at the center of the convict lease system, where camp administrators relied on Protestant Christianity to create more disciplined and obedient laborers in the short term and more law-abiding citizens in the long term. By implication, this article also identifies convict lease camps as important sites in the broader history of the Christianization of the African diaspora in the United States. Finally, though the article does not explore this topic in great detail, since all convicts were classified legally as slaves of the state, this history destabilizes dominant notions of “slave religion” as a phenomenon that only applied to African Americans, primarily on plantations. Instead, this history literally writes white Americans into the history of slavery, as white convicts similarly labored in convict labor camps, although history demonstrates that white laborers often received preferable treatment to black laborers.

1. Convict Labor in the South

Scholars often noted that the United States experienced two revolutions in the late eighteenth century. In addition to the American Revolution that established American independence, Americans in the young republic also created a penological revolution where individual states built penitentiaries to house convicts. Penitentiaries broke centuries of tradition where governments and governing bodies

² The dynamics in labor camps in Florida and Alabama overlap significantly. If scholars continue to explore the interplay of Christianity (or religion more broadly) and convict lease systems, their scholarship should look beyond these two states, highlighting points of convergence and difference in the various convict labor camps.

primarily punished criminals by imposing fines, corporal punishment, or execution. The architects of America's first penitentiaries wanted to break this tradition, as they believed that penitentiaries could detain and reform sinner-criminals by incarcerating them for extended periods of time.³ This novel experiment required the changing of laws and public sentiment, but it also required significant capital investments by the states who had to fund construction, detainment, and rehabilitative efforts. To offset costs related to incarceration, early prison reformers tried various strategies to generate revenue, including using inmate labor to manufacture goods sold to the public, and at least in Massachusetts as early as 1798, the leasing of inmates to parties outside the penitentiary (Mancini 1996, p. 5). The practice of convict leasing was not common in the early years of penological experimentation and reform, but early experiments with the practice provided a model for future prison administrators (Lichtenstein 1996).

The supporters of the penitentiary movement found their earliest successes in the northern states; however, as the nineteenth century progressed, southern states began to build penitentiaries. They, too, encountered financial issues, and taking their lead from northern states, some southern states and counties similarly leased convicts to private businesses who profited from convict labor, often with mixed results (Holt et al. 2013, pp. 50, 54). The fact remained, however, that prior to the Civil War, convict leasing was the exception to the norm, as most prisons worked their incarcerated populations inside the penitentiaries.

The end of the Civil War and the subsequent period of southern Reconstruction brought a series of changes that rippled through the South. These changes impacted every aspect of society including changes in the South's carceral practices, in the race of the incarcerated populations, in the legal status of the incarcerated, and in the conditions of confinement itself. Prior to the Civil War, southern prisons were filled overwhelmingly with white bodies. In Alabama, for example, white prisoners accounted for 99 percent of the incarcerated population (Curtin 2000, p. 6). A former slave described the absence of black bodies in southern prisons prior to the Civil War when he said, "I ain't never seen no jail till after peace was declared. In slavery times, jails was all built for the white folks. There warn't never nobody of my color put in none of them. No time for them to stay in jail. They had to work. When they done wrong, they was whipped and let go" (cf. Mellon 1998, p. 247).

The racial composition of southern prisons changed rapidly after the Civil War, however, as southern states created "black code" laws that did not explicitly mention race, but that resulted in the rapid incarceration of black bodies, and more specifically, of black men. Former slave owner Henry William Ravenel described the rationale behind the black codes when he wrote, "There must be stringent laws to control the negroes" (cf. Blackmon 2008, p. 34). Black codes implemented these laws and included such "crimes" as vagrancy, changing employers without the proper permissions, loitering, and other activities that were selectively enforced against newly freed African Americans. These laws had the immediate and intended result of punishing black Americans who were arrested in record numbers and sentenced either in prisons, jails, or convict lease camps.⁴

The legal status of the convicts changed in 1865 when the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlawed slavery "except as a punishment of crime". In other words, the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed race-based slavery, but it legalized crime-based slavery and transferred the ownership of the nation's new slave population to the individual states. In 1871, Virginia's Supreme Court affirmed this interpretation of the Thirteenth Amendment's slaves-of-the-state clause when it declared that the convicted criminal "has, as a consequence of his crime, not only forfeited his liberty, but all his personal rights except those which the law in its humanity accords to him. He is for the time the slave of the State" (*Ruffin v. Commonwealth* 1871). Based on the court's endorsement of the

³ The following scholars discussed the religious roots of the modern penitentiary, see Graber (2011); Hirsch (1992); Lewis (1922), and Rothman (1971).

