Please Don't Forget About Me: African American Women, Mississippi, And The History Of Crime And Punishment In Parchman Prison, 1890-1980

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“PLEASE DON'T FORGET ABOUT ME”:
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN, MISSISSIPPI, AND THE HISTORY OF CRIME AND
PUNISHMENT IN PARCHMAN PRISON, 1890-1980

A Dissertation

Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for the

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Telisha Dionne Bailey

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ABSTRACT

Despite the vast amount of research covering incarcerated men in the southern prison system from the beginning of the nineteenth century to present, the incarceration of women has gone almost unexamined. As the forgotten offender, historians, criminologist, and others interested in Mississippi carceral studies have failed to include a historical study that focuses on the incarceration of African American women in Mississippi. To date, there are two major historical works that explore Mississippi penology and its notorious Parchman Penitentiary. David Oshinsky’s, *Worse Than Slavery* and William Banks Taylor’s, *Down on Parchman Farm*, are the two pivotal historical works that examine the history of Parchman penitentiary, however, these works mainly focus on telling the story of incarcerated men. While sparingly including imprisoned women in their analysis, what goes overlooked are the women that spent years behind the walls of Parchman enduring the same hardships and exploitations as incarcerated men. To fully understand the penal system and the history of crime and punishment in Mississippi, it is imperative that the narrative is inclusive of all those individuals, especially African American women, who endured the states’ most notorious prisons, Parchman penitentiary.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the GREATEST and most inspirational women in my life: Carol J. Hawkins, Jessica Alice Foster, Alice Foster, Nellie Belle Bailey, Mary Ann Foster, Betty Bailey Irvin, and Louis Turner. I hope that you all are proud of me. Thank you!
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During the research phase, the staffs at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and the University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections were extremely kind and helpful. I would like to especially the extraordinary men and women whom I interviewed for this project. I thoroughly enjoyed our conversations and I learned so much from all of you. Without your participation and brutal honesty, this dissertation would not have been possible. I truly thank you!

Countless individuals have influenced not only the direction of this project, but also my graduate career; but a few deserve special mention. As a student at the University of Mississippi, I had the opportunity to work closely with several women who have become mentors to me during my academic career. I first met Dr. Nancy Bercaw, whose work piqued my interest and prompted me to question the scarcity of scholarship on African American women, as a second year Master’s student. Her work captivated me. After taking two independent study courses with Dr. Bercaw, I knew that my work must focus on the void of African American women in historical research in some capacity. Thank you, Dr. Bercaw, for exposing me to a different side of American history, one that was inclusive of everyone, even the marginalized groups. I am particularly indebted to Dr. Erin Chapman, a great mentor and friend, who challenged me to become a better writer and scholar. I would also like to thank Dr. Angela Hornsby-Gutting for believing in me from the beginning and telling me that I could do this!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT: .................................................................................................................. ii

DEDICATION: ........................................................................................................ iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: ......................................................................................... iv

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION
THE SCOTT SISTERS, MISSISSIPPI, AND THE SEEDS OF INJUSTICE ..................... 1

CHAPTER II:
MULTIPLE JEOPARDY: THE HISTORICAL POLITICS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE LEGAL STATUS AND IMPRISONMENT IN MISSISSIPPI, 1830-1930S........... 14

CHAPTER III:
I BEG FOR YOUR MERCY: THE BUSINESS OF BLACK WOMEN’S BODIES IN THE CARCERAL STATE THROUGH THE LIFE OF HETTIE RECORD OF MISSISSIPPI, 1880-1963........................................................................................................... 64

CHAPTER IV:
THE MARK OF INJUSTICE – A GENDERED INCLUSION: YOUNG BLACK AND WHITE WOMEN’S ENCOUNTER WITH MISSISSIPPI’S PENAL SYSTEM DURING FREEDOM SUMMER OF 1961................................................................. 111

CHAPTER V:

CHAPTER VI:
WE LIVE AND WE LEARN: GAINING VISIBILITY IN THE MISSISSIPPI PENAL SYSTEM.................................................................................................................... 176

CHAPTER VII:
CONCLUSION “MISSISSIPPI, THE CARCERAL STATE, AND THE FORGOTTEN OFFENDER”............................................................................................................. 203

BIBLIOGRAPHY........................................................................................................ 212

VITAE.......................................................................................................................... 229
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Scott Sisters, Mississippi, and the Seeds of Injustice

Gladys and Jamie Scott had never been in trouble with the law. As African American women in rural Mississippi, both women’s economic circumstances meant that they had a difficult time attaining social or economic progress. As young mothers, Gladys and Jamie worked hard to earn an honest living and provide for their children. Gladys, who was 19 years old was expecting her second child. Her older sister, Jamie, was 22 and had three young children. Life often seemed difficult for the sisters but both maintained adequate employment and their own residences. The feeling that this was not enough often worried the sisters so they worked extra hours to make more money while their mother helped with their children. Both women constantly attempted to find ways to make ends meet and secure a future for their children.

One event altered their path in life. Whether they were victims of circumstance or affiliation, the armed robbery accusations levied against the Scott sisters changed their lives forever. On the night of December 24, 1993, Gladys and Jamie Scott met trouble in the rural town of Forest, Mississippi at a Mini Mart convenience store. This trip to the store, a stop that they made numerous times, would gravely affect not only their lives but the lives of their children. After experiencing car trouble, Gladys and Jamie accepted a ride to the store with three
male friends who were between the ages of 14-18.\footnote{The three young men riding with Gladys Scott and Jamie Scott were Howard Patrick, 14 years old at the time of the incident, his 17 year old brother, Christopher Patrick, and Gregory Patrick, their 18 year old cousin.} After arriving at the store, the sisters recognized two young men, Johnny Ray Hayes and Mitchell Duckworth. The sisters often saw the two men at the store so it was no surprise and they all began to converse. After talking to the gentlemen for a short while, Gladys and Jamie told the three young men that they were going to leave with Hayes and Duckworth.\footnote{Johnny Ray Hayes and Mitchell Duckworth worked with Jamie at a local factory in town. They went to the store to buy two six-packs of beer. It was here that they encountered Gladys and Jamie.} The story then took some turns.

Hayes and Duckworth, having just got off of work, bought a few beers and were ready to enjoy the company of the sisters, so they invited them to go riding. According to court records, Gladys and Jamie decided to join the young men for what was to be a short joy ride and then be dropped off at their respective homes. As the car pulled out of the parking lot and onto a dark road, an undetected blue Oldsmobile followed. After making a first stop where the sisters used the restroom, they loaded back into the car and continued their trip. At a second stop Gladys got out of the car and walked over to the blue Oldsmobile to speak to the three gentlemen riding in that vehicle.

According to testimony, two significant events took place there. First, this was where the prosecution alleged that the Scott sisters devised a plan to rob Hayes and Duckworth. Second, this was where Hayes and Duckworth stated that they recognized that the blue Oldsmobile from the store was following them. What Gladys said to the young men in the car no one truly knows because of conflicting stories at trial, but Hayes and Duckworth speculate that this is when the group conspired to rob them. When Gladys returned to the car she decided that she would like to drive. After traveling for a short distance, Jamie announced that she felt sick. The car stopped at the request of its owner who explained at trial that he did not want Jamie to throw up in his
“clean automobile.” Almost simultaneously a shotgun entered the car and the three young men instructed Hayes and Duckworth to exit the vehicle. Hayes and Duckworth testified that the three young men, with Gladys and Jamie actively participating, robbed them at gunpoint. The men also testified that they were hit in the head with the gun and instructed to lie in a ditch on the side of the road. After the men reported the robbery, the men explained that Gladys, Jamie, and the three young men sped off in the blue Oldsmobile. After reporting the burglary to the authorities, police arrested all five suspects and charged them with armed robbery.

On December 24, 1993, police arrested Gladys and Jamie and charged them with two counts of armed robbery, which in the state of Mississippi carried a life sentence for each conviction. The amount of money the sisters were accused of stealing was $11. Even though no one was injured in the alleged robbery, what happened next served as a marker of the unjust Mississippi judicial system. During the trial both Hayes and Duckworth testified that they never witnessed Gladys or Jamie with a gun and agreed that it was their idea to stop the car so that Jamie would not get sick inside of the vehicle. While the Scott sisters maintained their innocence, a jury returned a guilty verdict on two counts of armed robbery. According to their sentences, Gladys and Jamie would spend the rest of their lives behind bars pending parole after each served a minimum of 20 years.

The judicial system the Scott sisters encountered demonstrated injustice at the highest level. Even though the three teenagers who testified against the Scott sisters admitted that they committed the robbery and recanted the false testimony they gave during the Scott’s sisters’ trial, Gladys and Jamie received no leniency from the courts. The young men, who had criminal backgrounds, testified before a judge and jury that they were forced by authorities to implicate the sisters as the masterminds behind the robbery. For their testimony, the prosecutors offered
the three young men plea deals where they would plead guilty on the charge of strong armed robbery and receive a reduced sentence of 8 years.\(^3\) The gun allegedly used in the robbery was never found. The Scott sisters testified that they did not plan the robbery nor did they participate. Both sisters attested that it was car trouble that led them to accept a ride to the store from the three young men.

All parties involved in the case were African American. Mississippi has a history of criminalizing black men and women; thus, when the case against the Scott sisters went to trial it was hard to imagine that they would receive a fair trial. According to their lawyer, Chokwe Lumumba, a human rights activist and major political figure in Mississippi who in 2013 was elected as the Mayor of Jackson, explained that while “the incident itself was not racial in any way…the way it was handled had a racial prism to it.” Lumumba further lamented, “Two white girls would have no way gotten two life sentences.”\(^4\) The issues that Lumumba presented reveal that Mississippi, according to the Mississippi director of the American Civil Liberties Union, “implemented a grave miscarriage of justice” in the case of the Scott sisters. The sisters experienced this injustice for sixteen years until their mother and some social activists took up the call for their release.

The question remains, what happened to other nameless African American women imprisoned in Mississippi? Who would speak for them? Who would take up their fight to make sure that their voices were heard? The story is more complicated than simply viewing the tragedy of the Scott sisters as an individual tragedy in which they alone experienced. It is

\(^3\) In the act of a strong-armed robbery assailants do not use a weapon when committing the crime. Most strong-armed robberies center on petty crimes that include the theft of purses, backpacks and other personal items. A person commits armed robbery when he/she takes something from someone else, using violence or intimidation, while carrying a dangerous weapon.

important to understand that the Scott sisters represent a demographic of women in the Mississippi penal system that are rendered voiceless due to their criminalization. Their story also represents the injustice that African American women experienced at the hands of a judicial system that had a history of demonizing incarcerated black women.

**Southern Penology – Race, Class, and Gender Politics in the Mississippi Justice system**

As a neglected aspect of southern history, crime and punishment have largely gone unnoticed by scholars. Until the last few years even with the recent increase in scholarly interest, a void remains in the history of women’s incarceration. To appreciate the necessity of a more thorough analysis of women in the Mississippi carceral state, one must understand the role of race within the penal system. Race, along with class and gender, significantly influenced how penology functioned in the state. Since the 1880s, the Mississippi justice system has effectively used racist ideologies of race and gender to criminalize African American women. White Mississippians viewed African Americans as a race and dangerous class worthy of control, and when given any serious attention they believed that black women were lewd, unwomanly, sexual deviants, and criminal by nature. Often deemed unimportant, incarcerated African American women and their plight in Mississippi went unnoticed. While several studies have explored the incarceration of men in the state, women have gone almost overlooked save for a few pages in several works.

Only a few monographs probe the southern penal system and focus on convict leasing, peonage, and chain gangs, all of which exploited African American women. Alex Lichtenstein’s *Twice the Work of Free Labor* is one of the first studies on the convict leasing system in the
Lichtenstein argues that the forced labor of African Americans in the South following the Civil War aided in the development of a New South while protecting white supremacy. Matthew J. Mancini’s *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928* delivers a searing history of one of the harshest, most exploitative labor systems in American history. Mancini explains that convict leasing was not only a free labor system for southern states to make a profit, it was also a means to uphold racial guidelines of inferiority and inequality.

Douglass A. Blackmon’s *Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of African Americans from the Civil War to World War II* provides one the most detailed histories of convict leasing to date. Blackmon’s work illustrates the inner workings of the leasing system in the South and how thousands of African Americans fell victim to the system. What Blackmon does that previous scholars did not was include incarcerated women in his study. By doing so, Blackmon provides a more concrete analysis of the leasing system and the hardships experienced by both men and women. Most recently in her book, *Chained In Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*, Talitha L. LeFlouria presents African American women as central actors in the convict leasing system and uncovers decades of labor exploitation and abuse that black women endured while incarcerated in Georgia. While this study focuses on female convict leases in Georgia, one can imagine that incarcerated women in Mississippi experienced some of the same exploitations. While David Oshinsky explores the convict leasing system in *Worse Than Slavery*, the leasing system is not his main focal point. In expanding the scholarship

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7 Douglass A. Blackmon’s *Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of African Americans from the Civil War to WWII* (New Your: Anchor Books, 2008).
of convict leasing, Pete Daniel’s work, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* further explores the abusive history of the southern penal system by viewing debt peonage as a system that further enslaved African Americans in the South.  


While the book does not investigate southern prisons, Gross does an exceptional job at including African American women as important actors in the historiography of the prison system. There are a few works that focus on prisons outside of Mississippi and include short analysis of prisons in Louisiana, Arkansas, South Carolina, and Georgia. There are also several works that study the history of southern prisons in relation to crime and punishment. One important study that examines the early stages of southern penology is Edward L. Ayers’ work, *Vengeance and Justice*, which explores components of southern crime and punishment and their connection to class and race.  

Mississippi differs from other states because historians have produced defining works that seek to explore the state’s notorious prison, Parchman penal farm. David Oshinsky’s *Worse Than Slavery* is a pivotal work that explores the history of Parchman penitentiary. Oshinsky provides the reader with an in depth history of Parchman penal farm by exploring the racism, cruelty and brutality that incarcerated African Americans endured while imprisoned. Oshinsky illuminates how Parchman’s founders thought its penal system represented progress over chain

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gangs, however, Parchman was a very cruel institution that implemented its own type of justice. The book details the consequences of being a black and male incarcerated at Parchman. Both white men and black women are relegated to an almost unimportant state. Oshinsky seems to have overlooked incarcerated African Americans women’s significance in his narrative of Parchman. Similarly, William Banks Taylor’s works on the Mississippi penal system aid in bringing Parchman penal farm to the forefront of historical scholarship. In *Brokered Justice: Race, Politics, and Mississippi Prisons, 1798-1992*, Taylor presents a detailed history of the Mississippi penal system from colonization through the 1990s.\(^\text{13}\) Taylor places this study within the social context of racial inequality and demonstrates how Mississippi through legal measures created a prison system that sought to incarcerate primarily African Americans. The revised edition of Taylor’s first work, *Down on Parchman Farm: The Great Prison in the Mississippi Delta*, presents a prison system that functioned as southern plantation by demanding and exploiting African American labor.\(^\text{14}\)

**The United States, Race, and Mass Incarceration**

The growth of the American penal system, led in part by the mass incarceration of African Americans, further illustrated that people of color continually experienced a marked set of justice that aided in their criminalization. Recent scholarship, which does not solely focusing on southern prisons, explores mass incarceration in the United States and tackles the consequences of developing such mentality. *Punishment and Inequality in America* by Bruce Western explores the era of mass incarceration and the social and economic consequences it


produced. Western further looks at punishment and inequality while profiling the unprecedented growth of the prison system in America. A. Leon Higginbotham’s work, *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process*, explores the ideologies of racial inferiority and the criminal justice system from the colonial period through the 1990s. In an effort to illustrate the injustice that African Americans experienced at the hands of the judicial system, Higginbotham explains that white opinions of black inferiority became systemized in law and paved the way for mass incarceration. Khalil Gibran Muhammad’s work *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* focuses on the consequences of crime and race in the Urban North. Muhammad investigates the development of mass incarceration as a means of maintaining racial inequality in the United States and attributes this development to the social construction of a perceived innate black criminality. In expanding the conversation on mass incarceration, Michelle Alexander argues in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, that through a variety of means, including the wars on drugs and poverty, the criminal justice system serves as a modern day system of racial control.

By the late twentieth century, America developed a system of mass incarceration that shaped the face of the American judicial system. According to historian Heather Ann Thompson, “between 1970 and 2010 more people were incarcerated in the United States than were imprisoned in any other country, and at no point in its past had the nation’s economic, 

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social, and political institutions become so bound up with the practice of punishment.”\textsuperscript{19} The fact that today there are more prisons presently under construction to house women speaks volumes about the need for more thorough study on the history of incarcerated women. The rate of female incarceration is on a steady incline and since 1980 the number of women incarcerated in the United States has increased at nearly double the rate of men.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Chapter Outline}

The following work hopes to fill the void in the histories that have often excluded African American women from their discussion of southern prison systems. The goal is to show African American women as essential factors in the study of the Mississippi carceral state and by doing so gain a clear understanding of the penal politics of the state. The sources are so scarce and the injustices that incarcerated women experienced were so varied that this work had to take different approaches to understand the incarceration of African American women. The dissertation uses a wide variety of primary sources including biennial records, state records, governors’ papers, pardon and clemency requests, and oral histories together with a broad range of secondary sources to study incarcerated women at different times. The dissertation does not try to draw conclusions that the sources do not support. Rather, the work seeks to illustrate that the history of incarceration in Mississippi cannot fully represent a definitive narrative if African American women continued to be overlooked.

Chapter one serves as the introduction to the dissertation. The chapter opens with the story of the Scott sisters who were each charged and convicted of two counts of armed robbery and sentenced to two life sentences in the state penitentiary. Their story exhibits the unjust

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Bureau of Justice Statistics, \textit{The Sentencing Project}, 2010.
\end{itemize}
politics of incarceration that African American women experience in Mississippi while demonstrating that many of these injustices continue to go unnoticed. Chapter two considers the historical politics of class, race, and gender in Mississippi and argues that black women encountered a southern justice system determined to use their criminality as a marker of inferiority. The chapter introduces Parchman penitentiary and illustrates the role that African American women played at its inception, their economic importance to the state and the convict leasing system, their ability to aid in the economic stability of the penal system, and their continuous physical exploitation through the 1930s. The chapter argues that by exploring female legal status and imprisonment in Mississippi, one will discover that African American women experienced a triple jeopardy that judged them for being black, female, and criminal.

The attention given to imprisoned men in Mississippi by historians, criminologists, activists, politicians, journalists, and prison officials has meant that women are often absent from the discussion. What goes neglected from the scholarship is what women were sent to prison, how the penal system treated these women once incarcerated, and the avenues that imprisoned women used to gain their freedom. Chapter three explores the avenues that incarcerated African American women in Mississippi had to freedom by studying pardon and clemency requests from imprisoned women and those individuals interested in their labor. The beginning of the chapter examines the incarceration of nine-year-old Hettie Record, the subsequent requests for her pardon from wealthy white men, and the response of the penal system as a way to illustrate that African American women had little control over their labor even when incarcerated. The chapter further demonstrates that incarcerated women created their own form of autonomy behind prison walls by writing governors and requesting their own pardons.
Chapter four explores the summer of 1961 and the female Freedom Riders who were incarcerated and sent to Parchman penitentiary. This chapter offers a gendered and racial inclusion of white and black women in the Mississippi penal system. The state viewed Freedom Riders as threats to the white majority and called for their immediate incarceration. The techniques used by prison administrators and guards when dealing with incarcerated females proved to be unequal as Mississippi was hesitant to punish white women to the extent that they punished black women. Chapter five centers on the reformist spirit of social and prison activist L. C. Dorsey while presenting the history of the prison reform movement in Mississippi in the 1970s. The chapter intends to weave together Dorsey’s determination to reform Parchman with the court’s decision in *Collier vs. Gates*, which deemed conditions at Parchman incorrigible and morally insufferable.

Chapter six brings women’s voices to the forefront of the study of Parchman and incarceration in Mississippi. It is important to listen to the voices of women, those incarcerated, the reformers, guards, families, and everyone involved so that imprisoned women and those close to them will leave the shadows of invisibility and gain a voice that allows them to tell their own story. While this invisibility was a form of injustice, by allowing women to share their experiences they gain some autonomy over their lives. By women sharing their experiences in the Mississippi penal system they gain a sense of control over their lives in a system that has all too often stifled them.

There are a few points of comparison when considering the Mississippi penitentiary and the differences between white men and incarcerated black women that this work hopes to illustrate. African American women felt none of the protection or shelter that white men, and in some instances, white women might have received due to the ideas regarding how white
southerners believed they should treat black women. Chapter seven, which serves as the conclusion to this study, presents this ideology by revisiting the case of Gladys and Jamie Scott. After a public call for their release by public figures and organizations, the fight would last two long years with Governor Haley Barbour unwilling to grant the sisters a pardon. The story of the Scott sisters demonstrates that Mississippi implemented a racial and gendered form of justice that punished the sisters for being poor, black, and female. The story is riveting because it illustrates that more must be done in order to reform a justice system that has thrived since its inception on implanting injustice. By including an analysis of African American women into the historiography of Mississippi penal politics, what will emerge is a more comprehensive account of the Mississippi judicial system. This is not merely a history of Parchman penitentiary; rather, this work is a history of gender, race, exploitation, criminalization, and discrimination in Mississippi as it pertained to the incarceration of African American women. This work seeks to justify the significance of such a study to the overall scholarship of American penology while pointing out the importance of including women in that narrative of southern prisons.
CHAPTER TWO

“Multiple Jeopardy: The historical Politics of African American Female Legal Status and Imprisonment in Mississippi, 1830-1930s.”

To realize how crime and punishment affected African American women in Mississippi during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one must first have a clear understanding of the construction of race and gender and how together they worked in unison to criminalize black women. The South’s racial order functioned as a racial hierarchy that kept black women at the bottom. Being black, female, poor, and criminal in Mississippi meant that women deemed as social deviants were outside the margin of justice. This triple jeopardy ensured that race, gender and class played a major role in their criminality. The lack of rights that white and black women in Mississippi had during the nineteenth and early twentieth century also created a sense of loneliness and isolation. While white women found space to alter their lot, African American women had no such recourse. Constantly struggling in a society that deemed them unequal, the penitentiary would prove just as scornful. African American women, then, had to navigate a South that viewed them through a sexual and criminal lens. While white women gained autonomy through the courts and their reformist spirit, African American women were afforded no such opportunities. This chapter will investigate the constructions of race and gender and explore the politics of female legal status and imprisonment in Mississippi during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Moreover, the chapter will illustrate that African American women endured a South determined to use their criminality as a means of denying rehabilitation. Likewise, incarcerated women actively labored and carved out a space for
themselves inside of prison to demonstrate their value, even if they did not have the wherewithal to understand those actions.

Dating back to the colonial period, married women in America gained much of their legal status through their relationship with their husbands. Both common law and statutory law found ways to exclude women, particularly African American women, from the protection of justice. The judicial system considered husband and wife as one. This meant that:

The husband, by marriage, acquires a right to use of the real estate of his wife, during her life; and if they have a child born alive, then, if he survives, during his life, as tenant by the curtesy. He acquires an absolute right to her chattels real, and may dispose of them…He acquires an absolute property in her chattels personal in possession…As to the property of the wife accruing during coverture, the same rule is applicable.¹

Men and women alike prescribed to the commonplace beliefs regarding a woman’s ‘proper place’ and accepted role as wife in Southern society. Men and women considered a woman’s place to be subservient to her husband, as Deborah Gray White noted in Ar’n’t I a Woman, when she states, “Mary Boykin Chesnut, the wife of a prominent Southern politician, concurred: “All married women, all children and girls who live in their father’s house are slaves.””² Although this language alludes to inferior status, white women gained autonomy during the early nineteenth century with the passing of the Married Women’s Property Act.

In 1839, Mississippi enacted the first Married Women’s Property Act, which undoubtedly was a major reform for white women in the state, principally in Natchez. The law, according to historian Joyce Broussard, “allowed married women to register personal and real properties as separate estates, meaning that wives alone legally controlled the registered items.”³ Broussard

argues that free married white women were cognizant of the boundaries imposed on them by societal constructions of gender. The South was decidedly hierarchical and white women found a place within that system to gain power without demanding complete equality with men. Married women “demanded equity rights as women socially and politically subordinate to their husbands but legally equal to them in certain specifically identified circumstances recognized in law (prenuptial contracts, dower rights, and the Married Women’s Property Act) and judicial verdicts (divorce).” Because of their social status, married white women found a Mississippi legal system more willing to work with them in maintaining property, personal assets, and estates. Broussard alludes to the fact that the African American woman, even when free, “carried a color burden” which placed her outside of the protection of the law. The fact that “No white woman in antebellum Natchez could be expelled from the state, whipped in punishment for crimes, or enslaved because she could not provide manumission documents,” speaks to the role that race played in Southern society. African American women’s color excluded them from this type of protection, especially since “black women carried the social stigma of blackness, which often presumed sexual promiscuity of any black woman, whether free or enslaved,” even when married or widowed.

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4 Ibid., 58.

5 Ibid., 58.


7 Ibid., 23.
Four of the five sections of the 1839 Mississippi Act regulated the rights of married women to own and dispose of slaves.\textsuperscript{8} Perhaps this right alluded to the autonomy that many white women gained in cases involving their dowry rights. In an effort to help protect the assets of men affected by bankruptcy by allowing them to transfer their property over to their wives and in preserving the system of slavery through the maintenance of enslaved people with the help of a father, brother, or son, the Married Women’s Property Act of 1839 created a system that ensured fathers the safety of their inheritances if their daughters married unsuccessful men.\textsuperscript{9} While single women with property had independent legal status, married women enjoyed a form of legal protection that afforded them autonomy after the death of their husbands. Most married women found that they benefited greatly from their marital status. These same property acts excluded African American women since enslaved men and women could not legally marry or own property.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, according to historian Kevin D. McCarthy, the legal status for Southern women began to change substantially, specifically in relation to issues of “maternal and/or parental custody rights against third parties,” as well as “matters of marital status.”\textsuperscript{10} While white and black women sought to prove their materialist capabilities, African American women discovered that Mississippi courts often called into question their race and sexual character. Violet Maples found that the judicial system rejected her claim “As a legally entitled person – as an African American, a woman, and a mother,”


\textsuperscript{9} Broussard, “Naked Before the Law”, 60-62.

giving her the rights to maintain custody of her children, yet, specifically declaring, “Violet Maples is the mother of seven children, by different fathers. She is the servant of, and lives in the kitchen of the father-in-law of her agent…She has no other…means of supporting her children.”11 The ruling justice, Jonathan Tarbell’s emphasis on Maples’s character suggests that he was more concerned with the fact that her children had different fathers and as McCarthy states, “The sexual ‘sins’ of women proved an obstacle to custody,” and race sexuality, two stigmas that black women faced daily, made such a undertaking even more daunting.12 White privilege would begin to prove just how unjust the Mississippi judicial system would be to African American women.

With the abolition of slavery in 1865 through the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, African Americans sought to navigate life as freed men and women while white Southerners looked for ways to restrict such freedoms. Freedom meant something different to everyone, and Southerners of all races and both genders worked to define their own personal freedoms. Emancipation for four million formerly enslaved African American men and women meant that their lives would be forever changed. Searching for a new beginning that included a life outside of slavery, African Americans looked toward a future when equality would be the norm. According to historian Michele Mitchell, “The era following emancipation was an era of cautious optimism for most African American women, children, and men.”13 African Americans understood that their struggle for freedom and equality would not happen overnight. To achieve equality, many recognized a long road ahead. White women, too, found

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11 Ibid., 80-81.
12 Ibid., 80.
that they had a form of personal freedom. While some white women expressed their freedom by continually pushing for social reform, others carved out a space of authority within their homes.

Perhaps black women’s ambition for racial uplift led them to take the necessary steps in moving the race forward. “Racial Destiny,” as Mitchell explains, served as the driving force that African Americans used when “speaking of themselves,” to represent the “desire to secure a productive, progressive future for the race.”

Interestingly, many Southern women, both black and white, shared a common story of dependency, struggle, and survival in a male dominated society. As historian Nancy Bercaw argues, “Dependency was a gendered language of womanhood,” and “Women, in essence, represented the crisis of emancipation – the unfettering of a whole class of dependents.” Following emancipation, the North sought to establish a free-labor system in the South constructed through a leased plantation system. African Americans actively participated in gaining and taking advantage of their newfound freedom. Bercaw states that this freedom, particularly freedwomen’s capacity to enter the workforce and provide for their families, startled Northern men. Despite this freedom, freedwomen found that their race and gender played a key role in relegating black women to dependent status, thus, in many respects deeming them unfit for freedom. African American women began to understand what life outside of enslavement meant for their families and more importantly, themselves. Ultimately, Southern white men continued to deny black women “the most basic right to ownership and control of their bodies,” while the judicial system sought to protect the South’s interest in agriculture by punishing any individual deemed necessary.

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14 Ibid, 8.
16 Ibid., 121.
Their history, however, differed in that Southern Jim Crow laws, penal codes, and racially biased groups especially targeted African American men and women during the region’s massive incarceration of Southern blacks following Reconstruction. While Southern states sought “redemption,” white racists resorted to every legal and illegal tactic to deny African Americans social and political equality. Throughout the South during the late 1860s and the 1870s organizations such as the Knights of the White Camelia, the Pale Faces, the White Brotherhood, and the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan flourished across the South. These organizations sought to terrorize African American men and women and exercise complete power over blacks. By the end of Reconstruction, Southern states began to pass laws that explicitly restricted the freedom of African Americans. Historian David Oshinsky explains that following the abolition of slavery, “Deeply rooted customs were now being written into law. The state legislature had just passed the South’s first Jim Crow ordinance, prohibiting Negroes form riding in railroad coaches set aside for whites.”

Almost immediately Mississippi began to implement additional laws that clearly defined Southern racial guidelines, which when not followed precisely, often resulted in harsher penalties for those who dared to test the system. Oshinsky states, “Blacks who challenged these rules faced arrest, humiliation, and sometimes worse.”

With its long history of racial, social, and cultural hierarchy, Mississippi often implemented unjust policies targeted at its poor, lower class citizens. Poor women and women of color historically found themselves subjugated both mentally and physically within the Southern penal system. The lives of African American women exemplify the same phenomenon because historically, black women found that whites often deemed them unwomanly and

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18 Ibid., 13.
subjected to third-class citizenship. Being black, a woman, and poor more times than not, placed women of color on the periphery of justice. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins argued this point when she stated, “black women can never become fully empowered in a context of social injustice.”

Socially, women of color found themselves as outsiders in a society determined to keep them in a servile state. Southern society treated black women as outcasts and they often found this true in very public ways. Historian Jennifer Ritterhouse explained, “Whites routinely withheld from blacks all forms of civility that might imply they were equals.” Ritterhouse further stated, “Whites demanded that blacks display not only civil but often servile behavior, to be manifested in a wide array of verbal and physical cues.” In doing so, whites did not address black women with titles of respect such as Mrs. or Miss. African American women could not shop and try on clothes in many Southern stores. The racial etiquette that instructed men to take off their hats when approaching a white woman almost never transferred into black women’s lives unless black men extended this courtesy. If Southerners treated black women born and raised in the South as outsiders, the female offender, especially black female criminals, did not fare any better. “Racialized” as innately sinful and criminal, whites viewed black female offenders as naturally immoral and understood their social standing to be that of an offender and deviant. Oshinsky claims that Southerners had long believed that African-Americans had a natural predisposition to criminal behavior, mainly a propensity to theft and noted that Southerners “took African-Americans stealing for granted, as a biological flaw.”

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21 Ibid., 40.
22 Oshinsky, *Worse than Slavery*, 32.
Southerners, in working to structure a new political and social economy, often cast aside the role of gender in the South following the Civil War. Historian Laura F. Edwards argues “gender, in combination with race and class, shaped the political terrain not just in Granville County (North Carolina) but across the South during Reconstruction. This gendered component changes our perspective on the issues, the actors, and the conflicts of this period.”23 From this viewpoint, white women in their own way experienced a double jeopardy. They, too, at times had to consciously live their race and gender. Issues such as motherhood, labor, health, and reproduction remained central to their status in Southern society and were directly tied to their gender and class. The privilege of being a white woman in the South included responsibilities and expectations that white women themselves often found hard to live up to. While some women hoped to use their race and gender as proponents of social uplift, others benefited from their reform. White women frequently had to decide on issues of most importance to them, including making decisions regarding conflicts between family expectation and reform activity. African American women, however, did not enjoy these same options. While African American women also dealt with issues of motherhood, labor, health, and reproduction, they, too, lived in a society where racism and criminalization stigmatized their daily life. In reality, being black was criminal; being a black female proved worse.

Both black and white women from all social classes tried to redefine themselves and the society around them. In many instances, this meant that differences had to be made racially. In the South, racial separation ruled the land. Personal success in the South often depended on the relationship between class and racial stratifications, especially those between women. While white men protected white womanhood, they often condemned black women for their blackness.

and their perceived lack of femininity. Historian Grace Hale asserts that Southern white men “who in more private settings” acted as sexual predators towards African American women, would rape black women with little fear of legal retribution while abusing black women of all classes.” 24 Black women found that their sexuality penalized them in a way that left them dehumanized and demoralized.

Looking at the South, the criminalizing and demonizing of African American women led white women to choose race over gender. 25 The South had two distinct classes of white women; one lower-class group who Southern white men believed to be immoral, lacking respectability, and who felt the pain of poverty. Southern white men subsequently viewed the second group, elite white women, as having a high moral compass, symbolized refinement, leisure, luxury, and wealth. 26 Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explains that in an effort to sustain a form of autonomy in southern society, elite white women kept their “distance from lower-class white women.” 27 Fighting a class bias, poor white women found that forging an allegiance with others of their race could potentially afford them some civil rights and political power. 28 In Southern society prior to the Civil War, poor white women shared in some of the same criticisms and abuses that African American women endured at the hands of Southern white men. Historian Crystal Feimster contends, “poverty was particularly shameful for white women because it violated norms of white femininity, thus, lower-class white women who labored alongside slaves

25 For a discussion of the history of white women being blind to the race question and often choosing race over gender during the post Reconstruction era see Laura F. Edwards, Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction (Champaign: The University of Illinois Press, 1997).
were an absolute contradiction of the Southern lady, who symbolized leisure, luxury, wealth, and refinement.”

Ultimately, facing “physical and sexual abuse at the hands of white men in the antebellum South,” poor white women formed allegiances with women of their race, who often looked upon them as a lessor, in hopes that by doing so they were protecting their sexuality and maintaining respectability. White women began to carve out their own space in Southern society and formed a sisterhood in whiteness in hopes that they would maintain some mode of autonomy and use their gender as a means to navigate the white patriarchal Southern society. Historian Deborah Gray White alludes to this point when she states, “The white woman’s sense of herself as a woman – her self-esteem and perceived superiority – depended on the racism that debased black women.”

Hale explains “both white men and women, rich and poor, exploited African American women economically, paying them pitifully for the deadening chores of domestic work.” While white women understood that their whiteness provided them with a form of protected social and political status, black women found no recourse in a society that placed them outside the boundaries of womanhood. Ultimately, views of criminality would play a major role in limiting how far both white women and black women moved past the ideologies of crime and race.

White Southern elites viewed crimes committed by women as crimes against the community. The criminal justice system placed deviant women it defined as criminals beyond the safeguards of social and judicial protection. Public officials believed that women offenders, especially white women, caused Southern society to decline because morally, they had failed to live up to their moral compass. Moreover, the label of “offender” castigated black female

30 Ibid.
sexuality in the South because their behavior linked “crime” to immoral sexuality. Historian Claude Nolan noted that one Southern planter wholeheartedly believed, “You can’t find a white streak in ’em, if you turn ’em wrong side outwards and back again…All the men are thieves, and all the women are prostitutes. It’s their natur’ to be that way, and they’ll never be no other way.”

Both white women and women of color, once deemed deviants, fell outside of normal social acceptance. Women offenders “became a pariah class, separate and distinct from the ideal, chaste and morally correct women in the Victorian era.” The female offender fared no better than a male offender, and in many respects, she was condemned because she had stepped outside of her womanly role. The Victorian principles created the standards for which women would ultimately be viewed and judged. As the numbers indicate, however, in Mississippi at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were almost no offenders who were both white and female. For example, in 1900, the state of Mississippi had twenty-three African-American women and one white female housed in the state penitentiary.

Based on the ideologies set forth for women during the Victorian era, the “Cult of Domesticity” and the “Cult of True Womanhood” set the standards as to who and what would be included in defining “womanhood”. The attributes of the “Cult of Domesticity” and “Cult of True Womanhood”, as Barbara Welter explained, “by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together they spelled mother,

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35 Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control. MS State Penitentiary. July 1, 1899 – July 1, 1901. Calculations taken from the 1899-1901 Mississippi Biennial Report. More information regarding prisoners can be found later in this chapter. These numbers do not include women housed in local and county jails. In addition, there were some cases where the state sent some women to the State’s mental institution and these individuals would not be included in the prison rolls.
daughter, sister, wife – woman.” Only by maintaining these qualities could women obtain the ideal of “femininity” and, by doing so, receive gentle treatment at the hands of white men. These protections often excluded black women from the idea of True Womanhood because Southerners did not deem them as ladies. Black women had to work, as had always been the case. Their lot in the South meant that they often lost their femininity once old enough to walk.

As slaves, black women found that plantation masters and mistresses continuously kept them in a servile state and often used their bodies both for work and sex. Black women paid a heavy price at the cost of their womanhood through the treatment they received as slaves. Within the system of slavery, black women endured beatings, rapes, physical abuse, and hatred from both white men and women. Southern white men rarely worried about protecting the womanhood of black women because many believed that black women had unwomanly features and characteristics such as manliness and having a strong will. Infertile women, for example, were treated as men and assigned to plowing. White southern men, who benefited from exploiting both the race and sex of African American women, believed black women to be both sensual and sinful beings who possessed a natural criminal nature. According to White, “White males characterized black women as infantile, irresponsible, submissive, and promiscuous.”

