

Convict Labor ^[1]

Share it now!



Convict Labor

by Matthew J. Mancini, 2006

See also: [Chain Gang](#) ^[2].



Convicts working on road clearing, 1920-1940. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

^[3]Convict labor and convict leasing, the practice of using convicts for work in the public or private sector, was common throughout the South after the Civil War. Its history in North Carolina was complicated by the state's confusing prison system, a patchwork of penitentiaries and work camps whose supervision was constantly in dispute between county and state officials. Unlike some states, North Carolina built a [state penitentiary](#) ^[4] in 1870, and the great majority of its prison labor—an average of 65 percent between 1870 and 1890—was absorbed by construction of the [Western North Carolina Railroad](#) ^[5], a state-owned enterprise. Indeed, North Carolina's nineteenth-century [rail network](#) ^[6] was largely an achievement of convict labor. These prisoners endured terrible conditions, usually living in filthy railroad cars that had been converted into rolling jailhouses by the addition of bunks, a kitchen stove, and iron rings to accommodate the convicts' chains.

By the late 1800s, when the construction phase of railroad development had concluded, two other industries began to compete for convict labor: road building and farming. In 1887 the legislature authorized counties to establish chain gangs at their own discretion. Equally significant was the state's purchase or lease of extensive farmland in the 1890s. By 1898, 90 percent of the state's prisoners (that is, virtually all able-bodied men) farmed over 8,000 acres. The largest farm, the 4,100-acre [Caledonia](#) ^[7], bought in 1893 for \$67,000, yielded the state \$1,000 a week in profits by the mid-1920s.

The state of North Carolina and its counties competed fiercely for custody of sentenced felons, and soon the state opened its own chain gang camps. Because of this unique state-county tug-of-war that masqueraded as prison management, the state did not secure responsibility for all convict operations until 1933. After that, the state simply took over existing county highway camps, and the prison system itself was placed under the jurisdiction of the [State Highway Commission](#) ^[8].

References:

Darnell F. Hawkins, "State versus County: Prison Policy and Conflicts of Interest in North Carolina," *Criminal Justice History* 5 (1984).

Matthew J. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928* (1996).

Jesse F. Steiner and Roy M. Brown, *The North Carolina Chain Gang: A Study of County Convict Road Work* (1969).

Additional Resources:

"An Act To Amend the Charter of the Western Division of the Western North Carolina Railroad." *Public laws and resolutions, together with the private laws, of the State of North Carolina, passed by the General Assembly at its session of 1872-73*. 1873. Raleigh [N.C.]: Stone and Uzzell. p.290. <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/u/?p249901coll22,182094> ^[9] (November 2, 2012).

Biennial Report of the Directors and Officers of the N. C. State Penitentiary Raleigh [N.C.]: Josiah Turner. 1876. <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/u/?p249901coll22,108339> ^[10] (November 2, 2012).

Pratt, Joseph Hyde. "Convict Labor in Highway Construction." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 46, Prison Labor (March, 1913. pp. 78-87.<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1012371> ^[11] (November 2, 2012).

Thomas, Susan W. "Chain gangs, roads, and reform in North Carolina, 1900-1935." Dissertation,[University of North Carolina at Greensboro](http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/listing.aspx?id=8322) ^[12]. 2011. <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/listing.aspx?id=8322> ^[13] (November 2, 2012).

Steiner, Jesse Frederick, and Roy M Brown. *The North Carolina Chain Gang: A Study of County Convict Road Work* Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970.

Image Credits:

"Photograph, Accession #: [H.1958.24.43](https://www.ncpedia.org/convict-labor) ^[3]." 1920-1940. North Carolina Museum of History.

Subjects:

[Reconstruction \(1865-1876\)](#) ^[14]

[Gilded Age \(1876-1900\)](#) ^[15]

[N.C. Industrial Revolution \(1900-1929\)](#) ^[16]

[Governmental programs](#) ^[17]

[Law and legal history](#) ^[18]

[UNC Press](#) ^[19]

Authors:

[Mancini, Matthew J.](#) ^[20]

From:

[Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.](#) ^[21]

1 January 2006 | Mancini, Matthew J.

Source URL: <https://www.ncpedia.org/convict-labor>

Links

[1] <https://www.ncpedia.org/convict-labor>

[2] <https://www.ncpedia.org/chain-gang>

[3] <http://collections.ncdcr.gov/RediscoveryProficioPublicSearch/ShowItem.aspx?119487+>

[4] <https://www.ncpedia.org/state-prison>

[5] <https://www.ncpedia.org/western-north-carolina-railroad>

[6] <https://www.ncpedia.org/railroads>

[7] <https://www.ncpedia.org/caledonia>

[8] <https://www.ncpedia.org/highway-commission>

[9] <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/u/?p249901coll22,182094>

[10] <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/u/?p249901coll22,108339>

[11] <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1012371>

[12] <https://www.ncpedia.org/university-north-carolina-greensbor>

[13] <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/listing.aspx?id=8322>

[14] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/reconstruction>

[15] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/gilded-age-1876-1>

[16] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/nc-industrial-rev>

[17] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/governmental-prog>

[18] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/laws>

[19] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/unc-press>

[20] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/mancini-matthew-j>

[21] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/encyclopedia->