⁴ In Georgia, for example, black Americans were incarcerated more than 12 times white Americans. See Muller (2018).

Thirteenth Amendment, the black and white bodies who filled the nation's jails and prisons were classified legally as slaves.⁵

As southern states disproportionately filled their jails and prisons with newly enslaved black Americans, southern politicians made the decision that would come to define incarceration in the South for decades to come as they either closed their prisons entirely or significantly curtailed their use. Instead of incarcerating convicts in prisons, state and county governments leased the incarcerated to private business interests who typically sent convict laborers to work in sugar and cotton plantations, coal mines, turpentine farms, phosphate beds, brickyards, sawmills, and various other places. In some cases, slaves of the state returned to the same plantations where they previously labored during the era of race-based slavery (Bergner 1999). By leasing convicts to private enterprises, states generated substantial revenue. For the first, and only, time in United States history, convict labor made incarceration extremely lucrative, further incentivizing states to arrest more people and to expand the leasing programs.

One scholar noted the spread of the convict lease system when he wrote, "By the end of Reconstruction in 1877, every formerly Confederate state except Virginia had adopted the practice of leasing black prisoners into commercial hands" (Blackmon 2008, p. 55). As black prisoners returned to hard labor, convict populations grew exponentially in states like Georgia, where from 1870 to 1910, the growth of the convict population exceeded the state's population growth tenfold. Additionally, black men comprised the overwhelming majority of these convict laborers, who were arrested in such large numbers that they routinely comprised around 90% of the convict labor force (Holt et al. 2013).⁶

Though the regulation of each state's convict lease system differed, generally speaking, state contracts required camp administrators to provide adequate living quarters, food, and medical care. The administrators of convict labor camps and inspectors who monitored them often claimed that the laborers received these protections and necessities; however, these reports are suspect and unreliable representations of day-to-day camp life. Camp operators were often alerted in advance of the inspectors' visits, allowing them to alter and improve the conditions inside the camps. Inspectors' reports are also suspect, because they relied partially on the testimony of convict laborers who often feared retribution if they spoke ill of their conditions and of their treatment in labor camps.

Despite these safeguards that produced more sanguine descriptions of labor camps, the laborers, the occasional inspector, and even former camp administrators drafted narratives of life in convict labor camps that conflict with the inspectors' more propitious accounts of life, labor, and punishment in convict labor camps. Collectively, these narratives suggest that race played an important role in the treatment of convict laborers. Judges were more likely to convict African Americans, and they routinely give black laborers longer sentences. After convict laborers were transferred to labor camps, laborers were often segregated by race, with white laborers receiving preferential treatment (Curtin 2000). The sum total of these factors created a regime of incarceration where white and black laborers often, although not always, had significantly different experiences inside labor camps (Carleton 1967).⁷

⁵ Scholars debate the relationship between the convict lease system and race-based slavery. Blackmon (2008) notably called the convict lease system "slavery by another name". As Oshinsky argued (Oshinsky 1996), the conditions in convict labor camps were often worse than slavery. Muller (2018), however, correctly highlights that the convict lease system was different from race-based slavery in important ways. Specifically, it had a smaller scale. Additionally, slavery was primarily an agricultural institution, while convict leasing was primarily industrial.

⁶ Scholars disagree on the factors that motivated convict leasing. While this paper focuses on the racial demographics associated with the convict lease system, scholars like Ward and Rogers (1987) situate the lease system within the context of the agrarian revolt. Ayers (1992) argued that a variety of factors combined to create the convict lease system. As Pruitt (2001) describes, Ayers' researched recent scholarship looks at multiple and competing factors that motivated the convict lease system.

⁷ While black laborers collectively received more harsh and consistent punishments than white laborers, there are numerous examples of white laborers who were beaten to death or treated so harshly they either tried to commit suicide or were successful. Inspectors in Georgia, for example, encountered a white laborer who alleged that he had not eaten in fourteen days and was trying to starve himself (see Lee 1886, p. 41). For a summary of a white convict who was allegedly beaten to death, see Carper (1973).

