

AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF INCARCERATION IN
CALIFORNIA, 1851-1990

by

AUGUSTINE SCHULLER BEARD

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Marsha Weisiger

This thesis uses official reports, legislative documents, and news articles to understand the relationship between incarceration, labor, and the environment. In the nineteenth century reformers, state officials, the general public, and free, white laborers all debated the future of incarceration in California. By 1880, the state constructed Folsom State Prison as a natural resource colony, prioritizing natural resource development and preservation of the racial hierarchy of California's labor system over concerns about moral rehabilitation and health. In the early twentieth century, Progressive and Conservation Era ideas about outdoor labor and moral transformation offered a resolve to the nineteenth century tensions. In highway camps and prison farms, incarcerated workers expanded capitalism to new rural fringes. The state presented these civilizing, masculinizing projects that rehabilitated prisoners' minds and bodies. In the post-war period, the highway camps evolved into conservation camps. The incarcerated workers were disproportionately urban men of color who labored to develop natural resources and protect white, rural communities from natural hazards. In the eyes of white Californian's, the prisoners' heroism earned them a degree of cultural citizenship. However, the camps contributed to imbalances in environmental citizenship

in post-war California: prisoners were equated with natural resources; the camps contributed to the unequitable geography of natural hazard management; and like other penal reforms, they did not quell the urban disorder that arose in part because of environmental injustices in communities of color. Environmental degradation in rural economies and the emergence of law-and-order conservatism shifted priorities, and rural whites demanded prisons to provide employment. In the end, California incarceration made wasted landscapes and bodies productive, and prioritized natural resource and hazard management over the benefits prisoners received from the “wholesome outdoors.”

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Introduction

California is a state of fires and prisons. By the end of October 2017, fires in California had caused over six billion dollars in damages, with over five thousand homes destroyed, nearly one hundred thousand people displaced, and forty-two people killed. Of the 9,500 firefighters, 3,800 were state prison inmates, who had risked their lives earning around one dollar an hour. With non-incarcerated workers earning at least \$10.50, the prisoners fighting to stop the fires surely saved the state millions of dollars in labor costs. On news and social media, the public debated how to interpret incarcerated labor. As a *San Diego Union-Tribune* headline succinctly put it, “For \$1 an hour, inmates fight California fires. ‘Slave labor’ or self-improvement?”¹ The forests and wildland-urban interfaces where inmates worked to pacify the flames seemed to be either a site of class struggle or rehabilitation. Perspectives from the incarcerated workers themselves also highlighted this binary. One woman explained to *The New York Times*, “There are some days we are worn down to the core... and this isn’t that different from slave conditions. We need to get paid more for what we do.” Another woman explained the fulfilment she felt from a sense of re-earning citizenship: “It feels good... when you see kids with signs saying, ‘Thank you for saving my house, thank

¹ Luis Gomez, “For \$1 an Hour, Inmates Fight California Fires. ‘Slave Labor’ or Self-Improvement?,” *San Diego Tribune*, October 20, 2017, <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/opinion/the-conversation/sd-how-much-are-california-inmate-firefighters-paid-to-fight-wildfires-20171020-htmlstory.html>.

you for saving my dog.’ It feels good that you saved somebody’s home, you know? Some people, they look down on us because we’re inmates.”²

Caught up in the disastrous fires that swept California in the summer of 2017 was the “Golden Gulag” – California’s penal system, which has been the largest state prison system since the 1980s. As of 2016, around 242,000 people were locked up in California, with around 136,000 in state prisons. For every 100,000 black people in California, 3,036 were incarcerated – a rate nearly seven times higher than that of white people, who were incarcerated at 453 per 100,000 white Californians. While constituting only 6 percent of the state’s general population, black people composed 27 percent of the state’s prison population.³ The California state prison system includes over forty correctional facilities and nearly fifty conservation and rehabilitation camps across every region in the state.⁴ This system of mass incarceration, particularly of people of color, and the vast geography of prisons that sustain it is what scholars have termed the “carceral state.”

The tension between exploitation and rehabilitation that the *New York Times* piece explores is at the heart of the environmental history of incarceration in California. Since the establishment of San Quentin State Prison in 1851, state officials, reform advocates, prisoners, and rural and urban citizens have debated how and where inmates should labor. Inmates and untamed landscapes presented similar obstacles to capitalism. Criminals represented an unproductive class that needed to evolve into civilized and

² Jaime Lowe, “The Incarcerated Women Who Fight California’s Wildfires,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2017, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/31/magazine/the-incarcerated-women-who-fight-californias-wildfires.html>.

³ Prison Policy Initiative, “California Profile,” <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/CA.html>.

⁴ “Printable Maps of California’s Correctional Facilities,” <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/map/>.

contributing members of society, and wilderness contained underutilized natural resources and threatened communities with environmental hazards such as wildfire, flooding, and landslides. The state needed to tame these unruly men and environments.

I argue that incarceration in California served to expand and develop the hinterlands, making unused landscapes productive and transforming “backwards” criminals into citizens. Ideas about natural resources, outdoor labor, health and climate, and other areas of interest to environmental historians have a central place in broader narratives about the emergence and growth of the carceral state and mass incarceration. An environmental history of incarceration and prison labor provides a new framework for understanding the development of the carceral state. Between 1851 and the emergence of mass incarceration in the 1980s, California developed a carceral geography that aided in the extraction, transportation, and commodification of timber, minerals, and other raw materials. Incarceration developed into a network of “resource colonies” that connected hinterlands to metropolises with convict labor. By resource colonies, I mean spaces where the state located incarcerated labor to transform landscapes in a manner that facilitated the extraction, transportation, and commodification of natural resources. These include not only prisons themselves, but also prison farms, highway camps, and firefighting camps. In the nineteenth century, incarcerated workers constructed dams and canals, quarried stone for San Francisco streets, and produced jute bags to transport California’s agricultural goods. In the twentieth century, the convicts worked in highway camps, connecting metropolises to urban centers and later in the century, in conservation camps where they suppressed fires and controlled floods. The state sought to maximize the utility of the criminal

lower classes, incorporating them into the broader project of extending colonialism and capitalism into underdeveloped regions.

This is not to say that reformers' ambitions for rehabilitation and renewed citizenship were disingenuous or a veil behind which the state hid more malevolent intentions. On the contrary, discourse about social transformation bolstered the resource colony model of incarceration and vice versa. While in the nineteenth century, reformers clashed with those they saw using incarceration for profit and extraction, beginning in the twentieth century, reformers and capitalists' interests aligned in the highway camps that developed into the conservation camps after WWII. Since the early twentieth century, reformers have used rehabilitative and economic justifications to expand camp programs and public works projects with convict labor. However, the resource colony model and imperative to use incarceration to productivist ends superseded rehabilitative goals when the two did not align.

Chapter One covers the development of the early California prison system between 1851 and 1900. In this period, two crises compelled state officials and others to consider the relationship between incarceration and nature. The first was an apparent failure of a convict-lease system at San Quentin under the private authority of James Estill, a San Francisco area capitalist. Frequent escapes, poor discipline, and harsh conditions brought Estill's management to the attention of the state. When the legislature investigated and challenged the system of private control, they determined that the geography and environmental conditions predestined San Quentin to be costly and insecure. This observation prompted the next crisis. After the state seized the prison, a debate ensued about how, if at all, the California prison system should expand.