Historically, these characteristics would follow African American women and shape the ways in which the world viewed her, chiefly the judicial system. This confirmed that more times than not, “the American black woman has occupied a unique if unenviable position in the United States,” and “historically, she has been the weight of inferior status and the prejudice derived

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38 Deborah Gray White provides a detailed analysis of both the Jezebel and the Mammy characters. White explains that the Mammy on the Southern plantation was often so respected that she found herself serving as a “friend and advisor to master and mistress.”
39 Deborah Gray, White, Ar’n’t I a Woman, 27.
from her sex as well as her color.”

Ultimately, “Black in a white society, slave in a free society, woman in a society ruled by men, female slaves had the least formal power and were perhaps the most vulnerable group of antebellum Americans.”

Black feminist theorist Frances Beal, pointing out the racial and sexual differences between black and white women, illustrated the complexities of being a black woman in America. Beal explored the intersections of class, race and gender and argued that it was only through this theoretical framework that one could have a full understanding of black women and their struggle for equality. Beal presented what she called the double jeopardy of black women’s experience. To be black and female, Beal argued, meant that a black woman was “a slave of a slave.” Beal explained that as Southern society reduced both black men and black women to slavery and oppression, black women “had no protector and was used as the scapegoat for the evils” of society. It was through this dual oppression that black women lost any form of protection for their womanhood. Their labor and sex led to their physical exploitation and a denial of security, which placed black women in vulnerable situations at the hands of both white and black men. Beal argued that black women’s “physical image has been maliciously maligned; she has been sexually molested and abused by the white colonizes and she has suffered the worst kind of economic exploitation,” at the hands of white America. Black women had to fight several fights at once that sometimes caused them to deviate from society’s accepted rules and guidelines in order to survive.

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40 Mel Watkins, *To Be a Black Woman*, 11.  
41 Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman*, 15.  
43 Ibid.  
44 Ibid.
Since black and white women in the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century lived distinct lives, white women did not experience the “double jeopardy” that black women endured. While poor Southern white women shared similar experiences with poor black women, white women did not live their race and gender in the same way or encounter the same prejudices that black women faced. The concern over racial purity and the belief that white supremacy must be protected left many Southerners unable to change their fundamental beliefs in a racial stratification. The overall experiences of white women thus differed from the experience of black women. Yet, one shared experience was that until the 1920s, women in most states did not have the right to vote. Prior to the 1920s and without that right to vote, women, both white and black, ultimately had very limited influence on the body politic. In some instances, however, white women found a voice as reformers and abolitionists and could often influence their husbands on certain issues. Almost completely disenfranchised, black men in the South during the Jim Crow era lost their influence, thus, through their silence black women had no voice.45 With no vote and no political power, African American women were left at the mercy of the judicial system.46

White women often did not recognize that their race afforded them the ability to navigate spaces. Black women understood the limitations that their race and gender placed on their lives. Even though they yearned for social equality, they knew the consequences of fighting for such rights. According to historian Leon Litwack, “when the white South acted on its racial creed, it

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sought to impress on black men and women their political and economic powerlessness and vulnerability – and most, critically, to diminish both their self esteem and their social aspirations.”

The concern over racial purity and the belief that white supremacy must be protected left many Southerners unable to change their fundamental belief in racial stratification. These very lens aided in the criminalization of women and both black and white women were forced to experience a Southern penal system that viewed female offenders more negatively than their male counterparts, and black women as worst of all.

White Southerners believed men to be more brutish, aggressive, and prone to criminal activity. White men viewed white women as chaste beings and protectors of not only white family structure, but also guardians of society and racial purity. When both black and white women found themselves outside of the traditional roles of which society deemed acceptable for them, they received severe punishments. The views that white men held of white women placed them under the protection of white men, however, once a woman committed a crime she fell outside of that protection. The main job for women consisted of their being a mother, wife, sister and daughter. Any divergence from these roles excluded women from protection. White men’s alleged goal stressed the protection of white women’s virtue. The astronomical numbers of lynchings of both black men and women in the South illustrate that white men believed themselves to be the protectors of white honor. While it had been customary for black women to be raped by white men prior to the war, historian Crystal Feimster explains that in the postwar years Southern white men began to “articulate a political discourse that defined rape as a crime committed by black men against white women,” in an attempt to “challenge black men’s rights

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as citizens.” 48 In doing so, white men expanded their control over Southern society. Feimster states that white men’s “portrayal of black men as beastly and unable to control their sexual desires served to justify the practice of lynching, segregation laws, and disenfranchisement of black men. 49 White men justified lynching as a means of protecting white womanhood, and African Americans rarely received any form of legal recourse or justice when it came to lynching.

At the end of Reconstruction, the South proved that it was not yet ready to accept the influx of motivated individuals who began asserting their power through freedom. Southern whites expected African Americans to keep their “prescribed place in southern society.” 50 White supremacist ideologies placed unbending rules for African Americans in the South. Subsequently, anyone who fought against the racial guidelines faced the consequences of judge “Lynch.” 51 As a constant threat, lynching sent fear throughout the black Southern community. Serving as an act of terrorism, white Southerners used lynching as a method of maintaining social control and upholding their aristocracy of rule. Not simply a spontaneous punishment for crimes, lynching assisted Southern whites in their attempt to perpetrate acts of terror against a race of people in order to maintain power and control. 52 Pushing for progress in economic, social and political life brought the wrath of white supremacy on Southern blacks. When African

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49 Ibid., 5.
Americans pushed against the rule of segregation and worked for equality, many entered the penal system.

The strict arm of the Southern judicial system punished African American men and women for the crimes they committed, no matter how small or large. The justice system placed a heavy weight on helping to protect white patriarchy and maintaining racial stratification. Women offenders found themselves in a peculiar dilemma because Mississippi judicial administrators undoubtedly did not create the penal system to effectively deal with female criminals. The double jeopardy of being both woman and criminal, and subsequently the multiple jeopardy that African American women experienced due to their race, gender, class, and criminalization caused many to question their worth and vitality. African American women found themselves at the mercy of a society that levied judgment based on racial and gender biases. The sexual and racial politics that black women met in Southern society caused many to question their worth and safety.

The imprisonment of women in the South shocked both black and white women. Concerns regarding the explosion of criminality during the late nineteenth century, especially female criminals, caused alarm. Many scholars, scientists, and even physicians began questioning why women became criminals. According to Otto Pollak, “In the United States, it was a physician, Ely van de Warker, who as early as 1875 took a stand against the belief in an inherent higher morality of the female sex and pointed to woman’s lack of opportunity, the nature of her occupations, and her comparative protection against temptation as explanation of her lower participation in crime.”

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female crimes and consequently turned their attention toward the female offender. While several social scientists such as H. Leale contended “both sexes participated equally in crime,” others, among them, “Clarence Darrow, Frances A. Kellor, and John Baker Waite”, argued that statistical data “does not measure male and female crime to the same degree”, without, however reaching Leales’ conclusion.\(^{56}\) While sociologists developed no definite conclusions, the lives of Southern black men and women began to define the story of the Southern penitentiary.

Materials in multiple archives tell the story of incarcerated poor white and black men in the Southern penal system. Yet, historians and sociologists alike have all too often excluded women from this discussion. Black women’s experience of the penitentiary system does not begin with the advent of the convict leasing system, but their story becomes paramount here in relation to their labor. Angela Davis, the American political activist, scholar, and author, argued, “using slavery as its model, the convict lease system did not discriminate between male and female labor. Men and women were frequently housed together in the same stockade and were yoked together during the workday.”\(^{57}\) Davis, in conjunction with Aptheker’s analysis of the “Texas State Convention of Negroes” held in 1883, explains that it was through this convention that the practice of “yoking” and chaining male and female convicts together was strongly discouraged. Davis also points to the penitentiary system in the South as one of the main reasons behind the organization of the Founding Convention of the Afro-American League in 1890. Aptheker argued, “(t)he odious and demoralizing penitentiary system of the South, its chain gangs, convict leases and indiscriminate mixing of males and females,” was one of the seven

\(^{56}\) Ibid, xviii.

reasons motivating the creation of the organization.\textsuperscript{58} Women’s experience of exploitation, physical and mental abuse and rape lends to a larger narrative that centers on how Southern society viewed black women’s bodies and labor. Seen as a prominent component of the workforce, prison officials expected female prisoners to work as hard, if not harder, than their male counterparts. In the convict leasing system, women worked in the fields, on railroads, and as domestics. Convict leasing, operating as a for profit system, depended on the labor of black men and women. The Southern penal system welcomed both men and women offenders because there was profit to be made.\textsuperscript{59}

In the United States between 1890 and 1940 women comprised an important portion of the American penal population. Both men and women during this period were imprisoned at increasing rates. In Mississippi, the imprisonment of African Americans outnumbered that of whites at close to twelve to one.\textsuperscript{60} The widely held belief among many Americans was that “confining women and men in prisons, asylums and workhouses was thought to be the best way of dealing with many of the problems that beset society including social unrest and crime.”\textsuperscript{61} According to historian David Oshinsky, “Southern whites had long viewed criminal behavior as natural to the Negro,” and with freedom, “‘black crime’ moved well beyond the plantation.”\textsuperscript{62} With crime on the rise, the Southern male aristocracy, which included politicians, plantation owners, and people of means, expressed concern regarding what to do with those deemed deviants.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{60} Statistics comprised from the Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control by the author. MS State Penitentiary. July 1, 1889 – July 1, 1940.
\textsuperscript{62} Oshinsky, \textit{Worse Than Slavery}, 32.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 20-22.
The most common crimes that the judicial system charged both men and women with committing included grand larceny, burglary, incest, forgery, arson, manslaughter, and murder, with stealing being the most common offense.\textsuperscript{64} Political and judicial administrators focused heavily on the criminal question during the turn of the century and the construction of prisons offered a response. Not only did many believe that prisons served as the answer to counteract deviant cultures; experts felt that prisons would aid in the reformation of those individuals who ended up confined within its walls.\textsuperscript{65}

While the penal system aggressively dealt with male offenders, women who found themselves within the confines of the justice system were at the mercy of a patriarchal system ill equipped to deal with the female offender. Both white and black women found themselves facing a judicial system that deemed them criminals. Criminologist Nicole Hahn Rafter argues that “the women’s prison system evolved at a different pace and, unlike the men’s system, it came to include two distinct types of state prisons: custodial institutions where women were housed together in one building and un-walled reformatories compromising a number of small residential buildings scattered over large tracts of rural acreage.”\textsuperscript{66} Before the state of Mississippi moved its state prison to Sunflower County in the Mississippi Delta in 1901, the penitentiary located in Jackson, Mississippi housed both men and women who received any form or length of a jail sentence. Eventually, after the state constructed Parchman penal farm and relocated the Mississippi state penitentiary, prison officials separated men and women. Male prisoners resided at Parchman and a separate prison facility known as Oakley penal farm housed

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 32.  
female convicts. There, separated by race, black and white women served out their time in the Mississippi penal system.

To understand the Southern penal system, one must comprehend the racial and social guidelines that prison administrators expected all inmates to follow. During the late nineteenth century and in an effort to maintain social control, Southern whites criminalized and penalized the South’s lower social classes and established a clear divide between the races. Historian Leon Litwack argues “to maintain and underscore its absolute supremacy, the white South steadily disenfranchised black men, imposed rigid patterns of racial segregation, manipulated the judicial system, and sustained extraordinary levels of violence and brutality.”

Systematic moves to preserve white dominance through intimidation also sought to prove to both black men and women their lack of power and access to a justice system to which they could turn to for help. This left many people of color in a position of helplessness and placed both poor white men and women at the mercy of a system that saw them as outside the Southern aristocratic system. Litwack argued that “between 1890 and 1915, in the face of racial tensions heightened by disturbing violence of black independence and assertiveness, whites acted to ensure the permanent political, economic, and social subordination and powerlessness of the black population.”

The Southern penal system served as a means to proliferate the plan of white supremacy. When questioning social equality and the principles with which the foundation of equality was built, one can imagine what happened when the female offender was introduced as a third criminal class in the South after white men and black men.

With the development of the penal farming system, women offenders received sentences that sentenced them to the state penitentiary and subsequently hired them out as convict lessees

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68 Ibid., 218.
while they served their time. Statistically, the number of female offenders paled in comparison to those of their male counterparts. At no time between 1870 and 1970, according to historians David Oshinsky and William Banks Taylor, did females comprise more than 5 percent of the Mississippi’s prison population.\(^{69}\) While their numbers were low, their color undoubtedly never changed. The majority of female prisoners in Mississippi comprised of African Americans. The penal system operated mainly as a custodial unit for women. Women offenders sent to prison oftentimes served out their time working alongside men. They wore the same uniforms and received no preferential treatment.\(^{70}\) Prison officials expected women offenders to work as hard as male prisoners. Concerns regarding the interaction between males and females often developed but many prison officials and guards felt that with close monitoring those types of activities would not take place. Some individuals, chiefly social reformers and prison officials, believed that women and men offenders should not be housed together. This belief grew during the mid to late nineteenth century when prison reformists exposed the horrors of the penal system. The move to place women into their own quarters and away from men took shape as an issue of reform. According to Rafter, activists believed that women’s reformatories “should be located in rural areas that would shield inmates from the corrupting influence of the city and provide ample opportunity for restorative exercise and fresh air. And they should resemble men’s prisons as little as possible.”\(^{71}\) Society believed women, especially white women, to be pious and pure and thus needed a place where they might think about their behavior and undergo a reformation. Their confinement, when moved to rural areas where they could spend quite time

\(^{69}\) David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery*, 169; William Banks Taylor, *Down on Parchman Farm*, 211.


\(^{71}\) Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Partial Justice*, xi.
reflecting on their past aggressions, would enable women to learn from their past mistakes and become better people not only for their families but also for their communities.\textsuperscript{72}

During the mid-nineteenth century, women’s reformatories opened in several states for the specific placement of female offenders. The threat of sexual contact with male prisoners became too much for many administrators. According to Rafter, “to administrators, women were a great nuisance. They had to be isolated to prevent sexual mischief.”\textsuperscript{73} Nevertheless, white men often served in administrative and other roles of authority within the prison. Reformers often questioned whether or not men in power could effectively help and reform women offenders. In reality, the same individuals who questioned men’s ability to aid in reforming female convicts held on to innate beliefs that imprisoned women might never change, thus, further ostracized female prisoners throughout society. Thus, in an effort to save their “fallen sisters,” “white middle-class women who had been abolitionist and health-care workers during the Civil War turned their attention to new forms of social meliorism, joining campaigns against sexual immorality and delinquency, and crusades for suffrage and temperance.”\textsuperscript{74} Crystal Feimster, who detailed the life of Georgia reformer Rebecca Latimer Felton in the late nineteenth through early twentieth century, explains that by the end of the nineteenth century middle-class white women began to focus their energies on prison reform, suffrage, and temperance. Feimster makes it clear that many reformers, especially Felton, had major concerns regarding white men’s sexual abuse of African American women and girls. Improving the conditions of incarcerated women remained a major goal of many female reformers. According to Feimster, Felton, who spent a majority of her early reformist days looking at the convict lease system, believed that

\begin{footnotes}
\item[73] Ibid, xi.
\item[74] Ibid, xxi.
\end{footnotes}
“The treatment of young black women to be the most horrifying aspect of the system.” The rape of African American women was typical in Southern prisons. Regarding rape, Feimster adds, “Worse, it was interracial: white guards raped black female convicts, forcing many of them to give birth to “illegitimate babies” of mixed race.” For white female reformers like Felton, the matter was a moral issue.

In fighting to combat the rape of African American women, one of the main objectives of female reformers sought to aid women in regaining their lost womanhood. These reformers believed that there should be separate housing for female criminals because, as many believed, state prisons were too “hard” and corrupt for women whom they thought, had a gentler spirit and demeanor. Women reformers believed in inherent differences between men and women and that women consequently needed “greater protection.” Reforming women, therefore, desired to rescue as well as reform, to save as well as to correct. Feimster explains that in her early reformists years, Felton believed that women should have protection from the troubles of society. Most importantly, women deserved protection from men who abused alcohol. Feimster explained that Felton, “defining protection as a right to which all women were entitled,” hoped to “encourage women’s independence” even if she realized that African American women might never fully enjoy that freedom.

In the Mississippi penitentiary, prison officials treated incarcerated women differently from male prisoners. While men went out to work in the fields, most women were given more domestic duties. Following in the tradition of the early days of female institutions where guards brought women their work, which often included sewing and laundry, the state penitentiary

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76 Ibid., 65.
77 Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, xxii.
78 Ibid., xxii.
79 Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 63.
followed this pattern. Prison administrators further expected women to maintain their daily living space, complete their work, and in some rare cases help tend medically to other women in their quarters. While penal officers often shackled together male prisoners and marched them around the prison and penal farm, they often left women in their quarters for work and private time. Prison officials hoped that such private time would offer females the opportunity to reflect on their criminal activity and offer some form of rehabilitation. Amanda Smith, an African-American female prisoner imprisoned in 1901 on charges of grand larceny, wrote in her personal journal “jail was a sad place…one had no family or friends and no one to talk to.”

Solitude left female prisoners alone, and they often found it hard to form bonds with other women in their same situation.

The idea of punishment as a form of rehabilitation sought to place the criminal in a confined place for an extended period in hopes that eventually a change would ensure. Historian Gresham M. Sykes argues, “punishment as the purpose of imprisonment is plain enough – the person who has committed a wrong or hurt must suffer in return.” Sykes explains that prison acts as an agent for the state and through this medium the state “is entitled if not morally obligated to hurt the individual who has broken the criminal law, since a crime is by definition a wrong committed against the state.”

Official penitentiary reports and prison statistical records illustrate that prison officials often punished their inmates for their criminal activity. Long workdays and living in cells under solitary confinement served as two of the major ways in

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80 Governors Papers. Andrew Longino, 1900-1904. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
82 Ibid, 9.
which the penal system punished criminals. By the mid to late nineteenth century, both male and female prisoners “could be held in solitude anywhere from 1 day to 100 or more.”

In 1890 and 1891, contractors hired out female convicts to work on their farms and plantations. The contractors arranged separate apartments for imprisoned women and worked them separately from other convicts. The contractors who provided food, clothing, and mediocre health care for their workers signed an agreement with prison administrators for the labor of female offenders. On the farms, the women picked cotton, plowed, performed household duties, and, in some cases, reared children. Contractors paid the state of Mississippi for the use of both male and female prisoners. In many respects, female prisoners became a new workforce for both private individuals and for the state of Mississippi. Regarding female convicts’ employment at the main prison, reformists often recommended the provision of more “extensive quarters and a greater diversification of indoor work.” This call for more suitable living quarters for individuals imprisoned in the South was not the first call for such a compromise. As early as the 1840s, Governor of Tennessee James K Polk pleaded for “suitable apartments” in which to separate men and women offenders. Polk’s request fell upon deaf ears and changes would not be seen for decades to come. Many Southern penitentiaries “were so egalitarian in its treatment of the sexes, that after the Civil War, it sent women to labor alongside men in coal mines and on railroads.” The Southern penal system viewed female offenders through a gendered lens that castigated their criminal behavior. The belief among many centered on the fact that if a woman committed a crime, then she was a “fallen woman” and that she

83 Ibid., 9-10.
84 Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control. MS State Penitentiary. July 1, 1891 – July 1, 1893, 8.
85 Ibid, 8-9.
86 Nicole Hahn Rafter, Partial Justice, 9.
should be treated like other criminals regardless of her gender. The care of the prisoners, at least as reflected in the records, was a major concern.

Female prisoners played an important role in helping to sustain the economic stability of the Mississippi penal system. The penitentiaries’ income for 1890 and 1891, after expenses, totaled over seventy thousand dollars combined for both years. In 1890, convicts hired out averaged 365 prisoners to fifteen different persons. In 1891, the average of convicts leased increased to 392 to 21 different persons in squads ranging from 15 to 25. This indicates the increasing number of people imprisoned and those individuals who leased convicts from Mississippi the following year. Leased convicts hired out came with a price that usually ranged from $9.00 per month for an able-bodied man, $4.50 for a “half-rate” man, and $5.00 for a woman.88 E.E. Foltz, the main female convict contractor who ran “Dabney” Plantation in Tallahatchie County contracted sixteen women to work on his farm. Additionally, the women’s department, which produced bedding and clothing, made a new profit of $94.65.89 The Biennial report recorded these profits and included them in the summary inventory and financial statement. The penal system relied greatly on the labor of female prisoners. During the beginning of the twentieth century, the prisons’ ability to turn a profit rested heavily on the work of female convicts. This demonstrates the value of female convicts labor.90

During the first half of the 1890s, the leasing system continued with numerous female prisoners leased to private farms. E.E. Foltz sustained his leasing of women convicts to work on his farm. By 1894, other plantation farms leased female prisoners from the state penitentiary. Lee & Lee, L.A. Sanders, Walls, Dabney, and A.H. Stone plantations held the main leases of

88 Ibid, 11.
90 Ibid., 13.
women convicts. A known racist, Alfred Holt Stone ran the Stone plantation, known as Dunleith. As the state auditor and a speculator in Delta land, Walter Wilson Stone set the precedent for his son by illustrating how to earn a living through leasing, buying and selling real estate.91 Once the elder Stone was elected as state auditor in 1885, his direct involvement in growing cotton declined. On April 21, 1892, Walter Stone deeded his son a half interest in a section of one of his land holdings ten miles outside of Greenville, Mississippi.92 According to James Hollandsworth, this piece of land was “not only valuable because the Greenville, Columbus, and Birmingham Railroad ran through it. It would become the nucleus of the Dunleith plantation.”93

By 1896, Stone bought the rest of the land and the plantation totaled 2,506 acres of land.94 While land speculation took a downward turn, cotton became the major staple of the farming industry. Stone, an entrepreneur at heart, understood that the growing of cotton was a very labor-intensive task that would require the labor of Africana Americans.95 Stone, according to Hollandsworth, “relied almost entirely on black labor for his success as a cotton grower.”96 The Dunleith plantation then leased male and female convicts to work the land. While both tenant farming and sharecropping comprised a large portion of the labor force on the Dunleith plantation, concern regarding profits encouraged Stone to make labor contracts with the penitentiary in order to hire workers. To be sure, the labor that Stone extracted from both male and female convict lessees helped his cotton business grow. Stone, a unyielding proponent for

92 Ibid, 63.
93 Ibid, 63.
94 Ibid, 67-68.
96 James G. Hollandsworth, Portrait of a Scientific Racist, 23.
racial separation and white supremacy, witnessed the writing and implementation of the Mississippi Codes of 1890 that would drastically change the system of convict leasing in Mississippi.

Changes in the rules of the penitentiary took place during 1890 and 1891. Two rules stand out concerning prisoners. Rule number forty-four stated that male and female convicts would not be allowed to work together, or to speak to each other; as far as possible they should be worked in different parts of the yard or camp. The importance of this rule illustrated that political and prison officials recognized the differences between male and female offenders. The belief that women convicts should maintain some type of autonomy from male convicts drove the push to organize separate spaces. Both male and female reformers continuously called for separate working and living quarters for male and female prisoners. Rule number 57 called for the provision at each “convict camp” of comfortable quarters to be used as a hospital, and all convicts sick or unfit for duty shall “be placed therein in charge of a sufficient number of nurses under the direction of the camp physician.” Prison officials worried about the health of women prisoners especially because of their labor. The education, treatment, and health of female prisoners remained a major concern of prison officials during the late nineteenth century.

Following imprisonment in the Mississippi state penitentiary, new inmates encountered questions concerning their education and religious affiliation. Education and religion played major roles in the penitentiary for both women and men. When prison officials began the intake procedure of processing every prisoner who entered the system, penitentiary guards asked prisoners a variety of questions including whether or not they attended church and about their religious affiliation and seemed interested in whether or not the new inmates recognized

97 Ibid, 32.
98 Ibid, 34.
Christianity as their religion. Prison officials then logged their responses and used them in the documentation of each prisoner. The prison chaplain taught Christianity and the basic Christian principles to prisoners on a weekly basis. Prisoners had to attend church every week. This reflected the belief amongst administrators that prisoners would undergo rehabilitation in prison and once released, would be better people. Many officials believed a person’s lack of religion led to criminal activity. The penitentiary also made conscious efforts to provide educational classes to both male and female inmates. During the 1890s, the penitentiary designated five women as the overseers of education at Parchman. Miss Dueling, Mrs. Dawson, Miss Susie Stevens, Miss Fannie Van Horne, and Mrs. Hermon taught specialized courses to prisoners.99 While Miss Horn and Mrs. Hermon taught vocal classes and “instrumental in music,” Mrs. Dawson taught classes to African American men and women. The classes for women included instructions on sewing, cleaning, and gardening. Miss Dueling reported that the education of prisoners went “exceptionally well” and that the prisoners “took well to the new forms of instruction” that they had implemented over the past few years.100 Prisoners also sought out education classes once imprisoned. Few prisoners during the late 1890s and early 1900s had received any formal education. Thus, education served as a major objective of many prisons because the hope was that individuals, once released, would become productive individuals.

The wellbeing of both male and female prisoners weighed heavily on the minds of some penitentiary officials. The handling and care of the prisoners included emphatically, “no

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99 Miss Dueling, Mrs. Dawson, and Mrs. Hermon’s full names were not included in the Biennial Report. After extensive research through the census, I was unsuccessful in finding out their full identification. Their importance can not be overlooked however, because they played an influential role in the lives of male and female prisoners.

100 Governors Papers, John. M. Stone. Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Personal records. 1890.
inhumane or unusual punishment or treatment shall be inflicted upon any convict.”

Due to changes in Mississippi legal codes, the Mississippi Constitution of 1890, and the prison reform spirit, many officials understood it as their duty to assure the implementation of the new laws. In a statement regarding labor contracts in the 1890-1891 biennial report, the Superintendent stated “we have sought to stop the contract that we make with those parties so as to throw every safeguard around the prisoners, to prevent maltreatment and escapes,” with escapes serving as the major concern.

Concern about sickness and death among female prisoners hit a high during the 1890s. Outbreaks of the plague and pneumonia came down on the penitentiary with fervor. Sarah Little, imprisoned for arson, died of pneumonia after serving seven months. Between 1890-1894, there were 11 cases of pneumonia reported. Foltz reported one sickness and death of a female lessee while under his watch. Nora Perry returned to Parchman with consumption after working for Foltz several months and ultimately died. The state of their leased convicts concerned Parchman officials so much that Nora Perry became a subject of a major discussion in staff meetings at the penal farm. Officials continued to voice their concern surrounding the care of their leased prisoners. Prison administrators kept a watchful eye on leased prisoners because the prison made a profit through the leasing system. Thus, the motive behind the concern rested heavily on financial gains and not a humanitarian spirit.

102 Gresham Sykes, The Society of Captives, 11.
103 Tabulations from the Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control. MS State Penitentiary, 1890-95.
104 The term consumption, in legal terms, meant the consuming of alcohol. The Mississippi Black Codes of 1865.
While the state penitentiary housed the majority of convicts in Mississippi, county jails served as a major feeder into the state penal system. Many women sentenced to the state penitentiary often came from county jails. Local courts could sentence individuals to the county jail, the state penitentiary, or both. In most instances, women sentenced in Mississippi during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century stayed in a county jail for a short period and then left for the state prison. Between 1890 and 1894, county jails served as the holding place for 15 women before they eventually landed at the state penitentiary in Jackson. County jails seemingly served as holding areas for criminals. These jails did not hold individuals who had sentences longer than a few months. One of the major concerns of official’s at local jails and the state penitentiary centered on the overcrowding of the state penal system. With the threat of overcrowding, prison officials worried about having to house too many male and female prisoners. They also worried that prisoners housed together might have inappropriate contact with one another. By sending prisoners almost immediately to the state penitentiary, prison officials made it hard for male and female prisoners to have contact without supervision.

The impression among prison administrators regarding convicts entering the state penitentiary from county jails hinged on the notion that large numbers of African Americans who entered the penal system came with diseases. It was a common belief among many white southerners that African Americans were prone to disease. As early as the antebellum period, illness and morality were persistent concerns of the nineteenth century. In an effort to advise the state’s physicians about the significance of administering adequate healthcare to slaves, the editor of a prominent Virginia medical journal stated, “Scarcely any observant medical man,

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106 Tabulations comprised from the Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control. MS State Penitentiary. July 1, 1891 – July 1, 1895.
having charge of negro estates, fails to discover, by experiences, important modifications in the
diseases and appropriate treatment of the white and black races respectively." Particular
diseases, which concerned prison officials the most, included syphilis, malaria, pneumonia, and
tuberculosis.

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s in conjunction with the development of scientific
racism, doctors began attributing certain diseases to African Americans and even went as far as
inventing new diseases attributed only to African Americans. As a highly respected and widely
published doctor from the University of Louisiana who practiced in both Mississippi and
Louisiana, Samuel Cartwright invented two diseases that he believed were natural only to
African Americans. Cartwright listed Draptomania as the disease that caused “negroes to run
away,” and Dysaesthesia Aethiopica, which he argued, caused rascality, a disease that alluded to
the knavish character or conduct among both free and enslaved blacks. Cartwright also
believed that whipping could cure this disease. While Cartwright attempted to justify the
inevitability and effectiveness of slavery, state and prison officials used the same assumptions to
justify imprisonment.

By the late nineteenth century, over one thousand documented inmates died while
imprisoned in the penitentiary. By the mid-twentieth century, that number would expand to

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108 Editorial, Mon. Steth., 1 (1856), 162-163 as cited in Savitt, Medicine and Slavery, 7. While this
information specifically refers to slaves in Virginia during the 1850s and early 1860s, one can make the connection
to southern whites common belief that African Americans were prone to disease prior to their eventual
imprisonment in southern jails.
109 In prison records tuberculosis is often listed as consumption, an infectious disease that attacks the lungs.
The disease spreads easily to those who are in close contact, hence, prison officials concern that prisoners from
overcrowded county jails would lead to the spread of the illness at the state penitentiary.
110 Vanessa Jackson, "In Our Own Voices: African American Stories of Oppression, Survival and Recovery
in the Mental Health System", pgs. 1-36, p. 4-8 mindfreedom.org @ academic.udayton.edu.
112 Todd L. Savitt, Medicine and Slavery, 8.
reach the thousands. The biennial reports for the state penitentiary through the mid 1910s listed prisoners who died while serving out their sentence. While the total numbers are inconclusive, by calculating the number of prisoners listed in the biennial reports between 1900-1930, the number of deaths at Parchman exceeded over 600. Prisoner I.D. number, name, cause of death, date, and location, when provided, helped in calculating the deaths of prisoners. The number is surely higher when considering those prisoners who died at the hands of injustice while serving as convict lessees, falling victim to debt peonage, working on chain gangs, or those who went unaccounted.

Prison officials often overlooked the safety of female convicts as several women succumbed to death at the hands of fellow prisoners. Crimes between male and female convicts were not the norm because the penitentiary sought to keep men and women separate. However, a second and much smaller reason for the leasing of both male and female prisoners due to overcrowding of the state penitentiary paved the way for some unfortunate events to take place. In 1893, six female prisoners died at the prison, two of whom involved prisoner-on-prisoner crime. One of the most tragic documented events involving a crime between a male and female convict took place in 1893. On July 15, 1893, a convict named Avery Singleton killed Lula Payne. Walls Plantation leased Payne along with other numerous prisoners. Singleton, one afternoon following a long workday, stabbed Payne with a knife and killed her. The circumstances and specific details surrounding Payne’s death are unknown, but this furthered many prison officials pleas to have male and female convicts separated. The Clarion Ledger reported the news of the killing and stated “A female negro killed by a male negro on Walls

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113 Tabulations comprised from the Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control. MS State Penitentiary. July 1, 1897 – July 1, 1927.
The article included no specific details or pertinent information surrounding the murder. This undoubtedly alarmed not only prison officials, but also the prisoners. News of the killing surely spread through the Walls plantation, other plantations, and the state penitentiary.

The overcrowding of the penitentiary and the obvious spike in new prisoners entering the penal system also caused alarm. An increase in male and female convicts rose during the 1890s and numbers continued to rise throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. The number of convicts in the penitentiary during the 1890s ranged from between four hundred and eighty-five to nine hundred. These calculations included both men and women. Between 1899 and 1900, the number of prisoners increased by almost one hundred. The penitentiary in Jackson was ill equipped to handle the influx of prisoners during the 1890s. Prison administrators began to devise a plan to create a new prison.

Black men undoubtedly constituted the largest portion of imprisoned individuals in the state penitentiary because vagrancy laws and harsh Jim Crow laws dictated that police often targeted them. In closer numbers, white men and black women constituted the second and third largest groups of individuals who encompassed the prison population. While the numbers of black women are low in comparison to both black and white men, overlooking black women as a viable component of the penal system is a great injustice to their history and the history of imprisonment in Mississippi. Imprisoned white women constituted a very small portion of the penal system and in some years none at all. The inclusion of the small number of white women serves as an important source of information regarding imprisoned women. While their numbers are not as high as black and white men, or black women, white women confined in the state penal system are important for the analysis of Mississippi prisons. Although few in numbers, their inclusion in the story, specifically pointing to their overwhelming exclusion from the state

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114 Clarion Ledger. August 3, 1893, 3.
penitentiary, serves as a marker of how the justice system viewed and treated white women. Historian David Oshinsky argues, “so few white females reached the state Parchman that a clear profile of them is impossible.”

Judges often did not want to sentence white women to serve prison sentences, no matter their crimes because in many respects, to do so would go against Southern custom towards a propensity of chivalry.

A closer look at the number of convicts and the racial breakdown of prisoners between 1890 and 1914 illustrates the increasing numbers of prisoners during the late nineteenth century. 1914 serves as an important year in prison statistical data because that year names of prisoners last appear. After 1914, the Biennial Reports omit the names of prisoners from their logbooks. Prison administrators in Mississippi kept thorough documentation from the 1890s throughout the first decade and a half of the twentieth century. The following graphs break down prisoners in terms of race and gender and provide a detailed account of the number of men and women imprisoned in Mississippi between 1890-1914. These numbers include both the state penitentiary and local and county jails.

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115 David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery*, 175.
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*Between 1897-1903 the prison register included a listing for Indian males. Between September 30, 1897 and September 30, 1903 there were two Native Americans imprisoned in the state penitentiary. Following 1903, the biennial report no longer included Native American as a separate category.

Close analysis of the graphs demonstrates that the penal system had a steady incline of prisoners over a thirty-year span. In addition, the number of African-American women remained steady until the late nineteenth century with the numbers increasing at the turn of the century. A substantial spike regarding the number of white female convicts from 1904 to 1905 is unusually
high compared to previous numbers. Following this spike in the number of white female criminals, the Biennial reports for the following three years do not report any information regarding male of female prisoners. The lack of information for the years 1906-1908 leaves one to wonder about the prison statistics during that period.\textsuperscript{116} Prison records commence again in 1909-1910, but the omission of female prisoners is a significant absence. For the next four years, women would not be included in the annual biennial report calculations of individuals imprisoned in the Mississippi penal system.

Close examination of the years 1912-1914 further illustrates the complexities of the penal system in Mississippi. The spike in the prison population seems traumatic upon first glance; however, one has to closely analyze the ways in which the prison system began to transform during these years. During the previous years, women lived not only at Parchman, but also at Oakley Farms and other small plantations around Mississippi. In 1912, the prison administration decided to move women to Parchman and make that their permanent home for the next seventy years. This move to Parchman, with an entire camp opened for women, certainly can be one of the major reasons that there was a spike in the female prison population. In the report of the board of trustees for July 1913, there were 1,708 convicts in the penitentiary. Of the 1,250 prisoners at Parchman during 1913, women constituted 57 of the convicts.\textsuperscript{117}

Classification records point to the categorization of black and white female convicts. Through these records, one can see prison officials, in keeping with the prescribed racial boundaries set in the South, housed white and black women in different quarters. These registers also illustrate the ways in which the penal system acknowledged the specific differences between

\textsuperscript{116} Today, neither prison officials nor archivists know exactly where those records, even if they exist, presently are. The belief is that one of the several fires or floods that wiped clean many governmental buildings during the 1920s and the 1930s, also aided in the destruction of these records.

\textsuperscript{117} Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control. MS State Penitentiary. July 1, 1911- July 1, 1913.
white and black women. The biennial reports between 1890 and 1930 serve as an excellent source for the recording and classification of female convicts. Between 1890 and 1905, the Biennial registers listed the names of female convicts, their age, height, sentence received, date sentenced, expected release date, their county of residence, and the crime for which they were convicted. The missing biennial reports for the years 1906-1908 placed a gap in the information that is known about prisoners in Mississippi. During these two years, records for both male and female prisoners went unaccounted. Once women finally returned to the biennial reports in 1911, only their gender is included in prison statistical calculations. Female offenders’ names no longer appeared in the biennial records. Men’s names remained in the reports through the late 1910s when they too disappear.