Occasionally, camp inspectors documented harsh and oppressive conditions inside the labor camps, where they noted that laborers went without food, water, shelter, and even suitable clothing. A deputy inspector noted that in one particular mine, “Most of the Negroes have not had a change of clothing in from three to nine weeks and are as lousy as they can be” (Blackmon 2008, p. 78). Laborers in mines and swamps often had to work in neck-high water, where they fended off not only sexual predators in the form of stronger laborers, but animal predators as well.⁸ The conditions in the mines were particularly bad, and one group of inspectors wrote the sum total of the oppressive working conditions combined with the “blackness of indescribable darkness” rendered it also impossible for new laborers to work without a sufficient adjustment period (Dawson 1886, p. 7). “It is simply impossible for a new man to work with such surroundings,” they wrote, “but in a few days things begin to appear more natural” (Dawson 1886, p. 7). Laborers also faced rampant sicknesses and diseases, which spread routinely through the various camps. Diarrhea and dysentery were the norm, while other illnesses like malaria and pneumonia frequently appeared. Laborers not only feared diseases and malnutrition, but they also tried to avoid corporal punishment. Convict laborers typically had daily quotas, and those who failed to meet these quotas or who objected to their treatment or conditions were routinely punished not only by the lash, but by sweat boxes, watering, and various other disciplinary techniques. As one scholar noted, “the brutal forms of physical punishment employed against ‘prisoners’ . . . were the same as those used against ‘slaves’ in 1840” (Blackmon 2008, p. 8).

The conditions inside convict labor camps were so bleak that mortality rates exceeded 20% in some camps. One camp operator partially explained the rationale for the poor treatment of convict laborers when he noted that camp administrators had little incentive to provide for the laborers. “Before the war,” he noted, “we owned the negroes. If a man had a good negro, he could afford to keep him But these convicts, we don’t own ‘em. One dies, get another” (cf. Mancini 1996, pp. 2–3). As this suggests, the sum total of scarcity, long work hours, oppressive work conditions, lack of food and health care, and harsh disciplinary techniques combined to make life inside convict labor camps—in the words of one scholar—worse than slavery (Oshinsky 1996).

2. Religion and/in Convict Lease Camps

In these otherwise harsh and oppressive labor camps, laborers found solace anywhere they could, and for most laborers, Protestant Christianity was their own option. One scholar noted as much when he wrote that Protestant Christianity provided laborers “the one regular diversion permitted [to] forced workers” (Blackmon 2008, p. 98). More often than not, chaplains, ministers, and religious volunteers were perhaps the only people who counselled or comforted the laborers. Long before southern states created convict lease systems, chaplains had already proved themselves important elements of the states’ carceral systems. As religious studies scholar Jennifer Graber described, chaplains played important roles in the nation’s first penitentiaries, where they ministered to the incarcerated and where they coordinated volunteer labor (Graber 2011). Their labor in American penitentiaries is but one example of the larger nineteenth-century dynamic where Christian reformers felt called to engage in moral, cultural, and political reforms. By the end of the Civil War and on the eve of southern Reconstruction, prison administrators accepted as natural the idea of state-funded chaplains as moral stewards.

This idea continued into convict lease camps, where state-funded chaplains typically visited the convict lease camps to minister to the laborers and to encourage their religiosity.⁹ Most chaplains were itinerant ministers who travelled between camps by rail or by horse, preaching sermons and

⁸ For a description of life in convict labor camps in Florida’s swamps, see Powell (1891). For an extensive summary of Florida’s convict lease system, see Handley (1993). See also Roberts (1981).

⁹ In 1901, a state-funded chaplain received an annual income of \$300; a rather modest salary considering the chaplain’s responsibilities. R. F. Rogers, Supervisor of State Convicts, repeatedly lobbied for a higher wage for the chaplain and for additional chaplains. See “Report of the Supervisor of State Convicts” (Rogers 1901).

distributing religious literature. Time allowing, chaplains counselled the laborers one-on-one,¹⁰ but chaplains tasked with visiting a dozen or so camps had limited face-to-face time with individual laborers. One particular chaplain in Georgia noted that he delivered 197 sermons in one year as he travelled between camps, regularly attracting more than 100 convict laborers for each service. Extensive travel presented a challenge to chaplains, as it limited their ability to preach to laborers. This was particularly problematic for a chaplain in Alabama who believed that face-to-face preaching “is God’s chosen instrumentality for the reformation and conversion of the world” (Nicholson 1892, p. 65).

Camp administrators accommodated these chaplains, and the historical records demonstrate that some administrators even required some of the laborers to attend the chaplains’ services. A camp in Georgia provides one such example, where black laborers were forced to attend segregated Sunday services. According to one of the attendees, the chaplain

would always finish in the same vein and with the same thought. These were almost his exact words: “If you suffer and are in pain and misery, it is God’s will. It matters not what your lot may be, the only thing of earthly importance is to save your soul. If the only way a man’s soul might be saved was by hanging him by the neck until dead, or electrocuting him, if these things were the only ways his soul could be saved, it would be better to kill him and save his soul than to let him live and lose his soul”. (cf. Burns 1997, pp. 185–86)

Some of the convict laborers apparently internalized this message, including a black convict who professed that he deserved his punishment because he was, in his words, “in trouble with the Lord”. Similarly, a convict in Alabama wrote a religious leaflet titled “the Story of a Lie”, where he wrote of the misdeeds of his life and how they led him to the convict labor camp. As this suggests, convict religiosity was simultaneously a source of comfort and control, consciously deployed to help the convict laborers accept their status as slaves of the states. Chaplains played pivotal roles in this process as they taught services, taught Bible studies, coordinated volunteers, and provided other administrative support.

