Understanding the Dominance of the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company in Birmingham, Alabama, 1886-1910

Stevie Jefferis
History 480
Davidson College
December 5, 2018
1. A Complete Seizure of Power

On August 7th, 1910, Harrison Grant, an 18-year-old African-American was sentenced to a year and a day of hard labor at the Pratt Mines at the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company on charges of burglary and grand larceny. Grant, like many other African-American convict laborers, was forced into mining various tons of coal a day: a dangerous and taxing job. On a typical day for Grant and the other prisoners, the precarious smog-filled air would shroud them, and they would work for hours in tight spaces until they met their day’s quota of coal. Grant met his fate when he was killed in the Pratt Mines by falling rocks. He was less than two months away from being released at the time of his death.

Grant’s story is a common one; the labor at the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company was unanimously characterized by its disproportionate representation of African-American males in the labor force, and by its unsafe labor and living conditions. Some prisoners, unlike Grant, chose a different fate for themselves and took an alternative route to evade the reality of convict labor at the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company: suicide. Despite the means of death, there was an irrefutable fact that death or mistreatment was eminent at the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company for convicts subjected to labor in the coal mines.

The lives of Harrison Grant and his convict counterparts in the early twentieth century

---

1 Alabama Department of Corrections and Institutions State Convict Records, 1889-1952, “Two Pages from a Convict Register, Listing Six African American Men Who Were Tried in the City Court of Montgomery, Alabama.” Government Records Collection, Alabama Department of Archives and History. Hereafter cited as ADAH. See appendix 1.


3 Curtin, 138-139. In her monograph, Curtin discusses the suicide of Sydney Holman in 1892, four years after the TCI took control of the Pratt Mines and convicts. Holman had been involved in an unsuccessful rebellion against a despised warden at the Pratt Mines, and subsequently lost his chance at being granted a pardon. Curtin claims that when he realized his fate of “continued exploitation and hopelessness,” he chose to end his life through a planned fatal incident in the coal mines during one of his shifts.
substantiate the distinctive transition of power in Alabama’s convict lease system between the State and the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company.

More broadly, the convict lease system was a well-established practice developed in and utilized throughout the American South. Through this system, individuals convicted of a crime were “[leased out by the State] as a method of criminal punishment” to various institutions, such as farms or mines. The beginning of this practice can be traced back to the Civil War. By no coincidence, convict leasing became widely implemented in southern states after enslaved people were emancipated, which was one of the main reasons why the practice was deeply rooted in racist sentiments. During the Reconstruction era, southern states were searching for a source of revenue, and simultaneously, thousands of slaves were theoretically freed. Thus, many state governments in the South implemented a lease system that helped generate internal revenue and helped aid their efforts toward restoration and industrialization. Concurrently, there were “new legal restrictions” implemented in the South “that drew a disproportionate number of African-Americans into prison.” This period marked a time where “whites [turned] to the courts to prosecute African-Americans for purposes of social control,” and this newly established legal process legitimized racial ideologies in the South. In the South, this practice lasted until well into the twentieth century, and Alabama’s convict lease system outlasted similar systems in the rest of the South. Alabama’s system was not done away with until 1928, and in that same year “on July 1st… the last convict miners emerged from the mile-long shaft near Birmingham.”

Among the southern states that implemented lease systems, the convict lease system in Alabama was unique because of its enduring and tenacious existence, as well as its extensive

---

5 Curtin, 3.
6 Mancini, 116.
involvement with the conglomerate The Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company.\textsuperscript{7}

Alabama’s lease system was distinguished because it had “the most profitable [prison system] in the nation” throughout the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{8} This was due to the fact that in Alabama all healthy, able-bodied convicts would be leased to contractors. The Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company, which can also be referred to as the TCI, was the predominant leasee in the state of Alabama. For a period of time, the company leased all the state convicts in Alabama that were able to work in the coal mines in Birmingham “[for an] average price of $13 per month each.”\textsuperscript{9} Since the TCI was the leading contractor of convicts, the company developed a unique class system that segmented convict laborers based on the quotas of coal they produced. The TCI paid the state a certain amount per worker based on their predetermined class. For first-class convict laborers, the TCI paid “$18.50 per month [if they] mined four tons of coal a day,” second-class was “$13.50 for three tons,” and “$9.00 for third-class who mined two tons.”\textsuperscript{10} These lease agreements between Alabama and the TCI enabled Alabama’s lease system to be considered the most profitable compared to other southern states.

Despite its unique characteristics, Alabama’s lease system was also similar to the other lease systems in the South because of its deeply embedded racism. In a typical year like 1890, 85 percent of the convicts leased in Alabama were African-American.\textsuperscript{11} Likewise, in 1896, 87 percent of the convicts leased in Alabama were African-American.\textsuperscript{12} There was also a period of

\textsuperscript{7} Mancini, 99-116. The convict lease system was not abolished until 1928 by Governor Bibb Graves. The convict lease system in Alabama transitioned into prison farms after the lease system was done away with. This was typical amongst southern states.
\textsuperscript{8} Curtin, 2.
\textsuperscript{9} The Patriot, “Convicts in the Coal Mines,” January 5, 1888.
\textsuperscript{11} Curtin, 2.
\textsuperscript{12} Mancini, 106. Out of the 1,710 total convicts in the state of Alabama, 1,496 were African-American.
time when eight counties in Alabama “did not lease a single white county prisoner.”\footnote{13} This was no coincidence: the convict lease system in Alabama was unmistakably prejudiced, as African-Americans were predominantly targeted for crimes and were more frequently arrested. At the time, Alabama, much like the rest of the South, began to “crackdown on petty theft” and turned crimes like burglary and larceny into “felonious” acts.\footnote{14} This change in law primarily affected African-Americans in Alabama, seeing as in 1877, 67 percent of the prison population consisted of black individuals arrested for “either grand larceny or burglary.”\footnote{15} Historian Mary Ellen Curtin addresses that “Not every prisoner was a ‘negro’... [but there was a] deep association between criminality, convict mining, and race.”\footnote{16} In 1890, a government official from Alabama inadvertently admitted the lease system was racist by stating, “The people of the South know the negro character better than do the people of the North... if every negro in Alabama who was guilty of a trivial offense, was ‘convicted by Alabama Justice’ every county in the State would have to build a penitentiary and there would hardly be enough outside to guard those inside.”\footnote{17} With government acknowledgment and numerical evidence, one can recognize that Alabama’s lease system was ingrained with prejudiced and racist ideologies.