Prison officials originally housed female offenders in Mississippi between 1890-1911 at Oakley Farm in Hinds County, Mississippi. In 1901 Mississippi moved female prisoners from Oakley Farm and housed them with males. While imprisoned, female offenders lived together at Camp 14 with a door separating white and black women. At its peak during the first half of the twentieth century, the camp would accommodate between thirty to forty women, however, on occasion, up to fifty or sixty women resided at the camp during the early stages. While it was common to hire older women to supervise the female prisoners, male authority at Parchman was always constant. Parchman did not only serve as a jail. As a penal farm, individuals worked and lived at Parchman. Prison administrators believed this to be the best way to run the penal system because the jobs on the farm kept the prisoners busy and their time regimented and disciplined.

\[118\] The biennial records for 1906-1908 are missing from both the Mississippi Department of Archives and the J.D. Williams Library. Two years of inquiry to the Department of Justice regarding these Mississippi records yielded no results. The analysis and conclusions drawn are strictly based on the information available to the researcher.
Social and gender roles played a major role in the interaction between matron and prisoner. The role of race in the social structure in the South during the 1910s surely dictated how a white female matron dealt with both her white and black female convicts. Parchman consisted of twelve camps in addition to the woman’s camp. M.M. Underwood served as the sergeant and Mrs. L.B. Carr headed “Camp 14” the lone camp for women at Parchman. Mrs. Carr served as the matron of the camp. Her duties included the responsibility of caring for and being in charge of the female prisoners. Her main job consisted of making sure that that the female prisoners performed their daily duties. Along with the matron, usually male guards had their wives help with the day-to-day operations of the female camp and take on the responsibility of watching over the female prisoners as help was needed. Male guards would undoubtedly turn to their wives for help when issues amongst the female prisoners arose. On occasion, contention between the matron or other female authority and a female prisoner surfaced. In referencing such events, Carr explained that, “when problems would arise between myself, the other female authority, and the female prisoners, we would work to settle out the issue. If personal time was needed, then we provided that.”\footnote{119} Mrs. Carr went on to express that, “we tried to keep the men folk out of it as much as we could.”\footnote{120}

Female prisoners at the women’s camp performed numerous duties. Their main job at the camp consisted of picking cotton. A detailed list of their jobs and duties, including the amount of production completed, illustrates how hard female prisoners worked. The female convicts cut, sewed, and manufactured garments for the entire prison community and other items needed. In his report, sergeant Underwood stated, “the output of products manufactured at

\footnote{119} Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control. MS State Penitentiary. July 1, 1911- July 1, 1913. pg. 21-22.
\footnote{120} Ibid., 21-22.
“Camp 10” will show this place to be a busy one.”121 During 1913, female prisoners made 18,635 pair of pants and 1,727 coats.122 Guards and prisoners, both male and female, wore the pants and coats, while the prison sold most of the garments to outside vendors.

To understand the production of female prisoners, one must note that the incarcerated women manufactured 568 aprons, 585 white jumpers, 4,985 sheets, 1,480 towels, and 128 pea sacks. In addition, 1,896 bed mattresses, 10,643 drawers, 8,072 undershirts, 3,876 nightshirts, 4,896 cotton sacks, 2,200 cotton sheets, and 160 yards of duck canvas, which was a heavy, plain woven cotton fabric, and worked at the brick yard which rounded out their production.123 Two years later, in 1915, female convicts almost doubled the production they completed in 1913. The valuable work of the female prisoners and the praise that they received from the prison administration illustrates that their work did not go unnoticed. J.C. Gathings, M.D., the Superintendent of the Mississippi penal system, wrote in his annual report that “the production of the female camp has by far exceeded our expectations.”124 The work of female prisoners helped to sustain not only Parchman’s labor force but also the needs of all the camps on the grounds. An interest in their labor proved especially important that same year when a fire destroyed the building previously housed by female convicts.

On July 21, 1913, the loss of thirty-five convicts, all black men, sent shockwaves through Parchman. Little information surrounding the fire or its causes remains. The biennial reports only mention of the fire included the statement, “An unfortunate fire that consumed the cage or

122 Ibid.
123 Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control. MS State Penitentiary. July 1, 1911- July 1, 1913, 19.
building from which we had moved the women.”125 This refers to the former women’s living quarters, Oakley farm. The lack of information surrounding the cause of the fire and the lack of concern or remorse for the lives lost speaks volumes to the value placed on African Americans. The report included no details or condolences for the lives lost or to the families of the victims, however, the loss of a substantial portion of livestock from one of the male camps during this same period led to an outcry from both prison officials and administrators in the biennial report. A dialogue ensued regarding the steps that prison officials should take in the future that would aid them in properly caring and protecting the penal farms livestock. In many respects, the story of the fire alluded more to how fortunate the prison was to have moved and saved the black female workforce than the loss of male convicts.126

In addition to detailing the amount of products that female prisoners manufactured, the report in 1915 included expectations for further production. The camp had four cows and four calves on which they relied for their milk, butter, and other dairy products. By 1915, while the output of goods such as bed sheets, sacks, and sheets mirrored numbers of 1913, a decline in pants, nightshirts undershirts, drawers, top shirts, and towels all decreased. Furthering an explanation of the duties of female prisoners, the report includes the point that “the negro woman confined at the female camp usually help hoe the crops and pick cotton.”127 Even though the numbers of prisoners steadily increased, prison administrators concerned with the budget and profit of the prison decided to set a limit on the amount of clothing that each prisoner received. The fact that prison officials depended on the hard work of female convicts illustrates the value of this group of offenders. While the penitentiary’s survival relied on several factors including

125 Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control. MS State Penitentiary. July 1, 1911- July 1, 1913, 6.
127 Ibid.
governmental funding and prisoners, women’s labor played a major role in the financial success of the prison.

During 1915, African American women comprised all forty of the females imprisoned at Parchman. Here, prison records further broke down the crimes committed by women and provide detailed statistics that illustrated that women committed a variety of crimes. Specifying the crimes of female convicts allowed prison officials to classify imprisoned women. Records indicate that manslaughter was the most common crime committed by imprisoned women in Parchman throughout the 1910s and 1920s. In 1915 alone, twenty women committed and received a prison sentence for the crime of manslaughter. In a distant second, murder followed with eight women charged and imprisoned for that offense. Women were convicted for selling cocaine or liquor, and two others for burglary. Incest and arson rounded out the crimes women committed in 1915. This was the first time the Biennial reports gave such a detailed account of female prisoners, the crimes committed and prison sentences received. Female convicts received sentences that ranged anywhere from one year to life in prison. In 1915, with fifty-eight being the oldest and eighteen the youngest, imprisoned women’s ages at the time of sentencing spanned a forty-year age gap. With the ages of female prisoners expanding to such a significant gap, prison officials continued to worry about such an important part of their labor force. Prison reformers who sought to aid incarcerated women ultimately had to work around the system because prison administrators were too invested in the labor of female convicts.

To protect their interest in the labor of female convicts, and also as a response to the outcry of many prison reformers across the country, many officers within the penitentiary believed Parchman to be a leader in the implementation of penal farming. Prison reform

\[128\] Ibid.  
\[129\] Ibid.
continued to be a major concern of prison administrators throughout the 1910s and 1920s. Interestingly, government and prison officials believed Mississippi to be a leader in the modern day penal farming system. E.J. O’Keefe, the superintendent of Parchman, alluded to this fact when he stated, “Throughout the entire country there seems to be a sentiment for prison reform. In adopting and maintaining the system we now have in vogue, that of working prisoners on farms, I believe we have taken the lead in this great reform.”\textsuperscript{130} This belief in the farming system drove prison officials to seek more funding from the state. Most of the reports regarding the production of female prisoners included the great care provided for women and how female prisoners performed their daily duties on the farm at a high level. This in many respects encouraged the use of female convict labor in the penal farming system not only in Mississippi, but also other Southern states such as Louisiana, Arkansas, and Tennessee. In addition, prison officials continuously worried about the health of prisoners at Parchman, especially female prisoners.\textsuperscript{131}

Between 1915 and 1917, the Mississippi State Board of Health conducted an anti-malaria campaign at Parchman. Dr. R.N. Whitfield led the campaign. A major anxiety among prison administrators centered on the spreading of malaria. Prisoners, both male and female, underwent blood tests to see if they had the disease. Prison records indicate that many on Parchman farm had been tested up to as many as thirty times.\textsuperscript{132} The women’s camp served as a major concern when it came to malaria because prison officials understood that a major source of their labor force could be affected. After running several tests, it was reported that malaria did not show up in every examination of the blood of an infected individual, therefore, several tests had to be

\textsuperscript{130} Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control. MS State Penitentiary. July 1, 1915- July 1, 1917. pg. 61.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 9-11.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 63.
given. For example, on November 29, 1916, only one case of malaria existed in the women’s camp. By April 25, 1917, ten other cases had been found.\footnote{Ibid., 64.} The health of such a valuable labor source led prison administrators to take the necessary steps to assure the health of the prison population, especially female prisoners. By 1917, the female prison population, due mainly to deaths from disease and the commuting of sentences, dropped to only twelve African-American imprisoned women.\footnote{Ibid., 135-137.}

By the 1920s, prison administrators streamlined penal records which led to the exclusion of several sections of data. The most glaring omitted sections included convicts’ names and their ages. While protecting inmates’ identities certainly played a major role in the decision to omit names from the biennial reports, one has to acknowledge that Southern social guidelines fought hard to protect white women and their reputations. Dating back to 1913, listing white females names in the reports concerned some state officials, including prison Superintendent, E.J. O’Keefe. Detailed in his 1913 annual report, O’Keefe stated, “the prison walls are no place for the demure woman of the South to be…criminalizing her in such a way that once she returns to society, she has little hope of ever marrying or being a proper mother.”\footnote{"Superintendent’s Report," in Biennial Report of the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Senate Journal (1913), 19-20.} It is quite possible that O’Keefe viewed prison as a place where only the disreputable went, and that there was no way, no matter the crime, that white women should ever experience such a fate.

Unknown are the exact reasons why women’s names began to disappear auspiciously from the prison reports. However, the increase in the white female prisoner population may have played a role in this fact. The preservation of the “Cult of True Womanhood” in the South may have served as one of the defining forces that caused prison officials to exclude female prisoners’
names in the annual reports. Southern social patterns dictated that white women’s respectability be protected and upheld. Black women, often denied the title of lady, found that their morality and protection was never a major concern of prison officials. Record keepers’ indifference in listing the names of men and black female offenders illustrates that black women’s morality and respectability was never a concern. Rather, a cloud of shame followed those individuals whose names found a way into publishable records.

For the first time by 1922, female prisoners’ race, religion, education, occupation, and domestic relation became staples in prison records. Whereas past prison records specifically classified only race of imprisoned women, prison officials began to make an effort to pay closer attention to the marital status of an incarcerated woman. A woman’s marital status mattered to prison administrators because it aided in how officials and guards viewed her and dealt with her punishment. A penal administrator noted that while white married imprisoned women “should have to pay for the offense of not only abandoning their families but also committing a crime,” he hoped that “a small stint in jail would serve as a reminder that there were consequences to criminal activity, no matter the offense.”\textsuperscript{136} While it was very hard for white prison officials to see white women incarcerated, clearly they did not have such feelings for the imprisoned African American women who starkly outnumbered white women in Mississippi jails and prisons. Parchman had two white females and thirty-two black female prisoners in 1922. This is the first year, since 1913, that white women reappeared in prison records. For several years, either the penal system imprisoned no white women or intentionally omitted them from their records, yet the stark contrast between the number of white and black women incarcerated is shocking. Here,

\textsuperscript{136} Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control. MS State Penitentiary. July 1, 1921- July 1, 1923, 28-30.
one begins to have a more thorough account of white and African-American female prisoners and their lives before the inclusion of their imprisonment in the records.\(^{137}\)

The occupations of African-American women before their imprisonment ranged from chambermaid (hotel cleaner), cook, laborer, laundress, nurse, and waitress. The two white female prisoners listed housekeeper and waitress as their occupations. Of the thirty-two African-American female convicts, seventeen were married and fifteen were unmarried, while one white female was married and one unmarried.\(^{138}\) When asked to state their religious affiliation, of the thirty-two African-American women, twenty identified as being Baptist, one as Roman Catholic, seven as Methodist, and four women listed no preference. One white female identified as being Methodist and one stated no preference.\(^{139}\) Seventeen African-American women listed that they could read and write, while prison officials or fifteen women themselves marked illiterate. These classifications certainly shaped how prison officials viewed and understood their female offenders. While officials continued to embrace prejudices regarding race and gender, they also basked in the ability to manage and care for the female inmates. In boasting about the female camp, its production, and the treatment of incarcerated women Superintendent E. J. O’Keefe stated,

> The woman’s camp, which has been and is ably managed by Sergeant N. Blount, rendered perfect service along its line, making all the clothing save winter underwear, for the entire prison body, all cotton sacks and sheets, all bed ticks, pillow slips, etc., and have worked a great deal in the different fields around the women’s camp and are now ready to organize and start a gang of at least thirty women to picking peas and cotton. They have all been humanly treated and, well cared for and are in excellent physical condition.\(^{140}\)


\(^{138}\) Ibid., 134-5.

\(^{139}\) Ibid.

\(^{140}\) Ibid., 19.
While O’Keefe expressed the importance of female convicts within the prison, he also made a clear statement to those reformers who continuously questioned the treatment of incarcerated women.

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, incarcerated African American women certainly recognized that the racist and segregated society they now experienced within the prison walls was not much different than the racism they experienced at home. The politics of Jim Crow that had swept through the South with such fervor intended to keep black men and women in a servile state. African Americans followed a strict code, a racial etiquette in any type of formal or informal contact with white Southerners. While the numbers of black men arrested in the South rose at alarming rate, so too did the numbers of black women. While some began to argue that the Great Depression aided in the spike of criminal behavior among thousands of white and black citizens on the verge of starvation, it is also true that the incarceration of African Americans served as an answer to white Mississippians who feared that blacks might offer political, economic, and social competition.

In an effort to gain some autonomy over their lives, by the 1930s, incarcerated women, both white and black, searched for avenues to secure their own freedom. While the task was daunting, freedom from behind the walls certainly began to seem more of a realistic possibility than ever before. Save for the occasional documented letters in which incarcerated women wrote to governors in the late nineteenth century, it is hard to determine whether or not in substantial numbers women wrote to governors on their own behalf requesting freedom by way of a pardon or clemency. What survived are the records of businesses, politicians, and wealthy planters who each had a particular interest in the labor of African American women. It was this interest that fueled some individuals to request pardons for certain women. After their incarceration, there
were those who believed that women, especially African American women, once they had served what was deemed an adequate amount sentence and repaid their debt to society, would be better suited working in the home of a white family serving in a domestic capacity. By the 1930s, however, records indicate that women began to actively write letters to on their own behalf to the governor of Mississippi requesting clemency or a pardon. This personal activism was a method women used throughout the rest of the twentieth century. Several records exist of judges, lawyers, and businessmen all working diligently to secure the freedom of black women for their own personal benefit. In addition, the letters of mothers, sisters, sons, daughters, husbands, significant other, and friends illustrate that incarceration had a profound effect on not only those incarcerated but also their family members. Incarceration had a broad reach and demonstrated that not all women who found themselves within the confinements of the prison walls were alone. The letters of incarcerated women also serve as an important glimpse at how imprisoned women not only viewed themselves and their crimes, but the hope that they each had for securing their freedom.
CHAPTER THREE


Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victim of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell.¹

- Hannah Arendt

In an article published on August 31, 1896, in the Denver Evening Post, the headlines read, “A Young Criminal: She is a murderous at nine years old and goes to the Pen!”² The short but intriguing tale of Hettie Record related to the Mississippi justice systems at the end of the nineteenth century is only one small, if poignant, story, but it reveals the business of black women’s bodies during imprisonment and in “freedom.” In 1896, the state of Mississippi convicted nine-year-old Hettie Record of Holly Springs of the murder of her infant two-year old niece. Accused of smothering her infant relative and burying the baby in the back yard, Record became the youngest person at that time to be convicted of manslaughter in the state of Mississippi. Record’s conviction meant that she would serve ten years imprisonment in the state penitentiary. The only surviving accounts that provide an insight into Record’s case and subsequent imprisonment are located in two newspapers: The Democratic Advocate, a

² Denver Evening Post, “A Young Criminal: She is a murderous at nine years old and goes to the Pen,” 31 August 1896.
newspaper from Baton Rouge, Louisiana and the Denver Evening Post, a newspaper from Denver, Colorado

In the late 19th century, Mississippi did not have a “house of detention” for women and did not use Parchman Penal Farm until 1901. Record’s lawyer and the District Attorney “agreed not to argue the case and to send her to the state penitentiary where she could be reared and cared for.” Feeling pressure from prison reformers, devout Christians, and public officials who during the late nineteenth century began denouncing the convict-leasing system and chain gangs, the Mississippi penal system looked for a suitable place to house Record. Mississippi had considered the possibility of sending Record to Louisiana, through a monetary deal where the states often traded convicts for monetary gain; however, Mississippi ultimately decided to have Record serve her sentence at the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Jackson. Even after her imprisonment, several Mississippi prison administrators lamented over Record’s age and her subsequent imprisonment.

Unsure of any further circumstances concerning Record’s imprisonment, it is clear that the Mississippi judicial system felt that a lengthy prison sentence for a nine-year-old African American little girl was warranted. Record had served close to ten years of her sentence, when in 1906, the story of Hettie Record took a stunning turn. Members of the Holly Springs community began sending pardon requests to Governor Anselm J. McLaurin on Record’s behalf. Additionally, a white judge, John W. Fewell, and his business partner, G.B. Hawthorn, a plantation owner, wrote a series of pardon, or clemency requests to Governor McLaurin requesting a pardon for not only Record, but also other African American imprisoned women.

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
6 Democratic Advocate, 6 August 1986.
The motives of these citizens, especially the judge and planter, speak to larger issues surrounding the value that whites placed on black women’s bodies. This is foreshadowing that both the judge and the plantation owner’s primary interest in Record lay in the value of her labor. In the South, white men often exploited African American women through both their laboring and sexualized bodies with few social or political ramifications.\(^7\) In the case of Record, these two white men sought to use the carceral state to aid in and legitimize their efforts to extract her labor to enrich themselves.

Between 1880 and 1960, approximately 20,000 persons served time in Mississippi’s penitentiary. While many served sentenced in county jails, Parchman penal farm housed most of those prisoners. Imprisoned men and women worked at the penal farm and provided the penitentiary with a cheap and abundant labor force. While Parchman and the state enjoyed the fruits of the labor the prisoners provided, many prisoners sought a life outside the confinements of the prison. In Mississippi, prisoners seeking freedom had very limited options. The most common approach to freedom involved pardon and clemency requests and, in some cases, the expiration of their sentence. Historian Vivien Miller, in exploring the Florida prison system, explains that “before the introduction of probation and parole in the twentieth century, there were four routes to freedom from Florida’s prison system: expiration of sentence, death, escape, and pardon.”\(^8\) When considering convict leasing and daily prison operations, the statistics from Florida and Mississippi suggest that the search for freedom was a hard, and often unsuccessful, path. The pattern extended to Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Arkansas, South Carolina, and Louisiana.

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\(^7\) Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves on the Southern Plantation* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 13-17.

A Brief history of Pardons and Clemency:

Pardon requests and acts of clemency or grace by an executive power rarely resulted in freedom for an imprisoned person. Pardons, according to Vivien M.L. Miller, “serve as the last opportunity for release in the series of discretionary administrative determinations which comprise the criminal justice system ranging from the decisions to arrest and prosecute a suspect, to the jury’s determination of guilt and punishment, and the appellate court’s decision on whether to grant a writ of error.” According to Miller, “it was then that the governor, with the approval of at least two other members of the State Board of Pardons, decide whether to exercise clemency.”

Imprisoned women endured a judicial system that placed them at the mercy of white males with the authority to determine their fate. When exploring the gender politics of the penal system, the probability of release became less likely for female criminals. Women’s road to freedom often encompassed a different path than the course of male convicts. As criminals, female offender’s unlawful acts led to their criminalization within the judicial system. African American women, who experienced a “multiple jeopardy” that penalized them for not only their race, gender, and class, but also for the crimes they committed, found themselves at the mercy of a criminal justice system that sought to embarrass and punish. Both white and black women, once labeled as criminals, had to find ways to navigate life inside the confinement of the penitentiary while also seeking the possibility of freedom.

Crime and punishment are inextricably linked. Arguably, as James P. Goodrich notes, “long before written laws were in existence, men were held responsible for the consequences of

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10 Vivian M.L. Miller, Crime, Sexual Violence, and Clemency, 1.
their own acts and a rude sort of justice measured to them.”\textsuperscript{11} The common belief that once a criminal always a criminal set the precedent for the judgment of persons who committed crimes.\textsuperscript{12} In an address covering the use and abuse of the power to pardon, the governor of Indiana from 1917-1921, stated, “when a man was convicted of a crime, consigned to prison and given the brand of a criminal, all his after life was without hope of reformation or redemption.”\textsuperscript{13} While general principles of prisons included the ideas of reform and rehabilitation, prison administrators in the Mississippi penal system often struggled to focus on such practices.

In Mississippi as in other southern states that began to develop their penal systems modeled after plantations, a strong belief in punishment exceeded most other concerns such as forgiveness and rehabilitation. Administrators main concern often centered on the labor of the convicts and the profit each individual helped to earn for the prison. Women played a major role in helping Parchman sustain itself. As part of Parchman’s viable labor force, the work of the female convicts played a major role in the daily operations of the penal farm. Concerns regarding the release of prisoners closely followed deliberations of what should happen to persons incarcerated in the penitentiary. Putting prisoners to work and aiding the penal farm in turning a profit took precedence over everything else.

In arguing for the power of pardons, David B. Hill, the governor of New York from 1885-1891, stated, “… the existence of some power to pardon persons convicted of crime[s] is recognized in every well-regulated government.”\textsuperscript{14} Not until the early twentieth century did ideas and perceptions of prisoners begin to change. The United States penal system followed many other societies, especially those in Europe and South America who had practiced forms of

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 334.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 334.
pardons where prisoners, at the mercy of the state, gained a commutation of their crime and sentence for almost one hundred years prior to America adopting the system. By the turn of the century, prison officials and society as a whole began to look at prisoners as individuals who, after serving time in the penitentiary and having a chance to rehabilitate, could re-enter society and become productive citizens. Moreover, prison officials and penal reformers believed that people, innately good in nature, should have an opportunity of redemption after serving their time.

With slow progress, male and female prisoners in Mississippi sought freedom though any avenue available to them. The United States legal system used pardons as a form of mercy executed by individuals who had the political power to enact its perceived grace. A pardon, according to Meah Dell Rothman, “In the broadest sense of the word, meant forgiveness, release, remission. Forgiveness for an offence, whether it be one for which the person committing it is liable in law or otherwise.”¹⁵ Pardons also functioned as the release of obligation or debt “to which one may have subjected himself by the non-performance of an undertaking or contract, or when a statutory penalty in money has been incurred, and it is remitted by a public functionary having power to remit it.”¹⁶

As an act of leniency, the power to pardon is one of the oldest departments of governmental function.¹⁷ Moreover, a pardon “is not an expungement or stealing of a conviction but represents forgiveness of punishment and guilt. It is preferred that candidates for pardon have many years of living crime free. The pardon restores rights lost as a result of the criminal

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¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷ James P. Goodrich, The Use and Abuse of the Power to Pardon, 335.
conviction.” In principle, persons convicted of criminal acts, including women, had an avenue for redemption because pardons served as a sovereign act of mercy or grace, whose exercise depends upon the structure of political power. According to authors Daniel J. Freed and Steven L. Chanenson, “throughout history, kings, princes, popes, and presidents have been vested with power to grant clemency – for reasons of mercy, forgiveness, compassion justice – to persons previously punished by the state.”

In Mississippi during the late 19th century, governors who began granting pardons did so for inmates who they believed had paid for their criminal offense by serving their time and by not breaking any more laws. Considering a governor’s power to pardon, A.J. McLaurin, who served as governor of Mississippi from 1896-1900, stated, “pardoning is the authority vested in the individual who believes that people are good and deserve a second chance.” The act of granting pardons in Mississippi lay in the hands of the governor who before 1890 did not have the sole responsibility in pardoning a convict within the Mississippi penal system. Before then, the state authorities determined pardons. The 1890 Mississippi Constitution took a definitive stance on the role of the state in the granting of pardons. Section 124 states, “In all criminal and penal cases, excepting those of treason and impeachment, the governor shall have power to grant reprieves and pardons, to remit fines, and in cases of forfeiture, to stay the collection until the end of the next session.” When the case involved treason, the constitution states that the governor “shall have the power to grant reprieves by and with the consent of the senate.

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19 Meah Dell Rothman, “Pardoning Power,” 152.
22 Mississippi Constitution, 1890. Adopted November 1, A.D., 1832 art V - 10; 1869 art V - 10.
however, “no pardon shall be granted before conviction.” In the cases of a felony, “after conviction no pardon shall be granted until the prisoner or someone on the prisoners behalf publishes for thirty days, in some newspaper both their resident county and an adjoining county, his or her petition for pardon, and clearly stating the reasons why such a pardon should be granted.”

The power of pardon lends the possibility of a second chance. In many respects, Freed and Chanenson argued “it is an honorable tradition in the eyes of persons awarded second chance, and of members of the public for whom forgiveness and mitigation symbolize the sovereign’s humanity or wisdom in providing a safety valve against convictions belatedly found to be erroneous or punishments deemed unduly oppressive.” The foundation of a pardon meant that one must be forgiven for his or her transgression, which was so important for incarcerated women who were often overlooked by prison administrators. Ultimately, Vivian Miller argues, “the pardon process helped undermine the alienation and marginalization of the convict from the world” outside of the prison.

Closely related to the act of pardon, the law defines clemency as an act or deed showing mercy or leniency; it represents forgiveness in judging or punishing. Under the criminal justice system, clemency is the act by an executive member of government extending mercy to a convicted individual. In the United States, governors grant clemency for state crimes and the president grants clemency for federal crimes. Freed and Chanenson explain that clemency and the enactment of a second chance may take on several forms that include “a complete pardon with restoration of civil rights, reprieve, commutation that reduces a conviction to a lesser

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Daniel J. Freed and Steven L. Chanenson, Pardon Power and Sentencing Policy, 121.
punishment, amnesty, or fines." Commonly acknowledged and accepted, “there are four appropriate grounds for clemency, namely, injustice of conviction, excessive severity of sentence, satisfaction of the demands of justice and necessity to obtain evidence against other criminals.” Each reason exists because questions regarding fairness and subjectivity of the law in punishing criminals stand at the base of any judgment.

As the primary purpose of punishment is to enforce obedience to the law, the ability to monitor and regulate that judgment provides convicted persons with an opportunity for a second chance, specifically in relation to receiving an executive clemency. Simone Richardson argues while a commutation of a sentence “is the shortening of a punishment to one less harsh…it is a request to be released from incarceration by way of being eligible for parole at an earlier date,” the principles surrounding an executive clemency state that a pardon “is the part of the umbrella term called executive clemency. Executive clemency is the constitutional power of the governor or president to issue a commutation of sentence, and reprieve.” Many imprisoned men and women in the Mississippi state penitentiary used the power of seeking executive clemency as a channel to gaining their freedom.

While some similarities existed in the Mississippi pardon process between male and female convicts who hoped to gain freedom, imprisoned women experienced a slightly different path. Between the 1880s and 1960s, female prisoners, in actuality, had fewer options than men for freedom if incarcerated. Coupling the criminal stigmatism that female convicts endured with the fact that many female prisoners were poor, freedom seemed out of reach to many.

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31 Ibid., 3.
Incarcerated women, especially African American women in Mississippi, had few alternatives in seeking reentrance into society and living outside of prison walls. Options for female convicts included a pardon by the governor, reprieve, death, escape, and suicide. While men shared these same options, women often rendered voiceless in a southern society driven by patriarchy, typically relied on others to speak on their behalf. Most African American women in the South had very little schooling, if any at all, and African American women and found that their criminalization placed them in a peculiar place.

The state of Mississippi operated few courts during the early and mid twentieth century. During this period, county courts, chancery and circuit courts heard all criminal cases in the state. The Mississippi Supreme Court was the highest court that heard cases in the state. In order for a person convicted of a crime in Mississippi to have his or her case overturned, the person had to either receive a reprieve or appeal the case to the Mississippi Supreme Court. Appealing a case meant that the individual had to have not only proper legal representation, but the financial means to pursue the appeal. Many cases during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century never went to trial. The accused person simply faced the judge to answer to the charges brought against him or her. Once there, the individual received a punishment and a sentence to serve time in either the county jail or the state penitentiary. In cases that did go to trial, the accused individual was a male. The courts cases involving men and women differently. Considered criminals by nature, men far outnumbered women in court cases and prison statistics. While men, especially white men of a certain economic status, often had the means to hire lawyers, poor men and women, both white and black, fought an uphill battle in seeking any kind of way out of prison.
Incarcerated Women and Harrowing Avenues to Freedom:

Considering the avenues female convicts had to freedom, it is easy to understand why the system of pardons never fully affected the lives of southern women in the same ways as their fellow male convicts. By nature, men had more opportunities to gain their freedom simply because of their gender. In most situations, incarcerated men could afford legal representation. Also, incarcerated men often testified on their own behalf. Imprisoned women in Mississippi, however, had to explore different possibilities when seeking freedom. One way was death.

From 1890-1960, some 300 women died while incarcerated in Parchman prison. African American women encompassed a huge majority, or ninety-five percent, of those. The causes of the deaths of incarcerated women included disease, old age, murder, and suicide. In 1917, an African American woman, Bettina Alston of Lowndes County, attempted suicide twice before she finally succumbed to death. An account of her death reported in The Clarion-Ledger provided various details. The wife of Willie Alston, charged and sentenced to eleven years in the state penitentiary on charges of grand larceny, Mrs. Alston spent three years in Parchman before her first attempt at suicide. The newspaper stated, “a negro female kills herself after her second attempt to take her own life. Prison officials believe that she hung herself with a bed sheet that came out of the woman’s camp. The woman had complained of heat exhaustion and was relieved of her duties and returned to her camp where the other women found her when they returned at the end of their day.”

The newspaper included no further information regarding the death of Mrs. Alston. The biennial report listed her death but no additional information

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32 Information regarding the death of female prisoners comes from calculations taken from the Mississippi State Penitentiary Biennial reports. Biennial reports for years 1890-1915, with the exception of 1906-1910, listed female prisoners names and other pertinent information. Tolls of the deaths of female convicts also appeared in the reports. After close examination of the biennial reports, recognition of several inconsistencies must be pointed out. Prison records from the Mississippi Department of Justice were unavailable at the time of this research.

33 U.S. Census, 1914.

34 The Clarion-Ledger, 18 February 1917.

35 Ibid., 1917
regarding the circumstances made the report. The newspaper’s inclusion of Mrs. Alston’s death centered on the reporting of numerous deaths that had taken place at Parchman during 1917 and 1918.

While a report of Mrs. Alston’s death made the news, undoubtedly other incarnated women who committed suicide went undocumented and unreported. In 1903, the biennial report mentioned the suicide of Lucile Treymont. Prison officials reported the death of Ms. Treymont, an African American woman from Starks, Mississippi found dead at Oakley Farm, as a suicide. Ms. Treymont’s death followed her escape and eventual return to the penal farm. The biennial report stated, “one black women dead at Oakley Farm from suicide.”36 As shocking as suicide was, many women in the position of Mrs. Alston and Mrs. Treymont placed their fate in their own hands. Suicide assured that incarcerated women controlled their destiny. The women ultimately chose this path because they saw no other alternative.

Death from natural causes, disease, or murder while incarcerated represented a second form of freedom for incarcerated women. While this form of freedom was drastic, the outcome was final. Many of the prison camps at Parchman were filled with disease, as the medical staff did not have enough staff or medications to care for every patient. Many diseases spread so quickly that medical staffs did not have time to halt outbreaks. Pneumonia, consumption, plague, malaria, and tuberculosis were several of the diseases that led to the deaths of female convicts.

A third method used by women to gain freedom was escaping or fleeing imprisonment. Before the housing of women at Parchman, leased women housed on private plantations or at Oakley Farm often used their autonomy to gain freedom. Imprisoned women found ways to

36 Mississippi Biennial Report of the Board of Control. MS State Penitentiary. July 1, 1901 – July 1, 1903. No information was found in the Starks or surrounding area newspapers regarding the death of Lucile Treymont.
escape their confinements because no one watched them closely at night. Women simply fled and no one knew of their whereabouts the next morning. During the late nineteenth century, three women, Jennie Wilson, Alma Sells, and Sallie Green, escaped from the plantation of E.E. Foltz. The Foltz plantation leased hundreds of male and female convicts from the state penitentiary each year. The Foltz plantation, for female leases, provided great opportunities for female escapees. Not only did women work in close proximity with male leases, they also had free time at night after they completed their work for the day. Several males escaped the Foltz plantation during the late nineteenth century and, undeniably, female counterparts surely watched them and took their successes and failures into account.\(^{37}\)

An announcement of a missing female from the Foltz plantation appeared in *The Clarion Ledger* in 1897. The notice stated, “a Negro female by the named Jennie Wilson, 24 years of age, left the Foltz plantation during the night. It is suspected that she left with a Jeb Abrams, Negro male age 28, by foot. If you see two convicts of this description they are to be returned to the state penitentiary.”\(^{38}\) The record of the capture of both Wilson and Abrams and their return to the state penitentiary, documented in the 1899 biennial report, includes only information regarding their return to the penitentiary and subsequently the Foltz plantation.\(^{39}\) Women leased and housed closely with men often took advantage of the opportunity to flee when men decided to leave the plantation. In several instances, women who escaped made it as far as home before their recapture and return to the penitentiary.

\(^{37}\) No exact statistics illustrate the numbers of male or female convicts who escaped penal farms when leased by the State penitentiary to private individual. The only documentation available are the accounts of escapes and returns to the penitentiary that are reported and listed in the biennial reports. Further research of the personal records of each individual who leased convicts from the state penitentiary might yield more information regarding escaped convicts.

\(^{38}\) “Escaped Convicts,” *The Clarion-Ledger*, November 18, 1897, sec. A.

Some imprisoned women understood that escape from the prison system was their only viable chance for liberty. While some imprisoned women chose to escape because they enjoyed the thrill, the dangers in doing so and the threat and probability of recapture deterred many from doing so. The warden of the penitentiary, M.L. Jenkins, argued in his annual report that “most if not all convicts who escaped were returned in less than a week to the penitentiary.” Stories of recapture certainly made their way throughout the penitentiary. These stories alone more than likely deterred many individuals, especially women, from trying to escape. Reference to female escapees rarely made the biennial reports outside of documenting their escape and recapture. Prison officials never placed a substantial amount of concern on female convicts who escaped because they were confident they could capture them. One account of a female escapee, Mary Lee Scott, survived in a letter written to the warden asking for forgiveness. In documenting letters received from convicts, Jenkins stated, “I received a letter from a female escapee asking for forgiveness for her error in trying to escape with the Negro, Will Herrington. She says that she meant no harm and was only trying to make it home to see her ill mother and father.” After escaping the confinements of imprisonment, the recapture and return of each woman eventually sealed their fate as incarcerated women.

A Plea for Pardons

The most common form of seeking freedom involved pardon requests to the governor. Pardon requests in Mississippi often came in the form of commutation requests. An incarcerated person, their family members, bosses, and in some instances, their communities, appealed to the

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41 Ibid., 24.
governor asking for forgiveness, leniency, and freedom. The idea of forgiveness, as an act of mercy, aided the courts, judicial administrators, and governors in the act of remitting sentences of individuals convicted of crimes. As David Tait explains, the terms, “forgiveness, pardon, mercy, clemency, indemnity, and amnesty provide a fluid and largely overlapping set of terms to mark out an approach to transgression or deviance that strays the hand of vengeance.”  

The power of forgiveness in the judicial system placed the power of judgment and forgiveness in the hands of individuals who had the power and interest to change one’s outcome. Women especially depended on this form of forgiveness because it was often their most effective form of recourse.

According to Vivian Miller, applications for “pardons, commutation, and reprieve had to satisfy a number of audiences as to whether the offense was pardonable, even where officials encouraged convicts to apply for clemency, and where prisoners had sufficient financial resources to do so.”  

Governors, employers, lawyers, juries, family and friends of both the victim and the accused all had an opportunity to play a decisive role in redressing unjust verdicts or outcomes. Just as in Tait’s words, “moral outrage finds its outlet in punishment, so compassion finds its expression in pardon.” In that belief in compassion female convicts experienced conflicts while searching for forgiveness. Female criminals, facing a justice system that criminalized them more harshly through penalties and long sentences, fought against a system that in many respects had the inability to forgive them for their transgressions. Female offenders, in many respects, had to rely on the compassion of male authority figures that judged them through a patriarchal lens and the long-standing idea men held regarding women’s proper

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43 Vivian M.L. Miller, Crime, Sexual Violence, and Clemency, 128.
44 David Tait, “Pardons in Perspective.” 134.
place. African American women, whose race, gender, and criminality placed a major role in their criminalization, encountered a judicial system that had no compassion for their waywardness. Deemed criminal by nature, African American women experienced a system where forgiveness and second chances were not viable options.

In some of the earliest documented pardon records for the state of Mississippi governors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries granted hundreds of pardons to individuals imprisoned in the Mississippi state penitentiary. Toward the end of their terms as governor, they pardoned several women. In some cases, the governors clearly stated why they granted certain individuals a pardon, and there are other cases where there is no explanation. Coupled with ideas grounded in patriarchy, white men understood themselves as an authority with the power to administer punishment and the influence to bequeath leniency.

The ideas that southern white males held regarding southern women more than likely aided them in their decisions to pardon certain women. Undeniably, southern men believed southern white women to be pure and moral individuals. It was the responsibility of white women not only to uphold a moral disposition but also to raise moral children. It is here where the imprisonment of white women caused an internal conflict for white men.45 How could white men imprison white women and at the same time elevate their wholesomeness? When making their decisions, many judges undoubtedly decided to administer some other form of punishment that was not as condemning.46 Faced with the reality of imprisoning and confining them to the state penitentiary, they often found ways to alleviate the stigma white women faced for being criminals. Pardoning or granting white southern women clemency enabled white men to do so.

46 Ibid., 158.
White men who requested pardons for African American women often had a stake in doing so. In some cases, the work of African American women meant additional labor to those pushing for their release. Some employers or friends of individuals who employed African American women requested their release for selfish reasons. The well being of African American women and their protection as women never played a role in these requests. One of the most interesting pardon appeals for African American women by two white men occurred in 1897. In 1865 Mississippi was the first Southern state to pass “Black Codes” to limit the freedom of newly freed African American men and women while regulating them to a servile position where they endured a labor economy in the South. The document specifically outlined the illegality of fornication and cohabitation, with language pointing towards the criminality of interracial marriage.\(^47\) By 1890, white delegates met in Jackson to devise the 1890 Mississippi Plan with the sole purpose of disenfranchising African American men. After the delegates accomplished their main goal, they began the state constitution. Concerning crimes and misdemeanors, the constitution stated, “all crimes and misdemeanors and penal actions shall be tried, prosecuted, and punished.”\(^48\) Jackson surely fell under this interpretation of the law.