In short, chaplains were extremely busy and played multiple roles in the camps. One chaplain described these roles and identified his various responsibilities when he described how in his first year-and-a-half on the job,

I have spent 69 Sundays in the prisons laboring among the convicts; have preached 115 sermons to the convicts; have visited the sick in the hospitals; have attended the burial of dead when it was possible for me to do so. I have distributed among the convicts three hundred and six copies of the Scriptures, and four thousand six hundred and ninety-six copies of religious papers, and three thousand one hundred and ninety-three copies of secular papers. In addition to this, we have had fourteen hundred and forty copies of religious papers sent to them through the mails. I have also furnished them with eleven thousand and three hundred pages of tracts. Also two thousand four hundred and eighty-six copies of Sunday school quarterlies and lesson papers, and eighty-eight copies of Sunday School Magazines. (Nicholson 1888, p. 247)

As this suggests, chaplains played various roles as ministers, counselors, and administrators.

Chaplains also worked with volunteer ministers (both ordained and lay) and with religious societies who provided the laborers with religious counseling and religious literature, who organized Sunday services or weekly study groups, and who baptized convict laborers. In 1904, for example, R.F. Rogers, Supervisor of State Convicts in Florida, credited volunteer Reverend James Teeter with

having done more hard work, with practical results, to furnish the entire prison camps of the State with proper literature, than any other person or organization of persons in the State. As

¹⁰ In 1895, Chaplain V. A. Herlong described how the state had fewer camps the past few years, which allowed him to “talk to each [convict] concerning his soul’s salvation”. See Herlong (1895, p. 83).

a result of his efforts, and the co-operation [sic] of this department, we now have at each camp a small bookcase filled with such books as are proper for prisoners to read. Too much cannot be said in praise of Mr. Teeter for his great interest in the prisoners. ([Department of Agriculture 1905](#), p. 320)

Four years later, with Reverend Teeter's help, every camp in Florida had at least one Bible in addition to the Ten Commandments, The Apostles' Creed, and Beatitudes "printed on canvas, in large letters", which hung on the sleeping and dining halls in each camp ([Department of Agriculture 1909](#), p. 423). Teeters was but one of the many volunteers who encouraged convict religiosity during the convict lease system.

In addition to state-funded chaplains and volunteers, the laborers themselves often organized religious services. As one regional camp supervisor wrote, "in each camp there is found among the inmates one or several 'preachers' who conduct regularly the religious services at these isolated camps" ([Department of Agriculture 1905](#), pp. 330–31). The historical sources do not provide much information about these preachers or about the content of their services; however, the sources do suggest that laborer-led services and studies were common aspects of convict labor camps. Convict laborers also organized Bible study groups, such as The Christian Endeavor Society, a whites-only Christian study group that met every Thursday night under the tutelage of "some ladies and gentlemen in Birmingham" ([Department of Agriculture 1905](#), pp. 330–31). Convict laborers in another labor camp in Alabama similarly organized a whites-only Young Men's Prison Christian Association. One of the group's administrators described the group when she wrote, "The principal feature of this Association is the study of the Bible in a practical way; taking a subject and finding all references to be had, on the same subject. Sometimes Biblical concerts are given, from which is derived much real pleasure by all who are present. This Association does more for the morality of the average prisoner than any other feature of the Reform department" ([Andrews 1894](#), p. 72). As The Christian Endeavor Society and the Young Men's Prison Christian Association suggest, white laborers had the ability to organize formal Bible studies aided by volunteer labor. The historical records also document informal religious study groups for black laborers, although these groups appear to lack outside and administrative sponsors.

As an ancillary to explicitly Protestant socialization, some camps created night schools to help the laborers acquire basic educations that would help them avoid future criminal behavior. These schools were voluntary and typically met at night when classes would not interfere with work, which remained the camps' primary objective. The pedagogical content varied between camps, but tended to focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic. The curriculum in Alabama's night schools was one of the more comprehensive and included reading, spelling, writing, arithmetic, geography, U.S. History, physiology, short hand, letter writing, and composition. Teachers and camp administrators itemized each laborer's proficiency by placing an "X" in each category when the teacher believed the laborer had sufficient knowledge of each category of learning. Camp administrators acknowledged that the content was quite basic and instilled in most laborers only the bare minimum; however, administrators also acknowledged that the night schools were the only formal education some of the laborers ever received.

