


CONVICT LEASING

TEACHER GUIDE

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PARK & MUSEUM

Alabama Course of Study

6.1) Explain the impact of industrialization, urbanization, communication, and cultural changes on life in the United States from the late nineteenth century to World War I.

6.9) Critique major social and cultural changes in the United States since World War II.

11. 1) Explain the transition of the United States from an agrarian society to an industrial nation prior to World War I. [A.1.a., A.1.b., A.1.c., A.1.d., A.1.e., A.1.f., A.1.i., A.1.k.]

11.14) Trace events of the modern Civil Rights Movement from post-World War II to 1970 that resulted in social and economic changes, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School, the March on Washington, Freedom Rides, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, and the Selma-to-Montgomery March. (Alabama) [A.1.c., A.1.d., A.1.f., A.1.i., A.1.j., A.1.k.]

Introduction

This unit explores how industry reacted to the end of slavery and the rapid industrialization happening in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Students will learn how Convict Leasing in effect took the place of slavery, and how industries in Birmingham took advantage of this unfair system.

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Resource List

TV or Screen

Paper

Pencil

Video Link: <https://www.alabamapioneers.com/birmingham-alabama-magic-city-early-settlers/>

SOURCE: <http://bplonline.org/resources/government/BirminghamPopulation.aspx>

Day One

- Natural resources in Central Alabama and emerging industries after the U.S. Civil War led to the founding of Birmingham.
- Students can watch the two short videos at this [link](#). These videos help students get a sense of life in Birmingham.
- Additionally, they can read the following background essay about Birmingham:

The city of Birmingham, Alabama, was founded after the end of the U.S. Civil War, in 1871. The huge deposits of natural resources (iron ore, coal, and limestone- three key raw materials used to make steel) were found by geologists in the first half of the 19th century, but this untapped potential in the Birmingham area was put on hold following the start of the U.S. Civil War. When the U.S. Civil War ended, industrial businessmen tried to capitalize on the natural resources in the Birmingham area.

In the Gilded Age- the period in the late 1800s of rapid economic growth in the United States- industrial entrepreneurs had to deal with difficult labor relations and the potential for strikes from workers due to poor safety and working conditions coupled with consistently low wages. They addressed these labor issues in the Birmingham area by drawing on rural whites in the Birmingham area and throughout the state of Alabama. The economy of Alabama, like other Southern states, was struggling after the U.S. Civil War, so people in Alabama were eager for the financial opportunities of industrial jobs in the Birmingham area.

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- End the day by having students complete the following short writing prompt in a couple of sentences.

Writing Prompt

- In your own words, summarize how industrialism and the natural resources in Central Alabama led to the founding of Birmingham.

Day Two

- **Goal**
 - To explore the growth of Birmingham due to industrialism.
- Students work with the following sources to explore Birmingham's economic growth.

Economic Impact of Industrialization in Birmingham Excerpt from: W. David Lewis, *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District: An Industrial Epic* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 250.

Despite the protracted depression of the mid-1890s; Birmingham bustled with industry. A promotional booklet issued by the Commercial Club in 1896 indicated that there were about 180 manufacturing plants including Furnace, Basket Factories, Bicycle Factories, Blank Book Manufactories, Boiler Works, Bolt and Nuts Works, Bottling Works, Brass Foundries, Breweries, Brick Works, Iron Bridge Works, Broom Factories, Wagon and Buggy Works, Candy Factories, Cabinet and Pattern Works, Cigar Factories, Cider Works, Cotton Compresses, Foundries and Machine Shops, Furniture Factories, Grist Mills, Harness Factories, Lithographers, Mattress Factories, three Daily Newspapers and ten Weeklies, Packing Houses, Pipe Works, Planning Mills, Rolling Mills, Saw Works, Stove Factories, Trunk Factories, Wheelbarrow and Truck Factories, Wood Turning and Scroll Works, Yeast Factory, Car Wheel Works, Cultivator Works, Pump Works, Cotton Seed Huller Works, and others. Five railroads served Jones Valley, Jefferson County had almost 600 miles of track. As always, mineral industries constituted the heart of the local economy. In 1896, the district had approximately 3,400 furnacemen, 3,500 ore miners, 5,000 coal miners, 1,500 coke oven employees, and 8,000 workers in rolling mills, pipe foundries, and other metal-fabricating installations. Coal production in 1900 was more than twice what it had been a decade earlier, and pig iron production had climbed by one-third.