Due to circumstances that were out of her control, Jane Jackson found herself at the mercy of the court over allegations of fornication. After a fire destroyed her home, Jackson moved in with a neighbor. While it is not clear whether Jackson and her codefendant lived together prior to the fire, what is apparent is that Jackson began living with a man to whom she was not married. A fourteen-year-old African American young woman testified against Jackson and indicated that Jackson had lived with the man prior to her house burning down. With the

\(^{47}\) Mississippi’s “Black Codes,” sec. 2.
\(^{48}\) Mississippi Constitution, art. 16, sec. 283.
witness and evidence stacked against her, the courts convicted Jackson of fornication and she received a sentence of three months imprisonment and a ten-dollar plus all cost fine.

It is here that the story of Jackson becomes interesting. As they would do for Hettie Record, John W. Fewell and G.B. Hawthorn wrote a letter to Governor A.J. McLaurin asking him to pardon Jackson.\(^{49}\) The men’s apparent stake in the labor of Jackson is important in trying to understand why they wrote such compelling letters to the governor on her behalf. The letter written by Fewell illustrated not only the importance of Jackson’s labor, but his letter also demonstrated the racial undertones white men held for African American women. Fewell stated,

My Dear Sir, Jane Jackson, colored, was convicted at the October term 1896 for the Circuit Court of Lauderdale County of the misdemeanor of Fornication and sentenced to three months imprisonment and Ten Dollars fine and all costs. She has served out the imprisonment sentence. She is still at work on the county roads and at ten cents per day, allowance, it will take her about 204 days to work out the costs, about $24.00. She is represented to me as a good woman – a hard and faithful worker – one who sticks to her work. I hear from sources that I rely on that the witness against her – a negro girl about 14 years of age, is a very lazy trifling hussy who was probably actuated by malice. But, whether this be true or not, I submit that this woman has suffered sufficiently – especially in the estimation of those who are not in a situation to cast stones and also in view of the tropical origin of her race. The offense may also be considered venial in view of the fact that from the circumstance of her house being burned down she was compelled to seek shelter in her ‘co-respondent’s house, he being her neighbor and friend and she a widdy woman and he a widdy man. Under all the facts and circumstances and under the recommendation of the Honorable Jude – a man of sympathy for the weak and erring – I beg to recommend and pardon of this poor woman and the remission of the costs.\(^{50}\)

In his opening, Fewell emphasized that Jackson, even after serving her time in prison, had to continue to work on the county roads as certainly a convict lessee in order to pay her fines. The

\(^{49}\) John W. Fewell served as a Confederate solider, lawyer, state legislature, and he owned Meridian Gas & Light Company. As attorneys, he and his sons represented the New Orleans and North-Eastern Railroad Company as well as, the Alabama and Vicksburg Railway Company. At the time of his letter Fewell served as the judge in Lauderdale County. Fewell almost certainly wrote his letter to the governor on the behalf of one of his clients.

\(^{50}\) Governor A.J. McLaurin Papers. Clemency Request, 1900-1903. Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Series 827/Box 1105.
fact that he stated that she would have to work 240 days to pay off the remainder of her fine explains why, more than anything else, he is writing the letter for her pardon.

While Fewell placed a substantial amount of interest in making a claim for the good nature of Jackson, he also went to great lengths to suggest Jackson’s accuser of being an immoral person. By calling the young fourteen year old girl lazy and trifling, and uplifting the work ethic of Jackson, Fewell differentiated the two women in nature and character and alluded to the belief that there are good, hard working black women and then those who were not. Fortunately, for Jackson, because of her worth as a laborer or servant, she gained the praises of a man who had the power to speak for her.

A second letter, written by the sentencing judge in Jackson’s case, G.B. Hawthorn, further illustrated not only the interest that white men had in her labor, but also how they viewed her as a African American woman. Hawthorn argued,

…Moreover the good woman, as I remember, was not very blameworthy; for understand she is elderly, and not very comely, while “the party of the other part” was a lusty coon, very well calculated “to out argue your Aunt Nancy” under the provoking circumstances so artistically portrayed in our friend F’s to you. Beside it was of my mind, to afflict the amiable dame with less punishment, than the younger party, so I gave her a shorter term and a smaller fine, and, if it had occurred to me, I would have taxed all the costs against the coon Lothario, because of his bad taste, and then he is able to serve the public. So I join with judge Fewell cordially, in recommending a pardon for Jane, for indulging a very amiable weakness. She will be better fit for work outside of prison and the sooner she is pardon[ed], the better for all it will be.51

Hawthorn stated that he did not understand that fining Jackson and making her pay all of the court costs would cause her to have to serve more time. In the interest of the individuals, Hawthorn explained that it was clear that Jackson’s release and return to her job would not only help her but also help those who controlled her labor. The language in both letters demonstrates

51 Governor A.J. McLaurin Papers. Clemency Request, 1900-1903. Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Series 827/Box 1105.
that black women experienced compassion from white men only when their bodies mattered. On the one hand, we see the same white men pleading for another African American woman’s release. Then we see two white men pleading for another African American woman’s release because of her hard work and good nature. This illustrates southern white men’s ability to use race as a tool to navigate racism and leniency.

From 1890-1896, governor John M. Stone pardoned numerous women toward the end of his term as governor. Accounts of female prisoners pardoned by Governor Stone illustrated that his pardoning power reached many. In his biennial message to the State Legislature of Mississippi in 1880, Governor Stone noted that the penitentiary continued to see an influx of prisoners, especially African American women. He voiced his concern over male and female convicts working together and quite possibly causing more harm than good. During the 1880s and 1890s, Mississippi searched for ways to improve its penitentiary system. Thousands of new convicts flooded the penal system during this period due to the implementation of pig laws, vagrancy laws, and Jim Crow justice. The influx of female convicts, no matter how white men perceived both black and white women, led many to find ways to lighten the numbers. By the early 1890s, in an effort to alleviate the burden of having to find suitable plantations to lease female convicts, Stone began to pardon several women.

Governor Stone was one of the first governors in Mississippi who began to grant pardons to numerous women in the Mississippi penal system. As one of the first women Stone pardoned, Lina Borders, convicted and sentenced to life in 1881 for the murder of her husband Alphonso Borders, served only ten years of her life sentence. A letter written by an acquaintance of

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53 Lina Boarders, formally Lina Hairston, married Alphonso Boarders on October 6, 1876. Their marriage lasted almost five years before his murder.
Borders requesting her pardon reached Governor Stone in either February or May of 1894. In the letter, the writer argued, “as a good woman, she deserves compassion for his actions for her husband was a man who drank and argued to[o] much,” and later states that, “she is a hard working woman with small children at home and no one to care for them.” While nothing implies that this letter influenced Governor Stone in his decision to pardon Borders, the significance of the letter lies in the fact that someone spoke out on her behalf. Another woman whom Stone pardoned, Bettie Austin (race unknown), received a life sentence for murder in 1883. After serving close to six years, Stone granted Austin a pardon in 1890. Eliza Spurlock, an African American female sentenced for two years in 1889 for committing arson, received a pardon after serving eleven months in the state penitentiary.

Stone continued to pardon female convicts toward the end of his tenure as governor. Lizzie Walls, convicted of incest and sentenced to two years in March of 1892, earned a pardon after serving close to three months in the penitentiary. Lucy Thompson, charged and convicted on March 30, 1893 of bigamy and released on July, 29, 1893, served a day less than four months in the penitentiary. The prison superintendent expressed his concern over the growing prison population, especially the spike in female convicts. Stone argued that

the overcrowding of the prison is a drain on the system and if the population continues to rise, we will not be able to sustain the prisoners needs. There will “not be enough food or clothing and they will become a burden for the state…We will also have a hard time in keeping female prisoners, who[s] numbers are growing day by day, separate from the male prisoners. We are able now to place

54 Executive Clemency Records, 1875-1884; 1894-1896. Series 806/Box 1117. Vol. 1117. Pardons, 1894-1896. Mississippi Department of Archives and History. The letter was more than likely written by her boss. The letter included several references to her work and being the only person that the author and his family trusted around their home. Coincidentally, the inaccuracy of the date remains because the first page of the letter is dated February, 1894 and the second page of the letter is dated May, 1894.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., Pardons, 1894-1896.


58 Ibid., 12.
in separate places but who knows what will happen if more and more continue to be imprisoned.\textsuperscript{59}

It is probable that several superintendents expressed their concerns of overcrowding with their governors. In turn, governors certainly made relieving the state of the burden of taking care of prisoners a top priority on their way out of office.

These incarcerated women, no matter the severity of their crimes, did not serve their entire sentences. Stone, faced with overcrowding and an influx of new prisoners each year, more than likely had to decide to pardon individuals even if he did not want to do so. The fact that Stone pardoned over three hundred male prisoners during his two terms alludes to the point that he wanted to deal with overcrowding. It is also possible that the concerns of officials regarding what would happen to convicts once sentenced to the state penitentiary led many to seek pardons. Only six of the fifteen females imprisoned in the state penitentiary received pardons in 1890, illustrating that not all women received leniency or forgiveness. The other nine women had to continue serving their sentences and wait until the next governor made his decisions regarding issuing pardons.

The burden of the state caring for convicts caused some petitioners to request pardons for imprisoned women. The case of Della Boston illustrates this very point. Boston, after her arrest, showed signs of mental issues and this concerned several people. The board of supervisors of Tippah County, Mississippi wrote a letter on Boston’s behalf petitioning for her pardon.\textsuperscript{60} The letter stated that after Boston received a jail sentence and a fine of $800 that she became insane and cost the county no less than $100 to care for her. The petitioners argued that

\textsuperscript{60} The board of governors included Jno F. Guyton, W.H. Mathews, J.S. Carmichael, H.G. Manning, and J.D. Smith.
it was shown at the trial that her mind has been affected for years. She is a poor negress without help of securing sufficient aid to pay the fine and we fear that if she is kept in jail for any considerable time, she will again have to be sent to the asylum.\footnote{Governor A.J. McLaurin Papers. Clemency Request, 1900-1903. Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Series 827/Box 1105.}

The authors believed the care of Boston to be too great of a burden on the state. Uno Y. Murray, who served as the secretary in the senate in 1897, also wrote a letter to the governor on Boston’s behalf. In a letter, Murray explains why a pardon would be better for not only Boston, but the state as well.
Hon. A. J. McAllister, Governor,
Jackson, Miss.

Dear Sir: During the summer of 1896, one Bella Boston, a negro, presented a forced order for goods to a Cotton Plant merchant for $10 to the amount of $4. She was indicted and placed in jail here, being unable to make bond. Soon after being incarcerated she became a raving lunatic and was sent to the Asylum at Jackson. At the Jany term of the Circuit Court last she plead guilty to the charge, being unable to pay an attorney. When questioned by the Judge she stoutly insisted that she knew nothing about the matter. It was shown by the physician who had treated her that she had not been right at intervals for some years. Judge Stephens, imposed the lightest penalty permissible, and intimated that he would have been constrained to make it even lighter had it been possible. Her people are not able to pay even the light fine and costs and no one seems to care to help her. It is believed that unless she can be released at an early day, she will probably become deranged again. Her friends say if she should be released, they will look after her and thus a considerable expense will possibly be saved this people. At the instance of some of her neighbors, I presented a petition to the Board of Supervisors of the county to your Excellency praying for her pardon and giving what they consider substantial reasons therefor. They unhesitatingly signed it and I
Murray furthered the arguments presented by the board of supervisors and explained that if Boston received a pardoned her friends agreed to care for her. The cost of caring for Boston for the state played a major role in her petitioners seeking her freedom.

Governor Robert Lowery, who served as governor from 1882-1890, pardoned seven women during the end of his tenure as governor. Before leaving office Lowery stated, “…it is
my duty to remove those from the penitentiary who have served their time and paid their debt to society.”

One of the most controversial pardons Governor Lowery granted involved Mollie Green. An African American woman convicted of grand larceny and sentenced in 1896 to the state penitentiary for four years, she received a pardon after serving three years. Governor Lowery received a letter from the victim of Green’s crime. The author of the letter states,

My family respectfully asks that you do not let the Negro woman Mollie Green out. She unlawfully stole food and tools from our land. She worked for us for many years and one day left and we did not hear from her for a long time. She returned with a young Negro boy during the night after being gone for a while from the farm. My youngest son heard a racquet outside by the barn and as was approached we saw Mollie and the young boy running away. They were caught a few miles down the road with food from our garden and tools out of our shed. She should serve the full sentence she is given and it is our hope that you do not let her out any earlier than she deserves.

Records indicate that Lowery pardoned seven women, all African American, from Parchman.

Letters to Governor A.J. McLaurin illustrate the community’s interest in securing pardons for their fallen women. At the beginning of his term in 1897, Governor McLaurin received numerous pardon requests on the behalf of Hettie Record. One letter written by Daniel Johnson, a judge in the Mississippi Delta, stated,

I am writing to ask you to pardon the young Hettie Record. I know that she has served almost ten years and I do believe that she has served her time. She will be better suited to work and pay her debt to society outside of the prison while she is still young and able to work. I am sure that there are place[s] that she can go and I have a good mind in that we can find her a well suited location to adjust.

Johnson clearly outlined that while he wanted Record pardoned, he also intended that she would work once pardoned. Her value was in her labor. Many southern white men placed their pardon requests for African American women in the context of what service they could provide for society once released.


63 Ibid., Series 827/Box 1103..
Often the letters included reasons why the petitioners believed that the female convicts deserved pardons. In 1898, eighty-seven petitioners signed a petition sent to Governor McLaurin asking for the pardon of two African American females. The language in the petition demonstrates their feelings regarding the enactment of punishment. The letter states,

We, our humble petitioners, do hereby petition your Honorable Board to pardon from the county farm Perle Moore and Sadie Moore convicted at the last June term of the court at Jackson, MS, upon the payment of all cost. These women, in our judgment, have been punished sufficiently, have been consigned in the county jail for nearly one year and we think the ends of justice have been more than met.64

The requests indicated that petitioners felt that each woman served a sufficient amount of time for their criminal activity. In both cases, petitioners believed that the women received penalties too harsh for the crimes committed. They believed that the punishments did not fit the crimes.

The petition for pardon to Governor McLaurin on the behalf of Fannie Brooks also illustrates the community’s interest in earning the freedom for a female convict. The citizens of Pike County, Mississippi submitted a petition for pardon to the governor and to the Magnolia Gazette. The petition ran consecutively five times from August 2, 1899 through August 30, 1899.

64 Governor Anslem J. McLaurin Papers. Clemency Request, 1900-1903. Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Series 827/Box 1105.
Proof of Publication.

State of Mississippi,
Pike County, 

PERSONALLY APPEARED before me the undersigned
Clerk of the Chancery Court

duly elected and qualified for Pike county, Mississippi, D. M. Hurst, publisher of the
Magnolia Gazette,
a newspaper printed and published in the town of Magnolia, in the county and State aforesaid,

who being duly sworn, depose and say that publication of a notice of which the present is a
copy, has been made in said paper 5 times consecutively, to wit:

PETITION FOR PARDON
To the Hon. A.J. McNair, Governor
of the State of Mississippi:

We the undersigned, respectfully, request your Excellency, to grant a pardon to
Pamela Brack, who was convicted of the crime of manslaughter on
the 11th day of September, 1897, in the
Circuit Court of Pike County, Miss.,
and sentenced to life in prison.
We state the following reasons for
granting the pardon, viz.:

(1) Extremely good and gentle character.
(2) The need of the petitioner's help to
her son and grandchildren.

Phineas R. Quinn
M. E. Ball, and
W. M. Stevens.

SIGNED TO and subscribed before me, this 16th day of Oct., 1897.

Witness my hand and seal.

D. McLaughlin, Clerk.
PETITION FOR PARDON

To the Hon. A. J. McLaurin, Governor of Mississippi:

WE, the undersigned petitioners most respectfully petition your EX-
emany to grant pardon unto

-- FANNIE BROOKS --

who was convicted of the crime of Manslaughter on the 11th day of
September, 1897, in the Circuit Court of Pike County, Mississippi,
and by the court sentenced to ten years imprisonment in the Peni-
tentiary of the said State:

WE assign the following reason for granting the pardon, viz:--

1) Extreme good and efficient conduct as a prisoner.

2) The needs of the prisoner’s helpless little children of their
mothers care. One of these children is extremely delicate and will
probably die unless its mother is with it to attend and nurse it.

Respectfully,

John R. Summey

C. J. Welch

James Currie

E. H. Donivan

W. F. Eldridge

E. T. Nelis

E. E. Johnson

S. B. Rush

J. M. Collins

D. E. Harris

Frank G. Jenkins
The two petitions for pardon submitted on the behalf of Brooks pointed to her good character as one of the main reasons why the governor should pardon her. The letters also explained that Brooks was a mother to small children and that unless she received a pardon, that one of her children might possibly die.

Petitions for pardons for imprisoned Mississippi women came from several different sources. Penitentiary officials on occasion petitioned for the pardon of incarcerated females. In several cases, personal connections with imprisoned females drove petitions for pardon. Personal interest in the labor of African American women encouraged white males to seek their release. Placed in the Meridian Daily Herald, a petition for pardon to the governor of the state of Mississippi ran consecutively from August 15, 1899 to September 15, 1899. The petitioners, all of whom were prison officials, asked for a pardon for Lucy Phillips who received fifteen years imprisonment in the Mississippi State penitentiary. The petitioners argued that Phillips, “exhibited extremely good and faithful conduct as a prisoner,” and that “she has been in our judgment, sufficiently punished for the crime.”

Phillips, who would soon turn seventy, worked in the home of J.M. Parchman before her incarceration. Her labor undeniably made her a valuable asset outside of the confinements of the penitentiary. At the time of the petition, J.M. Parchman served as the warden of the penitentiary. His special interest in Phillips cancelled out his position as warden. If granted freedom, Phillips’s return to the home and continued watchful eye of Mr. Parchman would mean that her labor and freedom belonged to him, inevitably leaving her in a state of confinement.

In the case of Eliza Johnson, an attorney, R.S. Powell submitted two letters on her behalf. Convicted of assault and sentenced to a year imprisonment, Johnson had not other forms of legal recourse outside of a pardon request. In one letter Powell respectfully petitioned for her pardon

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65 Meridian Daily Herald, August 15, 1899 – September 15, 1899.
on “reason of her previous good and character, and on account of having served a portion of the

time of sentence.” Powell pointed out Johnson’s good character and alluded to the fact that she

had served enough time in the state penitentiary. Johnson’s previous good nature and character
aided her when a petition circulated that affirmed that the citizens of Madison County requested
her pardon. Seventy-three people signed the petition.

**Mississippi and the Intersections of Class, Race and Gender in the Criminalization of
Southern African American Women:**

The church, religion, faith, family, character, and the severity of crime also made their
way into pardon requests. Many Southerners held on to their religious faith and often spoke
about God and religion in their petitions for pardon. While not every woman who requested a
pardon received one, a close evaluation of the crimes committed by women and the role of
religion, will illustrate the complexities of female crime and punishment. Women offenders
committed several different crimes throughout the late nineteenth century and the early part of
the twentieth century. Manslaughter, murder, felonious assault, grand larceny, burglary, incest,
arson, poisoning, bigamy, prostitution, and perjury were the most common charges brought
against women offenders. These crimes, when committed by women, were often viewed more
harshly than when men committed these same crimes. Men’s perceived brutality, especially
black men, set the expectation that male criminal activity was an inherent trait. Males, perceived
to be forceful by nature, often found that the expectation of their criminal activity seemed
nominal in relation to female offenders. There was no greater sin, even when judged by the

66 Governor Anslem J. McLaurin Papers. Clemency Request, 1900-1903. Mississippi Department of
Archives and History. Series 827/Box 1108.
criminals. In many respects, “female criminals were viewed as being much worse than male criminals.”\textsuperscript{67}

Class and poverty also played major roles in the lives of southern convicts. Many Southern women, including rural white and black women born in poverty, often found themselves involved in criminal activity. Trying to make ends meet, poor women often resorted to petty crime in order to provide for their families. While rural families struggled to make ends meet, many women often struggled to carve out a space for themselves in a male driven society. As wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and laborers, poor Southern women experienced a life different from Southern men. When women felt a sense of hopelessness in a male driven society, and as needs piled up, turning to criminal activity often was the next step. Often viewed and treated as dependents, women frequently experienced an unfavorable world in which they were daily judged on their gender. The U.S. census often listed women as child, daughter, wife, or widow which denoting dependency. Rarely were they considered as the head of the household.

Historian Laura F. Edwards illustrates how the industrial North viewed poor Southerners during both the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras. Edwards explains that African Americans and common whites alike “were marginalized by the stigma attached to wage labor, for this was viewed as dependency.”\textsuperscript{68} African American women formed the majority of the wage labor jobs throughout the South. Viewed as dependents, prison officials maintained this view in regards to imprisoned women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In many ways, this aided in the struggle that white and black women faced in seeking forgiveness and mercy after


committing crimes. Southern society looked down on women who strayed from the acceptable role of wife, mother, and companion. Thus, this marginalization undoubtedly followed both white and black women into the penal system.

The petitions for Flora Fenenr, an African American woman, and Rosa Jakes and Anna Moss, two white women, illustrate how petitioners used these women’s poverty as a means of fighting for their freedom. In the case of Fenenr, convicted of assault and battery and sentenced to one month in jail and a fine of $25.00, petitioners stated that she was a very poor woman who would be unable to pay her fine. They stated,

…she is extremely poor…she saw her father being shot upon and killed. She then retaliated and shot the man…this young girl of tender years and seeing her father being killed it is in human nature for her to act as she did. We believe that under these circumstances that she should be pardoned.\textsuperscript{69}

Fenenr’s petitioners believed that she was just in retaliating against her father’s perpetrator. They also stated that being poor would not allow her to pay the fine of $25.00, which ultimately would keep her imprisoned until she was able to do so.

A petition for the pardon of Rosa Jakes and Anna Moses, both white women convicted of peddling without a license, included twenty-seven signatures at the time of its submission. Both poor white women, Jakes and Moses had to depend on their communities to seek a pardon for them. The petition stated,

These women were doing no harm and are innocent in every way except peddling without license, and of this they were doubtless ignorant. They are now in jail and are unable to pay the fine and cost. It is the desire of the Sheriff who arrested them, as also the desire of J.P. who convicted them that you should grant them full pardon.\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{69} Governor Anslem J. McLaurin Papers. Clemency Request, 1900-1903. Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Series 827/Box 1109.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
The petition for Jakes and Moses illustrates that white female criminals also had their share of supporters. The petitioners made major issues of their financial state and ignorance in an effort to show that they women did not know that what they did equaled to a crime.

The Mississippi Constitution of 1890 played a crucial role in the imprisonment of thousands of African Americans in the South. During the Jim Crow era, Mississippi passed numerous laws directly affecting African Americans. Historian Victoria Bynum, in her discussion of miscegenation, explains “biracial education and interracial marriages were legally proscribed in 1878 and 1880; both were made unconstitutional in 1890. Disenfranchisement, segregation, and lynching peaked in Mississippi between 1889 and 1919.”71 The thought of white or black women marrying outside of their race posed a great threat to the Southern white aristocracy. The six miscegenation laws enacted between 1850 and 1890 in Mississippi ensured that the separation of races would continue. In regards to the miscegenation state code, the 1880 Jim Crow laws revised the state code to state that “the marriage between white persons and black or mulattoes or persons who shall have one-eight or more of black blood as "incestuous and void."”72 The penalty for such an offense could be a fine up to $500, or imprisonment in the penitentiary up to ten years, or both. Jim Crow laws specifically refuted the progress made for African Americans in the South during Reconstruction that included protection of voting rights for African Americans, the passing of five civil rights laws, and the tolerance of interracial marriage. Jim Crow laws specifically targeted African Americans who challenged the racial boundaries previously held in the South. Sweeping incarcerations of African American men and

72 Ibid., 270.
women in Mississippi occurred at the turn of the twentieth century. In some cases, police arrested white men and women who dared to act on any type of relationship with the opposite race. Between 1895 and 1915 alone, seven African American women charged with having an inappropriate relationship with a white man, received jail sentences ranging from two to nine years.

Bigamy and incest played a major role in the imprisonment of African American women in Mississippi. Between 1890 and 1925, thirty-seven female offenders in the state penitentiary were convicted and sentenced to jail for these crimes. Many married African American women found themselves without a husband due to desertion and decided to remarry. By doing so, women committed the crime of bigamy. Once captured, women received jail sentences of up to ten years for the offense. The case of Fanny Redus revealed how the justice system viewed African American women who remarried while still technically married. Redus received five years in the state penitentiary for the crime of bigamy in 1900. In a letter to the governor, the community banded together to write a letter on the behalf of Redus begging for the mercy of the court and governor. The letter stated that Redus was only a twenty-two year old girl who had married at fifteen. She had three children and her husband and the father of the children left her one-day and never returned. She remarried a short time later only to have her husband return. The letter stated,

…her first husband came home and said that he had been on the chain gang after being caught gambling. He was very upset at her for remarrying and took his issue to the police. This poor girl now has to endure the prison all because her husband left her. She was a quiet girl who took care of her children. Now that

74 Ibid., 41-42.
she is in the state penitentiary, there is no one who can watch after her three small children. We beg for your mercy and ask that you release her back to her family and community.\(^\text{76}\)

Fifty-three individuals signed the petition for Redus. Ultimately, she served two months short of her entire sentence. Governor McLaurin, one of the governors who made it part of his business of pardon several women during his tenure as governor, did not grant the pardon wishes of those individuals who pushed for her release.

Petitions for pardon came in many forms for incarcerated women. African American women had a hard time gaining any form of autonomy over their lives or bodies. Certainly, their imprisoned state made their dependency on others much more real. African American women found that they had no social or political protection. Whether labeled as a criminal, beast, unwomanly, sexually promiscuous, lazy, dirty, or uneducated, the strikes African-American women faced mounted daily. In this respect, it is important to understand why the petition requests for African American women, no matter how scarce, are very important in understanding of their lives. Many petitioners noted the age of the female convict and argued about the severity of the sentences handed down to women convicted of criminal acts.

In 1902, petitioners sent three letters, one by the accused, to Governor James K. Vardaman, asking for the pardon of Sarah Cook. Cook, convicted of killing a seventeen year old girl and her own newborn child in 1894, received a sentence of twenty-five years in the state penitentiary. In their letters, her supporters argued “the baby was born dead and she left her baby in the woods to conceal her shame…she is a young and inexperienced negro girl who has served five years and has had time to pray over her sins.”\(^\text{77}\) Here, the petitioners made mention of her race, age, and the fact that her baby was born out of wedlock. In speaking for herself,

\(^{\text{76}}\) Governor A. J. McLaurin Papers. Clemency Request, 1900-1903. Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Series 827/Box 1109.

\(^{\text{77}}\) Ibid., Series 827/Box 1103.
Cook wrote a letter to the governor and stated that she did not kill her baby and that she was very sorry for having a baby without naming the father.\textsuperscript{78} The three letters provide a glimpse not only into the ways in which the petitioners viewed Cook, but also at how she viewed herself. Forty-nine people signed Cook’s petitions, which ran consecutively in the Meridian Daily Herald beginning with the issue of February 1, 1902 through March 1, 1902.

Pardon petitions for female convicts offered limited hope because evidence confirms strong opposition to their release. Disparaging letters, which argued against their release, demonstrated that not everyone supported pardon petitions. Lucy Phillips, convicted on January 31, 1894 for robbery and arson, received a prison sentence of fifteen years in the state penitentiary. Citizens in Madison County believed Phillips sentence was too lenient. After hearing that individuals had petitioned for her pardon, they wrote a letter to Governor McLaurin vastly expressing their concern over the possibility of her receiving a pardon. The letter stated,

\begin{quote}
We, the petitioners and citizens of Meridian ask the governor to not consider a petition for the pardon of Phillips…we consider her one of the most daring and cold-blooded robbers and house burners, male or female, within the state, and we consider her very presence a menace to the safety of our property and our lives. Second, there are several cases of robbery held in abeyance in which she was the chief perpetrator. We consider that fifteen years is a light sentence for her crime, and we therefore pray Your Excellency to let her serve her time, as the penitentiary is the safest place for her.\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

The petitioners in this case made a point to not only explain why they felt that Phillips did not deserve a pardon, they also explained what they believed would happen if her pardon went through. They also argued in the lightness of her fifteen-year sentence. By stating that jail was the safest place for Phillips, they undeniably meant that something bad might happen to her upon

\textsuperscript{78} The letter that Sarah Cook’s wrote to Governor McLaurin did not go into a lot of details surrounding the death of her baby. She mentioned the fact that she was unmarried. She also plainly states that her baby was stillborn. She apologizes for the death of her baby and asks for mercy.

\textsuperscript{79} Governor A. J. McLaurin Papers. Clemency Request, 1900-1903. Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Series 827/Box 1109.
release. These petitioners made sure to voice their opinion regarding the pardon of Phillips. Subsequently, Phillips served her entire sentence minus three months.

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, more women began to petition the governor for a pardon. Governor Edmond Noel, before he left office in 1914, pardoned over twenty women. The crimes imprisoned women committed during this time ranged from failing to pay state private tax, arson, unlawful retailing, miscegenation, grand larceny, manslaughter, and murder. The spike in female convicts in the late 1910s and throughout the 1920s, coupled with the fact that the prison designated only one camp at Parchman for women, certainly aided Noel in his decision to pardon male and female convicts. In exercising his executive power, Noel also pardoned over 300 male convicts by the end of his tenure as governor. 80

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, no clear changes developed as petitions for pardons, which focused on labor, continued. Pardon request continued to illustrate individuals unrelenting push for the release of persons whom they had a special interest. In 1927, a letter to Governor Dennis Murphree written on behalf of an African American woman, Willie Brown, explained in detail why she deserved a pardon. The letter, written by Jake L. Teal, stated,

The undersigned petionter Willie Brown a colored woman most humbly presents this her petition for a pardon and most respectfully shows unto your Excellency that on or about the 15th day of July A.D. 1927, she was convicted in the County court of Hinds County Mississippi of the misdemeanar of having in her possession one half pint of liquor. That she was wrongfully convicted. That she was not guilty of having this liquor in her house. That her son and another colored man slept in her house in day time and drove a taxi cab at night for Hunt’s garage, and she believes but can not prove it that one of these persons brought this small bottle of liquor to her house. That it was put there without her knowledge or consent. That she is an old colored woman, being nearly 60 years old, and though abnormally fleshy and fat, she is in very poor health. That imprisonment on the county farm would greatly injure her health and danger her life. That she has been a faithful servant and law-abiding citizen all of her life and was never charged with any offenses whatever during her entire life before the present one.

She humbly begs your honor to pardon her of the convict which now stands against her in the office of the County Clerk of Hinds County, Mississippi, and to pardon her fully from paying the fine of $200.00 and of serving thirty days on the county farm, which sentence was given her by the county court upon said conviction, and all costs.\(^{81}\)

Brown, through her petition, proclaimed her innocence. She blamed her perceived transgressions on her son and his acquaintance. By including her age and health, Brown is providing just cause as to why her health would not sustain her imprisonment at Parchman. The stories that people heard and shared concerning Parchman without doubt made those sentenced there to try everything possible to not have to go. The reputation of the penal farm far exceeded itself.

The pardon petition for Cora Brooks further illustrates why some petitioners appealed for women’s freedom in Mississippi. Brooks, a widowed white female, received a sentence of sixty days in jail. She had a sick daughter whom petitioners believed needed Brooks care in order for the child’s survival. Petitioners requested the mercy and leniency of the governor based on these circumstances.

\(^{81}\) Governor Dennis Murphy Papers. Pardon Request, 1927-1928/1943-1944. Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Series 827/Box 1103
Booneville Banking Company  
CAPITAL $50,000.00 — SURPLUS $15,000.00  
Booneville, Miss.

6/25/1927.

Governor Dennis Murphy,  
Jackson, Miss.

Dear Governor Murphy:—

There is being mailed from this place to-night a petition for Mrs. Cora Brooks who is in jail, asking that she be released. I do not very often take a stand in a case of this kind. This woman has a daughter who cannot get the proper attention unless her mother is there to look after her and for that reason, feel that, since this daughter of hers has an incurable disease, she should be released.

Your early consideration of this matter will be highly appreciated.

Yours,

[Signature]
STATE OF MISSISSIPPI.
COUNTY OF PRENTISS.

To the Honorable Dennis Murphy, Governor of the State of Mississippi:

We, the undersigned, citizens of Prentiss County, Mississippi, respectfully petition your Honor to grant a pardon to Mrs. Cora Brooke, who is now confined in the County jail of said county, under sentence to serve a term of sixty days in jail and pay fines totalling $250.00 and all costs, following a conviction of two misdemeanors in the Justice Court and one in the Mayor's Court of the Town of Booneville, and in support of this petition, we respectfully show the following:

Mrs. Brooke is a widow and the mother of one daughter who has been seriously ill with an incurable disease for several months, and is now confined in the Northeast Mississippi Hospital, and humanity demands that the last days of this little girl be spent with her mother.

Mrs. Brooke is also in delicate health, and is now being treated by a physician, and unless she is removed from her present confinement, her physician's efforts will be in vain.

This appeal is made to your Excellency solely because we feel that this woman and her little daughter are entitled to humane treatment, and it is impossible for her to secure her release through payment of the above fines as she does not possess one dollar's worth of this world's possessions.

Respectfully submitted,
[Signatures]

DAIRY PEDDING, L. T. SAVAGE
W. A. WHITE
W. M. ELLIOTT
J. P. RAYMOND
J. B. GIFFORD
WM. T. QUINLAN

C. D. SOUTI
E. M. THOMPSON
E. T. WALTERS
The sickness of Brooks’ daughter undoubtedly opened the avenue through which her petitioners sought redemption. Brooks’ race, coupled with a sick daughter, unquestionably played a major role in the decision to request her pardon. Protecting the respectability of white women meant more to white men than punishing them for committing crimes. Governor Murphy pardoned Brooks in August 1927 and she returned home to care for her sick child.

As historian Vivian Miller notes, letters from “convicts, prison personnel, and lawyers to the pardon board describe social relations in the language of power and knowledge, domination
and subordination.” Female prisoners, in an effort to gain freedom, often wrote to the governor on their own behalf requesting clemency. In their letters, female prisoners included personal information about their lives, including the circumstances they believed led them down a criminal path. The petitions frequently included their feelings regarding crime and punishment. While the ability to write to the governor and explain their side of the story empowered female convicts, they also illustrated their vulnerability. While imprisoned women understood the repercussions of their actions, they believed in a forgiving justice system. Asking, and in some cases begging for forgiveness, female convicts believed that they needed to take their fate into their own hands.

In 1902, Delia Branch wrote a letter to Governor Andrew Longino asking for a pardon. Branch murdered her husband in 1899 and received a life sentence for the conviction. In her letter, Branch explained the circumstances that surrounded the murder of her husband. She also apologized for her actions but explained that during that moment, she had no other option.

Branch explained,

…I write to you to explain my reasons for killing my husband. He was a mean man who drank a lot and one day he came in the house and we got in to a fight and that happened often. On this day I was in the kitchen cooking and he came in he hit me. I grabbed the knife so that he would get away and he came at me again. I only intended to keep him away from me. I killed him but did not mean to. There are young children at the house and he is the father to them all. I would not wish to have done what I did. I beg for your mercy because I did not mean to kill him. I only wished to make him leave. Please think about letting me out so that I can take care of my children. If I stay here forever then who will care for them. My mother is getting older and is not able to tend to four small children. I ask that you please think about what I have asked of you. I will not get into any more trouble or cause any more problems. This is the first time that I have been in trouble. Please think about my pardon. That would mean so much to my aging mother and children.

Branch used her petition for pardon to explain the incident of killing her husband. She emphatically argued that she did not mean to kill him. His alcoholism, she believed, lead to previous attacks, and she had only intended to protect herself when he attacked her. By explaining her side, Branch hoped for mercy from Governor Longino. While Branch’s letter surely made it to Longino, he did not pardon her. While there are no records that denote why she did not receive a pardon, her letter indicates that she acknowledged her crime and hoped for forgiveness.

In an effort to seek compassion from Governor James Vardaman, Lucy Ann Howlett petitioned him for her release from the state penitentiary in 1905 after serving eight years. Sentenced in Noxubee county for the crime of burglary and larceny, Howlett received a fifteen-year jail sentence. In her petition, Howlett explained that she did not commit the acts of burglary and larceny. She stated that she was with her brother when he committed the crimes and that she tried to stop him. She explained, “…I did not steal from the store. My brother went into the store and took some things but I stood outside and when he came out and told me I begged him to take the things back…then the man came out to our house with the police and took us both to the jail.”

Howlett also explained her and her brother’s imprisonment caused their mother to fall ill. Howlett worried more about the care of her mother and stated, “…I feel that if I am not able to leave this place and tend to my mother that she will die. Having her only two children at the state penitentiary has been too much for her to deal and I beg that you consider her when making your decision…” Howlett sought leniency from the governor and she hoped that through his mercy, she would receive a pardon. While records indicate that Howlett served

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85 Ibid., Series 1026/Box 1255.
fourteen of her fifteen-year sentence, her words further reveal imprisoned women’s activism in seeking their freedom.

Female convicts often placed religion as the cornerstone of their pardon request. By doing so, imprisoned women illustrated the important role that religion played in their lives. In 1927, Lillie Mae Bell wrote a petition for pardon to Governor Dennis Murphy. Writing from the women’s camp at Parchman, Bell stated,

Dear Sir, just a few lines in the name of the Lord to ask you just to please grant me a full pardon. I am sick and unable to work much. I have been here eight years…I am on my last tears in my eyes in the lords name please I have prayed to the lord and I know he has for give me for what I have done. I know that I have broken the law…but please grant me a full pardon.\footnote{Pardon and Suspension Files. State Government Documents. Series 1026/Box 2148. Vol. 2148. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.}

Bell used religion to illustrate that she was remorseful for her previous transgressions. She acknowledged her faults and explained that prayer aided her through her eighteen year sentence. Prayer, in Bell’s understanding, played a central role in her redemption.