Alabama’s convict lease system cannot be discussed without understanding their largest and longest contractor: the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company. In 1887, the TCI purchased the Pratt Coal Mines and simultaneously “negotiated an unprecedented ten-year contract” for all state convicts in Alabama and for half of the county convicts.\footnote{18} This was a

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{13} Curtin, 2.
\bibitem{14} Curtin, 43.
\bibitem{15} Curtin, 43.
\bibitem{16} Curtin, 2.
\bibitem{17} The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, “Biennial Report of the Inspectors of Convicts to the Governor, 1888-1890,” (Montgomery: The Board, 1890), 55.
\end{thebibliography}
momentous turning point for the state of Alabama and its lease system. Before the TCI expanded into Birmingham, Alabama, multiple coal mining companies had been awarded contracts in 1883 for convict laborers, such as the Pratt Coal and Iron Company for 200 convicts, Comer and McCurdy Company for 200 convicts, and J.F.B. Jackson Company for 100 convicts. Nearly five years later in 1888, a Pennsylvania newspaper reported about the new deal between the state of Alabama and the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company. It explained that Alabama was earning $2,400 more than the previous year because of a new convict lease contract with the TCI, and that in return Alabama was giving up all 600 state convicts to this single company. This deal came after conversations and debates about the system, which spanned over several months because of the contentiousness of the issue. Once the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company acquired the Pratt Mines and won the bid for the majority of convict laborers in the state of Alabama, the labor, living, and health conditions quickly deteriorated.

Since the TCI was a sizable conglomerate with a workforce comprised of free miners and convicts, there was a distinctive dichotomy at the coal mines in Birmingham between the groups. The dichotomy between these two labor forces was notable because of their extremely separated existences and because it generated issues within Alabama’s lease system. This was a controversial issue within the TCI because it upset the free laborers, whose labor was less desired by the company due to its expensive nature. Free miners at the TCI spoke about the existing contrast by declaring, “No criminal should be allowed to work. Cause if he works he works cheap, and it knocks down your wages and mine.” The convicts posed a more frugal option to

---

20 The Patriot, “Convicts in the Coal Mines,” January 5, 1888.
22 The Scientific American, “Convict Labor,” 40, no. 9 (1879): 137.
contractors in the state of Alabama, but this was not the only issue that caused a division between the two groups of the labor force. The sentiment of free vs. condemned criminal also played into the segmentation of the workers and the convicts. Workers acknowledged the degraded status of the criminals by stating, “Ain’t it demorlizin’ and undignified for respectable folks to let their gov’ment be s’ported by the crim’nal classes?” Criminal was a class of its own, not to be mixed with the free laborers at the TCI or the outside world. This dichotomy is essential to understanding the convict conditions at the company, the fiscal motives of the company, and why some of the citizens of Alabama did not support the system.

The convict lease system that existed in the American South in the late nineteenth century has been thoroughly studied by historians primarily through moral and economic lenses. In the 1990’s, the historical conversation about the convict lease system was most notably initiated by historian Matthew Mancini. Mancini produced a seminal monograph about the regional study of the convict lease system, which briefly analyzed the practice in each southern state. In One Dies, Get Another, he uses a comparative method to evaluate the states’ systems against one another; simultaneously, he argues that the South’s lease system marked a morally significant shift in forced labor as it became a publicly promoted practice compared to slavery, which was a private practice of forced labor. Due to its broad focus, his findings overlap with and are expanded upon by other historians. This foundational work allowed studies of the convict system to diverge into various fields. Specifically, historians have built upon the basic understanding of the system and have viewed it through a social and moral lens, and an economic lens.

---

23 The Scientific American, “Convict Labor,” 40, no. 9 (1879): 137.
25 Mancini, 5.
The most extensive field of study about the convict lease system is the historical analysis of the social and moral elements of the practice. Historian Mary Ellen Curtin focuses her research specifically on the lives of black convicts in Alabama, and analyzes the systematic racism that existed in the state. Unlike other historians in the field, Curtin does not wholeheartedly agree with the argument that the lease system was a perpetuation of slavery. However, she does acknowledge the similar nature of the forced labor and that it was predominantly inflicted upon African-Americans. Instead, Curtin argues that there was a key difference between slaves and convict laborers: black convicts in Alabama had experienced freedom in their lifetimes. She says, “Freedom left black Alabamians vulnerable to new forms of legal repression and control. But freedom also enabled prisoners to create new challenges against white control and forced prison labor.” Since Curtin’s focus is on Alabama, she acknowledges the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company’s use of convict labor frequently in her analysis. Curtin uses the conditions and treatment of convicts at their mines to emphasize her overarching argument that convict leasing was a racialized institution, which contributed to the subordination of African-Americans after slavery. Like Curtin, historian David M. Oshinsky acknowledges in his work that there was an undeniable racial element to the system. He notes the immoral racism that existed by noting, “hundreds of blacks would be arrested, put on trial, found guilty, sentenced...[and] leased to the mines.” The larger focus of Oshinsky’s study is concentrated on the forced convict labor at a specific farm and the broader narrative of racial injustice during the Jim Crow Era in the South. Thus, his attention to the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company is limited. In his brief discussion, he subtly contends the moral

---

26 Curtin, 2.
27 Curtin, 41.
28 Curtin, 3.
29 Oshinsky, 77.
implications of the convict lease system at the TCI; he argues that the system was not about reforming the convicts or justly punishing them, but rather it was solely based on profits and systematic racism.\textsuperscript{30} The moral and social arguments in the historical study of convict leasing mostly pertains to race and the system’s comparison to slavery.

