

“The Hand that Rocks the Cradle Cuts Cordwood”: Exploring Black Women’s Lives and Labor in Georgia’s Convict Camps, 1865–1917

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On August 12, 1903, reporter E. C. Bruffey witnessed an unusual spectacle at the Georgia state prison farm. As he approached the main entrance to the women’s quarters, he “was met by a woman . . . attired in a pair of knee trousers made of gray goods, looking for all the world like the base running extremities of a ball player.” She wore a gray shirt “over which suspenders were drawn to hold up the knickerbockers . . . while upon the convict’s head sat a hat with a broad, wide brim, a brim broad and wide enough to have satisfied any farm hand of the neighborhood.”¹ Bruffey was captivated by the sight of this mysterious “Negro woman” dressed in male clothing and was eager to learn more about her. His curiosity led him to conduct an exclusive interview with the camp warden, where his suspicions confirmed that Mattie Crawford was no ordinary prisoner. She was, in fact, a “trusty” and the sole blacksmith for the prison farm.

In 1896, Crawford was sentenced to serve a life term in the Georgia state penitentiary for killing her stepfather. She alleged that the man abused her. So, one day “when he came into the house she took up a chair and brained him with it.”² Shortly after her sentencing, Crawford was leased to the Chattahoochee Brick Company. “After being there a while her great strength and activity caused those in charge of her to plan heavy work for her. She expressed a desire to become a blacksmith and she was taught the trade.”³

Crawford served three years at the Chattahoochee brickyard before being transferred to the Georgia state prison farm in Milledgeville. She quickly became an

1. E. C. Bruffey, “Only Woman Blacksmith in America Is a Convict,” *Constitution* (Atlanta, Georgia), August 19, 1903.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

iconic figure in the city, where it was confidently stated that she could “shoe a mule quicker than any man in the vicinity.”⁴ In 1903, Crawford was propelled to local stardom after Bruffey profiled her story in the Atlanta-based *Constitution* newspaper. The journalist’s candid portrayal of his encounter with Crawford was made complete by a photograph of the bondswoman holding her blacksmithing kit below a headline that read, “Only Woman Blacksmith in America Is a Convict.” Crawford’s reputation as a blacksmith made her a luminary in Georgia. Yet, she and others like her remain elusive in the historical narrative. This study exposes the clandestine world of black women prisoners held in Georgia’s convict camps after the Civil War and investigates how their incarceration benefited Georgia’s postbellum industrial and agricultural enterprises.

As the first light of emancipation became visible to the 4 million slaves held in bondage in the South, the darkness of captivity was illuminated by the promises that freedom held. Freedmen and women eagerly and optimistically embraced the prospects of reuniting with loved ones, acquiring land, gaining access to education, and enjoying the fruits of citizenship. Although voting rights were not extended to black women, African American men clung to the hope of exercising their political freedom. The right to define the terms of one’s labor, to move about freely without the threat of the lash, and to build and expand black institutions, free from white authority, further defined the freedmen’s agenda to permanently disavow “the badge of servitude” that marked the genuine and emblematic control whites had exercised over each aspect of their existence.⁵

The reconstruction of the black family was a top priority for freedmen and women, who enthusiastically changed their last names and legalized their marriages. Former slaves also expressed autonomy over their domestic lives by recognizing sex roles and a distinct division of labor within their households. In rural southern communities, black men asserted themselves as heads of household and routinely discouraged their wives from working outside of the home. However, poverty was a hostile culprit that pressed destitute freedmen and women into contractual agreements with ex-planters, many of whom were their former owners.

Sharecropping provided a convenient labor option for landless freedmen and women who did not benefit from the federal government’s failed plan of land redistribution. Ex-slaves who remained in the fields were paid in monthly wages or shares of

4. Ibid.

5. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 79; for further reading see W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: S. A. Russell Company, 1935); Alan Conway, *The Reconstruction of Georgia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966); C. Mildred Thompson, *Reconstruction in Georgia: Economic, Social, Political, 1865–1872* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1915); Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, eds., *The Freedmen’s Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999); Carol Faulkner, *Women’s Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen’s Aid Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

the crop produced and were provided with tools, seed, shelter, and other commodities essential to labor production. A substantial number of black women in the countryside engaged in agricultural work alongside men, "digging, hoeing, and chopping in the fields," in addition to domestic duties that often included cooking, tending to children, sewing, laundering, or even hog butchering.⁶ Most former slaves who worked as sharecroppers and tenant farmers toiled desperately to eke out a basic living. Yet, the sharecropping system created a semblance of normalcy for some black families.

In Georgia, 80 percent of freedmen and women resided in rural counties after the Civil War. A sizeable percentage of married freedwomen who lived in rural communities abandoned fieldwork to focus on the interests of their households and to fulfill their maternal obligations. In 1870, more than 60 percent of African American women residing in Dougherty County stayed at home.⁷ Whereas some black women in Georgia, especially single women, found agricultural work inescapable, married women commonly relied on their husbands to provide for their families by working in the fields. These women were "taken from the field to the shanty, to live the lady,"⁸ much to the chagrin of white Georgians who bemoaned the loss of this valuable labor supply.

White southerners expressed apprehension and fear over African Americans' desire for family independence and the tendency among wives and mothers to avoid wage labor in favor of attending to their own households. Black women who all but "retired from the fields" in the mid-1860s symbolized a significant withdrawal of potential laborers from the cotton fields, which escalated planters' fears about low agricultural productivity.⁹ Southern whites, in both the rural and urban areas, unanimously contended that black wives and mothers should continue working outside the home.

