Convict Leasing: 1867-1883
Convict leasing for profit developed between 1867-1883. After the Civil War, the State of Texas routinely arrested many newly freed slaves for vagrancy and petty crimes. The increase in prisoners caused overcrowding and extremely unhealthy conditions in the Huntsville Prison. The Texas Legislature decided that it could profit from the situation by turning over prison management to a private company for a fee and then grant it authority to rent out prisoners. This seamless shift from of African-Americans from slave labor to prisoner labor contributed significantly to Texas' post-war economic recovery.

Masterson Plantation, Brazoria County Prisoners considered wood chopping and sugar cane cutting to be the worst work assignments because of the sun-up to sun-down, back-breaking physical labor, poor food, wretched living conditions, and the extremely cruel treatment by contract overseers. Leased labor of African-Americans accounted for approximately sixty percent of the Texas State Prison population.

Leased prisoners often chopped wood to clear land as well as for fuel and construction projects. The labor was particularly grueling. African-American prisoners were required to cut a cord a day apiece, while the quota for white prisoners was three-fourths of a cord per day.

When used, a prisoner walked with the chain shackled to his ankle dragging the ball along the ground. He could only lift and carry the ball with a guard's permission. As a result, the shackle would rub a prisoner's skin raw.

In 1867 the Sugar Land sugar factory leased all the available prisoners from Huntsville. The factory kept some prisoners on its own plantation as well as sub-leasing the remainder to other farms.

In 1871, the Texas legislature turned over its entire prison system to Ward Dewey, and Co. for fee of $325,000 to be paid over a fifteen-year period. The company kept most of the white inmates inside the prison to work in its textile and furniture industries; however, it leased out the majority of African-American prisoners for labor outside the prison.
# Medical Report

The recorded examination of prisoners returning from an O&H Rail Road wood chopping force revealed scurvy, beatings, malnutrition, and self-mutilation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Condition Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chas Harker</td>
<td>Suffering from scurvy, pain in side, and deep self-mutilation, left hand chopped off to second joint.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan Gemoz</td>
<td>Suffering from scurvy three months, broken back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eunia Reese</td>
<td>Suffering from scurvy two months, improving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.C. Irvine</td>
<td>Shot in right leg by guard Powell while convict was on the boxes without permission, convict states he is a somnambulist (sleep walker) and was in the state of it when shot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jose Rodriguez</td>
<td>Suffering from scurvy three months, lungs badly affected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timus Lopez</td>
<td>Suffering from scurvy four months, improving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hipola Rodriguez</td>
<td>Suffering from scurvy two months, vomits blood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam Walker</td>
<td>Suffering from scurvy two months, improving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Kay</td>
<td>Suffering from scurvy two months, left foot badly cut &amp; crippled for life, hospital steward says that by proper surgical treatment the man would have gotten perfectly well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Burke</td>
<td>Suffering from scurvy three months, almost well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Hickman</td>
<td>Suffering from measles followed by scurvy and injured right leg struck by stick in hands of foreman Blakely Lame.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.
Convict Leasing: 1883-1899

The Texas Legislature decided to increase its revenues by handling all prisoner operations itself. The state opened a second penitentiary at Rusk, ninety miles northeast of Huntsville. Then it purchased Wynne Farm in Walker County, Harlem Plantation in Fort Bend County, and William Clemens Farm in Brazoria County. The State, however, continued to lease prisoners to agents for farming and various railroad and building projects including the State Capital.

Convict leasing continued unabated in Fort Bend and Brazoria counties. The mostly African-American prisoners suffered intensely under the heavy-handed and cruel discipline of overseers. Foremen routinely misappropriated off subsistence funds intended for convict food and clothing.

The contractor paid the State of Texas $0.65 per day for each prisoner who mined and shaped tons of pink granite. Typically, the prisoners lived in crudely constructed quarters.