However, the political and economic view of convict leasing pushes aside sentiments of morality and analyzes the production, profit, and power that this system generated for companies and governments. Multiple historians have created a discourse about the economic factors and the politics at play in the South and how it promoted and perpetuated the convict lease system. The most notable scholars in this field are Douglas Blackmon and Alexander Lichtenstein, both of whom generally argue that convict labor was a practice that promoted financial success for many companies and aided in the development of certain industries. With a narrow focus on the convict lease narrative through an economic lens, Lichtenstein addresses the Southern companies that relied on convicts and their levels of production because of the convict labor.\textsuperscript{31} He also discusses the overarching development of industries in the South, specifically the coal industry in Alabama.\textsuperscript{32} Lichtenstein fails to mention moral and racial arguments against the practice, and chooses to solely analyze the economic factors of convict labor. Oshinsky, despite primarily discussing morality and race, agrees with Lichtenstein’s argument that “convict leasing was

\textsuperscript{30} Oshinsky, 78.
\textsuperscript{31} Alexander C. Lichtenstein, \textit{Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South} (London: Verso, 1996), 95. Lichtenstein argues that the convict labor was the most reliable and productive source of labor. However, this argument does not acknowledge the fact that these convicts were given no choice to perform this labor, and therefore it is not necessarily a sound argument to say that it was the most reliable because they couldn’t have stopped even if they wanted to.
\textsuperscript{32} Lichtenstein, 88-91. This work does not give a special focus the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company’s plant in Birmingham, but it generally addresses the large scale of the company and includes details of its coke and coal companies. Lichtenstein acknowledges the economic power that the TCI had once they acquired the mines and convicts in Birmingham, and he argues that the TCI’s Alabama headquarters helped promote the growth of the coal and coke production in Alabama at the end of nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century.
essential to the growth” of the coal industry in Alabama, as coal production skyrocketed from the thousands of tons to the millions on tons in less than 15 years.\(^{33}\)

While historian Douglas Blackmon can be categorized by his predominant economic focus, he is also one of the only historians to attempt bridging the moral and economic views of the convict system in Alabama. He does not disagree with Lichtenstein’s argument about industrialization, but he chooses instead to center his work around US Steel’s acquisition of the TCI. Blackmon argues that US Steel ushered in a period of economic power for white businessmen in the coal and railroad industries; however, this period of “new construction and advancements in the mines…came with destruction.”\(^{34}\) Beyond the acknowledgement of economic success for white businessmen in the Alabama Coal Fields, Blackmon addresses the racial issues interlinked with the lease system through his overarching argument that convicts working in coal mines was an evolved form of slave labor. Blackmon attempts to bridge the two main perspectives on convict leasing and offers the most in-depth analysis of the TCI’s economic practices amongst all historians, but his work lacks strong claims about the morality of the system. While Blackmon’s work constitutes the initial effort to merge moral and economic modes of thought, this work will follow Blackmon’s lead, but instead, will focus on the period in the Alabama Coal Mines once the TCI first took control in 1887.

Although the scholarship about convict leasing is extensive, the scholars in the field have failed to solely examine the convict lease system as it existed at the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Power Company, specifically during the period after it acquired land in Birmingham, Alabama. The TCI is commonly referenced by historians because of the significant number of convicts it

\(^{33}\) Lichtenstein, 76.  
leased for labor. Oftentimes, however, the scholarship does not address the shift in power in terms of worsening conditions, economic dominance, and government complicity. Most scholars acknowledge the practices and the significance of the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company within the narrative of the convict lease system. Yet, there is not an existing work that solely focuses on the analysis of the TCI’s dominance in Birmingham after the acquisition of the Pratt Mines and the 10-year convict contract. Thus, I aim to merge the economic, moral, and political narratives that historians have previously addressed in the conversation about convict labor at the TCI. This paper attempts to analyze the Birmingham, Alabama location of the TCI through focusing on the company’s complete domination and period of corruption, brutality, and intervention; this will add to the collective knowledge about the convict leasing system, while also contributing a comprehensive understanding of the TCI through multiple historical lenses, such as social and economic history. I will argue that the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company’s financial dominance caused the Alabama state government and Alabama government officials to become complicit, which henceforth caused the convict labor conditions to intensify in severity as a result of reluctant Alabama government officials. The moral aspects and the intertwined economic and political aspects of the TCI in Alabama marked a distinctly corrupt and powerful period for the convict lease system in Alabama. Moving forward, in section two of this paper, I will show that within Alabama’s state government there was a distinctive paradox that illuminated the complete dominance of the TCI: government officials were privy to the conditions at the mines, yet they enabled and wanted to continue the lease system because of their symbiotic, financial relationship with the company. Subsequently, in section three, I will show that as a result of the relationship between the State and the TCI, the Alabama state government’s complicity impacted the lives of the convicts, which meant worse conditions and
hard labor. Most generally in this paper, I will show that the TCI’s acquisition of the mines and convicts in Birmingham caused the company to gain unprecedented control over the entire system due to its monetary success.

2. “The State Gives Up to a Contractor”\textsuperscript{35}

When the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company acquired the State convicts and the Birmingham coal mines, a monopoly was initiated over the convict lease system and the company commenced its period of dominance. The TCI’s economic success garnered it an unparalleled authority during this period, and most importantly the company gained control over Alabama government officials. The political influence of conglomerates such as the TCI and the overall effects it had on the convict lease system is barely addressed in the existing scholarship. Historians and scholars do not offer an in-depth political analysis of the convict lease system as they do of moral arguments against the system and economic arguments regarding the system.\textsuperscript{36} However, the political and economic aspects of the convict lease system were deeply intertwined and connected in the case of the TCI and the state of Alabama. There is a diverse variety of sources that substantiate my argument about the TCI’s political and economic influence over the Alabama government such as official government reports from Alabama state officials, documents and diary entries from the President of the Inspectors of Convicts, reports from the TCI to its stockholders, and legal documents such as the State Constitution and the Code of Alabama. It is evident in these documents that the relationship between the TCI and the state of

\textsuperscript{35} Dawson, 12.

\textsuperscript{36} Historian Alexander Lichtenstein is the only scholar in the field to attempt a political argument about the convict system. However, he mostly addresses the intersection and overlap between the economics and politics of the lease system. He does not address the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company’s corruption of the Alabama government, nor the scope of its the intervention in politics.
Alabama was financially beneficial to both parties; the state had an economic incentive to cooperate with the TCI, and this gave the TCI power over the state. Furthermore, through these documents, I show that as a result of the TCI’s economic dominance, the company had the power to influence and control government officials, and therefore the political sphere.