For black men and women who labored on the land, the sharecropping system carried the vestiges of slavery and perpetuated a system of racial subordination and forced labor that existed before the war. The inability of black sharecroppers to meet their expected crop quotas and fulfill their contractual obligations resulted in bondage for those who could not leave the land until their debts were settled. Black farm workers made a substantial contribution to the economic recovery of the South but were left with a financial burden that sometimes cost them their freedom.

One Georgia man was urged by his former owner to remain on the plantation to work for shares. He signed a one-year contract and was to be given \$3.50 per week and a one-room log cabin. During the same year, he met and married his

6. Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 89. For further reading, see Susan Mann's "Slavery, Sharecropping, and Sexual Inequality," *Signs* 14 (1989): 774–98. Also see Minnie Miller Brown's "Black Women in American Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 50, no. 1 (1976): 202–12.

7. Edmund L. Drago, "Militancy and Black Women in Reconstruction Georgia," *Journal of American Culture* 1 (1978): 842.

8. *Macon Daily Telegraph*, April 7, 1866, as quoted in Drago, "Militancy and Black Women," 842.

9. Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 45.

wife, Mandy, who was a house servant for the “captain” and his family. The couple upgraded to a two-room shanty on the property, which made the sharecropper feel like “the biggest man in Georgia.”¹⁰ He was so impressed with his employer’s seeming generosity that he renewed his contract consecutively for four more years. By the fifth year, however, his previous owner had died and left the plantation to a son, a senator¹¹ who persuaded the fieldworker to sign a ten-year contract. The man did not know that he would be forced to labor alongside convicts who he contended were treated like slaves, as was he and his wife.

Shortly after signing the long-term contract, the sharecropper noticed that the senator began to assemble a long, low-level shanty with rows of frames and stalls running through it. The structure, the man believed, would be utilized for holding horses. However, to his surprise, these were accommodations made for convicts who were hired to work on the farm alongside the free laborers. The senator had leased these men from the state penitentiary at a rate of \$200, each, per year. Once the second set of convicts arrived at the camp, six months later, another stockade was built and “twenty or thirty other convicts were brought to the plantation, among them six or eight women! . . . Sometimes, when I have seen them dressed like men and plowing or hoeing or hauling logs or working at the blacksmith’s trade, just the same as men, my heart would bleed and my blood would boil, but I was powerless to raise a hand.”¹²

The meanings of freedom held by former slaves stood in stark contrast to the interpretation of black freedom by white southerners, who were unable or unwilling to accept the changing socioeconomic and political conditions wrought by the Civil War. Postwar chaos and disorder challenged all segments of southern society. Yet, the future of ex-slaves took center stage in regional debates. In an effort to curtail the social, economic, and political mobility of freedmen and women and to reinforce black subordination and white supremacy, white southerners immediately set out on campaigns of terror and violence. With support of the law, extralegal justice became the status quo. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK), founded in 1866, used terror to intimidate black men from the polls and to destroy black institutions. African American women, however, were especially beleaguered by the confluence of physical and gendered oppression that took shape in the form of sexual assaults.

During the postemancipation period, black women still bore the stigma of sexual stereotypes formed in slavery. The Jezebel prototype, which was constructed in the minds of southern planters to help justify female enslavement and the rape of bondwomen, possessed a voracious sexual appetite and invited the illicit overtures of

10. “The Life Story of a Negro Peon, obtained from an Interview with a Georgia Negro,” in Hamilton Holt, *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans, as Told by Themselves* (New York: James Pott & Co., 1906), cited in Gerda Lerner’s *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 151.

11. It is difficult to ascertain which senator, in particular, operated this specific convict camp. However, it was customary for state and local politicians to acquire bids for convict labor.

12. “The Life Story of a Negro Peon,” cited in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 152.

white males.¹³ In the aftermath of emancipation, black women were still encased by this enduring sexual stereotype, and the rape of black women was defended on the old grounds of sexual promiscuity.¹⁴ However, in an increasingly virulent and hostile racial climate, rape served a new set of functions: to operate as a locus of control, a tool of debasement, and a weapon of terror.

In Georgia, "organized sexual-assault raids against black women were especially common in rural areas where terrorist groups like the KKK thrived."¹⁵ In one such case, Rhoda Ann Childs of Henry County was dragged from her home and attacked by eight white men while "one of the two men stood upon my breast" and the "two others took hold of my feet and stretched my limbs as far apart as they could while the man standing upon my breast applied the strap to my private parts. . . . Then a man supposed to be an ex-Confederate soldier . . . fell upon me and ravished me. During the whipping one of the men had run his pistol into me, and said he had a great mind to pull the trigger."¹⁶

Gendered violence and terror was not solely executed in the form of sexual assault but also took place in the form of lynching. While black men, who were perceived as the archetypal rapists of white women, were lynched as an act of "southern chivalry," black women were most commonly hanged for "murder or assault against a white person, or arson or theft of white property."¹⁷ Belle Hathaway of Hamilton, Georgia, was lynched after attempting to defend herself against a sexual attack.¹⁸ In another case, the corpse of Mary Turner was found dangling from Folsom bridge in Brooks County, sixteen miles north of Valdosta. She made "unwise remarks about the execution of her husband," Hays Turner, who was lynched for his alleged involvement in the murder of Hampton Smith and the assault on Smith's wife. On a Sunday afternoon, "the people in their indignant mood took exceptions to her remarks, as well as her attitude, and without waiting for nightfall, took her to the river where

13. See Deborah Gray White, *Arn't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985), for a more comprehensive discussion of the mythology of black womanhood during slavery and the genesis of black female sexual stereotypes.

