



Interrogating Sources

Life in Australia's Penal Settlements

Historical Context

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, the British government began sending prisoners to Australia, after England lost its American colonies and could no longer send convicts there. In 1788, the First Fleet arrived in Botany Bay (near present-day Sydney), marking the beginning of Australia as a penal colony. Over the next 80 years, more than 160,000 men, women, and children were transported from Britain and Ireland to serve their sentences in Australia. These convicts were sent to different penal settlements, including harsh places like Port Arthur in Tasmania and Norfolk Island. Life in these settlements was extremely difficult. Prisoners worked long hours doing hard labor, such as building roads, cutting timber, or farming. Punishments for breaking rules were severe and could include flogging, solitary confinement, or wearing heavy chains. Many convicts were sent for crimes like petty theft, which were often committed due to poverty. Although their conditions were harsh, some prisoners were able to earn their freedom early by working well or showing good behavior. Once free, many former convicts stayed in Australia and helped build new communities. Penal settlements played a major role in shaping the early history of Australia. They reflected British ideas about punishment and reform, but they also raised questions about justice, class, and colonization, especially as the land used for these settlements belonged to Aboriginal peoples who were displaced and mistreated. Understanding life in Australia's penal settlements helps students explore how punishment, colonization, and survival shaped a new society, and how the legacies of this system are still remembered today.

Connection to Habit

To truly understand life in Australia's penal settlements, students must learn to question and analyze different types of historical sources. Government records, convict letters, newspapers, and artwork often reflect the views of British officials or settlers, not the prisoners or Indigenous people affected by colonization. By interrogating these sources, students can uncover whose voices are present, whose are missing, and how bias or purpose shaped what was recorded. This habit of mind helps students think critically about how we know what we know about the past and encourages them to seek out multiple perspectives to get a fuller, more accurate picture of history.

Discussion Questions

- What was daily life like for convicts living in early Australian settlements like Sydney Cove? How did it differ between men and women?
- How did convicts interact with the environment and Indigenous people, and what consequences did these interactions have?
- Why did some convicts prefer to live in the town rather than on rural farms or at remote penal stations?
- Most of what we know about convict life comes from government records, personal letters, and later historians. How might each of these sources present different versions of convict life?
- Aboriginal people were present in and around convict settlements, yet their voices are often missing from early colonial records. Why do you think this is the case? How can we still try to understand their experiences?
- What biases might be present in government sources describing convict punishment and behavior? How can students recognize and account for those biases?
- Many convicts earned tickets of leave or pardons and chose to stay in Australia. What does this suggest about their experiences and the development of colonial society?
- What does the history of Australia's penal settlements teach us about justice and punishment? How might this history influence our views on prison and rehabilitation today?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Australia Penal Settlement Primary Sources
- Notebook or Large Chart Paper
- Pencil/Pen

Step 1: Distribute or project the three primary sources for students to examine in small groups or individually. Provide students with the following Think, See, Wonder graphic organizer or use the following discussion prompts:

Think

- What do you already know or think you know about each of these topics before analyzing the image?
 - What do you think the image is about?
 - Who might have created it, and why?
 - What period of history do you think it reflects?

See

- Closely observe the image and write down everything you notice.
 - What people, places, or actions do you see?
 - What clothing, tools, buildings, or activities stand out?
 - Are there any symbols or words?
 - What emotions or atmosphere does the image seem to convey?

Wonder

- Write 2–3 questions you have after analyzing the image.
 - What's happening just outside the frame?
 - What perspectives might be missing from this image?
 - How might Aboriginal people or convicts describe this same scene?
 - What evidence can this image provide and what can't it?

Step 2: Have students discuss their Think, See, Wonder notes with a peer, then shift to a whole-class discussion using the following questions to guide the conversation:

- What differences and similarities do you notice among the three images?
- How do these images reflect colonial power, labor, and conflict?
- How might each image support or challenge historical narratives we've read?

Primary Source 1

Convicts from the Hulks



Source: [View Near Woolwich in Kent, Shewing the Employment of the Convicts from the Hulks](#),
[National Museum of Australia](#)

Primary Source 2

Military Operations against the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land.
Parliamentary Papers (1831)



Source: [Military Operations against the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land. Parliamentary Papers \(1831\)](#)

Primary Source 3

Convicts in Sydney (1793)



Name: _____

SEE	THINK	WONDER