To understand why the TCI was able to politically influence the state of Alabama with fiscal motivations, the true financial success of the company must be acknowledged. The large profits generated by the TCI cannot be separated from the company’s reliance on convict labor. The TCI’s financial success and consequent dominance is most thoroughly demonstrated through its annual reports to shareholders. The TCI’s 1890 report to its shareholders shows that convict labor was arguably one of its most profitable assets. This report details the various mines at the Birmingham plant and its respective profits. The Pratt Mines were notoriously known as the location where “convicts were all to be worked” extensively.\(^{37}\) By no coincidence, in the 1890 report, the TCI noted that the Pratt Mines were the most profitable, with “$320,129.78 out of $779,944.75 total profits” which is over 40 percent of total profits.\(^{38}\) Historian Alex Lichtenstein argues that convict labor was the most productive form of labor at the TCI, as it typically generated the most profits.\(^{39}\) While the evidence shows that the Pratt Mines were responsible for generating the majority of the profits for the TCI, Lichtenstein’s argument is faulty. The productive nature of convict labor was due to the forced nature of the labor. Historian Mary Ellen Curtin brings up this idea of coercion to work by noting, “it is logical…to attribute the high productivity of Alabama prison mines to whippings and punishments meted out.”\(^{40}\) Curtin’s

\(^{37}\) The Patriot, “Convicts in the Coal Mines,” January 5, 1888.


\(^{39}\) Lichtenstein, 95.

\(^{40}\) Curtin, 98; Curtin notes that Historian Karin Shapiro argues other states’ convict lease system was not nearly as productive as in Alabama, specifically because of the convict labor at the TCI. Despite regular and extreme
point is valid; rather than claiming the convicts were naturally productive, their productivity
should be analyzed with the knowledge that the TCI forced convicts to work harder through
threatened punishments and mistreatments.

The company’s reports about profit and production further exemplify the financial
success of the TCI in the Birmingham coal mines. In the original contract, the State guaranteed
600 convicts for the ten-year period. However, in the TCI’s Annual Report to its shareholders in
1890, it noted there was “an average of 1,200 convicts now in the company’s mines.”41 With
more workers, the TCI had more means through which to generate coal. After only two years in
the Pratt Mines, the coal production had increased by 375,425 tons and coke production had
increased by 161,364 tons.42 In the same year, the company reported a profit of $779,944.75,
which is comparable to around $20 million in profits today.43 Business at the Birmingham plant
was prosperous, and this financial success enabled the TCI’s power. The TCI was evidently
successful in Alabama, and its cheap labor costs and frugal spending aided their accumulation of
wealth. The company’s frugal spending habits were illustrated through a report to the
stockholders which acknowledged “investing all surplus profits of the business in extensions and
improvements [in mine conditions]…was unwise.”44 Thus, the company was profiting off
inexpensive labor but would not invest in improvements for the mines. Instead, stockholders
successfully persuaded the company to “[devote] some portion of [the profits] to dividends.”45
The TCI had a profit-maximization mindset; appeasing shareholders was a worthy investment
because it would ensure their reciprocated investment for the future.

instances of cruelty in various other southern states, such as Georgia and Tennessee, their convict labor was not as productive as Alabama’s convict labor.

The TCI’s political influence over the State started when the company gained financial control over the state of Alabama with the unprecedented 10-year contract for convicts in 1887. The contract marked a rapid seizure of power; newspapers around the country reported that “Alabama has just let out all its convicts…they number about 600… [the price] is $4 more than the state has ever before received.”

The TCI possessed a record amount of economic authority, since it now had the largest contract for convicts in the history of Alabama’s convict lease system. This consequently affected the political sphere. Even before the TCI and the Alabama state government agreed upon a contract, the TCI’s economic status influenced political decisions regarding the convict system. The TCI’s financial ability to acquire coal mines in Birmingham and build a second plant there is an indicator of the TCI’s preexisting fiscal success. In 1886, R.H. Dawson had begun documenting the lengthy negotiations between the TCI and the state of Alabama. As contractors were bidding on new leases for the Alabama state convicts, there was a concurrent discussion in the Supreme Court of Alabama about whether the lease system would continue in Alabama. Dawson, the President of the Inspectors of Convicts in Alabama wrote in his personal diary, “The judges advise further postponement [on convict laws]…it was feared that the journals of the two houses did not show a concurrent opinion of adjournment… and if they were so, the convict laws would be unconstitutional- postponed until April 12.”

On April 12, 1886, Dawson updated his diary, stating that “bids [from contractors] postponed until the 14th to allow the Governor to submit questions to the Supreme Court.”

The Governor of Alabama was in charge of deciding on convict lease agreements with contractors and Governor O’Neal knew about the offer from the TCI. Therefore, Governor

---

46 The Patriot, “Convicts in the Coal Mines,” January 5, 1888.
47 Entries from April 1886, Reginald Heber Dawson Diaries 1883-1897, ADAH.
48 Entry from April 8, 1886, Reginald Heber Dawson Diaries 1883-1897, ADAH.
49 Entry from April 12, 1886, Reginald Heber Dawson Diaries 1883-1897, ADAH.
O’Neal had the power to sway the Supreme Court of Alabama. After these negotiations, and less than eight months later, the TCI was awarded the contract for all of the state convicts. The Inspectors of Convicts publicly defended Governor O’Neal’s decision to award all of the state convicts and half of the county convicts to a sole contractor. Inspector Lee said, “regard must be had to locating the convicts, as nearly together as possible, for the convenience of frequent inspections, and the price of bid.”\textsuperscript{50} While it was undoubtedly more convenient for the inspectors if the majority of convicts were consolidated by location, the Governor’s decision was also, and perhaps even more strongly, motivated by the unparalleled bid price that the TCI offered. Furthermore, since this was a record-high bid price for convicts, the TCI was most likely a motivator for the State to continue the lease system. Governor O’Neal’s discussion with the Supreme Court about the convict laws in April 1886 almost certainly resulted in convincing the government that the TCI’s bid presented ample financial benefits.

This was not the only instance in which a Governor of Alabama was politically motivated by the TCI’s financial success. The most blatant and jarring evidence of the TCI’s political influence over Alabama’s state government officials is a report from Governor Thomas G. Jones in 1890, two years after the company’s takeover. In the report, Governor Jones acknowledged that “the Constitution declares… ‘nor shall the State be interested in any private or corporate enterprise, or lend its money or credit to any individual, association or corporation.’”\textsuperscript{51} Yet the Governor subsequently admitted that the “present tax rate barely produces revenue sufficient for the ordinary wants of the state government, and there is no surplus in the treasury.”\textsuperscript{52} He

\textsuperscript{50} The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 57.
\textsuperscript{52} Commission for the Improvement of the Penitentiary and Convict System, 5.
concluded his report by conceding that “the only practical mode which suggested itself to the commission was the present [convict lease] contracts to be continued in force.” Governor Jones and the rest of the commission comprising other government officials knowingly defied the Alabama State Constitution for the financial benefits of the convict lease system. Since the lease system was capable of generating attractive profits for the state, the government would not have to tax its citizens and would be able to generate enough revenue to put the state in a comfortable financial situation.

