

**ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS ESCAPES OF
COUNTY CONVICTS, 1885-1890**

Finding aid

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ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY

The Alabama Department of Corrections was established in 1983 and is the newest iteration of a series of previously established Boards tasked with operating Alabama's state prison system. The agencies it succeeds include the Board of Inspectors of the Penitentiary (1841-1885); the Board of Inspectors of Convicts (1885-1893); the Board of Managers of Convicts (1893-1895); the Board of Inspectors of Convicts (1895-1919); the State Board of Control and Economy (1919-1923); the State Board of Convict Supervisors (1923); the State Board of Administration (1923-1939); the Department of Corrections and Institutions (1939-1953); and the Board of Corrections (1953-1979). The establishment of the Board of Inspectors of the Penitentiary coincided with the opening of Alabama's first state-operated prison, the Wetumpka State Penitentiary, in 1841. Established approximately twenty years after Alabama became a state, the state prison system replaced the practice of handling criminal offenses at a strictly local level, often publicly. Prior to the end of the Civil War, the demographics of the Wetumpka State Penitentiary skewed heavily white at ninety-nine percent with only one percent of the prison's population comprising free Black people. This was due to laws that stated enslaved Black people were to be punished for alleged legal offenses by those who held them in slavery. However, following the abolishment of slavery in 1865, the population of the prison drastically changed to ninety percent Black and ten percent white.

Wetumpka State Penitentiary nicknamed "the Walls of Alabama" or simply "the Walls," received its first male prisoner in 1842, who was sentenced to twenty years for housing a runaway enslaved person. The penitentiary would receive its first female inmate in 1850, who was sentenced to ten years for murder. While the prison was originally intended to be self-sufficient, the system turned to leasing the prison's facilities and inmates to individuals to maintain the institution. This granted the individuals who leased the prison the position of Warden, the first of whom was J. G. Graham in 1846. However, the practice ended when a convict murdered Warden Dr. Ambrose Burrows in 1862. The prison returned to state control, where appointed Warden Dr. M. G. Moore focused the labor efforts of the inmates into producing materials to support the Confederacy in the Civil War. After the war, Governor Robert M. Patton legalized convict leasing to assist with Reconstruction work, namely with rebuilding the railroad system. Once the railroad system had been completed, these prisoners were leased to farms, lumberyards, and coal mines. This became known as the Convict-Lease System, which generated revenue for the state when Warden John G. Bass established a system in which companies leasing prisoners made monthly payments to the state. As the state began producing revenue from the Convict-Lease System, county prisons also leased their inmates for a profit.

In 1883, Warden John Hollis Bankhead instituted a plan to limit the leasing of inmates to only a few companies, including the Pratt Coal and Iron Company; the Tennessee Coal, Iron, and Railroad Company; and the Sloss Iron and Steel Company. These companies built and operated prisons out of their mining sites, which were to be overseen by a Board of Inspectors tasked with assuring the prisoners were treated well and worked and lived under safe conditions. However, these Inspectors rarely oversaw the convicts' conditions, resulting in a high mortality rate among

inmates leased to these companies. The Coleman Law of 1885 moved the main office of the prison system from Wetumpka to Montgomery and the hierarchy of the Alabama prison system. Reginald H. Dawson took control and attempted to mediate tensions between contractors and inmates as well as improve the conditions for inmates leased to the mining companies. Convicts leased by both the state and county prison systems worked and lived under extremely poor conditions, often being overworked in an unsafe environment. Many inmates had their sentences extended due to falsified bad conduct reports intended to maintain the companies' cheap source of labor for longer. The largely Black population of the prison system began referring to convict leasing as a "new form of slavery." Despite efforts by some to improve working and living conditions for these inmates, little would change until the end of the Convict-Lease System.

The new hierarchy instituted by the Coleman Law would not be in place for long. Less than ten years later, on February 14, 1893, a new law created the Board of Managers to "New System." This law sought to end the contracts with companies leasing convicts and return the inmates to the state prison. The "New System" law was repealed after the state failed to remove the inmates from the companies' prison quarters by the deadline of February 1895. The Convict-Lease System persisted until Alabama became the last state to end the system in 1928. With the construction and operation of newer prisons such as Kilby, Wetumpka State Penitentiary's co-correctional facilities began to skew heavily female in population. The penitentiary changed its name to the Julia Tutwiler Prison in 1941, named after the well-known advocate for educational opportunities in prisons and general reform to the prison system, and moved to a new facility less than a mile north of the old one in 1942.

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SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This volume assembled by the Alabama Department of Corrections, then known as the Board of Inspectors of Convicts, presents a record of county convicts that escaped from their confinement between the years of 1885 and 1890, whether from a prison or a leasing company's facilities. The record is not split into any specific sections and is comprised of a singular list of escaped convicts organized by the date they escaped. Along with the name of the inmate, each entry into the record includes the prisoner's county, the date of the prisoner's escape, the date of the prisoner's recapture, and the name of the individual or company leasing the prisoner.

While the record is primarily organized by the date of the inmates' escapes, there are some entries that are recorded out of order. This is likely due to some prisoners' escapes going unnoticed until a short time afterward. It is notable that while there is a designated section within the record for documenting the recapture dates of escaped convicts, this section is rarely filled out, implying that very few convicts who escaped were recaptured. There is an additional section with each entry into the record for remarks, which includes information such as known aliases of escaped convicts, the amount of escape attempts the convict has made, or the reward amount offered for the convict's recapture. However, this section is filled out for very few entries.

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CONTAINER LISTING**

<u>Box</u>	<u>Description</u>
SG024878C	Escapes of county convicts, 1885-1890