

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-different-kind-of-slavery/>

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07.25.18

An imprisoned Black boy punished at a Georgia convict camp, 1932. (John L. Spivack)

After the Civil War, the abolition of slavery dealt a severe economic blow to Southern states whose agricultural economies had been built on the backs of Black people held in bondage for generations. Soon, former Confederates regained control of their state legislatures and set about to restore white supremacy in social and economic relations.

Using a loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment, legislators created a new system to restore some of the monetary benefits of slavery: convict leasing. After creating discriminatory Black Codes to criminalize newly freed Black people as vagrants and loiterers, states passed laws authorizing prisoners to be leased to private industries.

In 1888, the State of Alabama leased all state prisoners and half of all county prisoners to a Birmingham-based coal mining company. The prisoners, 90 percent of whom were Black, mined for 13 to 16 hours for just 30 cents a day. Many did not survive long enough to pay off their fines. In 1911, an explosion at the company's Banner Mine killed 128 men, including 125 Black prisoners.

Alabama profited from convict leasing for decades. In 1912, prison labor profit earned the state \$1 million, about a third of the state's revenue. In 1928, Alabama became the last state in the country to abolish convict leasing.

Through convict leasing, Southern states and private companies derived enormous wealth from the labor of mostly Black prisoners who earned little or no pay and faced inhumane and often deadly work conditions, generations after slavery was formally abolished.

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