

Worse than slavery



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Part One Oshinsky says little about specific statutes, constitutional provisions, or court cases. Only one case is analyzed at any length, the federal case of *Gates v. Collier*, which tore down the entire penal structure that was Parchman, from the trusty shooters to racial segregation, in 1972. But Oshinsky is silent on the legal intrigue surrounding the rise and fall of the preceding convict lease and of the move from sharecropper (the Penitentiary Department was a sharecropper at the turn of the century) to state-owned farming operations.

Most important was the so-called Sandy Bayou Mandamus case, *State v. Henry* (1906), wherein the state supreme court managed to conclude that convict leasing could linger on, despite the explicit prohibition of the practice in the 1890 Mississippi constitution, because the contracts the state entered into were leases of land, not of convicts! Part Two To what degree was Parchman, a so-called “farm with slaves,” an improvement over convict leasing? I guess what I am really asking is to which system—convict leasing or Parchman—does the title, *Worse Than Slavery*, apply?

Convict leasing was horrifically violent and inhumane while Oshinsky describes Parchman thusly: “In design, it resembled an antebellum plantation with convicts in place of slaves” (139). How might a convict who had the misfortune to serve in both of these systems respond to this question? I could draw quite a few different explanations from the book to answer these questions. The title of Oshinsky’s narrative *Worse Than Slavery* seems to be more of an accurate description of the convict leasing system than to the Parchman Farm state penitentiary.

When comparing the institution of slavery to both the convict leasing system and Parchman Farm, many similarities and differences can be made between the two. Both systems purely existed for the exploitation of cheap labor rather than criminal rehabilitation. However, the people who benefitted the most as a result of the labor differed. Convict leasing was generally headed by privately owned organizations run by the rich, planter class. These convict leasing organizations profited on the giving or “leasing” of laborers towards various local and state governments in the South. The efficiency of the laborer and the overall profits gained directly benefitted the planter class, which were the leaders of the plethora of convict leasing organizations in the South. This exploitation of cheap, “black” labor at the hands of the Planter class directly correlates to the labor system established by these same Planters in the ante bellum South. However unlike in slavery, these convict leasers were expendable. The death of a worker due to illness, and fatigue did not result in a loss of profit.

Instead of having to purchase new black laborers, laborers were given free of charge to the Planters. And the rate of available workers was constantly rising due to the infamous Jim Crow laws. However, these same planters as slaver owners would not have had the seemingly inexhausted resource of labor. A direct result of the banning of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century increased the overall value of the slave and decreased the opportunity to obtain new slaves, fresh from Africa.

Thus marriage and intermingling of the slaves was encouraged. The value of the slave is much higher than the value of the laborer in the convict lease system. Sanitation, food and other humanitarian concerns for the worker

were abandoned in the convict leasing system and replaced with concerns involving overall profit, not the health of the worker. Therefore it can be said that convict leasing was in fact “Worse Than Slavery.” Unlike convict leasing or slavery, Parchman Farm was an institution established by the state and for the state.

Headed by anti-Planter governor William Vardaman, convict leasing was becoming primarily dissolved in the South and was being replaced by labor supplied by state penitentiaries, such as Parchman Farm. The difference between leasing and Parchman lies in the people who benefit from the profits earned by the convict labor. Profits were obtained for the state and involving the state. Many of labor projects involved the improvement of roads, buildings, etc. for the benefit of the community.

However, the majority of the labor fell into the cotton fields. Where profits directly correlated to the state. In convict leasing, these profits would go towards the Planter class. The conditions of both Parchman and the convict leasing system were similar in that they were both horrible. However, because of the involvement with the Planter class in convict leasing, a direct correlation forms between leasing and slavery. And the analysis of this correlation yields to the idea that convict leasing was in fact “Worse Than Slavery”. Part Three

David Oshinsky's novel *Worse than Slavery* is ended with a quote from an almost fifty year veteran of Parchman Prison stating: “I'm not looking to go backwards. I know the troubles at old Parchman better than any man alive. I'm seventy-three years old. But I look around today and see a place that

makes me sad. "(255) I brought this up because I believe Oshinsky choose to close the book this way to show the significance and difference between the old parchman and the new one. The prisoner's words imply that some conditions within the now reformed are inferior to its ancestor which existed on the farm.

A major difference between the old and new prisons was the work which the inmates were allowed to perform such as growing crops, raising livestock, training dogs, working the sawmill, brickyard, slaughter house, or as a servant in a staffer's house. The performance of these various tasks allowed to become " a self- sufficient operation"(139) which gave the place more the feel of a communal living facility rather than a prison. This is evident in Horace Carter's statement: "...the feeling that the work counted for something, that the farm had a rhythm to it... (255) Another enormous difference between old Parchman and new was the use of time. The reformed prison had extremely strict and restrictive allotments for time in which prisoners spent certain time in cells and in the various exercise yards. On the old Parchman prisoners had the choice of how to spend their time when not working in the fields. One prisoner with a kind sergeant recalled: "...they [the prisoners] could fish or garden or lounge outside... "(140) The final major difference between the two systems was inmate relations.

In the reformed prison environment there was a high degree of inmate on inmate violence. One guard wrote: "...that builds black and white gangs that stalk each other, do horrible shit to each other, and hold together with constant reminders of the blood the flows. "(250) In the old Parchman inmate relations were superior, although trustees brutalized the " gunmen",

there was much less inter convict hostility. The new Parchamn was a significant improvement over its ancestor but it still could learn some things from its past.