With the notion that San Quentin lacked “natural advantages,” state officials set out to find a location that was better suited for incarceration. Legislators, prison officials, reformers, and the public debated the expansion in terms of access to natural resources, health, climate, and labor, which resulted in a decision to construct Folsom State Prison, which opened in 1880. I argue that in the end, a resource colony model of incarceration prevailed. It was against this backdrop of productivism and capitalist expansion that the environmental history of incarceration in the twentieth century unfolded.

Chapter Two examines the rehabilitative ambitions of reformers, experts, and state officials in the period from 1900 to 1942. Progressive era ideology about masculinity and conservation coupled with new penological thought about rehabilitation provided a new language to justify outdoor labor. While nineteenth century reformers opposed the Folsom quarry and other outdoor labor, reformers in the twentieth century found a place in nature for their projects of social transformation. Grounded in ideas about evolution and a faith in expert knowledge, officials developed a program of highway camps and farms, with an intent to transform backwards criminals into true men. While attempts to rehabilitate men through outdoor labor were certainly genuine, the highway camps received funding and support for their growth in part because they provided a cheap labor source to expand the transportation infrastructure into the most rural parts of the state, thereby increasing access to new markets and natural resources. Conservation ideology reconciled the tension between reformers and capitalists encountered in the nineteenth century and provided a new justification to expand the carceral geography and resource colonies.

Chapter three traces the development of forestry and conservation camps from World War II into the 1980s. Built off the model of the highway camps earlier in the century, conservation camps employed prisoners to work in forests on fire suppression, flood control, road repair, and other duties determined by the Division of Forestry and other partnering agencies. The conservation camps served as a highly visible interface with rural and suburban communities, making white Californians feel safer from both urban disorder and natural disasters. Rather than developing criminals into citizens as they purportedly attempted, the state reduced inmates to their role in the natural resource development and conflated the prison labor with the timber capital the prisoners were protecting. Thus in the late 1970s and 1980s when the conservation camp program and rural economies began their decline, rural Californians turned from timber and mining to the next resource they saw available: prisons and prisoners. The expansion of prisons in rural California was in part because of these ideas about incarceration and nature that developed out of the conservation camp program.

The history of prison has long been an interest to scholars. Most notably, Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* traces the genealogy of prisons and their relation to governing bodies, ordering time, and surveilling citizens in industrial capitalism.⁵ Further, many works on the history of incarceration have entered popular, non-academic discourse and greatly influenced criminal justice activism.⁶ Recently, historians have taken a renewed interest in American prisons and the carceral state. The carceral state is the set of political apparatuses surrounding incarceration

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Vintage Books, 1977).

⁶ Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Seven Stories Press, 2011); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (The New Press, 2012).

including policing, surveillance, policy, and discourse. Historians have sought to contextualize the carceral state in American political and social history more broadly. Areas of focus have included race, labor, national political trends, gender, and prisoner resistance.⁷ Historians have explored California's influence on broader American politics, San Quentin's fame as a rehabilitative institution in the early twentieth century, inmate and officer labor, and race in California's history.⁸ However, the historians have not focused as much on the relation between incarceration and natural resources, the built environment, environmental justice, the environmental-management state, environmental thought, agriculture, and other areas of interest to environmental historians. An environmental history of incarceration offers insight into the historical development of prisons as well as new perspectives on human relations to nature.

Environmental history is a discipline that asks the question: how does nature matter in history? Rather than treating the environment as a backdrop for human events and agency, environmental historians center nature as an indispensable force in their

⁷ Kelly Lytle Hernández, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, and Heather Ann Thompson, "Introduction: Constructing the Carceral State," *Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 1, 2015): 18–24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav259>.

⁸ Ethan Blue, "The Strange Career of Leo Stanley: Remaking Manhood and Medicine at San Quentin State Penitentiary, 1913–1951," *Pacific Historical Review* 78, no. 2 (May 1, 2009): 210–41, <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2009.78.2.210>; Shelley Bookspan, *A Germ of Goodness: The California State Prison System, 1851-1944* (U of Nebraska Press, 1991); Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Univ of California Press, 2007); Volker Janssen, "When the 'Jungle' Met the Forest: Public Work, Civil Defense, and Prison Camps in Postwar California," *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (2009): 702–26; Ward M. McAfee, "San Quentin: The Forgotten Issue of California's Political History in the 1850s," *Southern California Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (1990): 235–54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41171534>; Ward M. McAfee, "A History of Convict Labor in California," *Southern California Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (1990): 19–40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41171510>; Clare V. McKanna, "The Origins of San Quentin, 1851-1880," *California History* 66, no. 1 (March 1, 1987): 49–54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25158428>; Clare V. McKanna, "Crime and Punishment: The Hispanic Experience in San Quentin, 1851-1880," *Southern California Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (1990): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41171509>; Joshua Page, *The Toughest Beat: Politics, Punishment, and the Prison Officers Union in California* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

analysis of past events. The earliest environmental historians were interested in conservation, environmentalism, wilderness, and forests.⁹ Later historians abandoned assumptions of declensionism and an inherent dichotomy between culture and nature that undergirded the analysis of the first generation. They also widened their scope to questions of colonialism, state power, knowledge, built environments, and seemingly “unnatural” landscapes.¹⁰ Race, gender, sexuality, class, and other topics usually contained to the realm of social history have become increasingly present in environmental history.¹¹ I will situate my research in this body of literature that converges social history, geography, and environmental history.

The relation between state power and nature has long been a popular topic in environmental history.¹² Clarence Hall’s dissertation “Prisonland: Environment, Society, and Mass Incarceration on New York’s Northern Frontier, 1845-1999,” engages this dialogue about nature and the state, tracing the development of prisons in New York’s Adirondack region. Hall argues that the demand for “law and order” from suburban whites and the rural demands for economic development outweighed other

⁹ For analysis of American environmental historiography see Paul S. Sutter, “The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History,” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (June 1, 2013): 94–119, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jat095>.

¹⁰ Among the most influential contributions are Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (Harper Collins, 1990); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford University Press, 1999); Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (Macmillan, 1996); Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (Oxford University Press, 1985); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden : Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1967); Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹¹ Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Marsha Weisiger, *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country* (University of Washington Press, 2011); Connie Y. Chiang, *Shaping the Shoreline: Fisheries and Tourism on the Monterey Coast* (University of Washington Press, 2009).

¹² Perhaps most notably, White, *The Organic Machine*.

considerations in the growth of the carceral state. Historians such as Richard White and Donald Worster write of the bureaucratic state as web of regulators and experts empowered through the incomprehensibility of the bureaucracy and their distance from the public. However, Hall finds that the public was deeply involved in the the bureaucratic components of constructing New York's "prisonland." Conservation groups, wealthy vacationers, rural workers, anti-prison advocates, suburban conservatives, and inmates all had different visions for the Adirondack landscape, and they leveraged the state in effort actualize their vision. Hall's work provides important groundwork for the relation between the rural-urban divide, conservation, state power, and incarceration.¹³

Another important contribution to the environmental history of incarceration is Connie Chiang's "Imprisoned Nature: Toward an Environmental History of the World War II Japanese American Incarceration" which explores the role of the environment in the site selection, recreation, and labor of the Japanese and Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II. She finds that nature was both a force of empowerment and assimilation in the experience of those incarcerated. The prisoners found themselves in unfamiliar climates forced to labor on projects by officials who sought to assimilate and engender loyalty. However, the incarcerated communities used gardening, recreation, writing, and art as ways to engage the environment for

¹³ Clarence Jefferson Hall, "Prisonland: Environment, Society, and Mass Incarceration on New York's Northern Frontier, 1845-1999" (State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2014).