14. Catherine Clinton, "Bloody Terrain: Freedwomen, Sexuality, and Violence during Reconstruction," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 76 (1992): 321. For further reading on black women, crime, and sexual violence, see Kali Gross, *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

15. Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 33; Hunter's analysis provides the most comprehensive examination of working-class southern black women's lives and labor in the urban South.

16. Rhoda Ann Childs, "Affadavit of the Wife of a Discharged Georgia Black Soldier," September 25, 1866, in *The Black Military Experience*, vol. 2 of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861–1867*, ed. Ira Berlin, Joseph Reidy, and Leslie Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 807.

17. Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 160. For further reading, see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); and Donald G. Nieman, ed., *Black Freedom/White Violence, 1865–1900* (New York: Garland, 1994).

18. Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 172.

she was hanged. . . . The mob started to burn her and after her clothes were burned off they hung her and riddled her with bullets.”¹⁹

In response to the unchecked violence and terror meted against black victims, male and female alike, a minor population of African American men and women fled the rural South and migrated to southern cities in hopes of securing greater economic opportunities and protection from the persisting dangers of racial hostility and white violence. In Atlanta, black women found domestic work as the most tenable employment option available. More than 90 percent of black female wage earners in the city were employed as either household servants or laundresses. African American women formed the largest segment of the black working class in Atlanta. Conversely, the restrictions placed on black men’s employment severely reduced their ability to engage in the labor market. Therefore, in black urban households there was a greater proportion of female-headed families and women who participated in the paid work force.²⁰

Even as the contours of black women’s lives in the urban South paralleled in many ways, the degree of labor autonomy black laundresses expressed over household servants was largely evident and highly contested by white Georgians. Black laundresses that “lived out” enjoyed greater occupational and personal independence by working outside of white households. These entrepreneurs set their own wages, quit at will, and rejected outright degrading work “like washing white women’s menstrual rags”²¹ but were contained by the limited employment options for black women, who were confined to some form of domestic service.

For young, unmarried African American women, “living in” afforded the greatest opportunity for economic advancement. Nonetheless, these domestic arrangements were less than satisfying for black women, who routinely endured physical and sexual assault and were subject to the constant scrutiny of their white employers. One “Negro” woman said, “[I] lost my place because I refused to let my madam’s husband kiss me. . . . Soon after I was installed as cook, he walked up to me, threw his arms around me, and was in the act of kissing me, when I demanded to know what he meant, and shoved him away.” After she returned home, she told her husband about the incident. Her husband then “went to the man who had insulted me” and “the man cursed him, and slapped him, and—had him arrested! The police judge fined my husband \$25.”²² The incident exposed how southern courts upheld acts of violence against African American men and women. It also demonstrated the degree to which the southern legal system all but sanctioned the sexual exploitation of black women by white men.

19. “Five Lynched in Brooks Co.,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, May 20, 1918.

20. Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 113.

21. White, *Arn’t I a Woman*, 172.

22. “More Slavery at the South,” by a Negro nurse, *Independent*, vol. 72, no. 3295 (January 25, 1912), 197–200, cited in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 155–56.

The exercise of unmitigated power among legal officials in the South produced adverse consequences for black workers. Yet, the practice of excessive legal authority found its greatest manifestation within southern jails and prisons. Southern injustice was conjoined with racism, brutality, profit, and greed as aspiring industrialists and southern state governments worked hand in hand to create systems of forced prison labor that would expand state treasuries and foster industrial development in the South.

On its swift march toward modernization, Georgia, the heartbeat of the New South, developed one of the most sophisticated and elaborate systems of forced convict labor in the region. Bearing the widest range of industries in the New South, Georgia commanded the indiscriminate use of both male and female prison labor. Black men and women alike were the most frequent targets of Georgia's "experiment" in correction. In an effort to curtail black "lawlessness" and to obstruct the social, economic, and political mobility of freedmen and women, state officials swiftly devised a plan to hire out "able-bodied" prisoners to private industries. As southern businessmen worked to alter the course of the region's economic progress through industrial capitalism and partnership with northern speculators, they instituted a social, political, and economic order based on racial exclusion and political inequality.²³

The convict lease system of Georgia became a legendary operation but was most iconic for its extensive use of female prison labor. Like that of their male counterparts, black women's labor fit neatly into the New South prescriptions of modernity and industrialization. African American women prisoners toiled in road grading, brick making, mining, turpentine production, blacksmithing, machine operation, and domestic and agricultural work. Because Georgia possessed such a diverse variety of industries in the postwar South, female convict labor was demanded in a much broader capacity.