In 1962, Mittie Alford, a white female petitioned Governor Ross Barnett for a pardon. By working with the government, Alford hoped to receive a lighter penalty for the crime of forgery. In her petition, Alfred stated,

I am writing to see if I can get any help from you. In November I was sentenced from Pascagoula, Miss. to serve two years for forgery at Parchman. Before I was sentenced, a Narcotics Agent visited me in jail and promised to give me probation if I would turn State’s evidence, which I did. I know that you have received other letters concerning my case. My children’s lives were threatened if I did not turn State’s evidence and I am quite concerned about them. Also my son needs special care. I will appreciate whatever you can do to help me.\footnote{Penitentiary Correspondence, 1960-1964. [Ross Barnett] Series 987/Box 2031. Vol. 2031. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.}

Alford’s understanding of the judicial system led her to believe that her best chance for freedom came by way of working with the government. Before her imprisonment, she worried about her
children and this concern remained. By expressing these sentiments in her petition, Alford hoped for a pardon from the governor because of his compassion and mercy.

In her defense, Alford’s husband, Rufus Alford, met with Governor Barnett concerning her imprisonment. In a letter to Rufus Alford, Barnett responded,

This will refer to your visit to my office, accompanied by your twelve year old son, at which time you asked for a suspended sentence for Mrs. Alford, who was sentenced to serve, as I understand, for a period of two years in the State Penitentiary. I understand there were three counts of two years each, to run concurrently, and that she has been in the Penitentiary about seven months. I do not know anything about the background of Mrs. Alford. I am sure that the judge who sentenced her and the District Attorney who prosecuted her did not know her background. If Judge Leslie Grant and District Attorney Roy Cjmbest will write me a letter and recommend that I suspend the sentence, I will do so immediately. If you will get me a written recommendation from these gentlemen, she will be released at once. I looked at your son very carefully. He needs his mother, or someone to help look after him and your fourteen year old daughter.88

Rufus Alford’s actions demonstrated his concern for her and his children. By her husband speaking on her behalf, Mittie Alford did not have to rely solely on her own petition for pardon. Governor Barnett pardoned Alford on October 19, 1963. Her pardon came almost four months after she sent the petition.

The pardon experiences of imprisoned women in the Mississippi penal system illustrated the complexities female convicts experienced in seeking freedom. Deeply rooted in the letters recommending the pardoning of women, especially African American women by Southern white men were sentiments of racism and exploitation, which drove the requests. Maintaining hegemony over African American women’s labor undeniably meant that Southern white men would and did often write letters requesting pardons for black women. Once released, African American women repaid their debt for their freedom with labor. Gender and racial hierarchies aided Southern white women in seeking pardons. They faced a judicial system that had a more

forgiving disposition toward them than for African American women. The judicial system, in criminalizing female offenders, created very few avenues for women to achieve redemption. White men who petitioned for the pardons of African American women often pointed to the ignorance of African American women while also offering a backhand compliment regarding their “good” nature. The complexities of the pardoning process that both white and black women experienced empowered them to seek other avenues for freedom.

Mississippi’s criminal justice system, defined by a biracial and multiethnic society based on inequality and patriarchy, placed criminalized women on the margins of Southern society. Southern laws “enabled white middle-class men to reinforce their dominance, and to restrict black and lower-class freedom.”\textsuperscript{89} While “race, gender, and class relations were marked by personal, interclass, and interracial ties which could be paternalistic and patronizing,” at the same time, “could yield the desired outcome for social inferiors and offenders.”\textsuperscript{90} In an effort to combat Southern patriarchal society, female convicts searched for ways to influence their own fate. Imprisoned women petitioned governors on their own behalf asking for mercy and encouraged family members to do the same. Women became principal actors in bargaining for forgiveness and compassion. While more women remained imprisoned after the submission of a petition for pardon than not, the letters and requests help to convey a story for those silenced by crime and punishment.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid, 174.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid, 159.
CHAPTER FOUR

“The Mark of Injustice - A Gendered Inclusion: Young Black and White Women’s encounter with Mississippi’s Penal system during Freedom Summer of 1961”

On May 23, 1961 the morning headlines in Mississippi’s most circulated newspaper, the Clarion Ledger, read, “Our Police Will See Law, Order maintained.”¹ The editorial’s author stated, “It is earnestly to be hoped that the misguided young white and Negro lawbreakers from Nashville colleges will abandon announced plans to come to Jackson, and will go back to their classes.”² For weeks, news of the impending arrival of Freedom Riders to Jackson served as a major concern for politicians, police officers, and residents alike. Many in the state had kept a close eye on the movements of Freedom Riders as they originated and journeyed from Washington, D.C., and made stops in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and eventually Mississippi with plans to stop in Jackson before they completed their trip in Louisiana. Many Mississippians did not expect Freedom Riders to descend upon their state and cause havoc as they had watched on television the group do in other states across the South. This sense of difference was due to the White Citizens Council, a group who formed shortly after the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision that overturned the 1896 Supreme Court ruling of Plessy vs. Ferguson. These staunch white segregationists dominated Mississippi

¹ The Clarion Ledger, 23 May 1961.
² Ibid.
political and economic culture in their fight to maintain what District Attorney David P. Murray deemed “a southern way of life.”

Through the 1940s, imprisoned women in Mississippi used a variety of measures including escape, sickness, death, pardons, and clemency requests as a means to gain their freedom. While some avenues included white men requesting the pardon of incarcerated African American women in order to access and control their labor, some incarcerated women took matters into their own hands and explored daring avenues for freedom. In some instances their actions were final and might end in death. The more fascinating avenues to freedom included the tales of women who fought for their freedom on their own behalf by writing letters to governors, politicians, and family members while seeking justice. These letters proved to be very important in the narrative of the Mississippi justice system as they provide and insight into the complex history of penal injustice in Mississippi. By the 1950s and 1960s, across the nation people had heard about the severity of Parchman penal farm. What they had not heard were personal accounts from behind the walls. It would take the Freedom Riders to bring such gravity to the masses. The thousands of men and women behind bars at Parchman were often overlooked by society because they were criminals. The Freedom Riders, however, presented a different story. These individuals were mostly northerners, young, college educated, had families who were well-off, and the most important characteristic, white.

The showdown between Mississippi and the Freedom Riders would prove central in shedding light onto the darkness that was Parchman. While men and women shared some common experiences, the accounts of incarceration of female Freedom Riders illustrate the complexity of the Mississippi penal system. The women who participated in the Freedom Rides

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3 The Jackson Sun; "History of the Modern Civil Rights Movement;" The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture.
experienced only a small fraction of what normal incarcerated women went through. However, the experience would serve as a catalyst for many of these young women following the Rides to turn their attention to prison reform because they now had a clear understanding of the realities of prison life in the South, even if their experiences only mirrored that of actual incarcerated women. While gaining a more detailed understanding of the effects of imprisonment on female Freedom Riders, what remains lost are the stories of abuse and mistreatment that incarcerated women who were not a part of the Riders endured while incarcerated in Parchman.

During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, opposition to African American’s demands for freedom in Mississippi reached its peak. The Civil Rights Movement, which had birthed activist leaders including Medgar Evers, Ella Baker, John Lewis, Martin Luther King, Jr., JoAnn Robinson, and Fannie Lou Hamer needed young men and women of different races to aid in the fight for equality. Even when faced with strong opposition from Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizens Council, and local and state police, the Freedom Riders pressed on with a dynamic plan to attack southern racism at its core by desegregating interstate bus travel.

The South, wrought with racism and injustice, functioned under both *de jure* and *de facto* guidelines that if not followed was sure to lead to abuse, arrest, and even lynching. Coming off the presidential election in 1960 where John F. Kennedy ran on a platform that promised major civil rights legislation, over seventy percent of African Americans voted for and helped elect Kennedy in hopes that their lives might improve. African Americans praised the newly elected President for seemingly gaining the release of Martin Luther King, Jr., after he was arrested after participating in an Atlanta demonstration. Many, however, soon began to question the federal

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government, which while fighting an international Cold War to stop the spread of communism, could not guarantee or protect their own citizens basic human rights. The Kennedy administration failed to introduce major civil rights legislation, which disappointed many black supporters. By the 1960s, countless African Americans held high expectations for racial improvements and sought to take matters into their own hands.\(^5\) What they understood, however, was that in the South they were sure to face a justice system that functioned in an unjust way. A stint in a southern prison was a real possibility to many Riders who understood that part of their missions was to attack the embedded system of racism.

While in the planning stages of the Freedom Rides, many of the participants underwent intense training from CORE members who worked to prepare the Riders for the constant resistance they would face throughout the South. The trainings included the spewing of racial epithets, simulated attacks and beatings, and long conversations about the complex history of the racial South. While warning Riders of the likelihood of encountering dangerous individuals once they passed the Mason Dixon line, they also worked to keep the meetings upbeat as they recognized that they would need all participants to aid in making the Rides a success. While the Riders prepared for their trip South, government officials across the South began to strategically prepare for their arrival, especially in Alabama and Mississippi.
In response to the possibility of Riders arriving in Mississippi, government officials stated that they were ready to uphold Mississippi laws that centered on segregation and racial intimidation. Officials warned, “if they persist in coming to Jackson, however, they may have this assurance in advance: Our laws are going to be enforced and maintained by our police department.”

While encouraging residents of Jackson to allow the police to handle the situation, those officials hoped all citizens understood that they would aid in stopping any progress that the Freedom Riders hoped to gain in the state. Jackson mayor Allen C. Thompson fully believed that massive racial demonstrations similar to those that erupted in other states would be avoided. Thompson in an effort to assure citizens that Mississippi would resist Freedom Riders stated, “Law and order will prevail in Jackson. The good people of this city, white and Negro, will not put up with violation of laws…no one will be granted special privileges. Those who break our laws will be treated as any law breaker.”

These words ultimately set the stage for a major confrontation between the citizens of Mississippi and the Freedom Riders. Thompson’s stance meant that while police sought to enforce the law, they would also arrest and jail any violators. A decision on how to deal with the Freedom Riders was planned well in advance by many law enforcement officers, politician’s, and Governor Ross Barnett, who stated to the press that he had alerted law enforcement officers that one or more bus loads of Riders may be on their way to Mississippi.

Freedom Riders were an interracial group who, according to historian Raymond Arsenault, “consisted of 436 seemingly (ordinary) individuals who participated in an

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extraordinary civil rights campaign that transformed the character of American democracy.”

The group consisted mostly of young college aged men and women who sought to challenge the federal government for not enforcing the 1960 Supreme Court decision in *Boynton v. Virginia.* The decision ruled that the laws requiring segregated waiting rooms, lunch counters, restrooms, and other facilities in airports, bus stations and train stations violated interstate travelers’ constitutional rights.” At stake was the struggle for civil rights and human dignity.

Since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, southern states had refused to enforce the rulings of the high court that dealt with segregation and equality, and the young Freedom Rider men and women sought to challenge these injustices. Fully understanding the task for which they had signed up, this interracial group prepared for the fight of their lives as they headed South to disrupt the southern way of life and challenge segregation. Freedom Rider Helen Singleton remembered thinking at the time that a part of her responsibility was to “help break down the aspect of segregating society.” Segregation was the accepted way of life in the South and any threat to that institution would be met with staunch resistance. Freedom Riders understood that southerners would push back against their efforts but they felt that there was no room for backing down. According to Singleton, “Freedom riding, per se, was one of the aspects of the civil rights movement [that] needed to be done to change the status quo.”

The Freedom Rides, which left Washington, D.C. on May 4, 1961 with plans to arrive in New Orleans on May 17, fell behind schedule due to resistance in several southern states, mainly Alabama, where racial tensions reached an all time high. Almost simultaneously, Mississippi

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10 Ibid., 80.
Governor Ross Barnett began to take additional steps to halt the progress of Freedom Riders in his state. Governor Barnett ordered a “nonstop trip” for the riders when he instructed T. B. Birdsong, the Mississippi commissioner of public safety, to have Highway Patrol units on standby in Meridian and other points to meet the “riders” and “escort them nonstop through Mississippi.”

In an interview where he reflected on the events surrounding the Freedom Rides, Barnett explained, “We saw what a terrible scrap they had in Alabama. They had a world of trouble...so we got ready for it here. I had the cooperation of the Highway Patrol, the Jackson Police, the Mayor, Allen Thompson, and we had meant to meet them at the Alabama line, and bring them in, and when they’d violate our laws we would just put them in jail, one after another.”

On May 23, 1961, The Clarion Ledger announced no incidents in Mississippi, but the Freedom Riders were on the way and a little over twenty-four hours later Mississippi would create a face off with the non-violent group.

During the summer of 1961, Freedom Riders faced a southern society and culture structured around separatism and racial inequality. This world was foreign to many of the Riders who had never traveled in the South before but had only heard the horrific stories and tales of the cruelty that many of the regions minority citizens faced at the hands of racist white supremacist citizens. Freedom Rider Albert Gordon who was born in Belgium and moved to the United States at the age of seven had no firsthand real knowledge of the South outside of the stories he heard growing up. While certainly any accounts concerning the South startled him, he especially found that “issues of injustice grieved [him] so deeply,” because as a human being “he felt

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14 The Clarion Ledger, 23 May 1961.
profoundly about issues of morality, public morality, of ethics, and of justice.\textsuperscript{16} For Gordon, nothing would have prepared him or his fellow Riders for the forms of injustice that they experienced during the summer of 1961.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1961, however, the world watched as the racially mixed group of young men and women faced a distinct southern culture that was in no way ready for change, especially change that would mean equality for its minority citizens. It was in part due to this reason that the Riders understood the implementation of direct action and non-violent protest to break the color line in the South would mean more than just integrating public transportation. The Freedom Riders knew that this journey needed individuals who were selfless and who were willing to risk their lives for racial and social justice for all no matter one’s gender. While men constituted a majority of the Riders, women vowed to play an integral role in the movement and not take a back seat.

To demonstrate Mississippi’s blatant refusal to adhere to the Court’s ruling, Freedom Riders arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, late in the afternoon on May 24\textsuperscript{th}, 1961. Police met them with staunch opposition. While state officials worked hard to manage and control blatant racism, police arrested Riders “typically on charges of disturbing the peace or trespassing rather than on violation of segregation ordinances.”\textsuperscript{18} When the Riders refused to obey segregation signs at the Jackson Trailways and Greyhound bus stations, the police promptly arrested and imprisoned them in the local jail.

The abuse and brutality the Freedom Riders endured, coupled with the circulation of images and stories depicting the beatings and the corrupt penal system they bared, led to national

\textsuperscript{16} Albert Gordon, Freedom Riders 40\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Oral History Project, 2001. University of Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
\textsuperscript{17} Albert Gordon, Freedom Riders 40\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Oral History Project, 2001.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 81.
attention and national outrage. People around the world saw images of police officers arresting a racially mixed group of young men and women and feared what might happen to them. Even those individuals who had never visited the South and had no personal experiences with the southern justice system understood resistance. The images were clear. The invasion of southern culture would cost Freedom Riders a heavy price.

For many Americans, the most troubling images depicted young Rider women. What would happen to these young women, many wondered. How would they be treated? Would these young women, who may or may not have understood the system they were fighting, be able to withstand the mental, physical, and sexual injustices they might encounter? Would these young women receive fairness from the courts? While time would ultimately be the determining factor, most were ready for the fight. Freedom Rider Elizabeth Wyckoff, or Betsey as her friends and family called her, was a New York writer arrested in Jackson on charges of breaching the peace. Wyckoff used her arrest as a test case when she argued that Mississippi authorities used the “breach of peace” statute illegally to enforce segregation. Wyckoff’s case openly challenged whether Freedom Riders should be arrested at all. District Judge Sidney Mize of Biloxi, Mississippi rejected the plea because “remedies in state courts have not been exhausted…and an act of Congress prohibits the entrance of Federal courts into such a matter unless state remedies have been exhausted or do not exist.” Following the loss of her plea for a federal court ruling on the constitutionality of the breach of peace law which was used to arrest Riders, the court fined Wyckoff $200 dollars and sentenced her to two months imprisonment at

Parchman penitentiary. Wyckoff along with nine other women found themselves at the mercy of the penitentiary.

During the summer of 1961, police arrested hundreds of men and women for their political activism and imprisoned them in jails across the South. The story of imprisonment and Mississippi jails stands out not only because of the sheer numbers of men and women arrested, but for how calculated the arrests and subsequent imprisonment of Riders were. After their arrest, Riders went to the county jail in Jackson where police processed each person immediately. Freedom Rider Sandra Nixon vividly detailed what happened to her once the police detained her in Jackson for what was deemed “breach of the peace.” Nixon remembered, “I was arrested…placed in a patty wagon, brought to the city jail for processing. From there, I went to Hinds County jail for several weeks and from there I was taken to Parchman.” While most Riders stayed a few days in the county jail in Jackson before police transported them to the Hinds County jail, due to the large number of Riders arrested, judges began to order a quick transit to Parchman Penal Farm, a place that would become their final destination.

To understand Parchman was to understand the caste system in the South that segregated the races, maintained a racial hierarchy, and reinforced white supremacy. Parchman, it is clear, was nothing more than “a plantation masquerading as a prison, a place where the states least fortunate laborers went to suffer and die.” Now, Freedom Riders would get a firsthand experience of what decades of African American Mississippians already knew and understood.

One of the more difficult problems in understanding the experiences of women in the southern penal system stems from their lack of voices. Before the 1980s and 1990s, historical scholarship focused on prisons as institutions. Historians and sociologists focused mainly on

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males, thus providing insight into their lives as prisoners. Imprisoned women found it almost impossible to communicate their story because of their invisibility. As forgotten offenders, imprisoned women disappeared from southern life. The concerns of most persons interested in prisons often centered on the structure of prisons, prison administrators, the men behind the walls, and statistical data. While “quantitative data provided information about who went to prison and why, they did not record feelings.”24 Thus, the survival of imprisoned women’s experiences rested not only in their hands, but also in the hands of those interested in preserving their history.

By viewing the penitentiary as a gendered institution, one understands that imprisoned women shared an experience with other women within the penal system. While their circumstances differed, imprisoned women, female administrators, female prison staff, social workers, and female family members all shared a unique experience within the Mississippi penal system. Each shared, even if unequally, in the penal experience. For women to gain full visibility in the Mississippi penal system, the story must begin with female prisoners. As forgotten offenders, women in Parchman’s horrid history lived behind a veil that shielded the world from these delinquents. Mississippi, and more specifically, prison officials, hoped to conceal female convicts and hide them from public view. However, during the summer of 1961 when female Freedom Riders came to Mississippi to aid in the fight for equality the world would notice not only their struggle but also their plight as incarcerated women.

Women involved in the Freedom Rider movement and imprisoned in Mississippi had unique experiences within the judicial system. While most of the female Riders hailed from states outside of the South and from other parts of the country, some southern women chose to

Genevieve Hughes, a white female who served as the CORE field secretary in 1960, explained that she joined the movement in part because, “I figured Southern women should be represented so the South and the nation would realize all Southern people don’t think alike.”

Hearing terrifying tales about Mississippi and the racism that plagued the state made many women like Hughes more determined than ever to move forward with their involvement. In 1961 Sandra Nixon, an African American woman who grew up in New Orleans in one of the largest public housing projects in the State, was the first person in her family to attend college at Southern University in New Orleans. It was there where Nixon “became a member of CORE, learned the principles of the nonviolent movement, and met with several other students who would eventually became Riders.”

Freedom Rider Gloria Bouknight, a twenty-year old African American woman from the South, joined the movement mainly because she wanted to fight racism and social injustice. Bouknight, in an effort to become fully ingrained in the movement, became a Freedom Singer. As a member of the vocal group, Bouknight traveled throughout the country performing freedom songs in an effort to raise funds for SNCC and to spread the message about the efforts of young people organizing in the South to fight injustice.

As Bouknight traveled through the South, police apprehended and arrested her in Jackson and she served several weeks in the county jail.

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27 Freedom Singers originated in the black church in Albany, Georgia, and they performed throughout the country informing audiences about grassroots efforts of young people who were organizing to fight segregation and racism in the South. Singing and praising were a major aspect of the African American tradition and worship. Southern civil rights protest was often accompanied by the music of the black musical tradition. Freedom songs such as “Oh Freedom (Over Me), “This Little Light of Mine,” “Wade in the Water,” “I’m Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table,” and “Ain’t Scared of Your Jails” served as the catalyst of the movement and helped participants during moments of turmoil and crisis. Most freedom songs were common hymns or spirituals that many black communities sung at home and at church; the lyrics were often changed, however, to reflect the political aims of the civil rights movement. For more on Freedom Singers see: [http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/freedom-singers](http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/freedom-singers)
While some women joined the movement and traveled alone, others traveled with their spouses. The journey to the Deep South was therefore Francis Bergman first trip. Bergman was the second oldest Rider next to her husband who was sixty-one. Prior to her trip Bergman mentioned to others that she was ready to go and fight for justice and equality. The excitement of doing what was right and helping those who were systematically unable to help themselves was of most importance to the Freedom Riders, especially to female Riders who had some sense of what social injustice felt like.

All participants, both male and female, first were trained on the principles of non-violence while simultaneously receiving warnings of potential trouble upon entering the South. All Freedom Riders endured this lengthy teaching process before joining the movement and well into their tenure as a Rider movement leaders continued to teach them in the Gandhian way. Helen Singleton, who was nineteen years old at the time of the movement stated, “We were all prepared before we took the freedom rides. They had us in an orientation. We were told that we
would be met with violence, opposed, and jailed.”

Hailing from Virginia and attending college in California, Singleton explained that stories of real injustice began circulating around their meetings before their trip to Mississippi. She explained, “I heard about other students who went to Mississippi and who were imprisoned. I knew that some of them were beaten and we learned about the horrible conditions in the county and state jails. But I was determined to go and be peaceful no matter what.” Freedom Rider Clair O’Connor expressed the same sentiment in regards to the warnings she received before making her trip Mississippi. O’Connor stated, “Before I came to Mississippi I learned how to remain non-violent because we were assured that we would be imprisoned.”

Freedom Riders underwent rigorous training and preparation before they left on their journey and what would possibly be the most important part of their “training” was the “intense roll playing sessions which Arsenault explained was designed to give them a sense of what they were going to encounter.” Rider Carol Ruth Silver, too, alluded to the importance of nonviolence and how the success of the Freedom Rides depended on everyone’s full cooperation. Singleton summed up their mission when she stated, “we understood how to respond nonviolently to any opposition to what we were about to do.”

The stories about the Mississippi penal system, and especially Parchman, must have shocked most of the female freedom riders. Historian David Oshinsky described Parchman as being “synonymous with punishment and brutality,” because as a “quintessential penal farm,”

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Parchman “was the closest thing to slavery that survived the Civil War.” The Riders were warned and many even though they went through the training, would not understand the reality of such a place until they actually found themselves there. Oshinsky vividly detailed why even those who lived outside of the South understood Parchman to be one of the most notorious penitentiaries not only in the South but in the United States as well. By 1961, Freedom Riders certainly understood that by participating in the act of desegregation in Mississippi that Parchman, whose “story cover[ed] the bleak panorama of race and punishment in the darkest corner of the South,” most certainly awaited them. And once there, Mississippi authorities would go to great lengths to make sure that the Riders experienced a system that Vardaman explained, “was necessary to provide young African Americans with the proper discipline, strong work habits, and respect for white authority.” Mississippi authorities patiently awaited the arrival of the Freedom Riders because they already had a plan for them that included jail time.

Hinds County Sheriff J. R. Gilfoy when discussing the Riders and their ultimate fate in Mississippi, exclaimed, “I can’t understand why they call themselves Freedom Riders…the first thing they do when they get here is lose their freedom.” Because of the forewarning of the racial tensions in Mississippi, female riders began to prepare for both racism and imprisonment. By doing so, they hoped to ease the shock of whatever obstacles and hardships they endured once they reached Mississippi. Helen Singleton explained, “It was like I was in a new world,” after making her trip to Mississippi. She explained that she expected to hear derogatory language and that while she did not experience any real sense of fearing southerners per se, she

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34 Ibid., 2.
35 Ibid., 110.
did fear the penitentiary. The stories of most freedom riders, male and female, tell of the horrible penal system in Mississippi. The overarching theme that many men and women would take from the Mississippi penal system was that of overcrowded cells, the mistreatment suffered at the hands of prison guards and officials, and the racism prevalent throughout the system. While one male Freedom Rider pointed out that the cells were nasty and the beds barely sleepable, female Riders expressed those same concern as well as expressed anxiety over the unsanitary conditions they were forced to endure.38 Almost three weeks after the first Riders arrived in Jackson, the city and county jails were filled with Freedom Riders, and local officials began to devise strategies to transfer both men and women to Parchman.39

The Clarion Ledger noticed on June 12th, the “Hinds County Board of Supervisors authorized Sheriff Gilfoy to transfer as many prisoners to Parchman ‘as he may deem necessary to relieve and keep relieved the crowded conditions of the county jail.’”40 This was exactly what staunch segregationist leaders in Mississippi wanted. As they began to consider the prospect of transferring the Freedom Riders to the dreaded confines of Parchman, they lauded the fact that

38 Raymond Arsenault, Freedom Riders, 295.
39 Ibid., 316.
40 Ibid., 316.
this was where the Riders would finally encounter the full force of Mississippi justice.\textsuperscript{41} There is no doubt that these same leaders understood that Parchman, being almost two hours away from Jackson and the spotlight of media attention, could implement its own brand of justice aimed at anyone, male or female, who tried to disrupt the racial and social order in Mississippi. It would be here at Parchman where female Freedom Riders would endure some of their harshest days within the movement.

To discourage Freedom Riders from coming to Mississippi, authorities placed warnings in daily newspapers across the South that cautioned those thinking about making a trip to the state. One such ad read, “Attention: Restless Race Mixers – Whose Hobby is Creating Trouble. Get Away from the blackboard jungle. Rid yourself of fear of rapists, muggers, dope heads, and switchboard artists during the hot, long summer. Fulfill the dream of a Lifetime – HAVE A “VACATION” ON A REAL PLANTATION…”\textsuperscript{42} The language in the ad clearly meant to warn reformers to stay away from Mississippi because Parchman was not a place of leisure and anyone housed there would find themselves among criminals of all kinds. In a more sarcastic tone, Jackson attorney stated, “Let ‘em come; we can accommodate them,” obviously referring to the state penitentiary system.\textsuperscript{43} Ultimately, as Raymond Arsenault concludes, “Parchman epitomized a criminal justice system dedicated to the interest of racial control and exploitation.”\textsuperscript{44}

Many female freedom riders conveyed tales of the horrible living conditions they endured while imprisoned in Mississippi. For women, using the bathroom in front of men and having to sleep on the floor indicated the ways the penitentiary system viewed them. Most women

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{42} David Oshinsky, Worse Than Slavery, 233-234.
  \item \textsuperscript{43} The Clarion Ledger, 22 May 1961.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Raymond Arsenault, Freedom Riders, 358.
\end{itemize}
explained that the system did not treat them as women, but rather more like “dogs or beasts.”
White women imprisoned in Mississippi found themselves especially vulnerable to white male
prison guards who understood their behavior as “crossing the boundaries of racial and sexual
decency.” For decades, white southern men had understood their role to be that of a protector
of white womanhood. Young white women openly traveling with and in some instances
sleeping among African American men only served as further proof to white men that any
“White women who collaborated with black men to attack cultural moors of the South did not
deserve to be treated as women, much less ladies.” White men also believed that “the very
fabric of civilization was at stake, and the women involved deserved punishment harsh enough to
deter other women from straying from the fold.” This may explain why Freedom Rider Mary
Harrison Lee after she was arrested and taken to the city jail, was placed in general population by
prison guards where she found herself in close proximity to male rapists and murderers. Lee
explained that being imprisoned under these conditions while hard did not compare to the
treatment that she experienced at the hands of white male guards who she could tell “despised
the very nature of her existence…especially since she was fighting for a cause that they had no
interest in.” After a group of Freedom Riders returned to Atlanta and began to share their
stories with a prospective Freedom Rider, Mary Little Vance, she explained that here is where
she understood the vile treatment and conditions the Riders endured. Vance recounted a tale
from a female Rider who told of the horrific conditions of the jails in Mississippi. Stories of
overcrowding, unsanitary bathrooms, and living quarters shocked Vance who had heard
countless stories about Parchman from her journalist mother and from the members of CORE

\[45\] Ibid., 359.
\[46\] Ibid., 359
\[47\] Ibid., 359.
\[48\] Mary Harrison Lee, Freedom Riders 40th Anniversary Oral History Project, 2001. The University
Department of Archives and History. (accessed 23 October 2014).
(Congress of Racial Equality) and SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) which she worked for.

African American women, who traditionally found themselves excluded from public conversations involving womanhood, also faced severe consequences if they chose to “violate Southern conventions from the opposite direction.”49 Women like Helen O’Neal McCray and Sandra Nixon understood the racial guidelines black women had to follow in the South. Both understood that many southern white men viewed African American women as second or third class citizens. Nixon, working with CORE, found herself imprisoned when local police imprisoned her with a group of freedom riders. The judge sentenced Nixon to 60 days in the state penitentiary. The police took Nixon as the only African American woman jailed and imprisoned with her group that day, to the county jail. Nixon explained that the county jail symbolized the worst experience that she had in her life:

I remember this day vividly. May 30, 1961. I was arrested and charged with breach of the peace. I was placed in a patty wagon that was so hot. The wagon was black and it felt like it had sat out in the sun for house. They took me and some of the other people to the county jail for processing. I stayed there overnight. I could hear the guards outside of my cell talking. I could also hear everything that was going on in that place. There were other white women imprisoned but they were in separate cells. I laid there all night and did not have

49 Ibid., 359.
a mattress or anything to lay on. So I barely got any rest. That night, that was my worst experience by far. I kept waiting on them to come in and take me out of there and do something to me.\textsuperscript{50}

Nixon’s story resembled the stories of so many of the female Freedom Riders. Singleton recounted her time in the county jail and explained that after the police took her to jail and booked her, she “was on her guard” because the police officers continued to say degrading things to her.

The morning after Helen Singleton’s first night in the city jail with one black female, police officers brought twelve additional black women in to share a cell made for four. Reflecting, Singleton acknowledged the unjust reasons for their imprisonment and one story stood out to her. The police charged a woman with driving without a driver’s license. Singleton explained that the women told her, “not only was I not driving but I don’t even own a license or know how to drive.”\textsuperscript{51} Singleton struggled to understand why police would arrest this woman for no apparent reason. Singleton became concerned at that moment for her safety. She

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Sandra Nixon arrested in Jackson, MS on May 30\textsuperscript{th}, 1961.  
Source: Sovereignty Commission Online Mississippi Department of Archives and History
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\textsuperscript{51} Sandra Nixon, \textit{Freedom Riders 40\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Oral History Project,} 2001.
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wondered, “If they could arrest this women for doing absolutely nothing, then what do I think that they are going to do to me.” The following day police officers moved her to Hinds County jail where she spent one night before she was moved to Parchman. Like Nixon, Singleton believed her first and only night in the county jail to be her worse. Singleton did not have a bed so she had to sleep on the floor. The jailers did not provide her with a sleeping mat that she watched them give to white female inmates. Acknowledging this night as the lowest point of her entire experience, Singleton stated,

I slept on the concrete floor and there was a rat in the room. There was a lot of trash in the room and there was a pipe coming out of the wall that had one open end. I watched the rat and I saw that it had ran up into the pipe. I grabbed up all of the trash and plugged the pipe so that the rat could not come out. I still did not get much rest because all night I listened to the rat trying to make its way out of the pipe.

Several Freedom Rider women expressed similar sentiments about their imprisonment. Carol Ruth Silver, a Massachusetts native who graduated from the University of Chicago in 1960, became a Freedom Rider at the age of twenty-two. Silver recounted the night prison guards rushed her and ten other prisoners from the Hinds County jail to Parchman during the middle of the night. Silver explained that people began to fear their next location because “No one knew where we were going. We were just told to get on the bus.” Silver stated, “we were afraid that we were being taken to Parchman on the one hand but we were glad to be going to Parchman because we were not being taken out into the woods to be murdered.” After a few hours of prayer, the bus arrived at Parchman and prison officials began separating white and

52 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
black women. It is here while imprisoned for six weeks in Parchman that Silver began to keep a detailed dairy of her experiences as a Freedom Rider and document the hardships she experienced.

While some female Freedom Riders faced hardships during their first few nights imprisoned, others had very different experiences, especially before they were sent to Parchman. Freedom Rider Margaret Leonard conveyed that she, too, originally found herself in a city jail cell with seventeen young white females. Though the cell was overcrowded and uncomfortable, Leonard explained, the women in her cell did not receive harsh treatment. Leonard stated that she and the other young women in her cell formed a bond and acted as a support unit for each other.\(^56\) Leonard did point out, however, that she remembered rats being in the cell of the imprisoned African American woman next to her and that “she was having a hard time. It was hard to go to sleep. The rats…we didn't have them but…”\(^57\) Leonard never finished her sentence seemingly

\(^{56}\) Margaret Leonard, *Freedom Riders 40th Anniversary, 2001*. The University of Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

\(^{57}\) Ibid.
conveying even in her remembrance that the Mississippi prison system viewed white and African American prisoners with clear difference.

While female Freedom Riders had specific fears regarding their imprisonment, Mississippi authorities had major concerns that focused on the intimate relationships between white women and black men and the nationality of some of the Riders. Carol Ruth Silver explained that on her second day of imprisonment, detectives interrogated her along with several other white female Riders. Silver stated that the detectives spoke to her in a very paternalistic manner while spending quite some time inquiring about her relationship with African American men. Silver asserted,

They asked me if I had ever dated Negro boys (Yes), and if I would be willing to marry a Negro (that, I said was a matter of personalities, not generalities). I said that I had been engaged to a Negro boy once (which was not exactly true), but that it had been broken up because we had arguments about our divergent tastes in music, among other things. The younger and quieter of the two interrogators practically jumped out of his seat at this: “You see! You see! They are different from us!” I told him that I did not exactly follow his logic since my white friends had as diverse tastes in music as my Negro friends, ect…They brought up discrimination in the North and said that “we love our southern niggers.” I neglected to object to that appellation, which I should have.\textsuperscript{58}

The men interviewed Silver for close to thirty minutes and in addition to questions concerning her dating preferences, they asked her questions regarding public and private spaces, as well as her religious beliefs, “especially the word ‘agnostic.’”\textsuperscript{59} Silver explained that the word, agnostic, was foreign to her interrogators, and that the two men were fascinated by a word that they did not fully understand.

Mary Harrison Lee, too, explained that two prison guards interviewed her in a private room where they asked her repeatedly about her nationality while “running their

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 28-29.
fingers through my hair.”

Lee, a mixed race woman of African American and Filipino descent, explained that while she insisted on who and what she was to the male antagonist, they did not believe her. Due to her lighter skin complexion and ethnic features, it is possibly that the men questioned and probed Lee because they could not racially identify her as white or black and this threatened them. Their fear fueled their questioning. Through all of her experiences within the movement, Lee expressed that this was the one and only time that she felt frightened.

Fear of the unknown was a major issue among freedom riders, especially female Riders who had more vulnerability at the hands of white racist men both inside and outside of the penitentiary system. While Lee and Silver endured terrorization from prison guards, some women experienced fear when traveling as Freedom Riders and other women encountered different forms of threats and bullying.

After joining the Freedom Riders and traveling to Alabama, Mary Little Vance explained how a sense of fear engulfed her mind and she was terrified when riding through Alabama. Vance stated,

…On the bus and coming through Alabama right outside of Montgomery I remember seeing signs out that said, “Alabama Knights of the Ku Klux Klan welcomes you to Montgomery.” Right then was the first time that I really got scared because I was by myself and just terrified. I got to the Montgomery bus station and they were waiting on the Freedom Riders to come in. But since I was alone they didn’t see me as one. So I thought oh, am I supposed to sit in the colored only waiting room by myself? I had very little money so I called headquarters in Atlanta and talked and was told to not sit anywhere by myself. I was told to take the money that I had, get a cab, and I was given an address to go to. [Once I reached my destination] I was instructed to get out of the cab and head in one direction but as soon as the cab was out of sight to turn around and go in the other direction which was the black side of town. At this point I was really frightened because I did not know what was going to happen to me…I did [as I was told] and knocked on a door and some ladies grabbed me up and

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brought me in right quick and closed and locked the door. Turned out the other Freedom Riders would be in the next day. They kept me overnight and did a wonderful job, however, I was so scared. I questioned myself, what if we get found out? What will happen to me?61

With a growing fear of the unknown almost paralyzing Vance, she understood that Alabama was only the beginning and that Mississippi awaited her. From her training prior to the Rides Vance knew that escaping Alabama only meant that she has survived one more day and that her experience in Mississippi would be different.

The next major issue that many Freedom Riders faced did not come from the state of Mississippi, rather, from their own family members. When families wanted to keep up with the whereabouts of their relatives, they often turned to newspapers and other media. The mother and grandmother of Margaret Leonard paid extra attention to the media in hopes that they would hear good news about the Riders. Leonard explained that after she returned home her grandmother told her that she kept up with the Freedom Riders by watching the news and reading the newspaper. Many female Riders expressed the same sentiment regarding their families monitoring their daily activities. After their arrest, several female Riders after receiving their initial phone call home, had limited access to telephone usage. The young women often had no way to communicate their wellbeing to their families, thus the media served as a great source of information for those who could not correspond with their families.

Freedom Rider Mary Harrison Lee explained that her parents, especially her very religious father, were very upset with her once they found out that she had been arrested and jailed. While her father was not specifically troubled by her freedom work, he was

very worried about her wellbeing once incarcerated. Her father, who was very aware the racism that plagued Mississippi, ultimately worried about what might happen to his daughter once in the stronghold of Mississippi injustice. Lee explained, “[my] father was concerned about me being in jail so he called the president of Tugaloo College [to discuss my incarceration]…and as soon as I got out of jail on bond the president of Tougaloo College put me on a plane to go back to San Antonio.”