empowerment and resistance. My work will expand on her framework that centers experience, ideology, and imagination to the history of incarceration more broadly.¹⁴

In his article, “When the ‘Jungle’ Met the Forest: Public Work, Civil Defense, and Prison Camps in Postwar California,” Volker Janssen writes about “forestry honor camps,” low security facilities in rural areas where incarcerated people can work on reforestation or fighting wildfires. He argues that through civil service, inmates earned a degree of citizenship that incarceration otherwise denied to them. Further, he notes the contradiction that many of the inmate workers were urban men of color working in white, suburban and rural communities that largely voted for policies and politicians that encouraged the “law and order” conservatism that contributed to mass incarceration.¹⁵ The conservation camps contributed to California’s post-war “ecology of fear,” whereby natural hazard infrastructure and investment benefited white middle and upper class Californian’s at the expense of urban people of color.¹⁶

Both environmental historians and historians of the carceral state have taken interest in labor. One contribution of the environmental history of labor is the way historians have disrupted the notion that labor necessarily degrades pristine environments and a hierarchy of knowledge that places expertise over localized experience that accompanies outdoor labor.¹⁷ More recently, environmental historians of labor have explored the ways that both labor and landscapes are gendered or

¹⁴ Connie Chiang, “Imprisoned Nature: Toward an Environmental History of the World War II Japanese American Incarceration,” *Environmental History* 15, no. 2 (2010): 236–67.

¹⁵ Janssen, “When the ‘Jungle’ Met the Forest.”

¹⁶ Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles And The Imagination Of Disaster* (Henry Holt and Company, 2014).

¹⁷ Richard White, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?” William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, 1st edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).

racialized, and these insights will contribute my work.¹⁸ Further, environmental historian Mark Fiege writes that intersections with labor history can bring environmental history less “natural” spaces such as automobile factories – or in the case of this thesis, prison quarries.¹⁹ Neil Maher’s work, *Nature’s New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* discusses the way that the state sought gendered social transformation for young working class men in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which informs my own work of the prison highway camps that preceded the CCC.²⁰ From the convict-lease system to the neoliberal construction of the “prison-industrial complex,” labor has long been at the center of critiques histories of incarceration. The convict-lease system allowed private entities to contract prison labor for little cost, providing revenue to the state and maintaining the racial hierarchy in the post-slavery south. Inmates worked on “chain gangs” to construct railroads and often work on the same plantations that slaves labored on a generation earlier.²¹ Alex Lichtenstein, in “A ‘Labor History’ of Mass Incarceration,” calls on labor historians to analyze how prisons have shifted resources

¹⁸ Chiang, *Shaping the Shoreline*; Neil M. Maher, *Nature’s New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2007). Josh McDaniel, “Pulling Streaks: Voices from the Turpentine Woods,” *Southern Quarterly*; *Hattiesburg* 46, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 109–18. Diane Glave and Mark Stoll, *To Love the Wind and the Rain - African Americans and Environmental History* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (University of Washington Press, 2013).

²⁰ Neil M. Maher, *Nature’s New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

²¹ Jaron Browne, “Rooted in Slavery: Prison Labor Exploitation,” *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 14, no. 1 (2007): 42–44. Cassandra Y. Johnson and Josh McDaniel, “Turpentine Negro,” in Glave and Stoll, *To Love the Wind and the Rain - African Americans and Environmental History*.

geographically and politically in a “complex of economic transformation, shifting resources, public investment, and new political constituencies.”²²

By exploring the economic geography of incarceration, this thesis answers both Fiege and Lichtenstein’s calls to expand the spaces of analysis and the manner that incarceration contributed to economic transformation. In doing so, I engage foundational works from both environmental and carceral history. William Cronon in *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* describes the American West as a network of natural resource hinterlands and industrial metropolises connected with infrastructure that quickly transported goods, labor, and communication.²³ In *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South*, Alex Lichtenstein argues that the convict-lease system was not just an archaic or obsolete vestige of slavery, but rather, a vital component in the political economy and modernization of the the post-bellum South. Rising costs, rather than humanitarian concerns, influenced state decision-makers in the transition from the convict-lease system to state-run public works projects.²⁴ Rebecca M. McLennan, in *The Crisis of Imprisonment: Protest, Politics, and the Making of the American Penal State, 1776–1941* provides a groundbreaking account of contract labor in Northern states, arguing that profitability of prison labor was a central component of the growth of the penal state outside of the South in the nineteenth century. However, her focus remains on

²² Alex Lichtenstein, “A ‘Labor History’ of Mass Incarceration,” *Labor* 8, no. 3 (September 1, 2011): 5–14.

²³ William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1992).

²⁴ Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (Verso, 1996).

convict-lease, contract systems, and the motive to make prisons self-sustaining. This thesis will consider prison labor in a broader geographic and economic context, considering how prisons and prison labor extracted, moved, and transformed California's natural resources. Kelly Little Hernandez's *City of Inmates* argues that incarceration in Los Angeles was a component of colonial power that exerted control over and racialized subjects such that the state and could preserve white capitalist power. Racialized incarceration dates back to Spanish colonial rule, and the present-day carceral landscape of the city owes to a long history of conquest and colonialism.²⁵ As Lytle Hernández and Lichtenstein both demonstrate, incarceration was a component of broader economic projects to secure power and capital for a ruling class.

I situate incarceration not only in the political-economic context, but also in its geographic context engaging Cronon's framework to understand how incarceration interacted with nature and space. Combing histories of labor, geography, and other themes of interest to environmental and carceral historians, this thesis investigates the relation between incarceration, landscapes, and natural resources. It seeks to better understand and contextualize modern forms of incarcerated labor, especially where it clearly engages the natural world, such as the firefighters in California. Incarceration, I find, became a network of resource colonies and state officials intended modernize California, incorporating new markets and extraction points into the state's economic geography.

²⁵ Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (UNC Press Books, 2017).

Chapter 1: In Search of “Natural Advantages,” 1851-1900

James Estill, despite his extraordinary and diverse career, found himself flustered and out of his element as a businessman defending himself to the California state legislature. Estill operated San Quentin State Prison under a lease with the State of California beginning in 1851. By 1857, he had come under fire for his alleged mismanagement and corruption as he worked prisoners offsite and did little to prevent escapes. Under Estill’s management, San Quentin State Prison hardly resembled the modern image of a prison. Today, the idea of a prison conjures a particular built environment and surrounding geography, usually a large concrete facility with a wall or fence in an isolated, rural region. Estill, however, worked prisoners offsite at ranches, quarries, and logging sites often without guards, where they were free to drink and mingle with outsiders. Prisoners often strayed from worksites. They could be found fishing or even wandering about San Francisco. The prison itself served to house and feed prisoners, but the small cluster of buildings sitting along the coast, across the bay from San Francisco, did little to prevent escapes.²⁶

The chaos at San Quentin is partly attributable to the political historical context. In the 1850s, California underwent perhaps the most rapid demographic and political changes in the state’s history. The transfer of sovereignty from Mexico to the United States and the economic migration owing to the 1849 discovery of gold necessitated an expedient construction of a state apparatus.²⁷ Among the earliest tasks of any state government was establishing a prison. In 1851, soon after the U.S.-Mexican War where

²⁶McAfee, “San Quentin.”