More than 2,000 felons were detained in Georgia's private lease camps between 1868 and 1908. The convict lease system of Georgia employed, on average, 1,750 prisoners annually. By 1900, the total number of leased convicts equaled 2,258:

23. Ibid., 344. For a broader discussion of convict leasing in the southern states, see Matthew Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866–1928* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996); Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York: Verso, 1996); Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Reenslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008); Milfred Fierce, *Slavery Revisited* (New York: African Studies Research Center, Brooklyn College, City University of New York, 1994); Mary Ellen Curtin, *Black Prisoners and Their World, Alabama, 1865–1900* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); David M. Oshinsky, *“Worse than Slavery”: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Karin A. Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion: The Battle against Convict Labor in the Tennessee Coalfields, 1871–1896* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Martha A. Myers, *Race, Labor, and Punishment in the New South* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998); and W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Spawn of Slavery: The Convict-Lease System in the South," in *Race, Crime, and Justice: A Reader*, ed. Shaun L. Gabbidon and Helen Taylor Greene (New York: Routledge, 2005).

approximately 90 percent black men, 6.93 percent white men, 3 percent black women, and 0.07 percent white women.²⁴ Slightly greater numbers of misdemeanants were worked in county chain-gang camps during this period, building roads and erecting bridges. Of the 2,384 chain-gang laborers, 4.86 percent were black women, 89.5 percent were black men, 5.5 percent were white men, and one was a white woman.²⁵

African American women were arrested for a wide range of offenses including larceny, gambling, bootlegging liquor, adultery, fighting, drunkenness, vagrancy, prostitution, and “disorderly conduct.” Roughly 18 percent of black female arrests were for violent crimes such as murder, manslaughter, and assault. However, most African American women were charged with misdemeanor crimes against society such as fighting, disorderly conduct, drunkenness, petty larceny, and vagrancy.²⁶

In the city of Atlanta, where 40 percent of the population was African American, a greater proportion of arrests were of black men and women. These detentions emanated primarily from charges of public drunkenness, disorderly conduct, loitering, idling, and vagrancy.²⁷ In 1903, there was a total of 14,088 arrests made in the city of Atlanta. Of these arrests, roughly 58 percent were of African Americans, although blacks made up less than half of the total city population. Of the 8,163 black arrests, one-third consisted of African American women.²⁸

Facing an influx of freedmen and women into its cities, county and state officials in Georgia increased their police forces. Police officials in Dougherty County were diligent in carrying out the arrests of black vagrants who were deemed “shiftless negroes” and “vagabonds.” On the afternoon of August 28, 1903, “Sheriff Edwards organized a posse and proceeded to make a clean sweep of the city. The Negro bar rooms and dives in the districts known as Smoky Row and Sandy Bottom were raided. . . . The first raid netted twelve vagabonds, and all during the afternoon and night the jail has been filling up.”²⁹ As the county jails swelled, thousands of misdemeanants were sent to work on chain gangs, while felons, now property of the state, were forced to work in private lease camps.

In the aftermath of emancipation, the Georgia prison population quickly expanded and outgrew the corridors of the state penitentiary in Milledgeville. In December 1866, the General Assembly provided authorization to the state governor to hire out “able-bodied” felons, including women. On May 11, 1868, provisional governor Thomas Ruger granted the first lease of convicts to William A. Fort of the Georgia and Alabama railroad. One hundred prisoners were placed in Fort’s charge

24. Information obtained from the *Second Annual Report*, Georgia Prison Commission, October 1, 1899–October 1, 1900, microfilm drawer 199, box 60, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Morrow, GA, hereafter cited as GDAH, 33, and W. E. B. Du Bois, ed., *Some Notes on Negro Crime particularly in Georgia* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1904), 33.

25. *Second Annual Report*, Georgia Prison Commission, 1899–1900, GDAH, 33.

26. W. E. B. Du Bois, ed., *Some Notes on Negro Crime*, 49–50.

27. *Ibid.*, 49.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Atlanta Constitution*, August 28, 1903.

for one year, for the sum of \$2,500.³⁰ Despite the death of several prisoners, the state government deemed the lease a success.

When Rufus Bullock assumed office in 1868, he became Georgia's first Republican governor. He was a northern businessman who drew capital to the state through the incorporation of railroads and factories. During his two-year stint in office, Bullock successfully incorporated Georgia's convict lease system in an effort to economize railroad production by providing railroad owners with cheap, reliable labor. By December 1868, the contracting firm of William Grant and Thomas Alexander had secured 113 convicts from the state penitentiary to labor on the Macon and Brunswick Railroad.

In June 1869, all 393 prisoners held at the Georgia state penitentiary were "farmed out" to the contracting firm of Grant, Alexander, and Company for a term of two years "to be held, used, and controlled by them for their own use and benefit."³¹ By May 1870, Grant and Alexander expanded their operation and had more than 350 felons, male and female, working on the Macon & Brunswick, Macon & Augusta, and Air-Line railroads. These men were not required to pay the state directly for the use of convict laborers but were responsible for "clothing, feeding, medical attention, transporting, and guarding them from place of conviction to place of work, and defraying all expenses, free of charge to the State, excepting the salary of the Principal Keeper of the Penitentiary."³²

During the summer of 1869, there were nineteen to twenty women working on the Macon & Brunswick and eighteen to twenty women laboring on the Air-Line railroad. These women "did the same kind of work" as men and "they were required to do their business right in the cuts where they worked, the same as the men did. It was taken out in the wheelbarrows and carts."³³ Female convicts who worked in the "cuts" were utilized in the grading of surfaces for railroads, while others "shovel dirt and drive carts. Sometimes there are more women than are needed to drive carts; then they are put to shoveling dirt with the men."³⁴

30. William Andrew Todd Canton, "Convict Lease System," in *New Georgia Encyclopedia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004–2008).

31. Elizabeth A. Taylor, "The Convict Lease System of Georgia, 1866–1908" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1940), 9. For further reading, see Russell Duncan, *Entrepreneur for Equality: Governor Rufus Bullock, Commerce, and Race in Post-Civil War Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994); Russell Duncan, "A Georgia Governor Battles Racism: Rufus Bullock and the Fight for Black Legislators," in *Georgia in Black and White: Explorations in the Race Relations of a Southern State, 1865–1950*, ed. John Inscoe (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994); James F. Cook, *The Governors of Georgia, 1754–2004*, 3rd ed. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005); and Edmund Drago, *Black Politicians and Reconstruction in Georgia: A Splendid Failure* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992).

