

# GEORGIA PRISON PROJECT



## CHAIN GANGS

CREATED BY: CHRISTY A. DEY

### The History of Chain Gangs in the South

After the Civil War, the South was in ruins. Much of their infrastructure, such as roads and bridges were in need of repair or reconstruction.

First, the convict leasing system provided the necessary work force, but when Georgia outlawed this practice in 1908, the first prison farm was created where men worked in chains to complete public work projects. Considered a progressive penal reform, chain gangs were touted by the public as beneficial for all. Prisoners would be allowed to escape their cramped prison cells and work in the fresh air, and in return, the public would have improved roadways.



"Bad boys make good roads" was a saying used by Georgians in the early 1900s, as chain gangs were used to complete many major road projects.

Work camps with their chain gangs would move from site to site across the state as projects were completed.



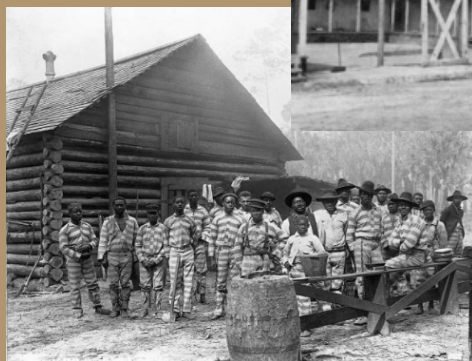
### The Conditions of Chain Gangs

Life on a chain gang was brutal.

Men were forced to eat, work and sleep in shackles chained to each other. For over 12 hours a day, they were forced to complete back-breaking manual labor as guards with rifles watched them.

Forced to live in portable camps, the prisoners endured squalid living conditions, maggot-infested food and little or no access to bathing facilities or medical attention for their shackle-induced ulcers.

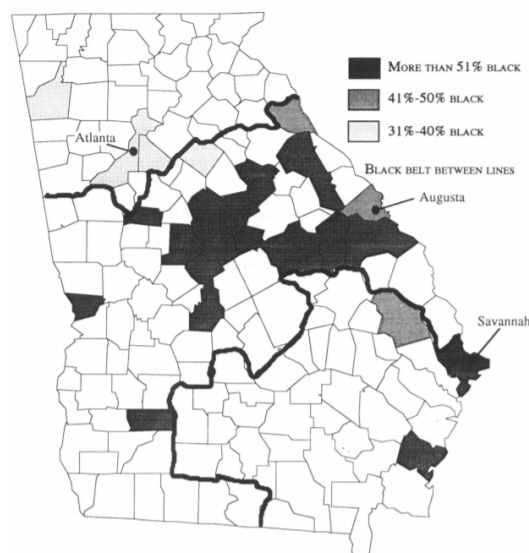
Additionally, prisoners were often beaten with leather straps and rifle butts for minor disciplinary infractions. As a result of the dangerous working conditions, constant abuse and deplorable living arrangements, many prisoners on chain gangs died.



### Racism in Chain Gangs

Chain gangs not only represented the brutality of prison systems in the South, but they also highlighted the prejudices shown toward African-Americans in the justice system. With 90% of Georgia's prisoners being African-American at the turn of the 20th century, it should be no surprise that the majority of chain gang prisoners were also African-American. Judges often chose to send white prisoners to the penitentiaries to serve their time and black prisoners to the chain gangs. Because African-Americans were often charged with misdemeanors for social crimes and could not pay the fines, these men were disproportionately sent to chain gangs.

BLACK POPULATION OF GEORGIA COUNTIES WITH CHAIN GANGS, 1901



The map above shows the racial composition of Georgia counties who enforced chain gangs in 1901. By 1911, all but eleven counties had enforced chain gangs. These counties had negligible black populations.

### Chain Gangs in the Media

Unfortunately, due to a deep-rooted tradition of racism in the South, the atrocious conditions on chain gangs were not reported and did not receive widespread attention until the media used white actors to portray the plight of these prisoners. Movies like "Cool Hand Luke" and "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" are such examples. Robert Burns, autobiography *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!* also shed light on the injustices caused by chain gangs.



"Encyclopedia of Race and Racism." Encyclopedia.com. 16 Oct. 2020. "Encyclopedia.com, Encyclopedia.com, 25 Oct. 2020, www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/chain-gangs#:~:text=Browne, Jaron, and Jaron Browne is an organizer with People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER). \"Rooted in Slavery: Prison Labor Exploitation.\" Rooted in Slavery: Prison Labor Exploitation | Reimagine!, www.reimaginepe.org/node/856#

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