²⁷ Kevin Starr and Richard J. Orsi, eds., *Rooted in Barbarous Soil: People, Culture, and Community in Gold Rush California* (University of California Press, 2000).

he served as general, Estill entered a contract, along with his partner Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, to construct and manage the state prison in exchange for full rights to convict labor. The arrangement seemed like a steal. All Estill and Vallejo had to do was provide food and clothing to the prisoners, and they could claim the entire value produced by the incarcerated workers' labor. After six years of Estill's management, however, Californians had enough. Furious with the lack of control Estill appeared to have over the prisoners he oversaw, neighbors, guards, and others demanded that the California legislature intervene to prevent prisoner escapes and wanderings.²⁸

It was in this context that Estill found himself in 1857. To many legislators, San Francisco residents, and others, it was clear the lease system was not working. Testimony attacked Estill for both his harsh treatment of inmates and his inability to properly discipline them. According to an 1857 report on the state prison by the California Legislature Joint Committee, the site was too isolated, making it difficult to mobilize an army if there was a revolt. The committee feared that it would be too easy for prisoners to hide out in the forests that surrounded the peninsula. Further, there was little stone or timber in the immediate proximity of the prison. The senate eventually concluded that San Quentin lacked almost all the "natural advantages" necessary for incarceration including its access to natural resources and a geography that ensured adequate security. Not only the Estill's mismanagement, but also nature itself seemed to work against a successful penal system.²⁹

²⁸ McAfee, "San Quentin."

²⁹ "Report on the State Prison by the Joint Committee of the Senate and Assembly," 25 February 1857, *Appendix to the Journal of the Assembly and Senate of the State of California*, (Sacramento: State Printer, 1857), 5. Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*.

Against this backdrop, incarceration in California transformed dramatically by 1880 from a chaotic and inconsistent practice into a well codified and ordered system that sought to maximize profit for the state and expand industry. After the state seized San Quentin from private lessees in 1858, a new crisis ensued. The population of California was rapidly growing and an expansion of the prison system was in order. With a shared recognition of the state's observation that nature interfered with incarceration and caused the first crisis, numerous actors including wardens, legislators, reformers, journalists, capitalists, and others all envisioned the way incarceration should interact with the natural world. They debated the future of incarceration in terms of natural resources, labor and the environment, and health and climate. In 1880, after two decades of debate, the state opened Folsom State Prison just outside of Sacramento. I argue that in the end, the state constructed a model of incarceration that engaged the natural world to promote the expansion of capitalism while concerns for the moral reform and health of prisoners fell lower on the priorities of the state.

Nineteenth-century ideas about nature, crime, and order informed both the construction of San Quentin and the crisis that transferred the prison from private to state control. Officials and scholars in California professed an environmental determinism that California bore the dual curse and boon of rich natural resources, especially gold, which brought great capital investment to the state, but also attracted criminal elements and immigrants. In his 1855 book, *Land of Gold*, an educated traveler from North Carolina, Hinton Rowan Helper expressed a lengthy condemnation of Californian frontier life and the impact of mineral resources on the racial and class dynamics on California. Helper believed that the promises of gold and fertile land in

California were overrated, writing that the only fertile valleys were oases in a land that was otherwise desert. Helper wrote that he knew of “no country in which there is so much corruption, villainy, outlawry, intemperance, licentiousness, and every variety of crime, folly, and meanness.”³⁰ The gold attracted men who would otherwise not work, but in the mines would labor endlessly in hope for gold. Not only did the gold attract most criminal aspects of white society, but also led to an undesirable racial heterogeneity that Helper believed further induced crime. He explained through analogy: just as a panther, lion, tiger, and bear could organize in peace over the body of a slain deer, “Americans, English, French, Chinese, Indians, Negroes, and half-breeds,” could not “greet each other cordially over a gold mine.”³¹

Governor John B. Weller, in his 1860 farewell address, proclaimed that the 1848 Gold Rush brought immense numbers of immigrants into California, and “but few of the restraints of civilized society were felt or observed.”³² The new governor Milton S. Latham agreed, observing that “California was, at an early period, a land of refuge for the most hardened of all countries.” He noted that this necessitated the early construction of a prison system that, at the time, only private capital was capable of producing in a timely manner. However, he argued, the state was suited by the turn of the decade to claim ownership of incarceration and use convict labor for the benefit of

³⁰ Hilton Rowan Helper. *Land of Gold*. (Baltimore: Published for the Author by Henry Taylor, 1855), 37.

³¹ Helper, *Land of Gold*, 39. Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (Penguin, 2016), 145.

³² “Governor John B. Weller's Farewell Address, January 9, 1860,” *California Assembly Journal, Eleventh Session* (Sacramento: State Printer, 1860), 61. Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*.

the state.³³ Estill used this environmental determinism to deflect the culpability for the unruly condition of the prison: “I regret to say that there can be no change for the better as long as the mines continue to yield their golden treasure, and the personal safety of our citizens requires them to go armed.”³⁴ Regardless of whether Estill or the state governed the prison, the lessee explained, the abundance of mineral wealth would continue to attract undesirable migrants, preserving California as a haven for criminals and lawlessness.

While Estill used environmental determinism to account for problems at San Quentin, his critics were not as convinced. Estill’s critics were most concerned with the number of escapes under the lessee’s watch. State officials, neighbors to the prison, and San Francisco residents argued that Estill’s liberal “trustee” policy and his greed for profit put too many prisoners at work on nearby ranches or timber harvest sites. Estill, however, argued that the site naturally lent itself to escapes, and that he could do nothing to prevent them. In 1855, Estill described the fog that surrounded the bay for five months of the year, how it rolled in from the hills, and how dense it could become. “Prisoners learn all the peculiarities of the location,” he wrote “and are not slow in availing themselves of every opportunity that occurs. Not a few have escaped by this means.”³⁵ Many would escape into the surrounding forests, able to sustain themselves and hide out for weeks at a time, and they could steal from nearby ranches and

³³ “Inaugural Address of Milton S. Latham,” *California Assembly Journal, Eleventh Session*, (Sacramento: State Printer, 1860), 108. Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*.

³⁴ James Estill, “Report of the Lessee of the State Prison to the Legislature of the State of California, February 14, 1855” *California Appendix to the Journal of the Assembly, Sixth Session*, (Sacramento: State Printer: 1855), 4. Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

residences after escapes. Estill reported it was nearly impossible to recapture prisoners after they escaped into the woods. Through careful observation and planning, then, the prisoners were able to develop an environmental knowledge that aided their escape. Estill suggested that there was nothing he could do to prevent these escapes, and that they were inevitable given the proximity to the forests and sea.³⁶

While Estill offset culpability for the unruly state of the prison to the geography, officials and neighbors of the prison believed that the source of the problem was the labor system. Estill frequently sent prisoners to go harvest wood, work on ranches, and conduct other duties off site, often with little supervision from guards or “trustee” prisoners. One revolt occurred at Marin Island, where prisoners were quarrying stone, and one of the largest escapes occurred near the redwoods where prisoners were sent to harvest wood. State inspectors from the legislature concluded that it was not just the natural conditions around the prison, but the amount of freedom that Estill granted prisoners in their labor around the prison. The inspectors wanted a wall built and for the prisoners to work within the confines of prison. Estill did not want to agree to this, because a wall would cost him more, and he could gain more wealth by contracting the prisoners to ranchers and timber harvests nearby.³⁷ The state purchased the contract for the prison from Estill, but sold the contract back to him soon after a financial scandal with the first elected board. Estill, having been exhausted by the first controversy in

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Report of the committee relative to the condition and management of the state prison,” *Appendix to the Journal of the Assembly, Sixth Session* (Sacramento: State Printer: 1855), 7-8, 27. Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*.