32. Georgia General Assembly, Proceedings of the Joint Committee appointed to Investigate the Condition of the Georgia Penitentiary, Principal Keeper Report, May 1870, Legislative Investigations, Joint and Special Committees, Legislative Papers, GDAH, 14.

33. Proceedings of the Joint Committee, June 1870, Records of the Georgia Governor's Office, GDAH, 122.

34. *Ibid.*, 137.

Despite reports of severe abuse and improper conduct in the management of state prisoners by the Grant and Alexander firm, Governor Hoke Smith renewed the company's lease in 1871. By this time, prominent Georgians such as Senator John Harris saw the leasing of the penitentiary as "an important experiment" and expressed "great confidence in the result of that experiment; and am now fully satisfied that the labor of the convicts can be so managed as to yield an annual revenue to the State of at least fifty thousand dollars."³⁵

After renewing the contract with Grant, Alexander, and Company in 1871, Governor Smith instituted a five-year lease with several additional individuals and companies: Dade Coal Company, John T. & Wm. D. Grant, T. J. Smith and H. Taylor, Henry Stevens, Northeastern Railroad, Wallace, Haley & Company, and George D. Harris, in 1874.³⁶ Pending the expiration of the aforementioned contracts, in 1876 the General Assembly authorized Smith to create a new lease for a minimum of twenty years. The lease was made to three prison companies that were respectively known as Penitentiary Companies Nos. 1, 2, and 3. "No. 1 was composed of . . . Joseph E. Brown, Julius L. Brown, John T. and Wm. D. Grant, and Jacob W. Seaver; No. 2, B. G. Lockett, John B. Gordon, L. A. Jordan, and W. B. Lowe; and No. 3, Wm. D. Grant, John W. Murphy, W. W. Simpson, Thos. Alexander, and John W. Renfroe. The price to be paid was \$25,000 per annum, irrespective of the number of convicts."³⁷

Several new lessees, including ex-governor Joseph E. Brown, amassed their fortunes through the production of coal and iron. Convict workers played an indispensable role in advancing the coal and iron industries of Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia, respectively. These leasing states largely depended upon convict laborers, who were deemed more "reliable" and "productive" than free laborers.³⁸ Prisoners could be impressed to perform tasks that were either too dangerous or undesirable for free laborers, particularly mining.

In 1874, Joseph Brown's Dade Coal Company was granted the lease of ninety-one convicts to work in his Raccoon Mountain mines. The company wrangled in profits nearing \$100,000 in 1888 alone, and Brown's empire grew as Dade Coal acquired additional holdings, including Walker, Rising Fawn, Chattanooga Iron, and Rogers Railroad and Ore Banks.³⁹ The principal driving force behind Brown's success was black male prisoners. However, there were a number of black women who were also employed at the Dade Coal Camp. In 1874, Henrietta Greene, Amanda Riggins, and Elizabeth Sciplin were all sent to Dade Coal to serve as washerwomen and cooks.⁴⁰ By 1882, several other women, including Carrie Massie, Cass Garrette, Maria Brooks, and Mary Johnson, were also confined in Brown's camp.

35. *Ibid.*, 132.

36. *Second Annual Report*, Georgia Prison Commission, 1899–1900, GDAH, 6.

37. *Ibid.*; the named individuals and companies were occupied in railroad construction and coal and iron production.

38. Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor*, 81.

39. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 86.

40. *Ibid.*

George D. Harris, another southern industrialist who hired convict labor in iron ore production, was granted a modest lease of prisoners in spring of 1874. Sarah Autry, the only woman in his camp, was put to work "raising iron ore." When John T. Brown, principal keeper of the Georgia penitentiary, visited Harris's camp on February 12, 1875, he observed that "the prisoners had been at work raising iron ore all the week, and were just as dirty, and no more dirty than any laboring man would have been after working all the week at the work they were employed at. Raising iron ore is very rough work and the prisoners often tear their clothes during the week,"⁴¹ but "as to the woman Sarah Autry . . . She is a person of dirty habits, perfectly indifferent to her personal appearance, and of the lowest order of humanity."⁴² Although "Sarah Autry is required to wash and dress just as the other prisoners are required to wash and dress . . . this woman is very dirty in her hobbies and it is impossible with ordinary effort to keep her clean."⁴³

Iron and coal production were but two of several industries that garnered revenue through the use of convict labor. Brick manufacturing also drew substantial profit to lessees. James W. English, an ex-confederate, former mayor, and onetime police commissioner of Atlanta, dominated Georgia's bricking industry. He built his empire through the incorporation of several successful companies—Durham Coal and Coke, Iron Belt Railroad and Mining, Georgia Pacific Railroad, and Chattahoochee Brick. English owned more than 25 percent of the Chattahoochee Brick Company, alone, and in 1886 acquired control of Penitentiary Company No. 3. After its reorganization that year, English was able to re-lease the company's prisoners to Chattahoochee Brick, gaining an annual return of 380 percent in leasing fees.⁴⁴ The Chattahoochee Brick Company became the largest brick producer in the state of Georgia and was known for putting free labor out of work.