Additionally, the state of Alabama altered criminal codes and sentencing procedures which ultimately benefitted the TCI; more convictions meant an increase in the convict labor force for the TCI and it meant the state of Alabama would generate more revenue through more leases. In the *Code of Alabama* passed in 1887 by the General Assembly the legal punishment for crime officially became “hard labor for the state,” and it included that “hard labor is for more than twelve months, and not more than two years.” Only mere months later, Alabama’s governor accepted the TCI’s bid for ¾ of the convicts in the state. This was no coincidence; at the same time, convicts were being arrested for crimes that would sentence them to “one year and a day” of hard labor. Before the TCI’s bid had been accepted, on average 40 percent of convicts would be assigned to work for a contractor at a coal mine. Once the TCI took control through this unprecedented contract, the percentage of convicts assigned to the Birmingham coal

---

53 Commission for the Improvement of the Penitentiary and Convict System, 6.
54 Robert Brickell, *The Code of Alabama, Adopted by Act of the General Assembly Approved February 28, 1887; with Such Statutes Passed at the Session of 1886-87, as are Required to Be Incorporated Therein by Act Approved February 21, 1887; and with Citations of the Decisions of the Supreme Court of the State Construing the Statutes*. Vol. 2. (Nashville, 1887), 180.
55 Alabama Department of Corrections and Institutions State Convict Records, 1889-1952, “Two Pages from a Convict Register, Listing Six African American Men Who Were Tried in the City Court of Montgomery, Alabama, 1909,” Government Records Collections, ADAH.
56 The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 349.
mines spiked to over 70 percent.\textsuperscript{57} An Alabama State Health Officer acknowledged that “many [convicts]… have been guilty of only trivial offenses; and many of these offenses are not in themselves criminal, or even immoral, but which have been made penal simply by statutory enactment.”\textsuperscript{58} Thus, the Alabama state government seems to have been influenced by its financial arrangement with the TCI. The government was arguably responsible for convicting individuals for the sake of generating revenue from the leases, and to uphold its end of the deal with the TCI. This spike in convicts in coal mines for trivial offenses does not seem to be happenstance. Rather, it reveals the TCI’s power and overwhelming political influence over government officials and the State laws.

The Alabama Inspectors of Convicts held a unique position within the lease system, and it ultimately made the inspectors most susceptible to the TCI’s political influence and power. The inspectors worked most closely with TCI and therefore, they were simultaneously the face of the Alabama government and the TCI when reporting to either audience. This middleman position left the inspectors liable for the government’s complicity with the convict lease practice, as well as for the TCI’s unhindered power. In a public article about Alabama’s convict lease system, President of Inspectors of Convicts R.H. Dawson acknowledged that an Alabama convict law had been altered in 1884. According to the law, the President of the Board of Inspectors of Convicts was also to take on the role of warden at the TCI.\textsuperscript{59} This meant the inspectors, who were government officials, also held positions of authority at the TCI. Not only did this mean Alabama government officials were in some way liable for the happenings at the company, but it also meant the state government was tightly connected to the company through

\begin{footnotes}
\item[57] The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 349.
\item[58] The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 243.
\item[59] Dawson, 8.
\end{footnotes}
these positions. In the Alabama Code, it required inspectors to “report all violations of the law in regard to convicts” when they were working in the coal mines at the TCI.\textsuperscript{60} The inspectors were in charge of “frequent inspections” at the coal mines and were required to “[take] care of the sick and to prevent abuse and mistreatment.”\textsuperscript{61} Despite the inspectors’ duties to frequently visit the mine’s prisons and check on the convicts, Dawson recorded visits to the Pratt Mines at the TCI on average about three times a month.\textsuperscript{62} Additionally, “[the Inspectors] had full power to regulate and prescribe the quantity and quality of food and clothing, the amount of work, the punishment that should be inflicted….the convict system of Alabama is the lease system, with constant State supervision and unlimited State control.”\textsuperscript{63} Since the inspectors were responsible for the convicts’ health and safety at the Birmingham coal mines, they rarely reported negative occurrences at the TCI despite their knowledge of prevalent sickness and death. For instance, in a report to the Governor, Inspector Dawson wrote vaguely about instances of floggings inflicted upon nearly 83 percent of the convicts at the TCI. He concluded with, “I make these statements with extreme reluctance. I may be making a mistake…[and] would rejoice if I could be convinced that I have made a mistake.”\textsuperscript{64} The reluctance to report the mistreatment of convicts suggests that the inspectors did not want to incriminate themselves or the TCI since both parties were liable.

There was a paradox that existed in Alabama’s convict lease system; the inspectors and the governor acknowledged that the system was unjustifiable, but they reasoned with it in the interest of monetary profits. Ironically, Inspector Dawson admitted that the convict lease system

\textsuperscript{60} Brickell, 196.
\textsuperscript{61} Dawson, 6.
\textsuperscript{62} Entries from July 1890 to September 1890, \textit{Reginald Heber Dawson Diaries, 1883-1897}, ADAH.
\textsuperscript{63} The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 56.
\textsuperscript{64} The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 46.
“cannot be defended, and for which an apology is [needed].” Yet, his position as the middleman between the state government and the TCI contributed to the perpetuation of the lease system. However, the Inspectors of Convicts were not the only individuals responsible for enabling the lease system to continue. Inspector Dawson once noted in his general report to the public that, “The best provision in the [convict] laws, was that allowing the governor to break up any contract, at any time, without assigning any reason.” Nevertheless, no Alabama governors ended contracts with the TCI despite various reluctant reports from Inspector Dawson that “there [was] a good deal of sick in the mines” or that “an attempt had been made burn the prison at the [Pratt Mines] by 4 convicts.” Thus, both the Governor of Alabama and the inspectors had motive to either be discreet about the reality of the conditions at the TCI, or ignore the reality in the interest of the financial benefits filtering through the contract.