1855, was eager to sell his contract. John McCauley and Lloyd Tevis took over the prison in 1857.³⁸

After the messy transfer in control concluded with state seizure of San Quentin in 1862, the state sent an investigative committee to the prison to determine the conditions under the new contractors. This committee suggested to the senate that the environmental problems with San Quentin went beyond just security and prisoners' capacity for escapes. They reported the poor health conditions owing to the built environment and, more importantly, the economic disadvantages from the geography of the site. In 1862, soon after the state had settled a dispute with the last private contractor, McCauley, the board of directors reported finding the prison in a "dilapidated condition" and "barely habitable."³⁹ The state prison was not on any state thoroughfare, so it was costly to transport prisoners and goods to and from the prison. There was no adequate well or above ground sources of water and no timber near the site, which was necessary for construction materials and fuel. While the original surveyors believed the clay would be abundant, it had been nearly exhausted, and the stone on site was worthless. The soil was too poor for agricultural purposes, and the topography was so uneven and mountainous that they had to expend too many resources to level it for the prison. Siting these concerns, the committee recommended the authorization and selection of a site for a prison that would have adequate land and granite for prisoners to labor profitably. They suggested that one third of the prisoners with the lightest sentences be transferred to the new site. Categorizing prisoners, they believed, would

³⁸ Shelley Bookspan, *A Germ of Goodness: The California State Prison System, 1851-1944* (U of Nebraska Press, 1991).

³⁹ "Annual Report of the State Prison Directors for 1862," (Sacramento: State Printer), 5.

prevent comingling, which corrupted the minds of young, non-repeating offenders and was an early iteration of the security-level based model pervasive in US incarceration today.⁴⁰ In sum, the prison was disconnected from valuable natural resources and the broader economic geography of California. The geographic and natural inadequacies of San Quentin were sufficient cause to build a new prison – one the officials hoped could be located near more abundant natural resources and transportation infrastructure. The legislature agreed, and in 1858, authorized planning for a new prison.

By far, the prevailing view towards convict labor in the California legislature was that prisoners should work towards the profit, or at least, self-sufficiency of the state. Further, many argued that the labor should support private economic interests, especially the agricultural industry. In 1861, a committee tasked with surveying San Quentin State Prison argued that the previous decade's system of allowing prisoners to work on farms in the surrounding area was dangerous and unprofitable. Instead, they believed the prisoners could better support California agriculture by manufacturing implements for farms, vineyards, and ranches. By having prisoners construct barrels or pack meat, they could cut costs and circumvent the need to import costly goods from eastern states or from across the Pacific. Further, they hoped this manufacturing could utilize the timber and other natural resources native to California.⁴¹ Thus, the committee hoped to use prison labor to pursue a more isolationist economic policy with natural

⁴⁰ “Report of the Joint Committee on State Prison Affairs,” *Appendix to the Journal of the Assembly and Senate of the State of California* (Sacramento: State Printers, 1858), 4. Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*.

⁴¹ “Report of Joint Select Committee to Examine into the Affairs of the State Prison,” *Appendix to the Journal of the Assembly and Senate of the State of California*, 1861, (Sacramento: State Printers). Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*.

resources circulating within the state to support the growth of agriculture. Further, factory labor offered easier means of control than the trustee system and outdoor labor preferred by Estill and McCauley. This fear was realized the following year when a revolt broke out in the brickyard. Seizing the opportunity that outdoor labor offered, the prisoners “deliberately planned and perfected” an attack on guards in an attempt to escape. In just a few hours, thirty-two prisoners were shot, six died during the rebellion, and three died of wounds afterward. While some escapees were later captured, others were successful, totaling fifteen escapes that year alone. The directors complained that it was difficult to work the prisoners inside without adequate shops with sufficient equipment to employ enough inmates.⁴² Thus the state was willing to accept manufacturing industries in prisons so long as it contributed to the growing agricultural economy and provided security that outdoor labor and an open prison landscape could not. To the state then, incarceration needed to connect to the broader economic geography of the state. In the decades to follow, these questions of economic and natural geography would determine the trajectory of incarceration in California for the rest of the century.

With authorization for the construction of a branch prison, the state set out to find a site that would offer better “natural advantages” than the San Quentin site. Although the senate passed the act authorizing a new prison in 1858, the state did not seek to construct a new prison until the mid-1860s after population had increased from

⁴² “Biennial Report of the State Prison Directors,” 1862 (Sacramento: State Publishers), 6, 21-22. Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*. Hereafter, the Biennial Reports of the State Prison Directors or Board of Directors of the Department of Corrections will be cited as follows for brevity: Biennial Report Prison, 1862, 21-22; All are retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*.

569 in 1860 to 651 in 1865 rendering San Quentin over-capacity.⁴³ A committee designated to determine a new location took interest in an offer for an area in Folsom near Sacramento in central California. The decision to construct a prison at Folsom along the American River revolved around questions of values about the relationship between incarceration and nature. Prison officials, state legislators, experts, and reformers all had different visions about where the branch prison should be, why it should be built, and how it should operate. Those engaged in the decade-long conflict were not just determining the location of California's second state prison: they were debating the ways in which incarceration should relate to nature in terms of health, labor, and the natural resource economy. A model of incarceration that had inmates incorporated into the expansion of capitalism prevailed over other concerns and visions.

In the state's search for a potential site for a new prison, Horatio Gates Livermore saw a golden opportunity. H. G. Livermore spent significant time in Sacramento during his time as state senator in the 1850s, where he saw an underutilized American River. He envisioned an industrial metropolis similar to Lowell, Massachusetts in Folsom, 22 miles upriver from Sacramento where the river could provide power and transportation for logging and industrial pursuits. H. G. Livermore purchased the Natoma Water and Mining Company company in 1864 with his sons Charles Livermore and Horatio P. Livermore. The purchase included the water rights to nearly ten thousand acres of ranchland. With the Natoma company and rights to much of the river, H. G. Livermore set out to dam the American River to provide "nearly

⁴³ Bookspan, *A Germ of Goodness*, 25.

unlimited power” to factories and logging operations he planned for the town of Folsom.⁴⁴

Conveniently for the Livermores, the state set out to find a new prison site that would provide more “natural advantages” than San Quentin around the time that H. G. Livermore began his development of American River. Legislators wanted to ensure that the prison would be relatively self-sustaining in water and food production, as well as produce a profit for the state and contribute goods and materials to the broader economy. In 1868 a committee from the senate inspected two sites: one at Folsom and one at Rocklin, both about twenty miles northeast of Sacramento. The committee wrote favorably of the Folsom site, noting the “inexhaustible supply” of granite they believed could eventually produce a profit for the state. Furthermore, the site had arable land suitable for agriculture, and the Natoma Water Company would assist with infrastructure for water and water power. This offer was particularly enticing considering the difficulties that the state faced at San Quentin with water shortages. Moreover, the committee wrote that the nearby woods would provide material for barrels, vats, and casts useful for the budding wine industry in the region. At Rocklin, the committee toured a 360-acre site where the bidder promised arable land to build a prison farm. However, they found less access to water and fewer natural resources around the Rocklin site. The quarry site that could provide stone for streets and buildings, the timber that could provide material for agricultural commodities, the railroads that ensured access to markets, and the river that prevented the risk of water

⁴⁴ Biennial Report Prison, 1888, 74; “Folsom Power House National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form,” United States Department of the Interior, National Parks Service, n.d.

scarcity all carried more clout than a potential prison-farm. To the Livermores' delight, the state agreed to purchase the site from Natoma Water and Mining Company on June 30, 1868, for one hundred thousand days in labor.⁴⁵

The natural-resource model of incarceration that compelled the 1868 committee and agreement was not ubiquitously popular among Californians, and debate about prison labor, reform, and health and climate created gridlock that stalled the construction of Folsom for over a decade. Three stakeholders involved themselves in the Folsom labor debate: the state wanted to minimize the cost of prisons; the reformers wanted to maximize job security for ex-convicts and reduce recidivism; and free, white workers wanted to reduce the competition with inmate labor. All three involved differing visions for how incarceration would engage the natural world. By 1880, the state found compromise with the free laborers, working prisoners at the Folsom quarry and opening a jute mill at San Quentin – which free laborers' saw as difficult, undesirable labor. Reformers' concerns, including vocational labor and prisoner health, received lip service at best.