At the end of the summer when Lee, who was an ardent student leader, returned to college a week earlier than the rest of the student body, learned that there was a warrant for her arrest. After Lee’s initial arrest and subsequent release on bail, she left the state of Mississippi, which was a direct violation of the terms of her bail. After securing a lawyer, going back to trial and pleading “nolo contendere”, Lee returned to school and did not have to serve any more time.

Freedom Rider Helen O’Neal McCray had a similar experience with her family’s reaction to her joining the movement. Many of her relatives were upset with her decision. McCray explains that her family was “terribly upset” about her decision to become a Rider. She expressed, “…sending me to college, they’d paid out of their pockets and they’d worked very hard to do that…then there was the sacrifice, and I was wasting money. That was a problem.” McCray explained that while she received support from her stepfather, her mother showed the most disdain for her decision to participate in the movement. McCray stated,

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63 A “nolo contendere” is a plea of “no contest.” The plea is not technically a guilty plea but has the same effect as a guilty plea, and is often offered as a part of a plea bargain. The plea ultimately admits only that you are not contesting the facts stated in the criminal charge and cannot be used as an admission of guilt in other cases.
64 Helen O’Neal McCray, Freedom Riders 40th Anniversary Oral History Project, 2001. The University of Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
My stepfather was pretty pleased by it, [but] my mother seemed to be much angrier about it, and about the money. But often women make the biggest sacrifices to the family. They supported the goals because that is what I had always been taught. My mother had always had this expression that you need to stand for something, or you will stand for nothing. But she had these opinions and I would remind her, that is exactly what you told me, that you have to take a stand. It was [apparently] fine for other people, [just not me] and I understand that too.

For McCray’s mother, taking a stance against injustice was fine, but her daughter being on the frontline of the movement and potentially facing arrest was a different matter in itself. While many African Americans understood that there was a need for Freedom Riders if they hoped to break a cycle of injustice that so many were born into, what they were unprepared for was the Rider to be their daughter, son, or other close family member. Many of these same parents had worked all of their lives to afford their children with opportunities that they themselves never had.

Freedom Rider Sandra Nixon’s family held some of the same sentiments of the previous Riders families when it was time for their daughter to join the movement. Nixon stated, “My father did not want me to go, of course,” mainly because he was a WWII veteran who had traveled as a soldier and had experienced racial prejudice. Nixon’s said that her father told her bluntly, “If [you] go on the Freedom Ride that [you] would probably be killed.”65 Nixon also explains that her mother took a very strong stance against her becoming a Freedom Rider the morning she was to leave. Nixon explained,

My mother was very apprehensive about my going, as a matter of fact, I can recall where I was at, getting ready to get on the train we were to leave at 7:30 that morning. My mother woke me up at 2 o’clock that morning and tried to convince me not to go. But I made up my mind that I had made the commitment and that I did want to go on the Ride, and that I did believe in the movement. After having a mother-daughter kind of talk, she finally accepted the fact that I was not going to be turned around.66

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66 Ibid
Nixon did not let her parents’ apprehension and fear deter her from becoming a Freedom Rider. She left on May 30, 1961 from New Orleans heading to Jackson, Mississippi.

Freedom Rider Margaret Leonard had a different experience with her family. While her mother was very proud of her and encourage her to fight for equality, Leonard received the most resistance from her sister. Leonard’s sister worked for the state department and was more “conventional” in her activism and often said to Leonard, “I do not understand why you would be doing this.”\(^{67}\) Leonard explained that it was not that her sister was politically opposed to her actions, rather, like their grandmother who told her, “I just wish that you hadn’t been in that national magazine,” she wished that Leonard was not as public about her involvement. After Leonard returned home she heard that while some of her friends did not like the fact that she was a Rider, others exclaimed, “oh, that’s just sissy [and] she just takes up for the underdog.”\(^{68}\) In many respects, this sentiment held true for Leonard who worked hard in fighting for equality and continued this work by passing on her principles to her children. Leonard felt that this was one of her greatest accomplishment: to have children who were also very politically active even though as she explained, they did not know what to do with their activism yet. While Leonard was very proud of her children, she could not help but to remember the summer when Freedom Rides consumed her life because as the Rides did in 1961, they were very much still a part of her. Leonard explained that she did have very serious concerns in 1961, most of which centered on her personal well-being and jail.

\(^{68}\) Ibid.
The threat of death and physical injury haunted many potential Freedom Riders. Family members of the individuals involved in the movement worried that something would happen to their daughters and sons. The mother of Rider Mary Little Vance thought that it was a very bad idea for her young daughter to travel as a freedom rider and explained as much to the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Thoughts of her daughter being imprisoned in the Mississippi’s state penitentiary caused enough alarm for Vance’s mother to call Dr. King and discourage him from sending Vance to Jackson. Vance, who grew up in a Presbyterian liberal household in Roswell, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta, explained that concerning Civil Rights demonstrations her mother “understood and gave her no static about picketing,” which she did a lot in Atlanta. When it came to Freedom Rides, however, her mother was adamantly against her joining the movement. Vance recalled the conversation that her mother had with Dr. King and expressed, “My mother called Dr. King and said to him, Mary is supposed to be studying history, and not making it.” Vance, who in the spring and summer of 1961 was attending college in Atlanta. She had begun

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working with CORE and the SCLC. It is here where Vance met and spent a lot of time with Dr. King and the other civil rights workers. Her mother felt that Mary Vance, just eighteen years old, was underage and would not give permission for Vance to join the Freedom Riders. Vance explained that she cried to Dr. King and exclaimed, “but it’s the right thing to do, I want to do it so bad,” and he responded “oh Mary, we must obey our mothers…this would not be a good idea this time. Go back to Atlanta and [to] SCLC. There will be plenty of things for you there,” and she replied “but it will all be over…all of the good stuff will be over.”

She was right. Vance never had a chance to actively participate in the Freedom Rides and once back at SCLC offices she forever felt her mother had thwarted that activism. Her mother’s decision to not allow her to become a Rider haunted her throughout her life. Vance explained, “Until her death, my mother believed that she had done the right thing and until today, I believe that she didn’t.” She went further by stating, “you know, sometimes you say things to your mother [like] I will never forgive you for this and of course you always do. She died year before last and I have never forgiven her for this. It broke my heart because my best friend Margaret Leonard went right on, went to Parchman farm and did her thing; and was brave and wonderful and I just felt like such a failure.” Vance often thought about what her life would be like had her mother allowed her to join in the Freedom Rides.

The story of Vance presents a complicated intersection between not only racial roles, and gender roles, but also social roles. Her mother, an author and an activist for racial equality, struggled with the interplay of race, gender, and class-consciousness. Author bell hooks wrote, “class struggle is inextricably bound to the struggle to end racism,” and Vance’s mother

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71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
undoubtedly understood that. Vance explained that she grew up middle class and that more so than anything else her mother believed in her gaining an education. It became clear that while Vance’s mother supported the movement, her class-consciousness forced her to choose class over race in regards to her daughter. In a moment of reflection, Vance acknowledged that her mother might not have fully understood at that moment, in the height of movement, how to allow her daughter to experience life no matter the repercussions. Vance stated, “my mother’s biggest fear was that I would be imprisoned. How would she explain that to her friends? It was one thing for me to participate but it was something totally different when prison came into play.”

Female Freedom Riders imprisoned at Parchman worked hard at maintaining a sense of community among themselves. Prison officials housed freedom riders in maximum-security cells located next to death row. Several of the imprisoned women explained what sharing in such conditions did to their psyche. Joan Trumpauer Mulholland described in detail the mental distress she endured while imprisoned at Parchman. Mulholland experienced “the psychological pressure of knowing that me and the other female Freedom Riders were isolated on Death Row.” Mary Harrison Lee explained that she has dealt with the physiological consequence of imprisonment for many years following her release from Parchman. Lee explained that she often had block out her memories of that period because of the trials she experienced. Looking back, Lee felt morally vindicated in her actions but stated that sometimes, “I question whether or not I did the right thing. My father was really upset and worried about me, so he had a chaplain bail me out. My father, who was not happy with me going to jail, once told me that I was going to

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have to live with that for the rest of my life. So even in me trying to do something good, there was shame there.”

Female Freedom Riders also forged important relationships behind the wall that they hoped would help them survive their time imprisoned. While imprisoned, some Riders would play cards, share food, sing songs, spell words, and pass notes that contained whatever information they were able to acquire from the outside via newspapers, telephone calls, or the occasional visit. In an effort to maintain some of their daily home routines, several of the female Riders often combed each others hair, shared stories about their upbringing, talked lovingly about a spouse or love interest, and talked about future goals and aspirations. This was in many ways a tool to help them cope with being behind bars, a reality that not many of them ever expected to experience until they were on the buses headed to desegregate interstate travel. All of this was done without prison guards knowing because had they found out the Riders would have suffered consequences. Being imprisoned was enough without the forceful threats and

mistreatment from prison guards. When guards did catch the female Riders doing something that they deemed inappropriate such as sharing food or playing cards, they would often verbally lash out at them while threatening to use physical force.

Despite enduring hardships while imprisoned, many of the young women fought hard to remain in high spirits throughout their ordeal. Freedom Riders sentenced to sixty days in prison stated that they had to make the best of their predicament. Helen Singleton explained that once at Parchman, they only took a cold, three-minute shower on Wednesday. She stated that the best part of the shower included the chamomile soap. Many of the women, enjoyed their food even though most of the time the cooks either burned or added too much salt. The women, separated by race, often talked to each other through the bars in their cells. Singleton explained, “we could not get out there and exercise like the rest of the prisoners. So, how did we pass time? Well, most of us were students with a major before we were imprisoned. We agreed to instruct each other. Whatever subject you were good at then that is the subject that you taught to everyone else.” Helen O’Neal McCray explained that she had no mattress because it was taken away her first day imprisoned. While she imagined that the guards took her mattress as a form of punishment, she did find that odd seeing how she was new and had not had a chance to do anything. McCray’s explained that jailers moved her in and took her mattress out.  

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Helen McCray also found herself isolated from other prisoners once imprisoned.

McCray expressed that she had a hard time maintaining the high spirits that she had before being incarcerated until she was placed on a block with other women. Here is where McCray fully realized exactly what she was up against. The encounters that she had with three women who were cells close to hers reminded her that while she was only a Freedom Rider, the state intended to treat her as a hardened criminal. McCray recounted,

> The county jail was where I had one of my most interesting kinds of experiences. I was by myself, I was isolated. On the end was a women, she was in a cell, she was in because she had killed her husband. Next to me was a white woman who was an alcoholic, and just gave her name, Jesse May and that suited her. And there was my cell. On the next there was a lady who was waiting to go to Whitefield. They use to when people were having mental problems they would lock them up in jail before they took them to the hospital ward. I knew then that my troubles had just begun.  

McCray began to fully understand that the state of Mississippi did not separate her involvement as a Freedom Rider from the crimes committed by other incarcerated women that involved the use of alcohol, theft, drugs, or murders, or having a mental illness. To Mississippi, she was like any other criminal with no differential treatment extended to her. To McCray, Mississippi

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80 Ibid.
seemingly compared her fighting for equality to the worse kinds criminal and mental behavior that a person could have and she now understood her own dilemma.

Almost all of the young women participated in what they called “lecturing.” The young women made the best of their time imprisoned in Parchman by “doing something educational and fun,” in the words of Carol Silver.81 Silver explained, “we had ballet classes, a series of lectures, various school projects, all to teach each other whatever we knew…we were highly charged, intellectual ladies….”82 They hosted these classes by yelling down the hall to the other prisoners and when guards approached, they often ran to their bunks and pretended to read or write. Several of the women explained that someone in the group often suggested that they sing freedom songs to keep everyone in high spirits. Some women described that, their bodies having endured so much, that singing a song became they often could not compete. O’Connor said, “After the second week I was really tired. I was tired of everything. I was ready to go home. Participating in the lectures and singing songs became a task for me.”83

Many of the women explained that the isolation of the penitentiary and the fact that they could not speak to their families caused them to fall into depression. They had hoped that by forming bonds with the other women while imprisoned, that they would find solace. Margaret Leonard explained that her imprisonment at Parchman led her to come face to face with the race question in the South. Before her imprisonment, Leonard felt that she had yet to face true issues surrounding race or racism and it was not until she found herself incarcerated that she began to struggle with questions of race and power. For Leonard, what affected her the most was

82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
emotional distress over “the Race question in the South,” and “her family’s involvement in it.” In an effort to explain why she began to question race Leonard stated, “At Parchman, for the first time I realized that I was imprisoned and had no power over my own minute-to-minute life. I was absorbing that in a pretty strong way. I began to question power. Who’s in charge of who… and it kind of knocked me over.” Being imprisoned with others who had the same worries and was just as scared as her pushed Leonard to the place where she felt, “I just got to the point when I wanted silence from other peoples presence. And I couldn’t get it.” State officials had hoped that all Freedom Riders would share this very sentiment. Eventually, being unable to go home or talk to family members took a toll on many of the Riders and several began to write home asking to be bailed out.

Unlike most of the female inmate population, all of the Freedom Rider activists said that they knew before their arrest that they would eventually return home. Helen Singleton expected a six-week jail sentence for her participation in the movement and nothing more. The fact that prison administrators purposefully separated the main prison population from Riders illustrated the lengths that the justice system went to maintain control. They did not want the Freedom Riders influencing the other prisoners. Thus, by maintaining the separation of prisoners, many of the Freedom Riders expressed shock over the treatment regular female inmates endured once they realized that there was a difference. Margaret Leonard explained that she did not know that female Riders received different treatment than other female prisoners until her last day.

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85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
Leonard recounted a conversation that she had with the matron as they walked to pick up clothes for her to wear out of Parchman. Leonard explained,

The matron said, yall have gotten away with everything. I asked her what do you mean. Then I asked her what would you have done to others. She said, oh, we would just find ways to kill them. Shocked, I said how? She said that there are just so many ways…you can do it with hoses, beatings…so unquestionably, I left in a funny state.\textsuperscript{87}

Leonard’s experience at Parchman her last day spoke volumes to the abuse that many prisoners experienced there. The fact that white and black female Freedom Riders maintained close connections throughout their ordeal illustrated the importance of their movement. Breaking racial barriers, these women strove to change an entire culture built around racism. In doing so, they met with one of the worst systems constructed in southern society. Racial guidelines strictly forbade interracial relationships of any kind, even in a controlled prison economy. Even though many found the law unforgiving to those caught in the system, they pressed forward. Shaken but not destroyed, they soldiered on in hopes of effecting change.

By the fall, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued rules prohibiting segregated transportation facilities. While one might think that this would have all but ended the Freedom Rides, in many ways the movement’s core participants continued to do the work of making sure that states followed the rules in regards to desegregation. While most Riders posted bail in Mississippi and returned home, others stayed in the state to do more work. Even though the ruling prohibited segregation in transportation did not mean that state officials would immediately implement the necessary steps to enforce change. All around the South, states including Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi continued to resist integration in transportation. In Mississippi, Freedom Riders who had experienced the unjust social and penal systems vowed to stay the course and continue the work that they had tirelessly done for the last few months.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
In December of 1961, the *Associated Negro Press* released a detailed account of Freedom Riders who wanted to crack the segregation barrier in McComb, Mississippi. The article announced that in Mississippi, “six Freedom Riders cracked Mississippi’s century-old segregation…and integrated McComb Greyhound Terminals.” McComb, a town of 35,000 people, while permitting desegregation of bus station facilities, had continued to resist the ruling of the Interstate Commerce Commission because they had only desegregated due to perceived force. To test the ruling, six Riders hailing from Baton Rouge, Louisiana “walked off of the bus and walked into what had been the “white only” waiting room.” Awaiting the Riders was a crowd of about 400 white men and women who cursed and taunted them as they made their way into the station. While the police kept the crowd outside, they certainly did not offer any protection to the Riders. On this day, the Riders found success. They successfully integrated the Greyhound station, a feat they just a week prior saw five Riders roughed up by an angry mob pretesting desegregation.

The desegregation of interstate travel was but one step in the long struggle for civil rights. The four hundred white and African American men and women who together in unison, rode buses throughout the South to fight the racist practices that divided its people. The Freedom Riders, as they were called, would forever be linked together as martyrs of a movement that helped to change the landscape of the South. Years later many Riders when reflecting on those eventful nine months remembered not only what drove them to participate but the pride they felt for actually helping to foster change. While some Riders used their involvement in the movement as a springboard for the work they would do for the rest of their lives, others felt that nothing they did ever matched that one summer. Rider Helen O’Neal McCray expressed this

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89 Ibid.
sentiment when asked about her life after the Freedom Rides. McCray emphatically stated, “Everything that I have ever done has been anti-climatic because the most exciting part of my life happened when I was nineteen and twenty. So everything is just a little, inevitably anti-climatic. That’s the only thing that I can say about it.”

The story of female Freedom Riders in Mississippi illustrates the complex issues of race, gender, and incarceration in correlation to the judicial politics of the state. Freedom Riders experienced a penal system determined to punish those who dared challenged the racial guidelines of Mississippi. Female Freedom Riders, then, confronted a South that held no reservations in regards to their incarceration. However, following their arrest black and white female Riders endured a very different justice system. Prison administrators, aware that the world was watching, made sure not to breach the line of total mistreatment. Even African American female Riders, who endured harsher abuse in comparison to white Freedom Riders at Parchman, were afforded some leniency when it came to their arrest and incarceration. After close examination of the experiences of female Riders, it is important to understand that while any female Rider who spent time at Parchman underwent hardships, their difficulties did not compare to the daily sufferings of the hundreds of women, especially African American women, who were incarcerated in Parchman during the 1960s. The fact that white female Riders received better treatment than black female Riders serves as a marker of how unjust the Mississippi penal system treated their white and black prisoners. The story of female Riders is important because their plight during the summer of 1961 fosters awareness to the exploitation, abuse, and violence that many women suffered at Parchman.

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The Mississippi penitentiary had a way of silencing those within its walls. It was going to take a very determined individual to attack Parchman at its core to bring justice to those the prison exploited. In Mississippi, many residents agreed with the way in which the Penitentiary ran economically and how the state housed and worked its prisoners. The physical, mental, and sexual mistreatment incarcerated men and women endured went unchecked. Prison reformist, L.C. Dorsey would use her voice and activism to aid those incarcerated behind the walls of Parchman penitentiary. While it was no easy job, Dorsey worked tirelessly to make sure that the men and women behind bars received justice.
CHAPTER FIVE


Everybody listen! We are having a hard time right now dealing with all the heat that has hit us regarding our treatment of the prisoners. We have to be on guard at all time because people are coming here left and right trying to see what we are doing down here. And as you all know, there are two phones at every guard station and post on the grounds, one red and one black. Now, some of you may know her and some of you may not but I am sure that you see her picture by the phones. Well, for those that don’t know her and have never seen her, her name is L.C. Dorsey and she who comes here a lot. She comes about once a week to talk with the prisoners. Well, we have received a direct order that if she comes on to the property from this day forward, I mean at any gate or otherwise, that you must immediately pick up the red phone and alert everyone. The red phone means emergency. L.C. Dorsey on Parchman land from this day forward is an emergency. We are not to allow this woman on to the camp grounds without alerting the right officials first and these are final orders!1

By the late 1970s, Mississippi judicial and penitentiary officials feared only one woman, Dr. L.C. Dorsey. Throughout Mississippi, state officials worried about the social reformer whose work centered on social work, the fight for prisoner’s rights, and equality. Dorsey served as the Associate Director of the Southern Coalition on Jails and Prisons from 1974 to 1983 and spent many of the following years advocating for change within the Mississippi penal system. Dorsey fought hard to affect change and endured a lot of hardships during her journey. The fact that prison administrators feared her illustrated that she had infiltrated their system and prison

1 Reverend Daryl Robinson related this story to the author when talking about Delta politics and Parchman. Robinson worked at Parchman during the late 1970s and 1980s. While not remembering the exact date of the event, he explained that he had come into work and his supervisor told him to attend an important meeting at 7:00am. At the meeting, Robinson stated that a sergeant explained to them the seriousness of the situation surrounding L.C. Dorsey and instructed them that if anyone disobeyed, the prison would fire them immediately.
officials seemed intent to stop her at all costs. For her part, Dorsey very much intended to influence change and she spent most of her life working towards her goal. Personal accounts of mental and physical abuse at the hands of prison administrators and guards only substantiated to Dorsey that she could not give up. She believed she had a job to do and that even if nothing changed, at least prisoners would know that someone fought for them. Dorsey stated,

They needed me. More than even my own children, the people behind bars needed me. Someone had to fight for them. Someone had to stand up to the white political structure and fight for the rights of the prisoners. And why not me? I came from the same type of places that many of them came from. I felt in my heart that I needed to do what I did because if I did not do it, then who was going to do it.\(^2\)

Through this consciousness, Dorsey vowed to fight against poverty and for the improvement of the human condition, especially for the men and women in Parchman prison.

A few years before L.C. Dorsey began her efforts to change the Mississippi penal culture, President Lyndon Johnson spearheaded the prison reform movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the South, prison reformers expressed their concern over Parchman prison through different media, and none more important than newspapers. At times, prison officials gloated over their use of “Black Annie,” which William Banks Taylor described as being “a heavy leather strap of antebellum vintage,” which was a form of corporal punishment to whip and discipline prisoners.\(^3\) The stories also included accounts of placing incarcerated men and women, as a form of punishment, in a secluded room with a very small opening known as the “black hole” for more than twenty-four house at a time where they were often denied food or water. In some cases, guards used blunt force to take down prisoners, even if there was no imminent threat. Reformers saw these tales and knew that they had to take action. An editorial

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\(^2\) L.C. Dorsey to author, Interview, 25 February 2012.

entitled “No Unemployment Found At Parchman” boasted that prison officials administered
punishment by placing inmates in the black hole for more than 24 hours at a time. Parchman
also remained the only prison in the United States that dressed its inmates in stripes, set up a gun
line around the work field or “any other given area,” and used killers as trusties.4 After
thoroughly explaining how Parchman maintained a controlled labor force, the editorial ended by
stating, “All things considered, a man could not hope for steadier employment than at Parchman
where you may be fired at but are never fired until your contract has expired.”5 While sarcastic
in tone, the author of the editorial seems to make light of the harsh conditions at the penal farm.

During the late 1960s, Parchman came under scrutiny for housing first offenders with
repeat offenders. In 1968, a Sunflower County grand jury investigated the Mississippi state
penitentiary and criticized its policy of placing “hardened criminals” in the first offenders’ camp
with youthful prisoners. The grand jury also criticized the penitentiary for continuing to place
female prisoners next to the death row inmates in maximum-security cells. As the previous
chapter mentioned, prison officials continued the practice of placing women close to death row
inmates, a system that really developed during the summer of 1961 when Freedom Riders
brought their fight for freedom and equality to Mississippi. The report, delivered to Circuit
Judge Arthur B. Clark, revealed that prison officials did not use the youth camp only for the
youth. It labeled the practice as “most undesirable.”6 The grand jury, which only took one day
to inspect the penitentiary, argued that Parchman must make immediate changes. The grand jury
also called for the use of paid guards to replace trusties over the entire

4 “No Unemployment Found At Parchman,” Clarion Ledger, 28 October 1965.
5 Ibid.
penitentiary system. In their final statement, the grand jury stated, “We feel that rehabilitation rather than profit is the major objective of the system.”\(^7\) This critique, “prison for profit,” set the tone for how reformers constructed much of their arguments regarding prison reform.

To “Inquire into the causes of crimes and the adequacy of the existing system of law enforcement, criminal justice, and corrections,” President Johnson created *The Presidents’ Commission on Law and Enforcement and Administration* in 1965.\(^8\) Johnson charged the commission to “investigate and report to him how federal, state, and local governments could make law enforcement and the administration of justice more effective and fair.”\(^9\) Findings illustrated that correctional agencies across the nation, and especially in the South, deserved special attention because of their longstanding policies and unjust administration of justice. In 1968, the formation of *The Joint Commission on Correctional Manpower* sought to determine the manpower, education, and training resources required to increase the effectiveness of correctional employees.\(^10\) The report concluded that corrections suffered from multiple problems including “apathy, piecemeal programming, inadequate funding, and a lack or support and understanding,” and without these systems in place prison reform would not happen.\(^11\)

That same year, the Southern Regional Council issued a report on southern prisons. The council argued that while many state prison systems in the South had undergone some degree of reform, others continued to move backward. The council singled out Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi as prisons that operated under “archaic and brutal methods.”\(^12\) The council issued a special report called “The Delta Prisons: Punishment for Profit,” because they believed that “the

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\(^7\) Ibid., 12 March 1968  
\(^9\) “The Presidents Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice.”  
\(^11\) Ibid.  
public does not know about its prisons.” Concern over the “beatings, lashings, bludgeoning and murders in the midst of unspeakable living conditions were commonplaces of penal history in the South.” Reformers sought to change the penal culture where prison administrators encouraged these activities. The council concluded,

The county camp system, which allows local governments to use prison labor to maintain roads and other public works, has often resulted, especially in the least populous and prosperous areas, in the development of chain gangs, housing which sometimes could be more accurately described as caging, and a diet which the prisoners refer to as ‘weevils and beans.’

While this report focused solely on male prisoners, female convicts undeniably shared in the horrible experiences of an incorrigible penal system that exploited them without reservation. However, in instances like these, prison reformers often overlooked female offenders because of sheer numbers. During the late 1960s, the penitentiary housed approximately 1800 men and 150 women, and African American women made up close to eighty percent of that number. The conversation, however, meant that women, whether they were overlooked intentionally or not, would benefit from this report if changes took place.

While Mississippi found itself at the forefront of the prison reform movement, the federal government began to pay close attention to the functions of prisons on the national level. In 1970, a commission organized the Presidents task force on prisoners and rehabilitation and its goal was “To improve the ways in which the nations jails and prisons, its juvenile detention homes and training schools, its probation and parole services, induce or help, or enable criminals to become law abiding men, women and children.” The task force determined that states

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
needed more funding for programs that helped prisoners once they left prison. The commission sought to stop people from committing crimes numerous times. The crime question became a great concern during the late 1960s and 1970s. Officers within all stages of the government hoped to address the perceived growing crime problem. This same year, the American Bar Association placed the prisoner rights movement at the center of the legal community by founding the Commission on Correctional Facilities and Services.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1971, the Commission on Intergovernmental Relations stated in a special report on \textit{State and Local Relations in the Criminal Justice System}, “Crime control is an enormous task for state and local government…crime imposes great social and economical cost on both victims and offenders.” \textsuperscript{18} The report concluded, “Growing anxiety about safety to personal and property, shaken public confidence in our institutions of criminal justice, as well as rising skepticism about the American promise of equal justice under the law are all symptomatic of the need to reappraise the modern crime control systems.” \textsuperscript{19} The report also acknowledged that many Americans questioned not only the criminal justice system, but also the administering of equal justice under the law. With the creation of committees and task forces that sought to address the issues of both crime and justice in the penal system, reformers, journalists, and a growing public began to pay closer attention to the treatment of criminals within the criminal justice system. This is how Mississippi found itself engulfed in a massive movement to reform its penal system. National attention only brought more scrutiny to Mississippi since many considered Parchman to

\textsuperscript{17} Thomas G. Blomberg and Karol Lucken, \textit{American Penology: A History of Control} (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2000), 140.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 1. Accessed June 17, 2012.
be one of the most notorious prisons not only in the American South, but also in the United States.

That same year, a pre-release center opened for women. On November 19, 1971, the Walker P. Scruggs pre-release center for women prisoners opened. Prison administrators named the building after the Delta leader and member of the State Penitentiary Board from 1962-1966. The center, through programs that centered on counseling and training, sought to prepare women prisoners almost ready for release for their re-entry into the free world. The center was also a part of a broad program orchestrated across several mediums including the main penitentiary, the Vocational Rehabilitation and Vocational Education Divisions, and the State Department of Education in 1967. The main order of the center was to encourage rehabilitation. At its inception, eight women, three white and five African American, ranging in age from 22 to 46, comprised the first group of prisoners to occupy the center. Their terms ranged from one to ten years. A story in the Jackson Daily reported on the center’s three month anniversary and stated, “The progress of the women’s pre-release center is good. The women trainees undergo daily Bible study, cleaning the center, cooking, washing clothes, and working on arts and crafts.” This center, for women, served as a great marker of progress in the state of Mississippi in regards to their female prisoners.

During a time when the name “Parchman” sent shivers of terror through the bodies of Mississippians, social reformers and prisoners fought to change the Mississippi penal system. In the 1970s, many people across the country began to look at Mississippi and its penal system when stories of both abuse and death made headlines. William Banks Taylor explains, “even in 1972 when Parchman first came under constitutional scrutiny from the federal court, the place

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20 Clarion-Ledger, 18 November 1971.
remained a plantation of some twenty thousand acres where convicts, a bulk of them black men, toiled in cotton fields under the sway of mounted white overseers.” 22 While Angola penitentiary in Louisiana had a similar reputation, reports of dirty politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s opened the floodgates for continued interest in the one southern penitentiary that most people feared. Sociologists and psychologists descended on Parchman to investigate the penal culture and its prisoners. Many researchers described Parchman as “isolated and virtually a kingdom unto itself.” 23 According to Taylor, those incarcerated “toiled under conditions that were, to say the very least, shocking to people of reasonable respectability.” 24 Prison administrators reveled in the fact that Parchman had its own autonomous economy. A newspaper article in 1972 illustrated the ways in which Parchman functioned as a city by stating; “Parchman has its own buildings, stores, farms, and homes for their workers. The prisoners, both male and female, supply the labor that sustains the whole system.” 25 The remoteness of Parchman aided in their ability to self-govern and many of its administrators touted that power to anyone who dared to intervene.

Roy Haber, known as one of the first reformers to attack the Mississippi penal system during the 1970s, filed a civil rights suit charging violation of inmates’ constitutional rights. Haber won his case and the state did not contest the Court’s decision. 26 According to David Oshinsky, however, “reform came slowly to Parchman.” 27 Following Haber’s success, the state held a penal correction mandate to spearhead prison reform. Topics included desegregation, separation of different types of offenders, medical needs, prison buildings, the trusty guard

22 William Banks Taylor, Down on Parchman Farm, 2.
24 William Banks Taylor, Down on Parchman Farm, 2.
26 Clarion Ledger, 15 October 1972.
system, the prison sewage system, and the psychological care of inmates. Several instrumental men attended the meeting including Mississippi State Senator Corbet Lee Patridge.

Criminologist Donald A. Cabana wrote, “Senator Corbet Lee Patridge, who had grown up within a stone’s throw of Parchman, knew more about the penitentiary than almost any other member of the legislature. His importance to the prison administration was enhanced by his chairmanship of the Mississippi Senate’s Correction Committee.”28 The meeting ended with the men agreeing to create a new directive for the state penitentiary.

One of the most significant steps in the effort of reforming the penitentiary began with the federal class-action lawsuit, Nazareth Gates v. John A. Collier. On February 8, 1971, Parchman inmates sued the Superintendent of the Penitentiary, the members of the Mississippi Penitentiary Board and the Governor of the State.29 At the time of the federal probe, the superintendent of Parchman, John Collier resigned and “Bill” Hollowell replaced him.30 Cabana argued that the lawsuit did not faze prison officials and,

Even when the US Justice Department joined the suit on behalf of the inmates, the attitude of the prison officials was largely to ignore it as a nuisance...Historically, federal courts had taken a hands-off approach to inmate litigation. They were hesitant to become involved in the administration of prisons, which was the province of prison officials. The corrections administrators in Mississippi had no reason to believe that the Gates lawsuit would be treated any differently. If the federal court ruled in favor of the inmates, it would place itself squarely in the position of usurping the states authority to run Parchman as it deemed necessary.31

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29 The plaintiffs, represented by the ACLU National Prison Project and private counsel alleged that the defendants, by their methods of prison administration, deprived the inmates of rights, privileges, and immunities secured to them by the First, Eighth, Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. The complaint also charged that Parchman segregated and discriminated against African-American inmates because of their race and subsequently violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The complaint sought injunctive relief to remedy the alleged misconduct of the defendants and a declaratory judgment that the continuation of certain practices and conditions at the penitentiary would cease.
31 Cabana, Death at Midnight, 43-44.
The Court’s ruling certainly shocked prison administrators. On September 13, 1972, the Federal District Court of the Northern District (Greenville, Mississippi), issued its first finding of *Facts and Conclusions of Law* upholding the claims of the plaintiffs. On October 19, 1972, Chief Justice William Keady’s consultant committee concluded, “Present conditions at Parchman are philosophically, psychologically, physically, racially, and morally intolerable.”

According to Taylor, the ruling “held the state of Mississippi in violation of the First, Eighth, and Fourteenth Amendments and, not incidentally, of several provisions of its own code mandating minimal standards at Parchman Farm.” Ultimately, the decision ended the prison for profit ideal and initiated an emphasis on rehabilitation.

With this rehabilitation, Judge Keady’s statement included several decisions that would affect the lives of both male and female convicts. Before the ruling, Parchman implemented the use of both male and female trusties. These armed prisoners guarded other prisoners and inflicted force when they saw fit. This caused Keady to denounce this practice when he stated,

> When the trusty system is used to place in the hands of inmates weapons or other forms of control over the inmate population, and prison officials either cannot or fail to prevent the arbitrary infliction by the trusties of physical or economic injury upon their fellow inmates, the system must be condemned as unconstitutional…as maintained at Parchman, the trusty system, which allows inmates to exercise unchecked authority over other inmates is patently impermissible.

Keady adamantly hoped to put an end to the unjust policies of the penitentiary. Prison reformers, both at the national and state level, praised Keady’s ruling and applauded his efforts. According to Oshinsky, Keady “helped give Mississippi a “constitutional prison,”” staffed by true penologists and civilian guards,” where he eventually “closed the worse camps, ordered an inmate classification system, established a prison law library,

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33 William Banks Taylor, *Down on Parchman Farm*, 197.
upheld the right of Black Muslims to meet and worship, and required at least fifty square feet of living space for each new convict.”

Reformers believed that the changes to the penitentiary would systematically change the prison experience for both male and female convicts.

The state appealed the Parchman decree by claiming the state had authority to control its own institutions. Many state officials, as well as Mississippians, believed that Parchman was the perfect place for convicts, especially African American convicts, and they wanted to make sure that the state had absolute power and control over that institution. Ultimately, “The Court denied some relief, holding that opening and inspecting, but not reading, inmates' mail was constitutional and that racial discrimination at the penitentiary had been mostly eliminated, but granted some relief, holding that the state's continuing failure to provide for inmates' physical health and well being, and for adequate facilities, contravened the Eighth Amendment.”

Prison officials believed that the Court had no jurisdiction over the State and should not have ruled in their plaintiff’s favor. The Court saw otherwise.

For females incarcerated in Mississippi, Gates v. Collier meant that, even without specific mention of gender, people would begin to take notice of the hardships that they too faced. Even though male and female prisoners experienced different forms of exploitation, the Court could not overlook their existence and exploitation at Parchman even if women played no actual role in the case or its outcome. An article in the Clarion Ledger argued, “After full consideration of the decision of the Court, it is important that female convicts receive proper

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35 David Oshinsky, Worse Than Slavery, 249.  
36 Ibid., 249.  
37 Clarion Ledger, 22 November 1972.  
38 David Oshinsky, Worse Than Slavery, 251.  
attention and care.” As the forgotten offenders, female prisoners were often excluded from legal debates and conversations. Male prisoners far outnumbered female prisoners in the correction community and thus, people often found it unnecessary to consider them. The small numbers of women seemed to mean that their problems, even the worst, did not match the type of problems that male convicts experienced.

In the Gates case, racism was one of the key factors in the final decision. Nowhere does the literature make a case for the exploitation of female convicts or how the decision would ultimately affect them. In the history of American social status, race trumped both class and gender. For African American women, this meant that they experienced a double jeopardy because they lived within both their race and gender. Certainly, the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) recognized and documented that female convicts had just as hard or even in some instances a worse experience within the Mississippi justice system. The fact that they chose to include only male plaintiffs speaks volumes of both the penal and judicial systems.

Following the Gates case, many people began adamantly calling for prison reform. In 1972, Governor Bill Waller boasted that the state of Mississippi spent $1.90 per prisoner per day compared to the national average of $13.00 per prisoner per day. This continued to incite outrage among prison reformers because they argued that the small amount Parchman spent on prisoners clearly meant that they did not receive proper nutrition or care. Justice Keady, then, ordered the Penitentiary to uphold strict medical and culinary standards. Parchman would offer “a wide array of educational, vocational, recreational, and religious opportunities.” Judge Keady, in a further step toward eliminating unconstitutional conditions at the prison farm, ordered the Mississippi State Penitentiary to end corporal punishment. He also called for an end

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40 Clarion Ledger, 7 December 1972.
42 William Banks Taylor, Down on Parchman Farm, 198.
to the practice of censorship of all mail to and from inmates. Both prison administrators and reformers debated relentlessly over the use of corporal punishment and when Justice Keady ruled on the matter, reformers were ecstatic but many questioned how long and who would monitor over the judges decision.

Governor Waller hoped to combat not only the bad press the Penitentiary received during the *Gates v. Collier* trial, but also the penal reformers who had effectively worked to bring national attention to Parchman. Waller released a letter from University of Mississippi professor George C. Cochran that called the state’s prison facility “far superior” in comparison to facilities maintained by a majority of other states. In his letter, Cochran said,

> I am somewhat dismayed over the attention given by this state's newspapers to the conditions at Parchman…This past month I made a fairly detailed inspection of Parchman. At that time, I also had the opportunity to discuss existing conditions and proposals for the future. The experience led to the conclusion that this state’s facility is, in comparison to those maintained by a majority of other states, superior. Civilian guards will be hired in their place.