The Inspectors were persuaded to remain unobtrusive due to their overlapping obligation to each entity. At the same time, they were aware of the company’s overarching dominance and the economic incentive to appease the TCI. Dawson frequently boasted about what he considered to be successes of the convict lease system. For instance, he wrote about removing sick convicts from the Pratt Mines and allowing them to recuperate before returning to work, and said that “during the past three years over $16,000 has been realized from the labor of such cases.” Instead of feeling concerned for the health of the convicts, which was the duty of an Inspector of Alabama Convicts, it is evident that Dawson and his counterparts were financially motivated and were influenced by the profitability of the system. This alludes to the essential paradox: the financial incentive posed to the Alabama state government swayed the Alabama government

65 Dawson, 1.
66 Dawson, 7.
67 Entries from June 20, 1890 and July 21, 1890, Reginald Heber Dawson Diaries, 1883-1897, ADAH.
68 Dawson, 11.
officials, such as the Inspectors of Convicts, to overlook the negative reality of the system in order to uphold and continue the relationship with the company. This sentiment it most thoroughly suggested when Inspector Dawson proclaims that “the object of the contractor is to make money. He can have no other. The business is unpleasant and only profit can reconcile one to engage in it. Do not be too hard on the contractor. Were we in his place we would do like him.”

To the inspectors, who were supposed to be regulating the TCI’s activities, profit-maximization was also understood as the goal. The inspectors could reason with the fact that the TCI relied on convicts as a means to maximize profits. The symbiotic nature of the contract between the TCI and the Alabama state government meant that the government could not fault TCI for its profit-minded motives. After all, the sentiment was mutual.

Although the Alabama state government oftentimes turned a blind eye to the TCI’s practices, the government made a singular request of the company to alleviate public condemnation. For instance, the State government had one requirement that the TCI had to comply with in order to renew a contract for the state convicts. In 1890, the TCI’s report to its shareholders detailed that a “new prison was required of [the TCI] under [their] contract with the state of Alabama for the lease of the state convicts for the next ten years.” At first glance, this evidence illustrates the rare instance in which the state government asked something of the TCI despite the paramount control of the company. However, this request from the State was seemingly simple. The TCI noted in the same report to shareholders that the new convict prison at the Pratt Mines cost the company $20,502.79. That same year, the TCI generated a profit of $779,944.75, meaning the cost of the new prison was less than 3 percent of their profits.

---

69 Dawson, 12.
Therefore, the Alabama state government was not asking much of the company. Yet, the government used this to defend their convict lease system to the President of the United States at the National Prison Congress in 1890. At the national gathering, W.D. Lee, a member of the Board of Inspectors of Convicts in Alabama defended Alabama’s convict lease system on a national stage. He said, “since [the TCI] contract was made the company has erected prisons…for the health and comfort of the prisoners.”\textsuperscript{73} The State used the request of building a new prison as a vindication for the state government’s role in the convict lease system. While the new prison was important, it also enabled the TCI to expand its presence in Birmingham and expand its convict labor force due to the new space. Inspector Lee clung to the claim that, “there is no inhumanity in the practice.”\textsuperscript{74} Lee chose to disregard the true conditions of the TCI coal mines and instead defended the Alabama state government against public criticisms that “the convicts at Pratt Mines are ‘poor, miserably housed, half-starved creatures.’”\textsuperscript{75} Thus, the State’s request to build a new prison and their defense for such at the National Prison Congress exemplifies the TCI’s omnipresent dominance. The Alabama state government became a passive and enabling agent under their contract with the TCI.

The paramount power of the TCI was unassailable which caused the state government to crumple under its presence. The Inspectors of Convicts lost their voice within the government and ignored their duty under law in the interest of maintaining their mutually-beneficial relationship with TCI. Furthermore, the Governor of Alabama disregarded the Alabama State Constitution to prolong the leases system for financial purposes, and refused to exercise his right to disband contracts. Moreover, the state government altered laws to cater to the TCI. Political

\textsuperscript{73} The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 59.
\textsuperscript{74} The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 59.
\textsuperscript{75} The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 59.
intervention in this form was unprecedented until the TCI seized the convicts and the Alabama coal mines; the TCI’s takeover ultimately resulted in an unchecked convict lease system and complicit government officials.

3. “Devoid of Every Instinct of Humanity”

The TCI’s influence over the Alabama government had the most evident effect on the convicts, with worsening living and working conditions in the Pratt Mines. One of the most convincing arguments that exemplifies the untouchable authority of the TCI after its takeover in 1887 is the unrestricted treatment of convicts. I argue that the TCI’s economic dominance influenced the Alabama state government, and as a result, the convicts suffered due to this government negligence and complicity with the lease system. In addition, the conditions of the convicts in the coal mines also contributes to the essential paradox of Alabama’s lease system: the government officials were aware of the realities at the Pratt Mines and did not personally agree with the practices, but chose to remain quiet for the sake of financial interests. The extensive diary and works of R.H. Dawson, the President of the Board of Inspectors of Convicts in Alabama, most thoroughly detailed the transition that occurred once the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company took control of the coal mines and convict laborers. The documents created by the inspectors offer both candid reactions and restrained commentary, culminating in a highly reflective account of the transition into an unmatched period of the convict lease system. Moreover, I compare Dawson’s diaries with public reports produced by the Board of Inspectors of Convicts for the public; these sources corroborate the truth and also exemplify the contrast between the public and private perceptions of the convict lease system in Alabama. Before the

---

76 The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 58.
acquisition, the conditions were still generally bad for convict laborers. Before the TCI took control in 1887, there were still letters coming to the inspectors that were indicative of the convicts’ general attitudes toward the convict lease system. In 1884, Ezekiel Archey, a convict working the Pratt Mines wrote, “we have been convicted of felonies, and by so falling, we lost every friend on earth.” The general sentiment associated with convict laborers subjected to the lease system was that they were lesser individuals and therefore punished with strenuous labor and poor living conditions. Additionally, in 1883, the Huntsville Gazette published a letter to the editor that attacked the “unchristian conduct” and “unmerciful destruction of human life” that resulted from the convict system. However, while the public believed the convict lease practice to be immoral from its outset, Dawson’s view of the convicts’ environment at the TCI shows the disregarded conditions of the convicts and unrestricted control of the company.

Dawson’s writings depict a clear transition once the TCI took control over the convicts and the mines. In 1886, he noted on multiple separate occasions, “went to Pratt Mines-everything going well” or “went to Pratt Mines… [the convicts] were getting on very well.” This was during the period when the convicts were divided amongst multiple contractors, some being worse for convicts than others. However, in 1892 Dawson wrote about the convict lease system in Alabama and said, “[it] cannot be defended…it is said to ‘know no law,’ and is often made the excuse for wrong.” Dawson’s comment about the convict system knowing no law is specifically targeted at the TCI and its brutal treatment of convicts. Furthermore, in August 1887, Dawson reports in his diaries, “[the convicts] are very unwell” because they were consistently well.