In the decade between the authorization of a new new prison in 1858 and the deal with H. G. Livermore in 1868, a prison reform movement emerged in California that looked for inspiration in eastern prisons. Reform advocates argued that the state should consider the relation between the physical health of prisoners and the environments where prisoners worked and comprised the major opposition to the construction of prison at Folsom. In the 1870s, two trends emerged that fueled the opposition. First, the state became increasingly concerned with governing the health and

⁴⁵ Bookspan, *A Germ of Goodness*.

sanitation of its citizens, especially in public institutions. The California legislator began appointing boards to govern public health and soliciting experts to report research and testimony for health policy. Towards the end of the decade, the relation between climate, health, and reform was one of the highest priorities to the opponents of the Folsom Prison.

Spearheaded by its vocal and determined secretary Reverend James Woodworth, the California Prison Commission (CPC) was the state's most influential reform organization in the 1870s. One penologist wrote of the CPC, "One of the most energetic, active, and useful among the prisoners' aid societies of America is the California prison commission," and praised Woodworth in particular.⁴⁶ The CPC received some funding from the state with the the mission of improving conditions in California prisons and jails and pursuing reforms towards more rehabilitative models of incarceration.⁴⁷ Woodworth and the CPC championed the Auburn system, a model of prison to promote discipline and rehabilitation that began in Auburn, New York, whereby prisoners labored in workshops during the day and remained silent in solitary confinement at night. Reformers at this time focused their efforts on education and religious services within prisons. For example, in 1870, San Quentin hired its first "moral instructor," C. C. Cummings, who was tasked with teaching the prisoner to read, write, and "cultivate their moral and intellectual powers."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Wines, E. C. *The State of Prisons and Child Saving Institutions in the Civilized World*. (Cambridge: University Press, John Wilson & Son, 1880), 186.

⁴⁷ *Appendix to the Journal of the Assembly of the State of California, 1878*, (Sacramento: State Publishers), 197.

⁴⁸ Biennial Report Prison, 1871, 34.

It was common for reformers like Cummings to compare rehabilitation and prison labor to “cultivation” of a plant in a garden. In 1886, Zebulon Reed Brockway, a penologist and reformer, spoke to the National Conference of Charities and Correction in support of labor in prisons. He explained that while free workers opposed prison labor, he believed that labor was an important part of moral reform for the prisoners. Brockway quoted the English clergyman Robert Collyer, comparing prisoners to a dried up root in a dark corner of a garden. Although discarded and forgotten, the root grew into a flower that blossomed the following spring thanks to “the only god it knew of—our blessed mother, Nature.”⁴⁹ This flower was “God’s blossom,” subverting the expectation of the gardener the way that reformed prisoners subverted the public’s expectations. Brockway explained, “If we work with mother Nature, it shall come to pass that, for crimes and their cure, society shall reach a perfection of development not possible without them.”⁵⁰ In this poetic passage, Brockway intended to refute beliefs that any prisoner was naturally a criminal. For Brockway and others, the prisoner, if properly cultivated, could naturally tend towards morality the way a bulb would grow into a flower. While this analogy served to undermine biologically deterministic conceptions of crime and argue that labor could serve reformatory ends, nineteenth century reformers did not conceive of a particular relation between nature and labor.

⁴⁹ Brockway, Z. R. “Labor in Prisons and Reformatories.” In Barrows, Isabel C. “Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction at the Thirteenth Annual Session Held in St. Paul Minnesota.” July 15-22 1886, 121-2.

⁵⁰ Brockway, Z. R. “Labor in Prisons and Reformatories.” In Barrows, Isabel C. “Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction at the Thirteenth Annual Session Held in St. Paul Minnesota.” July 15-22, 1886, 121-2.

Most reformers pushed for mechanical and industrial labor in prisons, believing this would best prepare prisoners for life outside of incarceration.

While he initially supported the branch prison at Folsom, believing it could resemble reformatory institutions in New York, James Woodworth withdrew his support upon seeing the future quarry sites. He wrote that “the granite quarries in the deep canyon above Folsom—with confined limits, and with the intense heat prevailing there in the summer, might, perhaps, answer as a place for the *punishment* of a limited number of the more hardened and robust convicts,” but should not be considered a suitable site for a reformatory.⁵¹ Unlike later reformers who found a place for outdoor labor and recreation in their efforts to change inmates, Woodworth and his colleagues saw hard, outdoor labor as an obstacle to reformation. It was preferable, they believed, to have the prisoners working in an industry that could employ them after incarceration. Only this model of labor, in conjunction with moral and religious teachings, could adequately “cultivate” prisoners into proper citizens.

In addition to advocating for more religious and education services and promoting manufacturing industries for purposes of vocational training, reformers also turned attention to health as it related to both built and natural environments. In the 1870s and 1880s, doctors, officials, and reformers began taking a more comprehensive view of prison sanitation, connecting it to health outside the prison and moral reform of the prisoners. In 1875, Dr. Eadle, the surgeon at San Quentin, wrote that prisoners came from unsanitary conditions in cities, bringing with them illness that spread through the prison. He wrote that the overcrowding, spread of disease, and inadequate food and

⁵¹ Bookspan, *A Germ of Goodness*.

water made it “absurd to expect reform, either morally or physically, under such circumstances.”⁵² Eadle suggested that some prisoners be “placed under proper circumstances and surroundings by such influences as humanity demands in a Christian civilization like ours, these men are not all irredeemable.” He reiterated what officials and politicians had argued for the past decade: that prisoners should be classified and separated in order to reform those that had not yet been lost to the depravity and corruption found in a prison environment. Prison officials had already taken steps to conduct such separation. In the previous year, they repurposed a “large room [2262 square feet], formerly occupied as a wagon shop in the basement of the manufacturing building” with 168 beds as a dormitory exclusively for Chinese men.⁵³ Eadle reported that this room was very unhealthy, lacking ventilation, and did not accommodate the growth in the prison population.

The California State Board of Health also took concern with overcrowding and sanitation at San Quentin. In their 1875 report, they were alarmed by the rapid growth of the prison and predicted even more growth given the “general character of the immigrants now daily arriving.”⁵⁴ In addition to improving the hygienic conditions, they agreed with Eadle that the prisoners should be classified and separated such that “those susceptible of moral improvement might be exempted from the contaminating influences of the incorrigibly vicious.”⁵⁵ Health experts saw immorality as a disease that

⁵² Surgeons Report, Biennial Report Prison, 1875, 49-50.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “Report of the State Board of Health.” *Appendix to the Journal of the Assembly and Senate of the State of California*, 1875, Volume III, 67. (Sacramento: State Publisher.) Retrieved from Hathitrust.org December 14 2017.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

spread just like the flu if prisoners were kept in close quarters. For Eadle and the State Board of Health, the issue of improving the sanitation and crowding at San Quentin State Prison was the first step in moral reform. These experts saw classification and separation as the first step, and the State Board of Health settled for an endorsement of continuing construction of Folsom State Prison, since it was already underway.

