

SILVERED ON BOTH SIDES

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STRIPES BUT NO STARS

Dublin Core

Title

Stripes but No Stars

Subject

race; African Americans; the South; Birmingham; North Carolina

Description

"Stripes but No Stars" provides a glimpse into the lives of both blacks and whites in the Gilded Age South.

Type

Essay

Creator

Scarlet Jernigan

Source

Image Courtesy of the American Museum of Photography

Date

circa 1892

Format

digital

Contributor

Thomas Lindsay

Coverage

N/A

Publisher

N/A

Rights

N/A

Relation

N/A

Language

N/A

Identifier

N/A

Text Item Type Metadata

Text

"Stripes but No Stars" by photographer Thomas H. Lindsey (1849-1927) gives mute testimony to a reality of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that is oft forgotten. By 1900, state legislatures in many southern states had passed laws that targeted African-American males for vagrancy, changing employers without permission, riding freight cars without tickets, and having sexual relations with white women. State and local governments inconsistently enforced and recorded these statutes, and many of the 100,000 to 200,000 African Americans arrested for these infractions usually had no attorneys to represent them in their subsequent trials and sentencing. Local farms, lumber camps, quarries, factories, and large corporations leased the convicts these machinations produced. The case of twenty-two-year-old Green Cottenham reveals how the system worked. Arrested in Alabama in 1910 for vagrancy, the judge sentenced Cottenham to thirty days hard labor, but when the defendant could not pay fees associated with his case, the judge lengthened his sentence to almost a year. The county then sold his contract to the U.S. Steel Corporation, for whom Cottenham worked in a mine near Birmingham (Blackmon, 2, 6-7). As Douglas A. Blackmon, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning work *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*, notes, "What the company's managers did with Cottenham, and thousands of other black men they purchased from sheriffs across Alabama, was entirely up to them" (Blackmon, 2). Within the mines, disease, accidents, and homicide cut short the lives of many prisoners, and overseers utilized the same techniques of coercion slaveholders had used against enslaved peoples before emancipation (Blackmon, 2, 8).

Few primary sources offering African Americans' side of the story remain, but Thomas Lindsey's photography provides hints of whites' attitude toward the system. Most whites accepted these practices without question, and Lindsey himself was no reformer (Blackmon, 8-9). Of Scottish heritage, he was born in Virginia, and as a teenager had fought for the South during the Civil War, though he was only sixteen years old when the war ended. Lindsey later moved to Asheville, North Carolina, and opened a commercial photography business. He specialized in portraits and documentary photography of Asheville and the surrounding countryside (Massengill, 63). The image "Stripes but No Stars" appeared in a catalogue from which customers could order prints. The photographer placed this image in a special section, "Class Z," which he described as follows: "In this class is represented all kinds of Character and Comic Subjects, such as rude Mountain Teams, Mountain Vehicles, Cabins where the lower classes exist—views photographed from real life during our rambles through the mountains. To many, this is the most interesting class in our entire list" (Museum of Photography). To Lindsey, this image evidently represented a bit of "local color," a term usually referring to the particular customs of an area but which could have a double meaning here. The convicts at work were simply something that one was likely to see if he rambled about the mountains of western North Carolina. The very title that he gave the photo was facetious. These details reveal that he had distanced himself from the subjects of "Stripes but No Stars." Lindsey's commentary above cited "rambles" about the countryside. Though a resident of Asheville, Lindsey was a tourist as he wandered the landscape, viewing all the strange sights showcased there. As far as the modern viewer can discern, he harbored no empathy for those he photographed on these treks.

In "Stripes but No Stars," the prisoners labored to make improvements on a section of the Western North Carolina Railroad near Asheville when Lindsey came upon them. The photograph seems to be a strange portrait, appearing to be posed, especially when compared to other images by this photographer of the same workers, which show them in action (Massengill, 67-68). Here, the workers are not actually doing anything. In fact, most of their tools are visible on the other side of the railway. There seems to be no clear reason for them to be lined up on one side of the track other than at the request of the photographer. With the line of laborers on one side, tools on the other, and the two white overseers in the distance, Lindsey gave the image aesthetic balance and told a story that Lindsey himself would have viewed differently than the modern observer.

As a native Virginian born before the Civil War, Lindsey would probably not have blinked an eye at the sight of enslaved peoples before emancipation, and so this new form of bondage would have been unlikely to shock. Most white Americans viewed these laborers, in their striped uniforms, as convicts and criminals, for that was what the criminal justice system had declared them to be. It is obvious from the image that the workers are probably all African Americans. (The one closest to the photographer may be white.) Because many white Americans were quick to jump to conclusions concerning race, they would probably assume that these convicts were all murderers, rapists, and thieves. Even if a white observer was aware of how the system worked, with its targeting of vagrants and other blacks hapless enough to run amuck of the system, he probably still would have viewed the laborers as the worthless dregs of society and concluded that at least the system was putting them to some use.

For the historian, this image offers a glimpse of the work conditions of these laborers and the convicts' attitude toward the photographer, both of which are revealing in their own way. Unlike some African Americans sentenced to hard labor, these are all garbed in prison uniforms. It was not uncommon for convicts to work in the rags of the clothes they wore when authorities arrested them. These laborers all wear shoes, which could only be a good thing considering their work. The men apparently have their lunch pails in hand, which means they did receive sustenance while working. One assumes that Lindsey came upon them as they were about to take their lunch break. In all three available images by Lindsey, many of the workers acknowledge the camera, though none are as posed as "Stripes but No Stars." For the laborers, the arrival of Lindsey may have been a welcome distraction. A handful of workers are turned away from Lindsey in the other images, which the observer could interpret as an intentional avoidance of the camera's lens, but may just signify a lack of interest. The men's expressions appear more neutral in the other two photographs, which show them at work or facing the camera from where they stood. In "Stripes but No Stars," distress is visible on some faces. Why is there a difference? Possibly the men resented being made to "perform" for the photographer, or maybe they were simply famished while Lindsey delayed their lunch.

For the modern viewer, especially one aware of the system at work here, the image tells a story of oppression and a systematic abuse of power. The viewer has no way of knowing who the true criminals are in the line of stripe-wearing convicts. Here, those hapless enough to catch authorities' attention at the wrong time are indistinguishable from hardened felons. It also tells of hopelessness, for these men could have theoretically overwhelmed their overseers, as the prisoners outnumbered the guards. The ratio of workers to visible overseers is about 25 to 2 in "Stripes with No Stars," with both of the overseers carrying weapons, though only the rifle or shotgun of one guard is visible here. Other images by Lindsey show 5 overseers, all in close proximity to the convicts. Yet, these prisoners did not rise up, just as enslaved peoples had rarely staged outright rebellion against slaveholders. Why not? The powers that be had created a system so stacked against these people that overt insurgency did little good in the long run and resulted in death in the short run. Resignation was often the way to survive, as there really was no escape, as Lindsey's stark "portrait" attests.

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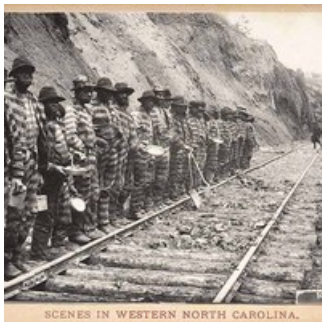
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Original Format

photograph, platinum print, 5x8 inches

Files



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