---

77 Ezekiel Archey to Reginald Dawson, Pratt Mines, 18 January 1884, Alabama Board of Inspectors of Convicts Administrative Correspondence, 1881-1897, Government Records Collection, Alabama Department of Archives and History.
79 Entries from January 22,1886 to June 4, 1886, Reginald Heber Dawson Diaries, 1883-1897, ADAH.
80 Dawson, 1.
sick as a result of unhealthy living and working environments at the prison mines.\textsuperscript{81} The lack of attention to the convicts’ health at the prison mines is indicative of the ironically lawless environment. Furthermore, the lawlessness at the TCI’s mines is exemplified through Dawson’s diary entries. For instance, Dawson notes in his diary that “a convict was killed…by a guard” because he “[attempted] to set fire to the prison” and the guard responsible for the convict’s death was released the following day.\textsuperscript{82} A convict attempting to set fire to the prison is suggestive of the general desperation of the convicts at the mines. The guard’s response is a verification that the TCI was characterized by disorder and disregard. Dawson’s diaries and reports about the convicts and their conditions illuminate the overall reality of the coal mines during this period under TCI’s control.

Furthermore, the state of Alabama’s Biennial Reports to the Governor contribute to the narrative that the convicts were subjected to a deteriorating environment once the TCI took control. The biennial reports were typically compiled by the Board of Inspectors, and contained lists of the convicts and their status, whether that be dead, released, or still under contract. The death records of the reports contain the truth about the convicts’ conditions. For instance, death at the Pratt Mines where convicts worked, sometimes resulted from workplace accidents in the mines such as “falling rock, asphyxia from fire in mine, and burns from gas explosion.”\textsuperscript{83} However, the more common reasons for death were those caused by sicknesses such as, “typhoid fever, pneumonia, tuberculosis, meningitis, and measles.”\textsuperscript{84} Another testament to the general lawlessness at the prison mines, a nondescript “violence” category is depicted to be the third

\textsuperscript{81} Entry from August 8, 1887, \textit{Reginald Heber Dawson Diaries, 1883-1897}, ADAH.
\textsuperscript{82} Entry from May 18, 1891, \textit{Reginald Heber Dawson Diaries, 1883-1897}, ADAH.
\textsuperscript{83} The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, \textit{86-87}.
\textsuperscript{84} The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, \textit{86-87}.
leading cause for death behind pneumonia and tubercular disease according to the reports.\textsuperscript{85} Furthermore, the TCI’s distinctive period in Alabama’s convict lease system is exemplified through the comparison between the reports to the governor pre and post-1888. In the First Biennial Report of 1884-1886, there were only 48 deaths of state convicts.\textsuperscript{86} In the Third Biennial Report of 1888-1890, there was an increase in total reported deaths of state convicts in the Pratt Mines with 61 deaths.

While there was an obvious increase in death of convicts that coincided with the acquisition in 1888, what is most shocking from the reports is the lack of attention or care the TCI gives to the convict conditions. In 1888, right after the TCI expanded into Birmingham, the report states, “a considerable number of these convicts have…been worked in the mines when they were not properly able to do that sort of work.”\textsuperscript{87} This exemplifies the strenuous nature of the work, and the lack of consideration for the convicts that were being subjected to unhealthy environments. Sickness spread like wildfire in the prisons at the Pratt Mines, which is why it was the leading cause of death. Dawson would frequently write in his diary “at Pratt Mines…[there are] a number of sick…a few with pneumonia.”\textsuperscript{88} Under the control of the TCI, the convicts were worked to their limits, regardless of sickness, rather than being treated with care and leniency. Consequently, the unhealthy living conditions that caused the convicts to become sick subsequently caused them to inadequately perform their assigned tasks. This ultimately resulted in punishment for the convicts. The report documented 137 punishments of convicts, out of the 165 convicts in the mines, “that is to say, 137 floggings…every one of these floggings represents a failure to [complete] the assigned task…[this] could not have occurred unless a considerable

\textsuperscript{85} The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 344. 
\textsuperscript{86} The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 96. 
\textsuperscript{87} The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 86-87. 
\textsuperscript{88} Entry from January 14, 1891, \textit{Reginald Heber Dawson Diaries 1883-1897, ADAH}. 
proportion of them were physically unable to do their usual quantum of work.” Yet, in Lee’s speech to the National Prison Congress, he directly contradicted the existing situation at the TCI. He stated, “whenever the health of the convict fails at any work, to which he has been assigned, it is made the duty of the physician to send him to the walls for rest and recuperation, where he is supported at the expense of the State.” Not only was the TCI fostering environments where the convict laborers could contract sicknesses, but the punishment of flogging when work was nearly impossible epitomizes the reality convicts faced at the TCI. Moreover, there were more contradictory reports about the amount of labor assigned to convicts in the coal mines. For example, Inspector Lee said, “so far as the amount of work is concerned… it is very light, or at least not in excess of the physical capacity of the convicts.” However, Curtin notes that Alabama state convict Ezekiel Archey wrote, “we are the men who do the work…please look at the white men and see how many are cutting 5 or 4 ton coal per day.” As an inspector, Lee knew this to be true, but to the public he would not reveal the reality of the conditions at the mine. This evidence also speaks to the racial disparity that existed between white and black convicts at the TCI. The TCI’s period of control over the convict lease system in Alabama seemed to embody a new symbol of simultaneous dominance and negligence, and it was most thoroughly represented in the convict conditions and punishments.