A tension between potential water shortages in freshwater-scarce landscapes and the disease found near wetlands and rivers emerged in the debate over the branch prison. The Folsom site appeared to avoid the troubles with water shortages that San Quentin had experienced for years. In the 1870s San Quentin prisoners and officials became concerned about water shortages and their effects on the operation of the prisons, especially in relation to sanitation and cooking. Officials found that while the dry climate brought good health, it also strained their resources in acquiring and distributing water efficiently. Prisoners complained about the lack of water available for cleaning and cooking purposes.⁵⁶ In the early 1870s, the state had to continually invest in new infrastructure to ensure sufficient water for prisoners, building new reservoirs, pipes, and wells.⁵⁷

While prisoners were building more infrastructure to secure water for San Quentin, scientists and health experts were exploring the relation between “malarial disease” and water resources in interior California. In 1875, Doctor Thomas Logan surveyed the theories about malaria and fever near the central California rivers,

⁵⁶ Biennial Report Prison, 1873, 15.

⁵⁷ “Majority and Minority Reports of the Joint Committee on State Prison Appointed to Examine into the Management Thereof, etc.,” (Sacramento: State Publisher) 1870, 4. Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*. “Report of the State Prison Directors,” (Sacramento: State Publisher) 1871, 11. Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*. Biennial Report Prison, 1873, 15.

reporting his findings to the California legislature. He explained that still water and wetlands seemed to spread the disease by miasma or gases. Although the areas had previously been healthy in drier, summer months, he wrote that the construction of dams, reservoirs, and other water infrastructure for the use of mining and agriculture had led to wetter, and thus unhealthier, conditions in the summer as well.⁵⁸ On this basis, reformers opposed to the prison at Folsom cited the climate and proposed labor conditions at the site. In 1874, reformist legislators wrote that the climate of central California was unhealthy and thus ill-suited for a public building. The summer heat and standing moisture, they believed, made the area susceptible to malarial diseases, which could not facilitate a reformatory. San Quentin, they wrote, was located at a healthy climate evidenced by the number of low cases of illness. They suggested instead the construction of a reformatory at San Quentin, where they believed more infrastructure could ease strains on water shortages as it always had.⁵⁹

In the nineteenth century, industrial workers felt a similar animosity towards prisoner workers that they felt towards Chinese migrant workers. They feared that mechanical and manufacturing industrial pursuits with prison labor would compete with free labor, and state officials generally responded in favor of white industrial workers. In 1874 the Mechanic's State Council wrote to the California legislature arguing "for a complete change in the system, so as to make the State compete with Chinese labor, in cases where they have monopolized any particular branch of business, and thereby

⁵⁸ Thomas M. Logan, "Malarial Fevers and Consumption in California." *Appendix to the Journal of the Assembly and Senate of the State of California*, 1875, Volume III. (Sacramento: State Publisher.) Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*.

⁵⁹ "Minority Report of the Joint State Prison Committee on the Establishment of a State Prison," (Sacramento: State Publisher), 1874, 2. Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*.

decrease the price still lower, so as to make it unprofitable to employ that class of labor.”⁶⁰ The council suggested that prison labor be directed towards doors, blinds, sashes, cigars, cigar boxes, coarse clothing, and other commodities that they believed to have “gone into the hands of men who are nothing but Mongolians.”⁶¹ Alternatively, the council conceded that they could support a quarry or a jute bag mill, as they believed that those would not compete with free, white labor.⁶²

This compromise by the Mechanics State Council was realized by 1880, with San Quentin prisoners manufacturing jute bags and Folsom prisoners working in the quarries. The state prioritized the racial anxiety and economic concerns of free, white workers over James Woodworth and the CPC’s proposal for transferable mechanical trades in prisons. Like the preoccupation with locating the prison near natural advantages, the development of prison labor policy in the nineteenth century demonstrates the importance of political economy in determining the landscape and geography of incarceration. Prisons needed to produce a profit and aid the development of the agricultural and urban economies, but could not do so at the expense of white workers.

The protest from reformers delayed but did not prevent the construction of Folsom State Prison. In 1874, six years after the state entered the contract with H. G. Livermore and the Natoma Water Company, construction finally began. A shortage in funding in 1878 seemed to provide one last opportunity to abandon Folsom in favor of a

⁶⁰ Memorial from the Mechanics’ State Council in reference to State Prison Labor, *Appendix to the Journal of the Assembly and Senate of the State of California*, (Sacramento: State Publisher) 1874, Volume VI. Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

reformatory institution at San Quentin, and reformers made a last ditch effort on the senate floor. At this point, the prison had almost been completed, but reformers in the legislature still recommended deserting Folsom altogether. Forming a committee to propose a reform-minded expansion of California's penal state, the legislators cited the same concerns about health, climate, labor and their obstacles to reform. Further, the committee accused Folsom advocates of being greedy in forcing labor on a quarry. The state could pursue self-sustainability in a prison, but they believed that the profit motive obstructed other priorities such as reform and sanitation. The committee wrote that "if punishment were the only end in view, it might be well to select Folsom as the place for inflicting it, but for the legitimate purposes of a State Prison, we are of the opinion that it is not the place."⁶³

Steadfast on securing a site that could provide a quarry and granite with adequate water, the Folsom advocates in the legislature countered the reformers, painting a picture of California's future with a resource-colony model prison. They described how the state could use the first rate granite, which would soon pave the streets and line the buildings of San Francisco and other urban centers. According to the legislators, even the mayor of New York, a model metropolis, believed in the superiority of granite. Moreover, the Folsom advocates explained that the new prison was situated near transportation infrastructure that connected to the East and all parts of the state, which would facilitate the movement of prisoners and goods to and from the

⁶³ "The Proposed Branch Prison," *Appendix to the Journals of the Senate and Assembly of the State of California*, 1878 (Sacramento: State Publishers), 7.

prison.⁶⁴ The advocates did not even address the concerns about health, reform, or climate that their political opponents highlighted. The image of a prison that provided raw materials for urban road and infrastructural development was enough for the California legislature, which approved the allocation for Folsom's completion.

After decades of debate and stalling, Folsom State Prison finally opened in 1880. Horatio Gates Livermore's plan for resource-colony model prison prevailed over James Woodworth's vision of an Auburn-style reformatory. More than a decade after he purchased the Natoma Water and Mining Company, Livermore died in 1881, never having had the chance to see his plan realized. After his death, his sons, H. P. Livermore and Charles Livermore took control of the company and set out to build the dam. Inmates did not immediately begin work on the dam. The first order was to clear the surrounding forest, construct a sewage system, and build a road in order to ensure the proper maintenance of a prison facility.⁶⁵

In 1882, the state was finally prepared to fulfil the contract to the Natoma Company and provide the promised convict labor for the dam. However, a conflict over the original deed halted work once again. In 1874, when the state began construction of the Folsom prison, the Board of Directors discovered that the 350-acre site was not the same land the state had hoped for, lacking some of the granite quarry sites for which they had originally chosen Folsom. The state secured an additional 150 acres from the Natoma Company, with the contract once again promising 30,000 days of labor. The company interpreted this as an *additional* 30,000 days totally 60,000 days, while the

⁶⁴ "Report of the State Prison Committee," *Appendix to the Journal of the Assembly and Senate of the State of California*, 1878, (Sacramento: State Publishers), 6-7. Retrieved from *Hathitrust.org*.