James English was a prototypical "master" of sorts who recognized the rich potential of using convict labor in his enterprises. From the beginning, Chattahoochee Brick relied heavily on convict workers, and by the 1890s held more than 150 prisoners.⁴⁵ English's company also detained another 150 convicts at a sawmill in Richwood, Georgia, 300 prisoners at its Durham Mines, and dozens more at the Iron Belt Railroad and Mining Company.⁴⁶ By the late 1890s, English's company controlled more than 1,200 of Georgia's 2,881 leased convicts. Prisoners at the Chattahoochee brickyard "produced nearly 33 million bricks in twelve months ending in May 1907, generating sales of \$239,402—or roughly \$5.2 million today."⁴⁷

41. Correspondence, Leased Convicts to Albany and Brunswick, 1875, GDAH.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 90.

45. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name*, 343. For further reading, see David Charles Berry, "Free Labor He Found Unsatisfactory: James W. English and Convict Lease Labor at the Chattahoochee Brick Company" (master's thesis, Georgia State University, 1991).

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 343–45.

English, like other lessees, relied on the energies of both male and female convicts. Few women populated the Chattahoochee brickyard operated by English, which makes it difficult to ascertain what their laboring responsibilities would have been. However, based on the absence of a sexual division of labor in other camps and a failure to distinguish between men and “women’s work,” it is plausible that these women participated in some level of brick production and/or worked as cooks in the camp kitchens. Mollie White, who was fourteen years old, stood five feet tall, and weighed 100 pounds, may not have been most useful in brick manufacturing. However, Mattie Crawford, who stood close to six feet tall and weighed more than 150 pounds, was taught the blacksmith trade at the Chattahoochee camp. She was described as “a woman of enormous strength” who could have easily managed the rigors of brick making.

Alongside industrial and domestic work, female convict labor was essential in farming. James Monroe Smith built his multimillion-dollar estate through the lease of convicts. Smith operated camps in twelve counties,⁴⁸ but at his Smithonia plantation he kept close to one hundred convicts (five or six of whom were women) occupied in the fields “plowing, sowing, hoeing, and reaping” corn, cotton, small grain, potatoes, peas, and cane.⁴⁹ In 1890, just two years before Smith subcontracted all of his female prisoners to W. H. Mattox in Elbert County, he had “four Negro women, all convicted of arson or murder. One with a six-weeks-old baby had killed her husband. Also there was a white girl of eighteen, convicted of murder. Her work was light ‘but her degrading situation preyed on her mind, and finally led her to suicide.’”⁵⁰

By the fall of 1892, Smith subcontracted all sixty-six women under his charge to Colonel W. H. Mattox, a former senator and owner of a six-thousand-acre farm. Mattox established his all-female convict camp in the town of Heardmont, situated in Elbert County. His site was suitably dubbed “Camp Heardmont,” where both female convicts and approximately one hundred free laborers worked the farm. The free laborers worked on the outlying farms separated from the women, who “must be kept distinct and separate, and they must be treated humanely.”⁵¹ The women prisoners worked in the fields nearest the camp for easier monitoring.

At Camp Heardmont, there was no sexual division of labor to be considered, which further necessitated the need to randomly use female convicts in agricultural, domestic, manual, and skilled chores. Women prisoners at Heardmont assisted in a variety of laboring tasks that ranged from cooking, sewing, farming, blacksmithing, and machine operation to cutting and hauling cordwood. According to one observer, “from a financial standpoint, these women give more than value received for their hire. They are workers that would put strong men to shame. The hand that rocks the

48. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 96.

49. E. Merton Coulter, *James Monroe Smith: Georgia Planter, Before Death and After* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1961), 76.

50. *Athens Weekly Banner*, September 9, 1890, as quoted in Coulter, *James Monroe Smith*, 68.

51. “A Queer Colony of Female Convicts in Georgia,” *Weekly News and Courier* (Charleston, SC), November 17, 1897.

cradle cuts cordwood, clears up new ground, pulls fodder, plows like a veteran, and makes itself an indispensable factor in the development of the farm."⁵² One "negro woman . . . is the machinist for the camp and runs a 50-horse power engine. One day her skirts became entangled in the wheels, and she immediately asked permission to wear trousers. . . . She runs the big gristmill and sawmill and does about half of the blacksmithing for the farm."⁵³

Mattox exclusively relied on his "Negro women" to perform the most arduous labor at Camp Heardmont. Pearl Pendergast, the "matron" and only white female at the camp, was relieved of such duties. Suffering from "dropsy," which rendered her "too feeble to work in the field," Pendergast was given light duty, which included looking after the dormitory and doing "a large amount of the sewing of the camp. . . . She is separated from the negro women and is their superior, as she has the counting of the convicts morning and evening entrusted to her care and is given minor authority in the camp."⁵⁴

After seven years, Mattox's operation came to a close. Although his "experiment" was well received and suffered minor scrutiny among prison officials, the Georgia Assembly thought it best to establish a state farm where female convicts, boys younger than fifteen years of age, and men who were "infirm, diseased, or aged" would be held. In 1899, the Georgia state prison farm was established, and all female felons leased throughout the state were relocated to the farm. These women were essential to the productivity of the establishment. "The burden of farm work falls upon the women and boys, who are, as a rule, strong and healthy, and who, not only make their own support, but assist to a large extent in making a support for the men, the most of whom are, by reason of age, infirmity or disease, unable to be self-sustaining" or "unable to perform any labor whatever."⁵⁵

The mandatory and often indiscriminate nature of black women's work in Georgia's prison camps was complicated by the ever-present threat of violence. Prison camps across the New South carried similar vestiges of the plantation system. In Georgia, "whipping bosses" or "overseers" were hired to enforce the rules and mitigate imminent confrontations with their subjects, yet their abuse of power led them to recreate cycles of brutality that evolved within the southern plantation system and became full grown during the postemancipation era. Captain James T. Casey, overseer for the Chattahoochee brickyard, "was a 'barbarous' whipping boss who beat fifteen to twenty convicts each day, often until they begged and screamed."⁵⁶ Ella

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. *Fourth Annual Report*, Georgia Prison Commission, 1900–1901, GDAH, 22.

56. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name*, 345. In addition, the whipping reports submitted by lessees to the Georgia state prison board between 1885 and 1886 are especially vital in tracing the trend in hostility against black women. The plenteous records of the Chattahoochee camp particularly exemplify striking patterns of abuse and resistance among women prisoners.

Gamble, convicted of murder in 1884 and sentenced to a lifetime of hard labor in the penitentiary, was recurrently subjected to Casey's rage and beaten regularly for "disobeying rules" and threatening the overseer's life.⁵⁷

Several female convicts who were leased to the Grant and Alexander firm and forced to labor on the Macon & Brunswick Railroad were whipped "for not working when they had become exhausted from heat of the sun and fatigue in the cuts; for quarrelling and fighting; for complaining of being sick and not able to work."⁵⁸ Women prisoners who were unable to load the large pieces of rock and debris in a wheelbarrow and roll it up the dirt-and-rock heap of the "cuts" were flogged, sometimes "bucked," and hit with rocks that would "knock them speechless."⁵⁹

In September 1908, Mattie Black was confined to a chain-gang camp in Sumpter County. One month later her sentence was commuted based on the recommendation of the camp physician who reported that "the said Mattie Black is suffering from the result of a fracture of the breast bone, and of the seventh and eighth ribs on the right side, and the results of injuries received internally when said fracture was occasioned."⁶⁰ In another case, "a young girl was sent to a chain-gang camp in Wilkes county. . . . For any small offense the white 'boss' would beat her on her bare back before the male convicts—her pleading would have no effect on the white 'boss.' The Governor pardoned this unfortunate girl that she might be relieved of her sufferings."⁶¹

Overlapping patterns of abuse, combined with inhumane living quarters, putrid food rations, and little to no medical care, exacerbated illnesses and led to many female deaths in the state's prison camps. These fatalities were "caused by negligence on the part of the 'bosses' to secure medical attention. . . . Little to no provision is made for the care of the sick; some have been forced to work till they fell upon the ground dead."⁶² In one such case, a young woman was "taken to her home in an alley, where, soon after, she died" from "a loathsome disease, brought on by exposure and aggravated by neglect, while serving out a sentence in these chain-gang camps."⁶³

Sarah Dixon, convicted of murder in 1902 and confined to the state prison farm, was granted a medical pardon after her health became "broken, ruined, and

57. "Whipping Report at Chattahoochee Camp," State Prison Board of Inspections Reports, 1885, 1886, 1889, RG-SG-S: 21-1-11, GDAH.

58. Proceedings of the Joint Committee, June 1870, GDAH, 145. James Maxwell, a former prisoner of Grant & Alexander, told investigators that male and female prison laborers on the Macon & Brunswick Railroad were whipped for the same offenses and received anywhere from 25 to 150 lashings for these infractions.

59. Ibid.

60. Mattie Black, *Applications for Executive Clemency*, 1908, RG-SG-S: 1-4-42, box 9, GDAH.

61. Selena Butler, *The Chain-Gang System, by Mrs. Selena S. Butler, Atlanta, GA., Read before the National Association of Colored Women at Nashville, Tenn., September 16, 1897* (Tuskegee, AL: Normal School Steam Press Print, 1897), 7.

62. Ibid., 4.

63. Ibid., 7.

wrecked.”⁶⁴ During her incarceration, she “developed a malignant disease which will shortly end her life . . . it is almost impossible for her to swallow anything, her throat and mouth being in such a serious condition with two holes in the roof of her mouth . . . said disease has eaten out one side of her face and nose to such an extent that the side of her face and nose have fallen in.”⁶⁵

Disease frequently claimed the lives of female prisoners whose sentences were commuted or pardoned on the cusp of their demise.⁶⁶ Many convict women were pardoned based on the incurable state of their diseases, their inability to provide labor, and the infeasibility of taking care of the terminally ill. While some cases were more severe than others, all pointed in a common direction—death. The circumstances surrounding the pardoning of Sarah Dixon illustrate the extreme medical situations that sometimes mitigated sentences for chronically ill female convicts.

Fatal diseases such as tuberculosis, cancer, and cardiac dropsy, and other undiagnosed illnesses, also contributed to the death of some female convicts. Lizzie Teasley, a prisoner in the Cobb County chain gang, was stricken with consumption (tuberculosis) and about to die when her sentence was commuted during the fall of 1909.⁶⁷ Ella Gamble was convicted of murder in 1884 and pardoned in 1904 after being diagnosed with “cancer of the womb, bladder, and rectum” with the potential to “die anytime from a sudden hemorrhage . . . she is a woman and now in poor health, on account of the heavy work she has been compelled to do since her confinement in the penitentiary.”⁶⁸

However, overwork, squalid living quarters, malnutrition, and physical violence were not the only sources of distress among black female prisoners. These women were especially beleaguered by the pestilence of rape. Sexual violence against black female prisoners was buttressed by the pejorative racial and sexual attitudes that existed toward African American women, bound and free. Preconceived ideas about black female promiscuity justified the abuse of African American women, who were frequently blamed for the cruelty meted against them. In Georgia's convict camps, acts of sexual hostility were an overt display of the camp manager's “economic mastery” and power over black female workers.⁶⁹ Camp bosses “owned” the labor of black women convicts, if only temporarily, and attempted to exercise control over

64. Sarah Dixon, *Applications for Executive Clemency*, 1907, RG-SG-S: 1-4-42, box 33, Records of the Georgia Governor's Office, GDAH.