Cochran concluded his letter by arguing that all prisons had security and behavioral control problems. In response, Waller wrote, “I find it refreshing to note that individuals with a high degree of experience in penology on the national scene rate Mississippi’s penitentiary system far superior to other states.” Waller viewed the note from Cochran as an expert opinion of the penitentiary and he hoped to use his recommendations for the 1973 legislature.

The next step in combating the Court’s decision and the common belief that Parchman functioned under ideologies of racism that created an unjust penal system for African Americans was to place an African American in a position of authority at the penitentiary. At the end of

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43 *Jackson Daily News*, 13 October 1972. *Jackson Daily News*, 20 October 1972. Before Judge Keady’s ruling, prison employees opened the mail of all inmates before them receiving their mail. Questions of inmates right to privacy and the constitutionality of opening their mail played a major role in Keady’s decision.


46 Ibid.
1972, the prison board named Clifford Jennings, an African American, as Assistant Parchman Chair. In the announcement, the board specifically stated that they hired Jennings. In a press conference in the governor’s office, Charles Riddell who served as the chairman of the prison board stated, “we told the governor that the board is running the penitentiary, and not the governor.” By being so forthright with their statement, the board spoke plainly in regards to their feeling that their governing body had the most influence over the state penitentiary. The prison board spent a majority of their time and efforts, responding to the Courts decision in *Collier v. Gates*. The judge’s findings outlined the racism within the Mississippi penal system and denounced not only their treatment of inmates but all of their inadequateness, even their hiring practices. Criminologist Cyndi Banks wrote, “Prior to the 1970s, white men constituted the majority of top positions in prisons; this changed in the early 1970s, when African Americans were recruited in significant numbers.” This recruitment helped place African American men and women in supervisory positions within the penitentiary. White some African America men held administrative positions, many, including African American women, took jobs as prison guards.

In pushing for prisoner’s rights, “the Fourteenth Amendment also applied to gender discrimination claims and provided the basis for much of the women’s prisoner rights movement.” Criminologist Nicole Rafter coined women’s penal reform as the “parity movement” where reformers “believed in sexual equality and aimed to eradicate the double standards” that female prisoners often experienced. One of the double standards that

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imprisoned women faced in the Mississippi penal system included the states’ denial in allowing women to have conjugal visitation rights. As early as 1959, Mississippi served as the only state to allow male prisoners to have conjugal or wifely visits. The penitentiary accepted the wife or one common law wife of an inmate for visitation. Bill Harpole, who served as the head of the penitentiary in 1959, stated, “When a man is deprived of normal sex activities, he seeks a substitute and abnormal ways,” and went further by concluding, “These cause fights and even killings.” The statements by Harpole alluded to both homosexuality and men’s inability to control their sexual desires.

Harpole apparently never considered conjugal visitation for female prisoners. This double standard lasted thirteen more years. In 1972, the same year that birth control became widely available, Parchman prison officials announced plans for conjugal visits for married women prisoners at the state penitentiary. Prison reformers called the move “unique in penal history.” In a statement regarding their new ruling, officials stated, “We are establishing conjugal visits for our married women inmates because we are convinced it is a vital step toward fulfilling our moral obligation to attempt to preserve the marriages of our inmates.” Prison officials cited high divorce rates among prisoners for use of the conjugal system and explained that the program helped reduce the divorce rate among male prisoners. In their conclusion, officials stated, “Conjugal visits for our men prisoners have proven a decisive factor in preserving their homes while they serve their sentences. We have given full consideration to the moral issues involved, but we have concluded that the blessings far outweigh the

52 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
disadvantages.” Reformers, while pleased with the decision, hoped that prison officials would stand behind their decision.

By 1973, with Parchman continuously making headlines with charges of unjust treatment of prisoners and official corruption, reformers and journalists believed that prison administrators had no intentions of ever changing. That year an editorial in the Commercial Appeal pushed for the breakdown of what the author deemed the “Parchman System” by stating, “What they have there now is a horrible organization that abuses its power when it comes to the penal population and the administration of justice.” In April, the penitentiary suspended four prison guards for “brutality” charges brought up against them by several prisoners. While the guards denied the charges brought against them, prison officials suspended them and conducted a full investigation. After the investigation, prison officials fired only one guard and three went back to work after two-week suspension.

During the 1970s, popular culture accepted new notions of family, ethnicity, and sexuality. Homosexuality became an intriguing topic as sociologists and criminologists throughout the nation began to look deeply at penal culture and homosexuality. A 1973 article in the Commercial Appeal titled, “Homosexuality In Prisons,” explored the perceived gay and lesbian culture within Parchman. The writer argued, “The gay culture at Parchman is going to be a big problem for both straight prisoner and officials alike. The homosexuals are of both races and I had a prisoner report to me that no one really knows who is who. Something has to be done to maintain some form of control.” With the Stonewall riots in the late 1960s and the emergence of the gay rights movement in the 1970s, members of the gay and lesbian community

55 Ibid.
sought recognition and inclusion in American society. Simultaneously, a national movement by liberals who sought to become more open to lifestyles that differed from heterosexuality and members of the lesbian community joined with feminists in an effort to fight for political and social equality. Many southerners, however, held on to deep religious and conservative views when it came to family, sexuality, and race. The government, however, held and promoted a more restrictive opinion of sexuality; a judgment that many penitentiaries adopted.

After optimistic changes during the 1960s and early 1970s, prison reformers hoped that systematic transformations at Parchman would continue. Newspaper articles throughout 1974 and 1975 congratulated Parchman on implementing changes and praised Governor Waller for his work on transforming the penitentiary. Waller believed that the state and its penitentiary “were starting into a new era,” and that “while there are continued problems in housing, we are working to rectify that issue.” However, penitentiary superintendent Jack Reed and hospital administrator P.L. Miller expressed vastly different sentiments when they spoke about the needs and improvement of the penitentiary. Reed stated, “There is a critical need for housing and we do not have the necessary funds to build more buildings at Parchman.” Here, Reed acknowledged that the penitentiary needed more bed space, but he alluded to the fact that without funding, construction would not begin. Miller wrote, “The hospital, constructed in 1945, was inadequate and needs to be changed…we are unable to get enough physicians to come into our penitentiary and work with us.”

Regarding the cost per inmate per day, Waller explained

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that the cost continued to rise and that soon the cost would far exceed the penitentiary’s ability.\textsuperscript{62} Governor Waller’s only interest was in changing a few issues concerning the penitentiary that the state could afford. Also, Mississippi officials wanted to satisfy federal courts without making expensive changes.

In 1974, after L.C. Dorsey resigned from her position as the director of Social Services for the Mid-Delta Head Start Program in Greenville Mississippi, she began working with the Southern Coalition on Jails and Prisons serving as their director.\textsuperscript{63} She reported to Ron Welch, a Mississippi attorney who represented Mississippi’s incarcerated in the states jails and prisons. Dorsey worked with both male and female prisoners during her nine-year stint with the organization. Dorsey pushed for changes within the penal system and faced several obstacles along the way. During her first week, Dorsey explained that she met with seventy male and female prisoners and talked to them about their experiences at Parchman. Prisoners told her stories of overcrowding, abuse, racism; and they shared feelings of fear, loneliness, depression, and concerns regarding children and family. Dorsey felt overwhelmed that first week. She wanted to help everyone but as she stated, “I was only one body, with one pen, and one note pad. I tried so hard that week. I probably overworked myself because I went to Parchman every day that first week.”\textsuperscript{64} Dorsey settled into her role and began creating a systematic approach to attacking the mistreatment of the prisoners.

By 1975, Parchman housed 72 women, the highest number in its history. With the number of female prisoners steadily rising, prison officials considered the possibility of building a new camp to house female convicts. Administrators struggled with the decision because they

\textsuperscript{62} The cost of each inmate per day in 1975 equaled $12 to $15 dollars a day. Governor Wallace believed that if the penitentiary followed federal orders that the cost could exceed $25 or $30 dollars per day.
\textsuperscript{63} L.C. Dorsey to author, Interview, 25 February 2012.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
worried about the cost of construction. They thought the money they would spend on the women’s camp would be better used elsewhere and they had other ideas regarding female prisoners. In a statement, a prison official stated, “The women’s camp, built to house two hundred but with fewer than seventy-five inmates may be moved…If we could work out some type of agreement with our sister states which offer rehabilitation and training for women, we could use this camp and other women’s facilities to alleviate prison overcrowding.”

L.C. Dorsey remembered the concern over the space for the female convicts. She explained that on her visits to Parchman, imprisoned women often told her that prison officials crowded as many as five people in a cell built to house two. Outraged, Dorsey explained that she questioned every Parchman administrator and worker in her efforts to investigate the women’s concerns but met with strict opposition to all of her inquiries. She stated, “That’s how it was my first few years going to Parchman. But they were not forthcoming with information for anybody so I didn’t take it personal, I just dug deeper.”

The fact that prison officials overlooked the concerns of female prisoners spoke large volumes as to how the penitentiary treated their female convicts. Even after the penal reform of the 1960s and 1970s in Mississippi, prison administrators continued only sparingly to address the issues that faced them. Dorsey explained that many prison official viewed the complaints of female convicts nothing more than them acting out and seeking attention, which in turn, caused many prison officials to disregard female convicts. According to Dorsey, many prison workers, both male and female, viewed female inmates “as headaches because they complained and those complaints were viewed as them trying to get some attention.”

A 1975 Clarion Ledger article entitled “Inmates Describes Prison Horrors of Parchman” provided accounts of prisoner’s

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66 L.C. Dorsey to author, Interview, 25 February 2012.
67 Ibid.
complaints with Parchman. One account of a female prisoner maintained even when sick, many of the guards would not allow her to go to the doctor for treatment. She also complained of overcrowding and the unsanitary conditions with which she and the other female convicts lived.68

In an effort to aid both female inmates and prison officials, Dorsey began working with administrators to help them understand the complaints and limitations of female inmates living in a male dominated area. The truth remained that many male prison administrators held on to the belief that in scholar Dana Britton words, “criminal women, unlike their male counterparts, were beyond redemption, by nature corrupt, and outside of the disciplinary regime of the penitentiary.”69 Thus, prison officials had no sympathy for female convicts. They had no concerns of their needs or wants. As Dorsey bluntly put it, “Women got a bad deal.” Parchman prison officials worked to cut a deal to send female inmates to another state, ultimately proving that they did not want to bother with female convicts.

Because prison officials decided to ignore their complaints, female prisoners did not receive the attention they needed when they had mental or physical issues. Dorsey viewed this as one of the major problems of the penitentiary. Within Parchman, administrators and guards continued to penalize female convicts by labeling them as needy, attention seekers, and headaches. The terms, considered derogatory in the penal system, aided in the criminalization of female prisoners. Each indicated a form of weakness and dependency on a system that did not want to support those types of needs. According to Dorsey, female convicts received little support from inside the penitentiary and this often led them to act out and rebel against the system. She stated,

68 Clarion-Ledger, 11 September 1975,
Churches would offer to help but the women were skeptical of them because they thought that all the church was going to do was preach at them and not to them. So they did not want that kind of help. Sometimes they would scream and storm out, and other times they would simply refuse to come and talk to me. They would often want to know why “I” was coming and not a man. They knew that I was not a lawyer and that all I could do was take a affidavit so they were not really interested in meeting with me, per say. Especially then ones who had shorter sentences. They were just counting down their days, but the women who had five, ten, or more years, then those are the people who were waiting on me every week.  

Imprisoned women often had several worries once incarcerated. Their main concern centered on the care of their children. When a mother entered the criminal justice system, “the child became exposed to that system; however, the criminal justice system traditionally overlooked the children.” Unlike most men sentenced to prison, women could not rely on a spouse to care for their children; therefore, they suffered more anxiety about the welfare of their families. Dorsey explained that when she met with imprisoned females, one of the first issues they dealt with childcare and she often had to reassure the women that the State would not place their children into foster care. Women experienced the pain of separation and worried about maintaining enduring relationships with their children once imprisoned. Imprisoned women depended on strong family bonds in childrearing. Most women placed their children in the care of their mother or a family member. They did not want to disturb their children’s daily routines and since most African American families maintained strong family ties, female convicts wanted their children to remain with family. Dorsey stated, “most of the females who had children expressed their desire for a family member, and not the state, to care for their children while they

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70 L.C. Dorsey to author, Interview, 25 February 2012.
72 Rafter, Partial Justice, 196.
were incarcerated.”\textsuperscript{74} The women would also communicate to Dorsey “that being away from their children was hard,” and several of the women told Dorsey “no one can raise my kids like I can, but if they have to stay with someone then I would rather that be my mother, sister, aunt or some responsible family member.”\textsuperscript{75} Most of the women who had children before their incarceration expressed happiness in knowing that their family was raising their children while they were away and that they could get their children back when they were released. Dorsey also mentioned the possibility of a female prisoner expecting a baby during her imprisonment. She explained that a pregnancy served as a great source of concern for not only the mother but also social workers and prison administrators. The process to help pregnant women began before they entered prison. Soon to be incarcerated women began at the hearing, talking to defense attorneys and prosecutors about their pregnancy, because they wanted to be sure to place the baby with a family member before the prison sentence began.

Incarcerated women also worried about reconnecting with their children once released from prison. Dorsey explained that she often had to work with imprisoned women for months before their release because they were scared of having to reconnect with their children after they returned home. To ease their worries, Dorsey often visited with the inmate and her child on visitation day and helped to facilitate conversation and to make the meetings go smoother. Incarcerated women also worried about their legal representation and their charges. Dorsey explained that women often worried about obtaining a job and following the guidelines of their probation once they left Parchman. She said one of her main goals when working with the ACLU included working with the lawyers to write legislation to aid former inmates with their classification following their release.

\textsuperscript{74} L.C. Dorsey to author, Interview, 25 February 2012.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
By viewing the prison as a gendered organization, it is also important to consider the lives and roles of female prison guards. Court decisions in inmates’ rights cases in the 1960s and 1970s created the immediate need for large numbers of officers. As the supply of male recruits became exhausted, administrators had little choice but to turn to women. This led to the professionalization of the correctional officer and led women into a historically male dominated field. At Parchman since the late 1970s, the majority of African American female who worked at Parchman worked with African American male and female prisoners. An article in the Commercial Appeal covered Parchman’s initiative to hire more female prison guards. The author discussed the climate of Parchman during 1977 and stated, “Parchman is undergoing a drastic change in how they guard their inmates. They are now hiring women to work the camps and monitor prisoners. Hopefully, these women will guard only the female convicts for the male prisoner is too rough a criminal for her to monitor.”

By monitoring their daily activities, female prison guards shared a unique experience with imprisoned women. At Parchman, they essentially lived together on the penal farm. Many of the female guards lived in the Delta and their job at Parchman possibly reunited them with former classmates, neighbors, or family matters. For persons growing up in the Delta during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Parchman played a major role in their lives. Most people had heard stories of Parchman and sometimes even first hand accounts. Dorsey, explained why people who grow up in the Delta decide to stay and work at Parchman:

When you grow up in the Delta, you are immune to the things that you hear about Parchman because you hear them all of the time. That’s just like if you take a kid from the Delta and tell them that their parent has gone to jail, they are not going to be shaken because either this is not the first time that their parent has went to jail or they have watched a friends parent go. It’s an all to familiar story to them.

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77 *The Commercial Appeal*, 8 July 1978
78 L.C. Dorsey to author, Interview, 25 February 2012.
As a reformer, Dorsey felt that this type of harsh reality caused children to lose both their childhood and their innocence. She believed that life infused with imprisonment led children to grow up to fast and become adults. She stated, “This was one area where I sought to seek change. I wanted children to be able to be children. I wanted them to see further than that penitentiary down there. And I wanted everyone to at least leave and experience life, and then if they decided to come back after they received an education and bring positivity back to the community, that was fine with me.” Dorsey explained that children who grew up in the Delta knew of the cruelty that could happen in life and that “it was too heavy a load for kids of such young ages to carry with them through life.”

The continued concern over prisoners’ health meant that Parchman had to closely monitor the physical output and needs of their inmates. Dorsey stated that among the concerns communicated to her, the tales of beatings and unjust treatment received the most attention. The Southern Coalition encouraged Dorsey to trace down every detail of the stories that prisoner shared with her and if decided that an injustice took place, then the coalition would start a full investigation into the matter. Dorsey and other members of the coalition knew of the inhuman treatment that prison officials subjected prisoners. Senator Patridge, in denouncing further unjust treatment of prisoners, stated, “Significant changes in the philosophy and operation of the State Penitentiary probably will not be made until Mississippians realize the prisoners are human beings.” Patridge argued that the problem in implementing change “is that prison administrators always think about the institution first…Even the state’s governors tend to think

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79 Ibid.
of bales of cotton and bushels of beans that are produced at Parchman instead of thinking of the
prisoners as human beings who have made a mistake and should be given a second chance.”

Injustice at Parchman for both male and female prisoners is part of the narrative that
many black and white Mississippians know all too well. The treatment that African American
men and women received, however, points to a larger conversation that centers on race and
injustice in the Mississippi penal system. In a society divided by strict racial and social
guidelines, the prison system fared little different in the ways it separated inmates and
maintained a form of segregation on those the system imprisoned. While class never played a
major role in southern society for African Americans because social guidelines predetermined
that all black southerners were alike, once incarcerated, race served as a marker of
criminalization. It was not until the mid 1970s that the Mississippi penal system, “a place that
was racially segregated,” moved to implement sweeping changes, no matter how forced, in an
effort to make life behind the wall better. It was also during the late 1970s and early 1980s that
women in the penal system began to voice their displeasure with the penitentiary. By listening to
their connections to the prison and their personal stories of imprisonment, one gains a better
understanding of incarceration in Mississippi.

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81 Ibid.
82 William Banks Taylor, Down on Parchman Farm, 199.
CHAPTER SIX

“We Live and We Learn: Gaining Visibility in the Mississippi Penal System”

The Mississippi penal system through corruption and humiliation often reduced women to an invisible state. By not having a voice to express their true feelings regarding the state penitentiary, lost were actual accounts of female incarceration in the state. The multiple voices of incarcerated women allowed to step from behind the veil of silence and share their personal experiences with the Mississippi carceral state and the judicial politics helps to shed light on one of the most notorious prisons in the United States. Even though women began to actively carve out a space for themselves within the penal system, seeds of abuse and injustice continued to mark their exploitation. By working tirelessly to change the culture and atmosphere of Parchman, L.C. Dorsey fought injustice at the state penitentiary. Dorsey understood the breadth of untold experiences and stories within the 20,000 acres of green pasture and cotton fields at Parchman. She believed her life’s work, centered on providing “those boys,” and in some cases “the girls, too” an avenue “to be heard” and “freedom.” Dorsey understood the justice system she faced and often asked, “If I don't help them and be there for them then who will?” While she spent a majority of her days at Parchman working with incarcerated men, she tried to meet with imprisoned women at least once a week. Since Parchman mainly housed men, it was easy to overlook the women confined behind the walls. Dorsey believed that she could do more for

1 L.C. Dorsey to author, Interview, 25 February 2012.
2 Ibid.
the women at Parchman but, as she put it, “I was only [one] woman with a big job to do. Sometimes I had to choose…listen to the men who had been writing us and we were representing or go and talk to the women who may or may not really want my help.”

The story is complex. Dorsey, too, had a story to tell. While working to provide an avenue for others to express themselves, Dorsey lamented, “I worked so hard to help others that I often didn’t have anything left to give to myself. I had no one to talk to. I was trying to raise children while working. That was my outlet.”

Having grown up in the Mississippi Delta, Dorsey found it hard to see so many of the people she grew up with incarcerated in Parchman. This was especially true for young black women. Dorsey was all too aware of the struggles that poor black women like herself encountered while growing up in such an environment. She understood that many of those young women had no outlet to express their pain and that, once incarcerated, the prison silenced them. Dorsey tried to provide incarcerated women an outlet to share their stories but found it difficult:

[N]o one cared about those little black girls anyway…how do I know? Shoot, no one cared about me! I tried to help them. But they let the prison win. I would go and talk to them. But they were too interested in what was happening on the outside and not enough on themselves.

Dorsey remembered an encounter she had when working with an imprisoned woman who had endured abuse from prison guards. When she went to speak to the young woman, the girl, “kept saying to me, why do you care? Nothing is going to happen. No one cares about what happens to me. I’m in prison. I might as well be invisible. My own momma don't care.”

Dorsey wondered how she could disagree with the young woman when she herself experienced

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
mistreatment at the hands of prison guards every time she went to Parchman. When Dorsey reported her concerns about the unchecked verbal and physical abuse she experienced at Parchman to prison administrators, nothing changed, as “more and more stuff kept happening. It got worse. I would tell my family and friends but as far as the prison went, no one cared.”

Dorsey knew her advocacy was the only form of recourse imprisoned women had against mistreatment.

Dorsey did not mind listening to anyone who wanted to speak to her because she understood that she might be the only vessel for the stories of incarcerated men and women to survive. She remembered one young lady who received no visits from family or friends and seemed to need Dorsey as an outlet for her story:

All she wanted was for me to come and get her out of her cell and listen…listen to all of her problems for hours. And while I had a little time to listen there were fifty other people I had to see that same day and listen to their stories as well…so I would tell her that she was going to have to tell me this stuff another day.

Even with the efforts of L.C. Dorsey and others like her, most imprisoned women spent their entire prison sentence silenced.

Living life confined behind penitentiary bars, social workers worked to help imprisoned women maintain familial connections and networks. Prison officials allowed husbands and boyfriends to visit, and they could use one of the private houses on the farm for visitation. Visitation afforded incarcerated women the opportunity to maintain a connection with their children. Social Worker Sonya Fox explained that she “felt that this was good for both the mother and child as their bond was able to continue.”

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Sonya Fox to author, Interview, 19 October 2011.
opportunity for conjugal visits with their spouse. Scholar Columbus B. Hopper explained that at Parchman, conjugal visits were the norm and had become part of the penitentiary's tradition.\textsuperscript{10} Incarcerated women had the opportunity to receive conjugal visits. Fox, when questioned about conjugal visits emphatically stated that the couple “must be married,” and that “boyfriends were not allowed.”\textsuperscript{11} The stipulations one must meet in order to participate in these visits often excluded many prisoners, especially incarcerated African American women who were often unmarried during their imprisonment. Those who did qualify, however, benefited from those social workers who helped orchestrate visitations for imprisoned women so that they could maintain some form of normalcy.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Mississippi Delta continued to send mass numbers of men and women to the state penitentiary. The Delta consists of seventeen counties in the northwest section of the state. Primarily populated by African Americans, the flat land and fertile soil developed an agricultural landscape that depended on cheap labor. Without much industry, many of the residents remained poor and struggled to avoid criminal activity. L.C. Dorsey knew firsthand the troubles of growing up poor in the Delta and used that knowledge as a social activist and penal reformer. As a staunch proponent of the prison reforms detailed in the previous chapter, Dorsey fought for prisoner rights and health and social reforms within the Mississippi penal system. In many respects, there is no one person more groundbreaking and important than L.C. Dorsey when working to understand the ill effects that the penitentiary had

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
on poor, southern women. Through her life’s work, Dorsey fought to help those individuals who she watched as children growing up become what she called “victims of the system.”

As the poorest area in the poorest state in the nation, the Delta offered very little financial support or opportunities for the African American community. Poverty and crime riddle the region and many of its residents provided a good source of labor for both private farmers and Parchman. In the Dorsey household, her parents preached hard work and believed that that was the only way to stay out of the penitentiary. As sharecroppers, Dorsey explained, her parents worked hard to have successful crops each year so that their children could go to school instead of working in the fields. She stated, “my father believed that working in the fields was just like slavery. He would always tell us that we needed to have our own because that was the only way to see to it that no one could enslave you.” Dorsey recalled that her father believed that if a person felt enslaved that he or she would someday end up at Parchman. Her father’s words stuck with her throughout her life because she wanted to always make sure that no matter her circumstances, she would never feel enslaved.

Growing up in the Delta, Dorsey watched many of her family and friends “go in and out” of Parchman. Dorsey explained that everyone she knew had some type of personal connection to Parchman. This connection included a personal account of imprisonment, working at the prison, or knowing someone imprisoned at the penal farm. Dorsey stated,

I knew so many people that went to Parchman that I can not even begin to make you understand what I am saying. Many of the men and some of the women in my own family were imprisoned at Parchman. That place was so big that growing up I thought that it could hold the whole world. I am serious. People would come back from there and tell us these stories of all the bad things that went on in there. And these stories would be told by different people. I bet that

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12 L.C. Dorsey to author, Interview, 25 February 2012.
13 Ibid.
over half of my high school classmates have either worked at Parchman or been imprisoned there. And I am no different.14

Dorsey’s surroundings made it so that African Americans often had little hope of ever leaving the Delta. Daryl Robinson, a pastor in the Delta during the 1980s, argued, “these people innately knew that if they were born in the Delta that they would never leave the Delta. That’s just how they thought about things and really, they could not think about much more than survival.”15 Dorsey contributed her ability to think further than the Delta to her father. She believed that if she had not left the Delta that her father would have made a “big fuss about the thing,” meaning her staying in the Delta and never leaving. Dorsey knew, however, that her leaving would not mean that she would never come back. Her plans always included coming back to the Delta and helping those who could not help themselves.

Dorsey left the Delta with her husband and three children and moved to Jackson, Mississippi, during the 1950s. There, Dorsey experienced abuse for the first time. Dorsey and her husband often had verbal spats; he would say very derogatory things to her, and she explained that those words fueled her in her decision to leave him. Dorsey recounted a story that she felt might have landed her in jail if she had not taken a split second to think about her actions. The story resembled the stories of so many incarcerated women but Dorsey provided the context. One afternoon, Dorsey and the kids had decided to take a walk. Her husband, who she said had another family down the street, did not agree with her taking the kids out because he wanted to go and spend time with his “other” family. Dorsey explained,

My husband decided that he did not want me to leave the house because, in his mind, he needed to keep his two families separate. You see, he had his girlfriend and her two kids living right down the street from us. I could actually stand under

14 Ibid.  
15 Reverend Daryl Robinson to Katrina Sims and author, Interview, 16 February 2012.
my carport and see her front door. So that day, I was just tired. I was really tired of him going back and forth. So I decided that we were going to go out anyway and he tried to stop us. He began yelling and screaming and it just became too much. I was in the midst of cooking breakfast and I had on some hot grits and a pot of hot coffee. I was standing in the kitchen and he came in and this is the first time that he had ever done this, but he raised his hand up in a motion like he was going to hit me. And before I knew it, the grits were all over him! I just threw them to keep him off of me! I thought to myself then, oh no, you’re definitely going to jail now…but you know what, you live and you learn.16

When Dorsey’s husband turned to abuse, she reacted. The grits did not burn Dorsey’s husband badly and he never pressed charges. She decided to leave him because she knew that if she stayed with him, “one of us would be dead and the other would be in the penitentiary.” Dorsey stated emphatically that she knew all too well that consequences of her actions would have lasting effects on her children if the police arrested her and sent her to the penitentiary but in that moment, she felt that she had no other choice. The situation taught her a lot about herself, most importantly, the ways in which she had internalized, to the detriment of her own well being, her surroundings and the state penitentiary.

While Dorsey served as a catalyst of providing a voice to the voiceless, the structure of southern penal systems facilitated voicelessness among those confined within the prison. One cannot fully understand the complexities of Parchman penitentiary and Mississippi penal politics without taking a closer look at the personal accounts from women both inside and outside of the walls. The omission of women’s stories and studies on their experience in Mississippi has meant that prison officials, reformers, and in some cases, court records have spoken for them. Imprisoned women found it almost impossible to communicate their story because of their invisibility. In the event that female convicts had the opportunity to share stories personal in nature with prison officials, medical staff at the prison, social workers, guards, and sometimes

16 L.C. Dorsey to author, Interview, 25 February 2012.
their own family and friends, their stories typically fell upon deaf ears. In many respects, people found it daunting to listen to incarcerated women’s stories because of the stigma of being criminals, or some of them likely assumed that incarcerated women had nothing worthwhile to share.

The history of both crime and punishment in Mississippi are necessary to understanding the complexities of the Mississippi penal system and the experiences of the women who survived it. The exclusion of imprisoned women’s accounts from scholarly study is shocking. The complex racial and social history of Mississippi makes every voice matter. Personal accounts of incarceration from prisoners or family and friends mean that those once silenced have a chance to speak. Women imprisoned in Mississippi have suffered insurmountable difficulties before, during, and after their confinement. Sexual violence, drug abuse, prison guard mistreatment, lack of adequate healthcare, and physical abuse facilitated the exploitation and mistreatment incarcerated women endured. This mistreatment silenced them.

The effect of imprisonment on the loved ones of incarcerated women deserves consideration as well. During the twentieth century, a majority of women, more than seventy percent, confined in the state penitentiary had children. Grandmothers, aunts, and close family members helped raise the children of incarcerated women. While female prisoners focused on maintaining a close connection to their children, family members worried about how the children would fare without their mothers. Some mothers of incarcerated women believed family had a responsibility to step up and help raise all children of incarcerated women. Olivia Jeffries, an African American mother of seven who had two daughters and one niece imprisoned in the state
penitentiary, believed that if imprisoned women had a pattern of “bad behavior and going back and forth to jail” then someone should step in “and help raise the innocent children.”

Incarcerated women’s hardships were often overlooked or pushed to the side by those whose job it was to protect them. One instance involved Sharon Mills, an African American woman born and raised in the Delta, who was incarcerated in 1971 and given a ten-year sentence for grand larceny. According to her niece, Stephanie Adams, Mills often complained to her family about inadequate healthcare and mistreatment from trustees, because her complaints to prison administrators went unheard. Mills family did not receive any relief from the state either. Adams remembered as a young girl her own mother contacting the prison on several occasions requesting aid for her older sister to no avail. Talks at the dinner table on Sundays “often focused on Aunt Sharon.” Mills’s family never forgot about her and spent years visiting Parchman so that her grandchildren would have an opportunity to know her. Mills story was common for women incarcerated in Parchman during the 1960s and 1970s. What stands out is that Mills gained her voice lived on through her family. Other incarcerated women, however, did not have the same fortune.

The concerns of most persons interested in prisons often centered on the structure of prisons, prison administrators, imprisoned men, and statistical data. While statistics provide an important insight into imprisonment and “information about who went to prison and why,”
according to Estelle Freedman, “the data, however, does not record feelings.” Researchers developed a heightened curiosity in the incarceration of men due to the sheer numbers of their imprisonment. What often went overlooked were the thousands of incarcerated women who resided in state prisons and local jails in the South. By not recognizing imprisoned women as a significant segment of the penal system, their voices remained repressed; thus the survival of imprisoned women’s experiences rested in the hands of those interested in preserving their history. Over the past two decades television programs including *Women Behind Bars, Women in Prison*, and *Beyond Scared Straight* have explored the lives and experiences of women presently incarcerated in prisons across the United States. One of the most popular shows today, *Orange is the New Black*, was much different from the other true life shows, as it is fictional and loosely based on a biographical account of a young woman who after actively participating in money laundering and drug trafficking, is convicted and imprisoned for over a year. Shows such as *Orange is the New Black* enable producers and large entertainment companies to depict the lives of imprisoned women and sensationalize their prison experience. By presenting incarceration in weekly dramatic installments, the shows make it easy to overlook the constant and consistent nature of the actual mistreatment, corruption, abuse, and exploitation that confined women endure.

From the inception of Parchman farm, prison guards and administrators ruled over Parchman with brute force. Prison guards oversaw incarcerated men and women with the use of a black whip commonly known as “Black Annie.” This method of punishment certainly inflicted both pain and terror. Gender played no special role in the administering of the whip’s power, as

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prison officials used Black Annie on both male and female prisoners. Stories of this horrendous device made headlines in the Jackson Daily News in 1954. In the newspaper, editor Phil Stroupe argued, “prison punishment by the hated Black Annie whiplash at Parchman state penitentiary is as bad as solitary confinement with a jug of water, one slice of bread and a cup of castor oil a day.”\(^{21}\) The fact that Stroupe acknowledged publicly the existence and use of such a weapon confirmed what Mississippians already knew: punishment at Parchman was unforgiving and severe. Stephanie Adams, the niece of Sharon Mills, alluded to the use of Black Annie when she recalled one occasion when prison guards punished her aunt for breaking a rule: “Aunt Sharon called home one night in a panic. I was about nine or ten then. I couldn't really tell what she was saying but I know that once my momma hung up the phone she turned to my grandmother and said, ‘Sharon got whipped!’ She got whipped!’”\(^{22}\) Adams vividly remembered the fear in her mother’s voice. While Black Annie affected those at the receiving end of its lash, family members who heard of this horrific punishment dealt with the harrowing consequences of such cruelty, too. Praised and encouraged by prison administrators, this form of unreasonable punishment ruled the penitentiary.

While prison life and individual experiences differed for women across the twentieth century, female convicts shared a common history as women behind bars. Unlike their male counterparts, imprisoned women found that their criminalization aided in their silencing. While men often found avenues where their voices were heard including in court, speaking to prison administrators, and having legal representation who served as their voice, women, often poor and

\(^{21}\) *Jackson Daily News*, 17 March 1954. Philip W. Stroupe served as senator John C. Stennis’ press secretary from 1960 to 1964. Stroupe also wrote columns for the *Jackson Daily News* and other major publications. The Congressional & Political Research Center and Digital Collections at Mississippi State University include an interview of Stroupe where he discusses his columns that focused on Parchman in the *Jackson Daily News*.

\(^{22}\) Stephanie Adams to author, Interview, March 2012.
forgotten, found it hard to communicate effectively without adequate resources. Only in the last three decades have imprisoned men and women found a limited voice in the narrative of penal history. African American women, then, have found the ability of sharing their story more complex. In many instances, “African American women’s voices…were rarely heard on crucial concerns about social policy, criminality, and the administration of the criminal justice system in the United States.”

Female prisoners, then, struggled from their omission in the body politic of “academic and social policy discussions relating to their lives.” Society often misunderstood women’s imprisonment because of the exclusion of their voices. This exclusion, as psychologists Sharon McQuaide and John Ehrenreich explained, “presented both a problem and an opportunity. There are few ‘clear’ media images or academic studies of these women to guide or misguide researchers. The task of deconstructing popular or academic images is barely an issue.”

Persistent visual and written stereotypes concerning African American women worked to keep their true selves concealed.

While the lives and experiences of imprisoned African American women remained on the margins of historical scholarship, the inclusion of white women in the narrative of Mississippi penology further illustrated the triple jeopardy that women who were black, female, and criminal experienced. Stories of white females in the Mississippi criminal justice system include them in the context of a fallen sister, nurse, prison staff, or reformer. Numerous studies explore the work of white female prison reformers during the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, though a detailed study of incarcerated women in Mississippi who hold no

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24 Ibid, 3.
administrative, medical or, support position is omitted from the scholastic record. In reality, until the late 1970s and the 1980s, the story of Parchman included white women as part of the professional workforce, while African American women were labeled as incarcerated prison laborers. A distinction between the two was clear.

For the first eighty years of the history of the Mississippi penal system, African American women far outnumbered white women. Despite this noticeable difference, their intertwined experiences meant that one could not have a true understanding of the Mississippi penal system and Parchman without understanding the stories of both demographics. The complex narrative of Parchman included women only when others spoke for them. In doing so, one loses a more concise account of Parchman. While David Oshinsky’s work on Parchman exposed the horrors of the Mississippi penal system, the framework of imprisonment as the continued enslavement of African American men meant that he quite possibly overlooked the extent to which women mattered. His book describes women only briefly, and their absence from this seminal work on Parchman penitentiary is a metaphor for their silence. Without the inclusion and examination of the personal experiences of African American women, it is impossible to have a clear understanding of the Mississippi penal system.

Viewing the penitentiary as a gendered institution illuminates the shared unique experience of imprisoned women. While their circumstances differed, incarcerated women, female administrators, female prison staff, and social workers all worked in a male-dominated

system. Through this shared familiarity, women in the southern penal system are troves of information, which can aid historians and the public in understanding the southern penal system. By doing so, avenues will continually open and people will hear women’s voices, views, and concerns regarding important issues dealing with the criminal justice system.

Most convicts confined in Parchman were poor residents of the state. Southern economics made Parchman a business worth sustaining. With a steady flow of convicts, Parchman continued to grow. In 1969, an editorial in the Delta-Democratic Times charged Mississippians, especially African Americans, to “stay out of the state penitentiary.” The editorial argued that Parchman caused more harm than good. Growing up in Mississippi, Avery Jackson noted that before her imprisonment she knew several people imprisoned in Parchman. Jackson recalled that she often heard of Parchman being “a bad place to end up if you were a black female.” Jackson explained, “When I got to Parchman all they talked about was how they treated women badly if you looked like anything. I did not know if they were talking about the guards or the other women. But I found out. Shoot, they were talking about both. When they told me that, I decided right then and there that I was going to stay in my place and out of everybody way.”

According to state statistics, women in Mississippi committed mostly non-violent crimes including grand larceny/theft, drug abuse, prostitution, and fraud. The complex history of African American women in Mississippi usually concerns issues of race, class, and gender. Born black, female, and poor often meant that one had limited opportunities in Mississippi. Prior to the civil rights movement African Americans in the state were disenfranchised, segregated

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27 Delta Democratic Times, 18 October 1969.
28 Avery Jackson to author, Phone Interview, 14 September 2011.
29 Ibid.
socially from white, endured the racist policies and practices of Jim Crow, and had no real opportunities for economic advancement. This lack of resources and opportunities often led men and women down the wrong path. Avery Jackson serves as one example of how the lack of resources encourages criminal behavior. Born in Mississippi in 1947, Avery Jackson never graduated from high school, which she left following her sophomore year to find work and help mother at home. Growing up, Jackson had always thought of attending Jackson State University and becoming a nurse. She married in 1965. In 1966, Jackson gave birth to her first of three children, a daughter. Jackson never thought that children would change her life as much as they did. Raised by a single mother, Jackson began raising her daughter alone after her husband’s imprisonment. With the help of her mother, she raised her daughter as a single parent until she married for a second time. This union led to the birth to two more children, both boys. It became hard for Jackson to raise three children with their father in and out of the house. After losing her job, Jackson stated, “I had no more options. So I did what I had to do. I would go in a store and grab a few things for my kids.” What began with Jackson going into a store and taking a few items for her children turned into a life of petty criminal offenses.

