



Historical Empathy

Exploitation of Black Labor Beyond Slavery: Sharecroppers, Convict Leasing, and the Chain Gang

Historical Context

The formal end of slavery in 1865 did not bring true freedom or economic independence to most Black Americans. Instead, the South quickly replaced slavery with new systems designed to maintain white economic dominance and racial control. Two of the most common systems were sharecropping and the chain gang, both of which operated to exploit Black labor in ways that mimicked and extended slavery under different names. Sharecropping developed during Reconstruction (1865-1877), framed as a compromise between formerly enslaved people seeking land and planters who had lost enslaved labor. Under this system, Black families would farm a portion of a landowner's land and pay for the use of land, tools, seed, and housing with a share of their crop (usually cotton). While it promised autonomy, in practice it created a cycle of debt and dependency. Landowners and merchants charged high prices for supplies and manipulated accounting, making it nearly impossible for sharecroppers to gain financial independence or leave the land. Most sharecroppers did not own land, lacked legal protection, and had no real opportunity to build wealth. For many, the promise of freedom became a reality of poverty and constant labor with no way out. At the same time, the convict leasing system and later chain gangs served as a continuation of slavery through the criminal justice system. In the aftermath of emancipation, Southern states passed Black Codes, which criminalized everyday behavior among Black Americans, such as vagrancy, loitering, or not having proof of employment. Those convicted were often sentenced to hard labor and leased to private businesses, including railroads, mines, and plantations. The practice was deadly. Prisoners worked under dangerous conditions, received little to no medical care, and were subject to violence from overseers with no accountability. When convict leasing ended in some states, chain gangs took its place, forcing prisoners, most of them Black men, to do backbreaking labor for state projects like road building, while chained together.

Connection to Habit

When studying sharecropping, convict leasing, and chain gangs, it's essential to move beyond just the facts and statistics. These systems were not just economic arrangements or criminal punishments; they shaped the daily lives, choices, fears, and hopes of millions of Black Americans navigating a world that claimed slavery was over while continuing to deny their freedom and dignity. Historical empathy encourages students to imagine what it meant to survive in these systems. Understanding sharecropping, convict leasing, and the chain gang is essential for recognizing how freedom was limited, redefined, and resisted in the century following slavery.

Discussion Questions

General Questions

- What were the key features of sharecropping, convict leasing, and chain gangs? How were they different? How were they similar?
- How would it feel to live in a society that promised freedom but replaced slavery with new systems of control and exploitation? What might you hope for, fear, or resist and why?

Sharecropping

- Imagine you are a formerly enslaved person who just entered a sharecropping agreement. What hopes or fears might you have for your future?
- Why do you think landowners continued to use sharecropping even after slavery was abolished? How might that have shaped your understanding of "freedom"?

Convict Leasing

- As someone imprisoned for a minor offense and leased to work in dangerous conditions, what would you think about justice and the legal system?
- How might it feel to be treated as property again, even after the legal end of slavery?

Chain Gangs

- You are chained to others and made to break rocks or build roads in the heat. How might that affect your physical and mental health?
- What emotions might you feel if you were jailed and forced into a chain gang for something like vagrancy or unpaid fines?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Print copies of Primary Source Analysis Guiding Questions
- Print or digitally display the Post 13th Amendment Labor System Chart
- Print or digitally display the primary sources for 5 stations

Step 1: Use the following chart to introduce the topic of post-slavery systems that exploited Black people for their labor. [5-10 mins]

Step 2: Primary Source Stations (Gallery Walk or Small Groups) [45-60 mins]

Students will rotate through the stations or work in groups, analyzing the sources using the Source Analysis Guiding Questions:

- When was this source(s) produced? How many years is this source(s) post-13th Amendment (1865)?
- What does this source(s) tell us about this particular labor system (sharecropping, convict leasing, or chain gang)?
- What emotions or struggles are suggested by the source(s)?
- What are two questions that this source(s) raise for you?

Set up stations with the following primary sources:

[Station 1]

- [Sharecropping Contract \(1867\)](#)

[Station 2]

- Speech Excerpt: [Mary Church Terrell "Peonage in the United States" \(1907\)](#)

[Station 3] Photo Set - Sharecropping:

- Photo 1: [A Farm Security Administration photo of a cropper family chopping the weeds from cotton near White Plains, in Georgia, US \(1941\)](#)
- Photo 2: [Wife and child of young sharecropper in cornfield beside house \(1939\) Hillside Farm, Person County, North Carolina. Photographed by Dorothea Lange. Farm Security Administration; Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.](#)

[Station 4] Photo Set - Convict Laborers

- Photo 1: [Black orphaned children and juvenile offenders bought to serve as laborers for white planters, Library of Congress \(1903\)](#)
- Photo 2: [Female prisoners at the Parchman Post Office, Mississippi \(1930\)](#)
- Photo 3: [Parchman Penitentiary, Sunflower County, Mississippi. Female prisoners sewing. \(1930s\)](#)

[Station 5] Photo Set - Chain Gang Laborers

- Photo 1: [A chain gang in the Southern US \(1903\)](#)
- Photo 2: [Chain gang street sweepers, Washington, D.C. \(1909\)](#)

Suggested Activity cont.