65. Ibid.

66. Applications for executive clemency, forwarded to the Georgia prison commission between 1875 and 1923, have been especially useful in determining some of the causes of death for black female prisoners held in county chain gangs.

67. Lizzie Teasley, *Applications for Executive Clemency*, 1909, RG-SG-S: 1-4-42, box 30, Records of the Georgia Governor's Office, GDAH.

68. Ella Gamble, *Applications for Executive Clemency*, 1904, RG-SG-S: 1-4-42, box 38, Records of the Georgia Governor's Office, GDAH.

69. Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 7.

these bondwomen through sexual and physical assault. Like slaveholders, these men also “owned” the right of sexual access to their female property.

In 1897, a female prisoner was raped at Camp Heardmont. “The guards became so infatuated with her, that peace did not always reign within the camp among the guards. One day an offspring came; both mother and child died.”⁷⁰ In a similar case, four women were raped in W. B. Lowe’s camp in Dodge County. These women “complained that the overseer compelled them all to submit to his carnal desires—that he would threaten them with the lash if they did not submit.”⁷¹

Black women’s defiance of sexual exploitation sometimes provoked rage among white overseers. In 1898, one black female prisoner was beaten in a Georgia chain-gang camp after refusing the sexual advances of the prison guard. The woman was found guilty of disturbing the peace and sentenced to hard labor for forty days. “One day the guard commanded her ‘to go to the rice barn with him in private to carry out his wicked design.’ She refused, and the next morning she was compelled to go there, and was then strung up by her wrists until her feet scarcely touched the floor and her clothes tied over her head. She was then whipped with a rawhide on her naked body until the blood ran down.”⁷²

Black female convicts labored under the constant threat of physical and sexual abuse. However, these women did not accept their victimization but explored and implemented passive and active methods of resistance: arson, running away, malingering, disobedience, fighting, talking back, and destroying clothing. In response, convict camp managers resorted to the use of chains, whips, dogs, guns, and other weapons to contain female laborers. Others like Colonel Maddox claimed to use “kindness” to undermine female unruliness and to extricate the maximum labor possible from the female workers under his charge.

Maddox was an insightful manager of female convicts who knew not to underestimate a woman’s tendency to rebel. Maddox argued

“You can drive a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” . . . I tried driving at first. The convicts gave me trouble. They rebelled and mutinied under the sting of the lash; they cursed the captain who brought the strap down upon their smarting backs. . . . I found they would shirk at every task possible. . . . I know nothing about the management of male convicts, but I do know that it is the nature of a woman to rebel if she is treated cruelly. Take a woman and beat her with the lash and she becomes stubborn, hysterical, cowed and browbeaten.⁷³

However, despite his efforts, at least five women escaped from Maddox’s camp.

70. Selena Butler, *The Chain-Gang System*, 7.

71. Rebecca A. Felton, “The Convict System of Georgia,” *Forum*, January 1887, 489.

72. Clarissa Olds Keeler, untitled manuscript, Mary Church Terrell Papers, box 102, folder 16, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC.

73. “A Queer Colony of Female Convicts,” November 1897.

At the Georgia state prison farm, officials were also pestered by female escapees. In August 1915, Minnie Bird was sentenced to the farm following a misdemeanor conviction. According to the camp warden, Bird attempted to “escape after she had been here only a few days. I think she was persuaded to run away then by a very bad girl I have here.”⁷⁴ Other female convicts worked out their frustrations by destroying property and defying the orders of white authorities. On February 4, 1886, both Mollie White and Nora Daniel were flogged by Captain Casey, the whipping boss for the Chattahoochee brickyard, for “burning shirts.”⁷⁵ Emma Clark and Ella Gamble were also thrashed by Casey for “threatening my life.”⁷⁶

The contest waged between black female convicts and their oppressors did not always result in victories. However, these women were willing to challenge encroachments on their self-worth and fought hard to preserve their humanity within a dehumanizing system built on terror and control. The postwar chaos and disorder that upset the existence of freedwomen in Georgia was made a part of their interior world in the state's convict camps. The convict camp structure merely replicated the larger drama of the postwar South.

It is important to examine how black female prisoners supported the construction and development of Georgia's postbellum industries. Although it is clearly understood that the larger scheme of convict leasing greatly enhanced the industrial economy of the New South, what is less understood is the way female prison labor factored into this plan. In their limited numbers, convict women did not single-handedly grow the South's industrial economy. Yet, their labor, which was heavily industrial and skilled in nature, draws scholars to a more compelling conclusion about the black female industrial workforce in the South, which has been deemed virtually nonexistent. ■

74. Minnie Bird, *Applications for Executive Clemency*, 1916, RG-SG-S: 1-4-42, box 9, Records of the Georgia Governor's Office, GDAH.

75. “Whipping Report at Chattahoochee Camp,” State Prison Board of Inspections Reports, 1886, RG-SG-S: 21-1-11, GDAH.

76. *Ibid.*, 1885.