SOURCE: <http://bplonline.org/resources/government/BirminghamPopulation.aspx>

- Students in pairs read these two sources and then answer the following two questions. Use evidence from the sources to support your arguments.
 1. What are the most important things that you learned from these sources?
 2. What do these sources say about Birmingham's industrial identity?
- After groups answer these questions, there is a brief class discussion where students share their responses to these questions.
- End the class by having students write an exit slip response to the following writing prompt. The exit slip should be a couple of sentences in length.
- **Writing Prompt:** In your own words, summarize how industrialism led to Birmingham's population growth at the end of the 19th century

Day Three

- The U.S. Civil War did not end racial discrimination that African Americans faced.
- Students explore racial discrimination after the U.S. Civil War with the following Alabama Black Code Laws.
- **Reading Prompt:** Black Codes were laws made at the end of the U.S. Civil War to make things harder for the newly freed African Americans. There were dozens. Here are a few from Alabama:

Alabama Black Code (1865)

Sec. 1. No negro shall pass within city limits without special permit in writing from his employer. Violators will pay a fine of two dollars and fifty cents, or shall be forced to work four days, or suffer corporeal punishment (whipping).

Sec. 3. No negro shall rent or own a house within city limits. Any negro violating this provision shall be immediately removed and any person who shall rent or sell a house to a negro shall pay a fine of five dollars for each offence.

Sec. 4. Every negro is required to work for a white person who shall be held responsible for the negro's behavior.

Sec. 5. No public meetings of negroes shall be allowed within city limits after sunset.

Sec. 6. No negro shall be permitted to preach to congregations of colored people without a special permission in writing from the police.

Sec. 7. No negro shall be allowed to carry fire-arms, or any kind of weapons, without the special written permission of his employers and approved by the police.

Sec. 8. No negro shall sell, buy, or exchange any merchandise without the special written permission of his employer.

Sec. 9. Any negro found drunk shall pay a fine of five dollars, or five days on the public road, or suffer corporeal punishment (whipping).

Sec. 11. It shall be the duty of every citizen to act as a police officer for the detection of crimes and the apprehension of offenders, who shall be immediately handed over to the proper captain or chief of patrol.

- **Discussion:** What are the goals of these laws? How are African Americans negatively impacted by these laws? Students answer these questions in pairs and then have a brief class discussion.
- Transition to watch the following short videos about convict leasing:
 - <https://www.pbs.org/video/slavery-another-name-reflections-convict-leasing/>
 - <https://www.pbs.org/video/slavery-another-name-chain-gangs-or-convict-leasing/>
 - <https://www.pbs.org/video/slavery-another-name-what-it-meant-be-convict/>

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- After watching these brief videos, students, in pairs, read the following short summary about the convict-leasing system. The teacher may also use primary sources from this [link](#) to examine convict-leasing system.

Industrial businessmen addressed potential labor issues by drawing on rural whites in the Birmingham area as well as another source of labor. Companies hired convicts from other cities and from the state of Alabama to work in these industrial jobs. The convicts were almost all African Americans, often falsely charged or convicted with suspect evidence, who then had to work in dangerous conditions for an undetermined amount of time. In other words, cities and the state of Alabama were able to earn more money by charging more African Americans with crimes to meet the need for more industrial workers.

- Students use all of these sources to write a short definition of the convict-leasing system. Their definition should be a couple of sentences in length.

Day Four

- Students in pairs analyze one of the three following documents and complete the graphic organizer. Pairs should choose which of the three documents that they examine. Pairs need to complete the following graphic organizer with the primary source that they selected.

Letter from a Federal Judge in Alabama to the U.S. Attorney General

Sir: Some witnesses before the Grand Jury here have developed the fact that in Shelby County [Alabama] in this District, and in this Coosa County in the Middle district, a systematic scheme of depriving negroes of their liberty, and hiring them out, has been practiced for some time. The plan is to accuse the negro of some petty offense, and then require him, in order to escape conviction, to enter into an agreement to pay his accuser so much money, and sign a contract, under the terms of which his bondsmen can hire him out until he pays a certain sum. The negro is made to believe he is a convict, and treated as such. It is said that thirty negroes were in the stockade at one time. Thursday, a negro witness who had been summoned here, and testified before the Grand Jury, was taken from the train by force, and imprisoned on account of his testimony; but finally his captors became frightened and turned him loose. The grand jury found indictments against nine of the parties. I deemed it essential to the safety of the negro that a deputy marshal should protect him while in that county, and while here giving testimony; and that the accused parties should be promptly arrested and held to bail, in order to deter them, at least, from further violence to the negro....