The dichotomy between the free laborers and the convict laborers further illuminates the living and working conditions of the convicts at the TCI. At the company, the labor force consisted of both convicts and free workers. However, the two groups were typically kept “separate and without coming in contact with each other” which gave the notion that their labor

89 The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 46.
90 The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 57.
91 The Board of Inspectors of Convicts, 57.
92 Curtin, 38.
and living experiences were different and that their lives held different values. Historian Mary Ellen Curtin addresses the immoral practices at the TCI because of the highly-racialized system. She does not, however, acknowledge the dichotomy between the free laborers and the convict laborers and how it further exemplifies the deteriorating conditions under the TCI’s rule. A court cases brought forth by a free worker at the TCI illuminates what the conditions for convicts must have been like. One instance sheds light on the working conditions and relentless effort to extract labor at all costs. In 1890, Frank H. Pierce, a free laborer working in the Pratt Mines at the TCI, was “seriously hurt by a trip of tram cars on the main slope of the mine.” This was a testament to the dangerous conditions of the work environment at the mines, for free laborers specifically, but also for convict laborers who worked in mines that were in the same or worse conditions. More importantly, when Pierce took this to court in Alabama to seek damages from the TCI, the court decided to sustain the demurrer in favor of the TCI. Therefore, Pierce was denied any damages. The TCI was not going to be held responsible for its apathetic approach toward maintenance and safety in the work environments by the court system. Since this was the outcome of a case from a free laborer’s injury complaint, one can question how the TCI would proceed if this had happened to an the expendable convict. Seeing as the convicts belonged to the state of Alabama, the TCI could get away with extreme punishments, workplace injuries, unsanitary conditions, and deaths of convicts with no fear of being held liable. The reality for the convicts at the TCI makes sense when one realizes its complete control over the lease system and its financial dominance over the state of Alabama.

Once the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company gained complete control of the Pratt Mines and the convict labor in Alabama, the transition to a period of power was inevitable.

---

The TCI had what seemed like unlimited power, which enabled it to control the convicts and extract as much labor as possible. Furthermore, the immoral elements of the general convict lease system as it existed under the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company were transparent through the company’s cruelty; the living and working conditions were unsafe and the punishment and personal treatment furthered the degradation of the convicts. The TCI’s influence over the Alabama state government can be credited as the main reason for the lawless, unrestricted, and overlooked convict conditions at the Pratt Mines.

4. “Let Us Hope that its Days are Numbered”

Within the larger narrative of the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company’s existence in the Alabama coal mines, there is a period of manipulation, cruelty, and corruption. The TCI had the ability to convince Alabama officials into an unmatched ten-year contract, which established a monopoly over the convict lease system. From there, its power and authority over the State grew exponentially, until it had unlimited reign over the convicts, coal production, and political decisions regarding the lease system and its laws. This unconstrained domination meant that the TCI had supreme authority, with the convicts and the government at the whim of the company. Furthermore, this meant unlimited potential for production, profits, and therefore, success. While this was a lucrative decision for the company, the government profited from their relationship more so than ever before. Moreover, neither entity was willing to disband a mutually-beneficial relationship, in which both parties had incentives to stay involved. The symbiotic nature of the relationship was arguably the root of all evil for the lease system in Alabama, causing it to extend further into the twentieth century than in any other southern state.

95 Dawson, 12.
While the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company’s sudden seizure of power in Alabama caused a distinct period within the convict lease system, the lease system remained alive in Alabama for nearly two decades after this period, due in large part to the TCI. Likewise, it could be argued that the TCI’s dominance over the convict leases system did not die after 1910, but just changed forms. After this period between 1886 and 1910, the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company was acquired by US Steel, becoming a more massive conglomerate controlled by wealthy, white businessmen.\footnote{Blackmon. For more about this period of the convict lease system in Alabama, Blackmon’s central discussion focuses around US Steel’s acquisition of the TCI in the second decade of the twentieth century.} Despite countless efforts from organizations across the state to abolish the convict lease system, it did not end until 1928.\footnote{Curtin, 135.} Alabama’s enduring lease system was one of the most prominent testaments to the power of the TCI during its entire reign over the Pratt Mines and the Birmingham plant.

Beyond the TCI’s principal dominance over Alabama’s lease system and its dark period of financial manipulation, worsening conditions, and political corruption, this narrative tells a more pertinent story about the history of southern states that utilized the lease system. The TCI’s ability to dominate Alabama’s government more broadly illustrates the idea that southern states were an actively complicit agent in the subordination of criminals, most of whom were black; the states allowed for the continuation of a racially-motivated, immoral, and corrupt system for the sake of generating revenues for governments. Selfishly-motivated government officials used the lease system for their financial needs at the expense of individuals condemned for apparent transgressions. The idea of convicts as expendable members of society perpetuated a racial tension throughout Alabama and the rest of the South. Moreover, it associated black individuals with an idea of danger and criminality. In this narrow instance of convict leasing, the TCI and
Alabama agreed upon the fact that profits were the desired outcome of the convict lease system; the reformation of criminals or punishment for indiscretions was not a consideration for either party since it did not fit into their larger goal. The convicts subjected to this unjust system were degraded as expendable resources for government profit and coal production. Their hopelessness was never realized, their outcries were never addressed, and their deaths were never important to the few individuals in the system with power. In late nineteenth-century Alabama, the monopolistic power of a company, combined with a capitalistic state government culminated to create a system in which the few individuals at the top benefited from the marginalized and condemned individuals at the bottom; the bottom tiers of southern society would not gain equality, redemption, nor justice through this parasitic system.

Appendix 1.

Appendix 2.


Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Alabama Board of Inspectors of Convicts Administrative Correspondence, 1881-1897, Government Records Collection, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

Alabama Department of Corrections and Institutions State Convict Records, 1889-1952, Government Records Collections, Alabama Department of Archives and History.


Brickell, Robert C. The Code of Alabama, Adopted by Act of the General Assembly Approved February 28, 1887; with Such Statutes Passed at the Session of 1886-87, as are Required to Be Incorporated Therein by Act Approved February 21, 1887; and with
Citations of the Decisions of the Supreme Court of the State Construing the Statutes.

Commission for the Improvement of the Penitentiary and Convict System. Report of The
Commission ‘For the Improvement of the Penitentiary and Convict System of
Alabama,’ Organized Under an Act, Approved February 18, 1891.

Dawson, R. H. The Convict System of Alabama, as it was and as it is. University of Illinois,
Urbana-Champaign, 1892.

Huntsville Gazette, 1883, Huntsville, Alabama.

The Patriot, 1888, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Pierce v. Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Co., 110 Ala. 533, 19 So. 22, 1895 Ala. Lexis 160
Supreme Court of Alabama November 1895, Decided.

Reginald Heber Dawson Diaries, 1883-1897, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

The Scientific American, Volume 40, no. 9, 1879.

Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company. Description of Plants and Mines, with
Illustrations. Birmingham, Alabama, 1900.


Secondary Sources:

Blackmon, Douglas A. Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black People in


Fierce, Milfred C. Slavery Revisited: Blacks and the Southern Convict Lease System, 1865-1933.