Jackson recognized that her life was spiraling out of control after her first arrest but she could not stop. After her third arrest and conviction, Jackson served a four-month sentence on charges of petty theft in 1978. At the time of the interview, Jackson pondered, “I wonder how much different my life would be had I not gone down that path? I have turned out alright. My children are better than me and hopefully their children will be better than them.”

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
What would you do if you didn’t have any money? Remember, this was in the seventies and things were not like they are today. I couldn’t keep a job because I did not have anyone to watch my kids. My mother watched them when she could but she worked too. And I couldn’t pay anyone to watch them because I didn’t have any money. So you see, I had to do what I had to do. Now, if you ask me if I am ashamed or not, then of course I will tell you that I am. No one wants to be a thief. I don’t steal now. I just did what I had to do then.  

Jackson felt that she had no opportunities, as limited options for African American women in her community were commonplace. For poor women, poverty and crime produced both an imposing and menacing fate. Imprisoned women frequently reflected that they often had to make hard life or death decisions. Jackson placed the wellbeing of her children first. By doing so, she felt that she saved herself “from having to do any of that other bad stuff like prostituting and sleeping with a lot of men for money. See, people already looked at us like we were thieves so that wasn’t nothing new.”

The hardships Jackson experienced throughout her life seemed insurmountable, but theft, unlike prostitution, offered her a way to support her family without losing her dignity.

During the mid to late twentieth century, African American women participated in the culture of dissemblance to combat stereotypes concerning sex. As discussed in chapter two, African American women created a politics of silence, which shielded them from exploitation and judgment, by not acknowledging their sexuality. Denouncing stereotypes of the Jezebel, sexual promiscuity, sexual availability, and criminals by nature, African American women became asexual and reserved. Political scientist Melissa V. Harris-Perry argued that “this form

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32 Avery Jackson to author, 2011.
33 Ibid, 2011.
34 The culture of Dissemblance as historian Darlene Clark Hine argues “is the behavior and attitude that black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.” Citation see below
of dissemblance was a tactic to find the upright in the crooked room.” According to Harris-Perry, African American women aligned themselves with stereotypes, believing them to be true when they were not. Avery Jackson, in an effort to denounce one stereotype, ultimately accepted another. In many respects, Jackson had to choose whether or not she wanted others to view her through a sexual or criminal lens.

The politics of silence, created through the culture of dissemblance, did not always mean that African American women would remain silent on certain topics. Taboo topics like imprisonment and welfare often found their way into conversations black women had with other black women. The peculiar aspect of the culture of dissemblance meant that African American women had the ability to talk among themselves in private about topics affecting black women. Olivia Jefferies demonstrated this duality on two separate occasions. In her first interview, Jefferies talked briefly about two taboo subjects regarding African American women. The most controversial stories she shared involved her marrying at a young age and losing her unborn child after she miscarried. In her second interview conducted at her home, Jefferies talked openly about African American women and the penal system. For Jefferies, her home offered her a sense of comfort. Jefferies felt comfortable enough to discuss topics that included imprisonment, sex and miscarriage, and welfare. When Jefferies spoke of imprisonment, she candidly opened up about her own personal connection to the penal system in Mississippi.

37 Olivia Jefferies to Elizabeth Payne, Interview, 5 September 2005. Makin’ Do website [http://www.outreach.olemiss.edu/media/documentary/women_history/jefferies.html](http://www.outreach.olemiss.edu/media/documentary/women_history/jefferies.html) (accessed 19 May 2012). In her first interview conducted at the Union County Heritage Museum, Olivia Jefferies talked briefly about marrying at a young age. She shared the story about her marriage to express the unhappiness of her father concerning her decision. She also talked briefly about going to the doctor because of a sickness and waking up the next morning and she had lost her unborn baby. In her estimation, the doctor caused her to lose the child. Jeffries did not provide any further information about this story until her second interview.
Adopting her niece’s daughter at the age of sixty-five, Jefferies explained how she became a mother for the sixth time at the age of sixty-five. Referring to her adopted daughter’s biological mother, Jefferies spoke at length:

You see, this is how I got this little girl (pointing at her daughter). Her mother can’t stay out of jail for no time. She’s out one minute and then the next minute she is in. She went to jail for drugs and they brought the baby down here, you see, she was only one year’s old then and now she is ten. So she has been with me that long. Anyway, they brought the baby down here and they asked me, can I keep her until her mother got out of jail. I said that I would. When her mother got out, she stopped by here that day for a little while and then she was gone. She begged me to keep the baby for a little while longer. She has not come back to get her yet. So a few years ago, I told her that if she wanted me to keep the baby that I was going to adopt her and she agreed after a few days…You know, she can not stop running the streets. She is man crazy and she is into drugs. She barely comes by here now. I told her to stay away if she cannot take up any time with her daughter. This confuses her. So she does not come around much. She went back to jail like four or five time since the baby has been here with me. Maybe after this last time in there she will learn her lesson.38

Jeffries felt comfortable talking directly about her niece, including being open about her rebellious lifestyle. The penal system and African American women became a major topic of conversation in which Jeffries shared her personal feelings and beliefs. The politics of silence, in the privacy of Jefferies home, dissolved as she spoke openly about the imprisonment of her niece. While expressing her disappointment in the actions of her niece, Jefferies also accepted the stereotypes of black women as criminal and sexually promiscuous. While Jefferies believed that people who committed crimes deserved imprisonment, she also expressed concern over what good actually came from the penitentiary. Recalling a conversation with her niece, Jefferies said, “You know I don’t know what to really make of her situation. I think that she is a good girl. She just went down the wrong path. But nothing about the penitentiary can make you

38 Olivia Jeffries to author, Interview, March 2006. The second interview with Olivia Jeffries took place at her home in New Albany, Mississippi. During this interview, Jefferies seemed to feel more comfortable. The topics of our conversation ranged from
change, I suppose. But if you do bad things then you have to go.”

Jefferies wrestled with the effects that imprisonment have on the black community, especially black women. Jefferies went as far as to proclaim that she would never want to work at Parchman or any other prison because “it hits too close to home. I can’t imagine working there and seeing all of those black men and women in there. Why do bad things that are going to get you there? Working there would be just as hard for me. I would hate to go to that type of place everyday.”

The story of prison employees provides a different insight into how prison politics affect women. The Mississippi penal system employed both black and white women in the penitentiary dating back to the early nineteenth century. White women originally worked as teachers, matrons, and nurses. African American women worked in chain gangs, leased to plantation owners where the prison earned a nominal fee for their labor, toiled on the penal farm, and labored as domestics both inside and outside of the prison. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, white women moved into professionalized jobs within the penitentiary. They began working in clerical and nursing occupations, jobs once held by men. As the penitentiary continued to grow, the need for a more balanced prison workforce developed. Criminologist Nicole Hahn Rafter explained that “as the female populations expanded, the need for matrons became ever more obvious, and one legislature or prison administrator after another grudgingly established the office of matron.”

The Mississippi penal system created the matron position in the late 1890s, which only lasted until the construction of Parchman in 1901. After Parchman opened, the prison began leasing both male and female prisoners to companies for a nominal fee.

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39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
By doing so, prison administrators did not have to worry or care for as many prisoners. As the penitentiary continued to expand throughout the 1930s and 1940s and Parchman no longer leased prisoners, the need for matrons returned. Prison administrators believed that women should have the responsibility of monitoring females. Both men and women who worked at Parchman lived on the grounds with their families. While men ran the daily activities of the penal camps, women served as nurses, secretaries, librarians, or their husbands’ helpmates. These positions enabled white women the ability to gain autonomy in a male dominated and controlled system.

During the 1920s, Congress passed several laws regarding organized crime and prohibition, which resulted in steep increases in the national prison population.42 Historian Vivien M.L. Miller points to the Great Depression as the precursor to the growth of the southern penal system. The Depression left a majority of Mississippians destitute. With abject poverty came an increase in criminal activity. According to Collins, “to manage this increase, in 1930, federal legislation created the Bureau of Prisons and authorized the construction of additional federal correctional facilities.”43 Whatever the cause, Parchman needed skilled laborers. Medical advances during the 1930s, coupled with women’s need and desire to work, led many women to the medical field. Parchman, as one of the largest employers in the Mississippi Delta, welcomed female nurses, cooks, and teachers. The Clarion Ledger announced that Parchman intended to hire “young women nurses to work alongside male doctors at the state penal farm.”44

During the 1930s, Parchman employed eight female nurses and three male doctors. The head nurse, Alice Stewart, worked at Parchman almost nine years. The time she spent working

43 Ibid, 21.
44 “State Penitentiary Hiring Nurses,” Clarion-Ledger, 8 November 1937.
at Parchman provides an important aspect of female labor during the 1930s and 1940s that might otherwise go unnoticed. Stewart completed her nursing training, earned her nurse’s certificate in 1925, and became a nurse for the Unites States Veterans Bureau in Memphis, Tennessee.\footnote{“Alice’s Album: A Brief Photographic History of Parchman,” Unpublished biography.} In 1932, the penitentiary board of trustees appointed W.A. “Betsy” Montgomery to serve as their first female president, a monumental feat despite that administrators had appointed Montgomery to serve out her late husband’s term. Montgomery brought a more humane vision to the prison as she encouraged prison officials to treat both imprisoned men and women as humans worthy of respect. Historian William Banks Taylor wrote, “She sought to have a penal system that would treat prisoners with compassion and would operate with transparency.”\footnote{William B. Taylor, Brokered Justice: Race, Politics, and Mississippi Prisons, 1798-1992 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994), 65-66.} Stewart and Montgomery, both white women, held professional positions within the penitentiary and succeeded in gaining the respect of their male colleagues. They not only gained a voice, they successfully paved the way for more women to follow their example.

One area within the Mississippi penal system where women effectively caused change came by way of social workers. Social work had a long history dating to the late 1890s, when women actively pushed for the civil rights of all people and worked to develop benevolent and private organizations. Sonya Fox was one such woman in Mississippi who hoped to address the needs of her community through her work as a social worker. Born in 1928 in Columbia, Mississippi, Fox watched her father suffer from alcoholism. She grew weary of drugs and their consequences. As a student at Southern Mississippi University, Fox majored in health and physical education. After graduation, Fox took a job in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where she taught health and physical education. Eventually, she turned to social work as a career. As a
social worker, Fox aided in old age assistance and made home visits with the blind. Through this work, she began to develop a reformer spirit that she would put to use in her work with women imprisoned in the state penal system:

Well, I always knew that this was something that I enjoyed. Also, watching my father lose his job and turning to a life of alcoholism, I told myself that if I could, I wanted to help people who no one else wanted to help. I watched all of my father’s friends and most of his family turn their back on him and that hurt me so bad. I knew that drugs were bad but I never thought that my father would lose everything.\(^{47}\)

Fox’s involvement at Parchman began when she worked with women released to pre-released houses. Women towards the end of their prison sentences resided in these homes and completed the rest of their time. Fox explained that they allowed many women, depending on their behavior, the opportunity to work and visit with family, “but they did have a set time that they had to return to the house.”\(^{48}\) Sue Ellen Rhodes, whose daughter spent three years imprisoned in Parchman during the early 1980s, remembered such a home for her daughter:

I remember that my daughter stayed at a half-way house before she was allowed to come home for good. Sometimes we could go and pick her up for the day so that she could see her kids. Other times, we would just go and visit her. I think that she also had a job. Just something little that she could do to occupy her time.\(^{49}\)

In the pre-release facilities, women learned how to maintain a home, especially the skills of cooking and cleaning. Women also learned the maid service. Fox explained that by learning these skills, women would have no problems surviving outside of the penitentiary. Fox also shared a story of a former decorator at J.C. Penney-turned-female-convict imprisoned at Parchman for writing bad checks. In Fox’s estimation, the young woman had a bright future outside of the confinements of the penitentiary. Fox explained that she talked to her about doing

\(^{47}\) Sonya Fox to author, Interview, 19 October 2011.
\(^{48}\) Ibid.
\(^{49}\) Sue Ellen Rhodes to Meghan Gallagher and author, Interview, 20 April 2010.
the right thing and second chances. She stated, “I wanted everyone to do a little better than they were doing. She believed that her life was over and I assured her that it was not. I told her that she was going to have to want to change and then people would help her.”\(^{50}\) Fox strove to restore women back into their previous lives and jobs along with better decision-making skills.

Prison administrators provided two options to imprisoned women regarding their education: they could either earn their GED or learn a trade. Many women imprisoned in Parchman during the 1960s and 1970s had not earned their high school diploma before their incarceration. On the occasion that women entered the penitentiary with a degree, prison officials encouraged them to learn a trade. Many southern whites believed that having a trade better served African Americans than a degree. Fox explained that most women, white or black, had a choice in deciding what they wanted to pursue. She believed that learning a trade seemed more logical for most imprisoned women because of their lack of education, and, ultimately, women could learn a trade faster than they could earn a GED. Prison administrators and social workers believed, “[s]uccessful reintegration of offenders depended in part upon providing education and training programs that taught the skills necessary for obtaining gainful employment upon release.”\(^{51}\)

For female offenders, “the greatest constraints of incarceration are both the potential for termination of parental rights and the limited contact with their children.”\(^{52}\) Historically, one aspect of female criminality often overlooked included the consideration of pregnant incarcerated women. Pregnant imprisoned women experienced a different criminal justice

\(^{50}\) Sonya Fox to author, Interview, 19 October 2011.


\(^{52}\) Ibid., 407.
system than other imprisoned women. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, approximately forty-five percent of women entering prisons expected to give birth while imprisoned.\(^{53}\) Fox stated that social workers and the Mississippi penal system worked hard to care for and support imprisoned pregnant women. In Mississippi, pregnant women who went into labor while incarcerated did not give birth at Parchman. Social workers organized the births of babies to take place at one of the local hospitals in Sunflower, Ruleville, Cleveland, Clarksdale, or Marks. Fox explained that one of the main reasons why social workers did this was so the newborn babies’ birth certificates would not say Parchman: “if we did not send the women to one of the local hospitals, then the birth certificate of their newborn child would say Parchman. I have never known of a doctor to deliver a baby at one place and then write in another location.”\(^{54}\) Here, the importance rested on the fact that babies born to incarcerated women would not have the stigma of being born inside of a prison. The penal system for pregnant incarcerated women gave women options to determine where they would place their children. This enabled imprisoned women, especially African American women who often experienced mistreatment at the hands medical doctors in Mississippi, to maintain power over their reproductive wellbeing.

Children born to imprisoned women, according to Fox, “were born into a peculiar situation because now we had to find someone to care for the baby because the baby could not stay at the jail with the mother.”\(^{55}\) Imprisoned women and social workers called on family members to step in and help raise the newborn until the release of the mother. If no one agreed to take on responsibility, social workers placed babies in foster care as a last resort. This


\(^{54}\) Sonya Fox to author, Interview, 19 October 2011.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.
decision, according to Fox, had lasting effects on everyone involved. Sue Ellen Rhodes talked candidly about her daughter having a baby while incarcerated at Parchman: “I was so upset with her because she did that. I kept asking her why she would go to jail knowing that she was four months pregnant.” Rhodes, like Jefferies, explained that she had to take care of her daughter’s newborn baby for close to three years until her release from the state penitentiary. Caring for the daily needs of her granddaughter and spending Sunday afternoons traveling to and from Parchman to visit her daughter, Rhodes accepted her circumstances.

Parchman penitentiary served as a marker of unjust judicial politics for many African Americans in the Delta. Many Mississippian who resided in the Delta worried about their children and the all too often tale of Parchman penitentiary. L.C. Dorsey knew that the Delta was not a place that she wanted to raise her children. She understood that her children might face one of two realities: either work at Parchman or be imprisoned at Parchman. After in-depth consideration and long nights weighing her options, Dorsey explained why she worried so much about her children encountering the penitentiary as African Americans:

African Americans really had no options in the South, especially in the Delta. At every corner, there was someone white telling you that you could do either what they said or end up at Parchman. Threats of that place were used as bargaining tools but black people really had no choice. And in the end, chances are, you would end up there anyway. And I really worried about my daughters ending up in a place like that. I had family members and friends who had been imprisoned there and they told of some of the most horrific things that happened in there to women. So I just knew that I was going to have to leave the South if I wanted my children to ever have a chance at life.

In her opinion, African Americans had to leave the Delta in order to have successful lives. She understood the effects that Parchman had on individuals and the repercussions many faced inside and outside of the penitentiary. The stories Dorsey heard from women imprisoned in Parchman, 56 Sue Ellen Rhodes to Meghan Gallagher and author, Interview, 20 April 2010.
coupled with her personal experiences of the penitentiary, led her to proclaim that Parchman “was the scariest place on earth.”\textsuperscript{57} The stories reminded Dorsey why she worked so hard to leave the Delta but also what encouraged her to return. After several years away, Dorsey returned to Mississippi to do just that. As he previous chapter detailed, during the 1970s and 1980s, Dorsey, along with Ronald Welch, spearheaded the prison reform movement in Mississippi. She called that “one of the greatest decisions that I ever made in my life.”\textsuperscript{58}

While the voices of incarcerated women were often unheard, a closer study of Mississippi penology illustrates that women played a very important role in the history of Parchman. Habitually disregarded, the voices of incarcerated women and their female family members, female prison guards, nurses, administrators, and reformers lend to a more complete narrative of the Mississippi penal system. One will not have a clear understanding of Mississippi and its penal politics without including the story of the thousands of women who found that imprisonment touched their lives. The reformist spirit of L.C. Dorsey, Sonya Fox’s social work, and Alice Stewart serving as a head nurse at Parchman demonstrated that women, no matter the work, could find a calling at the most notorious prison in the South. Olivia Jefferies and Stephanie Adams exhibit the complexities of not only experiencing female family members incarceration, but also often wondering how their imprisonment affected those around them. The story of Avery Jackson offered an in depth look behind the walls of Parchman while she pondered on her time spent there. These stories are all very important for what they bring to the study of the Mississippi penal system. Without the inclusion of these voices, there is no accurate

\textsuperscript{57} L.C. Dorsey to author, Interview, 25 February 2012.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
account of Parchman. Their voices must be heard. In the case of women at Parchman, especially incarcerated women, the journey for inclusion begins when they are no longer silenced and allowed to share their experiences.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Mississippi, the Carceral State, and the Forgotten Offender

This account of the Mississippi penal system has presented a very different history of Parchman penitentiary from the accounts previous scholars have offered. This analysis places incarcerated women at the forefront of Mississippi penal politics. Too many researchers have overlooked the breadth of information pertaining to incarcerated women, the forgotten offenders in Mississippi history, thus denying these women their just due as an important piece of this history. From the late nineteenth century throughout the twentieth century, narratives of Parchman have included women only sparingly.¹ The fact that African American women, though a small percentage, were housed at Parchman from its inception in 1901 through the early 1980s meant that the story of the penitentiary could not overlook their significance. However, that is exactly what happened.

Policy makers at Parchman penitentiary, constructed to function as a penal farm that used the labor of incarcerated men and women to turn a profit for the state, never had any qualms about incarcerating African American women and putting them to work. Reminiscent of the old southern plantations in the South, the labor of black women was vital to the success of the penal farm. With African American men and women performing much of the menial labor, the system functioned under paternalistic rule. In a South where women’s respectability was paramount and

white men went to dire straits to uphold white women’s womanhood, they did not extend this same reverence to African American women. The racial and sexual ideals that white southerners, especially men, held regarding African American women meant they found it easier to criminalize them as opposed to white women. Once imprisoned, African American women found it hard to receive any form of justice and were often left to their own devices when searching for avenues for freedom.

The history of race in Mississippi, then, positioned incarcerated African American women in a very peculiar place. While prison administrators considered incarcerated African American women at Parchman to be a viable source of labor and income, they also penalized these “incorrigible women” for being black and criminals. As punishment, these women were forced to toil in the convict leasing system, labored alongside men on chain gangs, worked daily on the penal farm making clothes, prepared food for inmates, and harvested crops. What this illustrates is that while black women’s labor was important to the penal farm, their incarcerations served as a marker of what was not a southern genteel woman. In contrast, white women, should they find themselves incarcerated, were given small jobs to perform on the farm until they completed their sentence. The numbers show, however, that at no time during the first half of decade did white women outnumber black women within the penitentiary. The numbers, and surviving records indicate that African American women were at Parchman working alongside incarcerated men and enduring injustice. What this means is that to have a complete story of the Mississippi carceral state, everyone must be included.

In studying the history of incarcerated women in Mississippi, one must consider Parchman at its inception. By the turn of the century, African Americans had lost almost all of
their rights gained through the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized segregation in the South and lynching became a permitted practice. African American men and women toiled under the unfair system of sharecropping and rarely had an avenue for social or racial advancement. Mississippi, interested in new streams of revenue, sought a system that was self-sufficient. To make a profit while taking the burden of caring for prisoners away from the state, Mississippi participated in and profited from the convict leasing system until reformers and state officials began calling for its end. Whether or not these individuals felt a sense of shame toward the system is unclear. What becomes evident is that Mississippi understood that creating a penitentiary that functioned as a penal farm would mean the state would have a place to house their criminals while also turning a profit. What often goes overlooked is the reality that African American women, too, found themselves within the stronghold of the penal system that worked them just as hard as men prisoners in an unforgiving justice system.

African American women have often been excluded from the broad narrative of American history unless included as enslaved women, over-sexualized beings, criminals, or victims of rape and sexual exploitation. This manner of inclusion exemplified all of the stigmas that African American women endured for being black, female, and criminal. A mark against everything that seemed right with society, African American women found they were ostracized and often overlooked. This might explain why African American women in the history of southern penal system, until recently, have gone almost unnoticed. Coupling this omission with the intersections of race and gender placed African American women on the peripheral of justice in Mississippi.
During the twentieth century, northerners and southerners alike considered the penitentiary a worthwhile place to send the bad seeds of society. While northern prisons functioned under a more utilitarian system based on rehabilitation, southern prisons meant to punish severely those who committed crimes, even if that meant prisoners suffered by toiling in the hot sun for close to sixteen hours a day.

As the forgotten offenders, incarcerated women often had to carve out a space for themselves behind bars while exploring different avenues of freedom. Many women spent time writing family members in order to stay current on life outside of the walls. Some women used their time to write governors and family members seeking pardons. When women requested pardons on their own behalf, their letters provided insight into their personal lives, provided details surrounding their incarceration, explained how their viewed the circumstances surrounding their crime, and why they believe they should be pardoned. Wealthy southern white men, who had a vested interest in the labor of black women, also used this vehicle to request the pardons of certain women whom they deemed valuable. These letters provide an extensive look into the complexities of injustice and freedom.

The oral histories of women including L.C. Dorsey, Sonya Fox, Stephanie Adams, Olivia Jefferies, and Avery Jackson offer different perspectives on the Mississippi penal system. While each woman had her own personal experience with the judicial system, what stands out is that in some ways their stories are all connected. The women relayed stories of abuse, mistreatment, racism, and sexual exploitation while also tackling what it meant to be incarcerated in Mississippi. What the stories of these women provide is a spotlight on the intricacies of the
penal system while also pointing out the injustices and hardships that many women endured at
the hands of the penitentiary.

Nowhere can one truly comprehend the effects of incarceration on those incarcerated and
their families than by looking at the outcome of the case of the Scott sisters. The case of the
Scott sisters’ long-fought journey to freedom illuminates how unjust the Mississippi penal
system was to these two poor young African American women. The world would have never
known about these two women had it not been for a sickness of one of the sisters and the
grassroots activism of many people who wanted to tackle the grave injustice they felt that the
sisters endured.

The Scott Sisters: Continuous seeds of Injustice

Jamie and Gladys Scott had served nearly 16 years of their double life sentence for two
counts of armed robbery when they were released from the custody of the Mississippi
Department of Correction on January 7, 2011. The sisters, who spent their incarceration housed
at the Central Mississippi Correctional facility, would have been among the forgotten had it not
been for a few activists who took up their plight and began denouncing their unfair sentences.
The grassroots movement led by their mother, Mrs. Evelyn Rasco, who sought her daughters’
release, attracted national attention. For years family and friends of Gladys and Jamie
unsuccessfully fought for their release. Jamie suffered kidney failure in 2010. Coupling the
inconsistencies in the testimony during the trial with the health of Jamie, a renewed urgency
emerged to free the sisters. The Scott’s lawyer, Chokwe Lumumba of Jackson, along with
advocacy groups including the Jackson branch of the National Association for the Advancement
of Colored People (NAACP), the Mississippi branch of the NAACP, the Innocence Project, and the Mississippi American Civil Liberties Union all joined in the call for the sister’s immediate release. Their arguments were that the sentences were excessive and according to Lumumba, “Two white girls would have no way gotten two life sentences.”2 While the organization’s involvement proved to be very important in the push to gain the freedom of the Scott sisters, it was also the groundwork and constant protest of average citizens who made the movement more powerful. In a massive letter writing campaign to Mississippi governor Haley Barbour and U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, family members and activists alike argued the time had come for the women, now 38 and 36, to receive justice by being granted a pardon. Former Freedom Riders, who through personal experience understood the hardships the sisters must have endured while incarcerated, wrote a letter to the governor demanding the release of the Scott sisters’. The complexities of their case were paramount when considering the crime the women were accused of committing and their subsequent punishment. The stipulations surrounding their release from prison were even more shocking especially when taking into consideration their economic state once released.

On December 29, 2010 when Governor Barbour suspended the sentences of Gladys and Jamie, one would imagine that this would be a day of rejoice. While their mother, lawyer, family members, advocates, and especially Gladys and Jamie, were happy that the dark days of incarceration were over, they all understood that this was not a monumental victory against injustice in Mississippi. The days ahead were going to be long and the battle for justice was ongoing. While reports from the day of their release quoted the sisters as saying that they were

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“grateful” and “blessed” after being released from prison, both had to wonder how they were going to afford a kidney transplant, medical bills, and parole fines. The sisters could not afford the procedure and were unsure if they would qualify for Medicaid. Governor Barbour was on record saying that one of the reasons he considered releasing the sisters was that Jamie Scott’s dialysis was costing Mississippi nearly $200,000 a year. Their release, then, was more of an economic issue for the governor than an issue of justice. Following their release, one stipulation the sisters faced included Gladys, 36, donating her kidney to Jamie, 38, within a year. Their lawyer and several activists wondered how this would happen given that a doctor had ordered both sisters to lose weight before the surgery could take place. While questions remained regarding how the sisters would fare once released from custody, Gladys and Jamie were just happy to finally be going home to their five children, grandchildren, and extended family.

The day the sisters were released a press conference was held where Gladys and Jamie answered questions from the news media and gave short statements about their newfound freedom. Jamie, ecstatic about being released from prison, stated, “I’m real weak…it’s like a dream, I can’t wake up right now. I never thought this day would ever come, when I’d be on the outside of the walls,” as she wiped away tears. She went on to state, “Now I’m on the outside, and I can get some decent medical treatment. I am so very grateful for this day.” According to reports, their release was also a reunion for the women who had been held in separate locations within the prison. While Gladys and Jamie were excited and relieved to be released from custody, a larger issue remained. The sister’s would have to spend the rest of their lives on parole. Parole meant paying fines that the two women could not afford. That, however, was the

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4 Ibid.
price of their freedom. Nsombi Lambright, the director of the Mississippi ACLU, was quoted as saying that he believed that the Scott sisters’ case was “a grave miscarriage of injustice,” one that in many estimations could never be undone.

The tragic case of the Scott sisters illustrates the unjust complexities of the Mississippi penal system. Their conviction on charges of masterminding the robbery of two men with the help of three African American male acquaintances and stealing $11 dollars at gunpoint landed the sisters in the hands of the Mississippi department of corrections. Even though no gun was ever found and there were no injuries, their conviction of two counts of armed robbery illustrates just how unjust the penal system treated African American women. The Scott sisters had no previous records. This was their first time to get in any kind of trouble. Both were young women. Both were mothers. The system, including the jury and judge, seemed to take all of that into consideration when implementing their sentence. While one might think that considering their age and the fact that neither Gladys nor Jamie had ever been in trouble before that the court would have shown leniency, the direct opposite happened. The jury seemed to punish the sisters because of their gender and race. That happened often in Mississippi. The stories are numerous but have to be uncovered.

Willy Scott, the older brother of Gladys and Jamie, was an Army staff sergeant in Afghanistan. He had serious misgivings regarding what happened to his sisters. When prompted, Scott exclaimed, “How do you take two teenage girls and some teenage boys and rob a person for $11 and get life in prison? Every day people commit terrible crimes, and they don't get life in prison. They were kids. They weren’t adults. They were children. How do you
justify that?”5 The Gladys and Jamie’s brother understood the unjust system that incarcerated his sisters but what he could not understand was how that happened. Sentenced to life in prison, both sisters seemed to receive a punishment that did not fit their crime, especially when taking into consideration the lack of credible evidence during their trial. The story of the Scott sisters exemplifies all that was, and in many cases still is, wrong with the Mississippi justice system. Stigmatized as offenders, the sisters had no form of recourse against a system that since its inception criminalized African American women. The reality is that stories like the Scott sisters are more common than one might imagine.

Parchman and the Mississippi Prison System Today. What Now?

In 2015, the Mississippi Department of Corrections houses fewer than 19,000 persons. Of those incarcerated, approximately 2,700 are incarcerated females.6 There are three state prisons, fifteen regional facilities, and five private prisons. Of the three state prisons, Central Mississippi Correctional Facility is the only unit that houses incarcerated females. When opened in 1986, incarcerated females were relocated from Parchman in the early 1980s and relocated to CMCF.7 This facility houses approximately 1,500 incarcerated women who are classified under different custody levels, including minimum and medium security, Maximum (Close custody) and death row. All female offenders sentenced to death in the state are housed at CMCF and

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7 Mississippi Department of Corrections, Division of Institutions, http://www.mdoc.state.ms.us/division_of_institutions.htm
male death row offenders are housed at the Mississippi State penitentiary, Unit 29. CMCF has an inmate capacity of 2,125.\textsuperscript{8} Referred to in this work as Parchman, women were originally housed here. Today, the prison consists of minimum, medium, and close level male offenders. According to the MSP, offenders provide more than 100,000 hours of free offender labor each year to adjacent towns and counties, as well as assisting other state agencies.\textsuperscript{9} As a penal farm, the bulk of the activity involving Mississippi Prison Agricultural Enterprises, the unit responsible for a majority of the farming for the prison system, takes place at Parchman. MPAE supplies food to the 3 State Institutions, 17 Community Work Centers and 4 Restitution Centers.\textsuperscript{10} The MDC continues to operate and turn a profit today.

While the inmate population has changed throughout the years, what has remained constant is that the Mississippi penal system still has a long way to go in the way that prisoners are treated. The story does not end with the Scott sisters; rather, the story begins with a new awareness of the injustice that incarcerated women endure daily at the hands of a judicial and penal system in Mississippi. The stories of the women included in this work intend to centralize incarcerated women into the narrative of Parchman and reveal their importance to the history of prison studies. Without their inclusion there is no definitive history on Parchman.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
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Andrew Longino (Papers)
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Anslem J. McLaurin (Papers)
Council of Federated Organization Records
Edmund Noel Pardon Files
Freedom Riders (Collection)
Joan Trumpauer Collection
L.C. Dorsey Papers, 1979-1992
Mississippi Sovereignty Commission Files
Murphy, Dennis (Papers)
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University of Mississippi Department of Archives and Special Collections, University, Miss.

Alfred H. Stone Collection
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David Cohn Collection
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VITAE

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Education:

**Doctoral Candidate**, Department of History, The University of Mississippi, 2006-Present
Dissertation: “Please Don’t Forget about Me: The History of African American Woman and Imprisonment in the Mississippi Penal System,” directed by Dr. Ted Ownby and Dr. Charles K. Ross
*Defended: July 21st, 2015.*

**M.A.**, U.S. History 1877-Present, The University of Mississippi, 2006

**B.A.**, Liberal Studies, Reinhardt University, 2003
Thesis: “The Personal Story of Slavery through Enslaved Women’s Voices,” directed by Dr. Kenneth H. Wheeler

Teaching Experience:

The University of Mississippi

**Instructor of Record:**

**History 330: Mississippi History**, Summer 2015

**History 106: U.S. History Since 1877**: Spring 2015, Fall 2014, Spring 2014, Fall 2013, Spring 2012, Fall 2011, Spring 2010

**History 332: The South in the 20th Century**: Fall 2013


**African American History 307: African American History to 1865**: Fall 2012, Summer 2011

**African American Studies 410: Readings in U.S. Black Feminism**: Spring 2013

**African American Studies 339: African American Women’s History**: Summer 2012, Fall 2012, Summer 2011
African American History 350: Topics in African American History: Spring 2013
African American Studies 310: Experiences of Black Mississippians: Summer 2013
AAS 201: African American Studies 201: Summer 2009, Fall 2009, Summer 2010
AAS 202: African American Studies 202: Spring 2010, Summer 2010

Online/Adjunct Instructor

History106: U.S. History 1877 to Present: Itawamba Community College, Online, Spring 2009 - Fall 2010
History 1113: World Civilization I: Victory University, Online, Fall 2013
History 1203: History of World Civilizations II: Victory University, On-site, Fall 2013

Teaching /Research Assistant
AAS 350: African American Women’s History, Spring 2009
HIS 106: U.S. History since 1877, Fall 2006-Spring 2008
Research Assistant, Fall 2008
Research Assistant, Fall 2007
Research Assistant, Summer 2007

Selected Awards and Fellowships:

The University of Mississippi
Dissertation Fellowship, Department of History, Spring 2011
Dissertation Fellowship, Graduate School, Fall 2010
Black Graduate and Professional Student Leader of the Year Award, 2010
Research Fellowship, Department of History, Spring 2009
William Winter Student Scholar, William F. Winter Institute, 2007
Georgia Nix Miller Women’s Activism Award, Sarah Isom Center, 2006
Minority Fellowship, Graduate School, 2004-Present

Reinhardt University
“10 Under 10” Alumni Award, Reinhardt University, Spring 2013

Community and Public Service Award
Lifetime Dedication Award, Boys and Girls Club of Rome, GA, Spring 2005
Invited Lectures:

“Women Matter Too: African American Women and the Southern Justice System, 1890-1980,” talk delivered at Delta State University, Cleveland, MS, October 20, 2014


“I Beg for your Mercy: The History of Imprisoned Women and their Plea for Pardon in Mississippi,” paper delivered for The Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies Brown Bag Lecture Series, The University of Mississippi, University, MS, September 17, 2012

“Is the United States in a “Post Racial” Society and where do Black “Sista’s” fit in?” paper delivered at Race In the Millennium” Roundtable at The University of Mississippi, University, MS, March, 19, 2010


“Please Don’t Forget About Me: The Criminalization and Punishment of Women in the American Penal Justice System,” talk delivered for History 702, Research Seminar, with invited guest, The University of Mississippi, December 10, 2007

Selected Conference Presentations:

“I Beg for Your Mercy”: The Business of Black Women’s Bodies in the Carceral State through the Life of Hettie Record of Mississippi, 1892-1902,” delivered at the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Jacksonville, FL, October 2-6, 2013

“Weaving an Oral History Website and Avoiding Technological Entanglement,” delivered at the Oral History Association Annual Meeting, Pittsburgh, PA, October, 2009

“Black History Voices,” talk delivered for Black History Month Symposium, a joint production for Mississippi Public Broadcasting and The University of Mississippi, February 27, 2007

“Using Modern Technology to Document the Past,” presentation delivered at the Creating Futures through Technology Conference and Trade Show, Tunica, MS, March 21-22, 2006

Public History and Exhibitions:

“Reading Women into History,” Women’s History Month Symposium, The Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies in conjunction with Thacker Mountain Radio, The University of Mississippi, March 7, 2013

“Reading Women into History: The Life and Times of Women from North Mississippi,” Women’s History Month Symposium, The Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies, The University of Mississippi, March 8, 2012.

Introducing “Black History Voices: The Lives of African Americans in the United States from Slavery to Present,” Black History Month Symposium at The University of Mississippi, Mississippi Public Broadcasting, 2010

“Making Do: The North Mississippi Women’s History Project,” Oral History Project, Department of History and Division of Outreach and Continuing Education, The University of Mississippi, Fall, 2005- Spring, 2009

Introducing “Black History Voices: The Lives of African Americans in Mississippi from Slavery to Present,” Black History Month Symposium at The University of Mississippi, Mississippi Public Broadcasting, 2008

Conferences Organized:

“First UM Conference on Rethinking Mass Incarceration in the South,” University of Mississippi, 2014


University Service:

The University of Mississippi
Senator, History Department Representative, Graduate Student Council, 2010-2011

Graduate Women’s Director, Graduate Student Council, The University of Mississippi, 2009-2010

President, Black Graduate and Professional Student Association, 2008-2010
Graduate Student Representative to the Faculty, History Department, The University of Mississippi, 2008-2009

Chancellor’s Commission on the Status of Women, The University of Mississippi, 2006-2010

Crisis Intervention Volunteer, Women and Families Center/Oxford Crisis Center, 2005-2007

**Community Activist:**

Founder and Director, “I-VOW” (I am a Voice for Women), Non-profit organization for women in transition from penal institutions to freedom, September 2012 – present
  * Provides sources of educational, mentoring, support and empowerment of women who are current or former prisoners and serves as an advocacy organization that seeks to aid women entangled in the penal system.

Founder and Director, “Stand Up,” a mentoring program for African American female women ages 10-18, Rome, GA, 2001-2011
  * Provided mentorship, tutoring, health education, and leadership skills to at-risk African American female women ages 10-18 years of age.

**Professional Memberships:**

American Historical Association
Association of Black Women Historians
Association for the Study of African American Life and History
Organization of American Historians
Oral History Association
Southern Historical Association
Black Graduate and Professional Student Association
Feminist Majority
Graduate Women’s Association