Excerpt of a Letter from a Convict Laborer to the Alabama Board of Inspectors of Convicts

“[Our living quarters are] filled with filth and vermin. ... [Gunpowder cans were used to hold human waste that periodically] would fill up and run over on bed [where some prisoners were shackled in place at night]. ... Every Day some one of us were carried to our last resting, the grave. Day after day we looked Death in the face & was afraid to speak. ... Fate seems to curse a convict. Death seems to summon us hence. ... Comer is a hard man. I have seen men come to him with their shirts a solid scab on their back and beg him to help them and he would say [‘]let the hide grow back and take it off again.[’] I have seen him hit men 100 and 160 [times] with a ten prong strop [sic], then say they was not whiped [sic]. He would go off after an escape man come one day with him and dig his grave the same day. We go to cell wet, go to bed wet and arise wet the following morning and evry [sic] guard knocking[,] beating[,] yelling[,] Keep [sic] in line Jumping Ditches [sic].”

- **Reading Prompt:** This is an excerpt from a book Frederick Douglass wrote over 100 years ago. Douglass was born a slave, escaped, and spent his life working to first free and then inspire African Americans.

Chapter III – *The Convict Lease System*

Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Washington claim to be too poor to maintain state convicts within prison walls.

Hence the convicts are leased out to work for railway contractors, mining companies and those who farm large plantations. These companies assume charge of the convicts, work them as cheap labor and pay the states a handsome revenue for their labor. Nine-tenths of these convicts are Negroes. There are two reasons for this.

The religious, moral and philanthropic forces of the country — all the agencies which tend to uplift and reclaim the degraded and ignorant, are in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon [white]. ... The white Christian and moral influences have not only done little to prevent the Negro becoming a criminal, but they have deliberately shut him out of everything which tends to make for good citizenship. ... The Negro is shut out and ignored, left to grow up in ignorance and vice. Only in the gambling dens and saloons does he meet any sort of welcome. What wonder that he falls into crime?

The second reason our race furnishes so large a share of the convicts is that the judges, juries and other officials of the courts are white men who share these prejudices. They also make the laws. ... The People's Advocate, a Negro journal, of Atlanta, Georgia, has the following observation on the prison showing of that state for 1892. "It is an astounding fact that 90 per cent of the state's convicts are colored; 194 white males and 2 white females; 1,710 colored males and 44 colored females. Is it possible that Georgia is so color prejudiced that she won't convict her white law-breakers? Yes, it is just so, but we hope for a better day." ...

Every Negro so sentenced not only means able-bodied men to swell the state's number of slaves, but every Negro so convicted is thereby disfranchised [unable to vote].

Graphic Organizer

Source	What do we know about the author of this primary source? Who is the audience? How do we know the author's audience based on evidence from his source?	What did you learn from this primary source? Why is this important? Use evidence from the source to support your arguments.	How is this primary source similar to or different from the other two primary sources? Use evidence from the source to support your arguments.
Letter From Judge			
Letter from Convict Laborer			
Excerpt from Frederick Douglass book			

Day Five

- **Writing Prompts:** Students independently outline and complete one of the two following writing prompts..

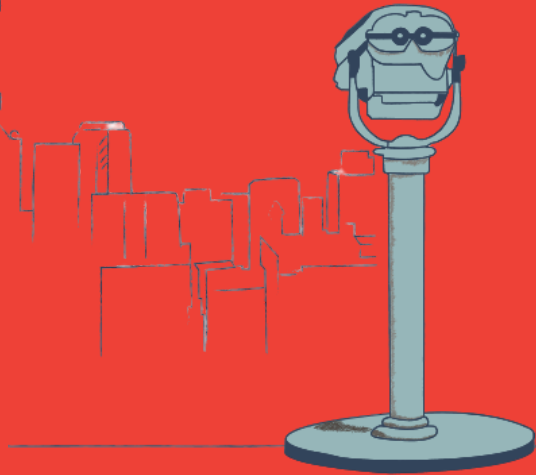
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1. Imagine that you were an activist against the convict-leasing system because of its violations of African Americans' rights and freedoms. Write a letter to a Birmingham newspaper detailing why the convict-leasing system should be ended. Your letter should also include information about the false charges brought against prisoners and their living and working conditions. Draw on evidence from the sources examined in this project to support your arguments.

2. Imagine that you are an industrial businessman in Birmingham and want to get investors' financial support to enable your company and the city to grow. Write a one-page letter to a possible investor explaining the reasons the investor should consider financially supporting your company. Some items to highlight in your letter are the economic potential of Birmingham's industries, the benefits of a large, strike-free labor system, and the abundant natural resources in the Birmingham area. Draw on evidence from the sources examined in this project to support your arguments.

- Students need to edit their writing prompt once completed.

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