Step 3: Whole-Class Debrief [10 mins]

Use the following questions to discuss:

- What surprised you about your source(s)?
- How did your understanding of post-slavery labor systems shift?
- Why were the oppressors motivated to create these systems?
- How do these systems connect to labor or justice issues we see today?

Step 4: Exit Ticket [5 mins]

Based on the source(s) you analyzed, write a few sentences about what you think W.E.B. Du Bois meant when he said "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery."?

Optional Homework or Extension Activity: Reflection Rooted in Empathy: "A Day in Their Life" [15 mins]

Encourage students to use specific details from the primary sources to inform their reflections. After analyzing the sources, students choose one system (sharecropping, convict leasing, or chain gang) and write a first-person reflection or journal entry as if they were someone living within that system using the following prompts:

- What does your daily life look like?
- What are your hopes, fears, or frustrations?
- What does freedom mean to you under this system?

Primary Sources

[Station 1]

Sharecropping Contract (1867)

The State of Mississippi Marshall County

Articles of agreement made and entered into this 1st day of January AD 1867, between IG Bailey of the first part and Cooper Hughs Freedman and Charles Roberts Freedman of the second part Witnesseth

The said parties of the second part, have agreed and do by these presents agree and bind themselves to work for the said party of the first part during the year 1867, on the farm belonging to said party of the first part near Early Grove on said County upon the following terms and conditions to Wit the said Cooper Hughs Freedman with his wife and one other woman, and the said Charles Roberts with his wife Hannah and one boy are to work on said farm and to cultivate forty acres in corn and twenty acres in cotton, to assist in putting the fences on said farm in good order and to keep them so and to do all other work on said farm necessary to be done to keep the same in good order and to raise a good crop and to be under the control and directions of said IG Bailey and to receive for their said services one half of the cotton and one third of the corn and fodder raised by them on said farm in said year 1867 and the said Charles Roberts Freedman with his wife Hannah further agrees and binds themselves to do the washing and Ironing, and all other [2] necessary house work for said IG Bailey and his family during said year 1867 and to receive for their said services fifty dollars in money at the expiration of said year 1867 and the said Cooper Hughs Freedman further agrees and binds himself to give the necessary attention of feeding the Stock of cattle and milking the cows twice daily belong to said IG Bailey, and do the churning when ever necessary during the said year,

And the said IG Bailey party of the first part, agrees and binds himself to furnish necessary Mules and farming implements to cultivate said crop and to feed said Mules to furnish said Cooper Hughs Freedman and his family five hundred and fifty pounds of meat, to furnish said Charles Roberts Freedman and his family four hundred and eighty seven pounds of meat and to give said parties of the second part, one half of the crop of cotton and third of the crop of corn and fodder cultivated and raised by them in said year 1867 In witness whereof we hereto set our hands and seals the date first above written

Signed Sealed and acknowledged [strikeout] { I.G. Bailey {Seal}

My presence this 14 May AD 1867 { Cooper [inserted: his mark] Hughs {Seal}

AB Conley {Seal} { Charles [inserted: his mark] Roberts {Seal}

Justice of the Peace [docket]
1867 Cooper & Charles

Source: Sharecropping Contract (1867).

Primary Sources

[Station 2]

Speech Excerpt: Mary Church Terrell “Peonage in the United States” (1907)

In the chain gangs and convict lease camps of the South to-day are thousands of coloured people, men, women, and children, who are enduring a bondage, in some respects more cruel and more crushing than that from which their parents were emancipated forty years ago. Under this modern regime of slavery thousands of coloured people, frequently upon trumped-up charges or for offences which in a civilised community would hardly land them in gaol, are thrown into dark, damp, disease-breeding cells, whose cubic contents are less than those of a good-sized grave, are overworked, underfed, and only partially covered with vermin-infested rags. As the chain gangs and the convict lease system are operated in the South to-day they violate the law against peonage, the constitutionality of which was affirmed by the Supreme Court two years ago. In the famous case of Clyatt versus the United States, Attorney-General Moody, recently placed upon the bench of the Supreme Court, represented the Government, while Senator Bacon and others appeared for Clyatt, a resident of Georgia, who had been convicted in the Federal Courts of that State and sentenced to four years' hard labour on the charge of having held two coloured men in peonage on account of debt, in violation of the law. In his brief, Attorney Moody declared that the executive arm of the law, so far as the enforcement of the statute against peonage was concerned, has been practically paralysed...

The more work the lessee gets out of the convict, the more money goes into his gaping purse. Doctors cannot be employed without the expenditure of money, while fresh victims may be secured by the outlay of little cash when convicts succumb to disease and neglect. From a purely business standpoint, therefore, it is much more profitable to get as much work out of a convict as can be wrung from him at the smallest possible expense, and then lay in a fresh supply, when necessary, than it is to clothe, and shelter, and feed him properly, and spend money trying to preserve his health. It is perfectly clear, therefore, that it is no exaggeration to say that in some respects the convict lease system, as it is operated in certain southern States, is less humane than was the bondage endured by slaves fifty years ago. For, under the old regime, it was the master's interest to clothe and shelter and feed his slaves properly even if her were not moved to do so by considerations of mercy and humanity, because the death of a slave meant an actual loss in dollars and cents, whereas the death of a convict to-day involves no loss whatsoever either to the lessee or to the State...