Despite the emphasis on seemingly secular material, night schools in convict labor camps also included Protestant socialization. Camp administrators expected the teachers to serve as moral, ethical, and religious role models. To that end, teachers prayed before and after classes, they asked laborers to read from the Bible, and they helped the chaplain during Sunday's religious services, often themselves leading Sunday schools. These teachers also mobilized their communities to donate Bibles and Protestant tracts, pamphlets, and books, which they donated either to the school or the chaplain himself. In short, camp administrators relied on a steady flow of information between the night schools' teachers and the chaplains, creating the impression that, even in the night classes, Protestant Christianity was an essential component of successful rehabilitation and desistance.

This cursory summary of state- and camp-sanctioned Protestant socialization combines to highlight how politicians, camp administrators, and private volunteers collectively encouraged this type of socialization for the nation's enslaved convict laborers. The question remains: Why? States had no

legal obligation to encourage or to even accommodate laborer religiosity. The fact remains, however, that Protestant Christianity was a staple in convict labor camps. One camp administrator described the rationale for this accommodation when he said, “let the State do something more than punish [convict laborers]. Let the Sabbath and the intervals between the prescribed hours of labor and rest, be bridged over by an educational process, that will direct the mind from dwelling hopeless on their past lives, and turn their thoughts from their accustomed, and depraved channels” (Hayes 1886, p. 238). Another camp administrator echoed this sentiment when he wrote, “It has been my intention to learn well, the disposition of the prisoner—of whom ‘tis my duty to try to make a better and wiser man—and thereby act in such a way that I may receive best results from my labors mentally, morally, and religiously” (Andrews 1894, p. 68). In other words, camp administrators believed that Protestant Christianity could help improve the laborers’ morality and character. For these administrators, Christian socialization “worked” when it convinced the laborers to discipline themselves and to accept the conditions inside the camps. In the process, camp administrators reinforced notions of American citizenship in the post-war South predicated on the combination of work and individual discipline rooted in their versions of Protestant moral codes.

3. Conclusions

This essay provided, first, a cursory overview of legalized slavery in the form of convict lease camps after the Civil War, which impacted perhaps several hundred thousand Americans (and more if we consider the families and dependents who relied on convicted laborers for economic or other forms of support). States enslaved these people regardless of their race, gender, or ethnicity, but the overwhelming majority were newly freed black Americans (and more specifically, black men). These slaves returned to manual labor arguably in conditions worse than slavery, where they labored for administrators who had little interest in the laborers’ well-being. These conditions persisted until several factors combined to close the camps, including a growing awareness of the conditions and treatment of laborers inside labor camps, political fear that convict labor camps damaged the states’ reputations, and perhaps more importantly, several states feared that they would lose tax revenues from tourists who avoided the state because of their convict labor camps. The era of convict labor camps came to an end in 1923 when the State of Florida became the last state to outlaw the convict lease system (although some counties continued to lease convicts to private parties).

This essay also provided an overview of the role of Protestant socialization in convict labor camps, where multiple parties—including the laborers themselves—supported convict religiosity. Protestant Christianity played multiple and perhaps even conflicting roles inside the labor camps, yet despite the near pervasive presence of Protestant Christianity in most camps, scholars have largely ignored this topic and have yet to include it in the academic literature that addresses black religion, black history more broadly, American religious history, and the history of slavery in the United States. Scholars interested in any of these topics would be served by exploring these issues in greater detail in future research.

These explorations are hindered by limited sources, as firsthand accounts of life inside convict lease camps are few and far between. Many of the laborers themselves were either illiterate or had few opportunities to document and preserve their experiences. Despite this scarcity, “a vast record of original documents and personal narratives” can be found not only in the files of the Department of Justice at the National Archives and in the records that state inspectors, politicians, and camp administrators kept, but also “in the attics and basements of courthouses, old county jails, storage sheds, and local historical societies” (Blackmon 2008, p. 6). Additional sources include the letters that convict laborers wrote to governors and inspectors, WAP slave narratives, and the lyrics of blues and gospel music popular in black churches and in African American communities. Collectively, these sources provide ample material for scholars to begin substantive investigations of the multiple and competing forms of convict religion in what journalist Douglas Blackmon described as the “forgotten crime against African Americans” (Blackmon 2008, p. 4).

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