Upon completion of the Capital, hundreds of contract prisoners went to work on private farms rather than work at the new state-owned plantations.

Huntsville Penitentiary administrators leased more than five hundred prisoners to work at Marble Falls in Burnett County to quarry stone for constructing the Capitol in Austin.

Courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.
Death Report
Stocks were made of wood with holes for a prisoner’s head and arms. A guard pulled the stock upward using a rope tied to a pole. The prisoner could choke to death if he was raised off the balls of his feet.

“I heard Mr. Sumner tell prisoner Frank Furlow to get on the stocks. Sumner then told prisoner George Hill to stock the prisoner, which he did by raising Furlow until he stood on the balls of his feet. After about five minutes, Hill let Furlow down. Sumner then commanded Hill to put Furlow back in the stocks because he was not contrite. The Negro did as he was told and raised Furlow a second time. Furlow then jumped and flounced about to a considerable extent. After he stayed in the stocks for about five minutes, he was taken out and found to be dead.”

Courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.
Convict Leasing: 1899-1912

Texas expanded its prison operations by purchasing two additional farms: Imperial Farm in Fort Bend County and Ramsey Farm in Brazoria County. In spite of the possession of five working farms, approximately one-third of the prison population continued to be leased for outside labor. After a series of inspections that made the public aware of horrific prisoner treatment, the Legislature discontinued all leasing to agents in 1912.

Governor James Hogg gave Edward M. House the honorific title of “Colonel” because of his valuable work as a friend and advisor. House used his connections to acquire leased convict labor to build his Trinity & Brazos Valley Railroad from 1904 to 1910. Later, House went on to be an advisor to President Woodrow Wilson.

Leased prisoners worked building the 25 mile long Texas State Railroad between Rusk and the Calvert Iron Mine in Palestine.

Huntsville Penitentiary Cemetery
The headstone listed only the deceased’s identification number. Sadly, a prisoner had no name in death.

The “BAT” was a three to five foot long three ply leather strap attached to a one-to two-foot-long wooden handle. A prisoner would be ordered to bare his backside and then lie face down. Four inmates would then pull out his feet and arms into a spread eagle position, while a fifth inmate sat on his head. A guard then slowly administered from twenty to fifty blows on the prisoner's buttocks and back.

Leased prisoners worked from dawn to dusk, while rifle-bearing guards on horse-back maintained control. After the official discontinuation of convict labor in 1912, prison officials continued to illegally lease prisoners to private agents for several more years.
Penitentiary Board Leasing Contracts Report of 1903

This list includes only private contracts and does not contain the over two thousand prisoners who labored in the two state penitentiaries and five state farm facilities. The total number of leased African-American prisoners accounted for approximately one-third of the entire prisoner population.

The following contracts for convict labor were approved by the Board and signed in open session: T. P. Barry, agent, 60 1st-class negroes; John D. Rogers, 50 1st-class negroes; Tom Peoples, 50 1st-class whites and Mexicans; C. W. Riddick, 50 1st-class negroes; Edwin Wilson, 50 1st-class negroes; Dyer & Bertrand, 50 1st-class negroes; T. W. House, 60 1st-class negroes; W. T. Watt, 50 1st-class negroes; E. H. Cunningham & Co., 200 1st-class negroes; C. G. Ellis, 125 1st-class negroes; W. L. Steele, 50 1st-class negroes; M. H. Turner, 75 1st-class whites and Mexicans; H. D. Lindsey Land & Cattle Co., 75 1st-class whites and Mexicans; W. J. Terrell and G. W. Harrington, 50 1st-class negroes; Mrs. D. Eastham, 125 2nd-class whites and Mexicans; W. W. Watts, 50 1st-class negroes; A. P. Borden, Executor, 50 1st-class negroes; Roach & Hughes, 75 1st-class negroes.

There being no further business on hand, the Board adjourned sine die.

APPROVED: 

Chairman.

ATTEST:

Secretary.

Courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.