Plantation owners and others in search of labour, who have already given their orders to the officers of the law, are promptly notified that some available labourers are theirs to command and immediately appear to pay the fine and release the convict from gaol only to make him a slave. If the negro dares to leave the premises of his employer, the same magistrate who convicted him originally is ready to pounce down upon him and send him back to gaol. Invariably poor and ignorant, he is unable to employ counsel or to assert his rights (it is treason to presume he has any) and he finds all the machinery of the law, so far as he can understand, against him. There is no doubt whatever that there are scores, hundreds perhaps, of coloured men in the South to-day who are vainly trying to repay fines and sentences imposed upon them five, six, or even ten years ago. The horror of ball and chain is ever before them, and their future is bright with no hope...

Primary Sources

[Station 3] Photo Set - Sharecropping

Photo 1



Source: [A Farm Security Administration photo of a cropper family chopping the weeds from cotton near White Plains, in Georgia, US \(1941\).](#)

Photo 2



Source: [Wife and child of young sharecropper in cornfield beside house \(1939\) Hillside Farm, Person County, North Carolina. Photographed by Dorothea Lange. Farm Security Administration; Office of War Information Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.](#)

Primary Sources

[Station 4] Photo Set - Convict Laborers

Photo 1



Source: [Black orphaned children and juvenile offenders bought to serve as laborers for white planters, Library of Congress \(1903\)](#)

Primary Sources

[Station 4] Photo Set - Convict Laborers

Photo 2



Source: [Female prisoners at the Parchman Post Office, Mississippi \(1930\)](#)

Primary Sources

[Station 4] Photo Set - Convict Laborers

Photo 3



Source: [Parchman Penitentiary, Sunflower County, Mississippi. Female prisoners sewing. \(1930s\)](#)

Primary Sources

[Station 5] Photo Set - Chain Gang Laborers

Photo 1



Source: [A chain gang in the Southern US \(1903\)](#)

Primary Sources

[Station 5] Photo Set - Chain Gang Laborers

Photo 2



Source: [Chain gang street sweepers, Washington, D.C. \(1909\)](#)

Labor System Chart

Labor System	Sharecropping	Convict Leasing	Chain Gangs
Time Period	1865–1940s (in some areas into the 1950s)	1865–1928 (most active in late 1800s)	1890s–1950s (some use into the 1970s)
Who Controlled Labor	White landowners; sharecroppers signed yearly contracts	Private companies leased prisoners from the state	State governments controlled prison labor directly
Labor Conditions	Physically exhausting, economically exploitative; debt cycles	Brutal, often deadly; no protection for prisoners	Harsh and dehumanizing; prisoners worked chained together
Type of Work	Farming cash crops (especially cotton)	Railroads, mining, timber, plantations, brickyards	Road construction, ditch digging, public infrastructure
Profit Model	Landowners profited from crops; sharecroppers received a portion	State profited by charging companies to lease prisoners	States reduced infrastructure costs through forced prison labor
Who Was Targeted	Freed Black families and poor whites with no land	Primarily Black men arrested under Black Codes	Predominantly Black men arrested for minor or fabricated offenses
Location	Widespread in Deep South (MS, AL, GA, SC, LA, AR)	Common in AL, GA, TX, FL, MS, TN	Common in GA, FL, AL, NC
Legal Framework	Legal contracts but heavily manipulated in favor of landowners	Based on Black Codes and vagrancy laws	Jim Crow laws and penal codes targeting Black mobility
Public Awareness	Normalized and widespread; part of everyday rural life	Often hidden from public view	Highly visible; prisoners worked in public, chained together
End Result	Kept Black families in generational poverty and landlessness	Ended due to public pressure and reform movements	Gradually phased out mid-20th century, but echoes in prison labor today

Source Analysis Guiding Questions

Name: _____

Station 1:

- When was this source(s) produced? How many years is this source(s) post-13th Amendment (1865)?
- What does this source(s) tell us about this particular labor system (sharecropping, convict leasing, or chain gang)?
- What emotions or struggles are suggested by the source(s)?
- What are two questions that this source(s) raise for you?

Station 2:

- When was this source(s) produced? How many years is this source(s) post-13th Amendment (1865)?
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Source Analysis Guiding Questions

Name: _____

Station 3:

- When was this source(s) produced? How many years is this source(s) post-13th Amendment (1865)?
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Source Analysis Guiding Questions

Name: _____

Station 5:

- When was this source(s) produced? How many years is this source(s) post-13th Amendment (1865)?
- What does this source(s) tell us about this particular labor system (sharecropping, convict leasing, or chain gang)?
- What emotions or struggles are suggested by the source(s)?
- What are two questions that this source(s) raise for you?