⁶⁵ Biennial Report Prison, 1888, 74.

Board of Directors maintained that the contract simply reiterated the original agreement. After inmates had worked a cumulative 11,000 days on the water infrastructure, a dispute over the original deeds arose, and the company halted the project. The Board of Directors sued, but the California Supreme Court decided in favor of the Natoma Company in 1888.⁶⁶

Full of confidence after the court's decision, H. P. Livermore arrived at the Governor Waterman's office in Sacramento to negotiate with the Board of Directors and Governor on May 5, 1888. Livermore had considerable leverage against the state. He and his company owned the land in front of the prison and surrounding the canal, allowing them to bar ingress and egress or access to water as well as the railroads that the state depended on to market its stone from the quarries. To make matters worse for the board, the original deeds that the previous board agreed upon lacked some absolute necessities for the operation of the prison: the rights to pump water across company lands to the prison, the rights to ingress and egress, and the right to maintain guard houses on company lands to supervise the quarry. Finally, the board found that the water rights contained in the 1868 deed would be insufficient for operating a prison in 1888. There were more prisoners than two decades earlier and the state needed more water for irrigation, power, and sanitation. The state agreed to provide sufficient convict labor to complete the water infrastructure, without consideration for a specific number of days, and Livermore agreed to provide all the rights the state needed to operate the prison. Rather than the original \$15,000 the state agreed upon (30,000 days at 50 cents a day), the inmate labor was worth closer to \$200,000 by the completion of the water

⁶⁶ Biennial Report Prison, 1888, 74.

infrastructure.⁶⁷ Further, they agreed to enlarge the canal from thirty to fifty feet in width, and the state received over eight hundred horse power from the dam rather than the two hundred twenty the original deed promised.⁶⁸ Once again, conflict over natural resources and labor complicated with bureaucratic nuance dictated the direction of California incarceration. In the end, private industry and the state agreed on even more water infrastructure, demanding more energy from the American River.

On January 16th 1893, the water flowing from the American River finally turned the wheels in the powerhouse, providing power to Folsom Prison, and making it the first prison in the United States with electric lighting. With the completion of the dam, the state could put prison labor and the power from the American River to other uses. The state opened an ice plant that December, providing refrigeration for surrounding fruit growers so their products could reach more distant markets. A local newspaper advertised that Sacramento residents could purchase this “summer luxury” for cheap.⁶⁹ The American River and infrastructure built in collaboration with the Livermores’ company irrigated the surrounding area, providing sustenance to inmates working in the quarries that provided stone for dams, canals, roads, and other structures around the state.⁷⁰ In 1895, the Board of Directors met with the Highway Commission to open bids for the purchase of rock-crusher that would convert the granite into a macadam for streets and highways.⁷¹ The prison that had cause so much conflict in the preceding

⁶⁷ “Folsom Power House National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form,” United States Department of the Interior, National Parks Service, n.d.

⁶⁸ Biennial Report Prison, 1890, 76.

⁶⁹ “A Summer Luxury,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, Volume 86, Number 109, 25 December 1893.

⁷⁰ Biennial Report Prison, 1894, 74.

⁷¹ “Outlook for Cheap Road Metal,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, 30 September 1895.

decades finally seemed to be following through on its promise to achieve self-sufficiency and provide raw materials and goods for California's growing urban and agricultural economies.

The abundant and cheap inmate labor provided the Livermores a springboard to propel their business and development projects around Sacramento. The dam and canal the inmates built near the prison provided a holding spot for logs floating down from the Sierra, which the Livermores processed in their mill, which operated on the surplus hydro-electric from the dam. In 1899, however, the heavy rains and flooding pushed the logs over the dam, demonstrating that the businessmen did not have as much control over the American River as they had hoped, and they had to shut down the mill due to the losses. Inspired by the success of the powerhouse at the prison, the Livermores built a dam downriver from Folsom in 1895, which provided hydroelectric power 22 miles away to Sacramento until 1952 – a distance much greater than anywhere in North America that the businessmen completed despite great skepticism from engineers and scientists.

Constant crisis and conflict characterized the period between 1851 and the 1890s in California incarceration. Much of this pivoted around opposing positions on the relation between nature and incarceration. The state justified the rapid construction and private ownership of a state prison in part because beliefs about environmental determinism, in addition to the financial problems of the early years in the state. Objections to the management largely revolved around the relation between nature and security, especially in relation to escapes. When inspectors found that the natural resources, economic geography, and health were all substandard for a modern prison,

they authorized the construction of a “branch” prison, where the young, uncorrupted prisoners would be sent. State officials fixated on finding a site that had adequate natural resources and transportation infrastructure so that the prison could contribute to the growth of capitalism. This preoccupation superseded the commitments to reform. Reformers criticized the obsession with granite at Folsom. They feared that such difficult labor would overburden the bodies of prisoners inhibiting rehabilitative ends. Mechanical labor, reformers believed, would better “cultivate” prisoners, like a gardener cultivated their flowers. However, state officials compromised instead with free, white workers who conceded that prisoners could work in granite quarries and jute mills for the budding agricultural industry – largely because of the poor work conditions and lack of competition in these industries. This compromise suggests that the state was committed to preserving the existing racial hierarchy over the potential for higher profits for the state or providing prisoners with transferable skills as the prisoners hoped. Further, the state only paid lip service to those who cited malaria and other health concerns, including the growing state apparatuses dedicated to health and public institutions.

An environmental perspective on early statehood and incarceration in California provides insight into the ambitions and ideology of officials and others with a stake in prisons. The California state prison system entered the 1890s with carceral geography that promoted the growth of capitalism. Incarcerated labor built the first dam on the American River, which stored timber from the Sierras and powered Folsom’s lumber mill. After passing through the Folsom Dam, the American River turned the wheels of the powerhouse at Folsom State Prison, powering the equipment and convict housing

necessary to maintain the quarry. The stone from the quarry traveled on the railroads to pave the streets of Sacramento, San Francisco, and other budding metropolises. Across the bay from San Francisco, incarcerated workers at the San Quentin jute mill produced burlap sacks that cheapened the cost of transportation for California's agricultural products. The productivist mandate involved not only the private leasing of convict laborers, or the motive to make prisons self-sustaining, but also, the transformation of landscapes and raw materials for capitalist interests. Two lessons emerge from this period. First, each stakeholder had a different vision for the perfect prison environment and how prison labor should interact with the landscape. Second, prison labor not only produced profit for private capitalists and the state, but also extracted and commodified natural resources. Considering natural resources, health, labor, environmental thought, and other themes of interest to environmental historians helps contextualize incarceration.

Chapter 2: Rugged Men in Rugged Country, 1900-1942

The first decade of the twentieth century, Folsom State Prison – and perhaps the entire California penal system – was in crisis, or at least appeared to be in the eyes of the wardens who oversaw its management at the time. In 1903, inmate R. M. Gordon led fourteen men in an escape using dynamite and armed with knives. The men overpowered the guards and warden Wilkinson, killing two and injuring others, took Gatling guns from the armory, and escaped eastward toward the foothills of the Sierras in El Dorado County. Headlines read “People of Mountain Town in Terror,” as soldiers and vigilante posses pursued the escapees who had scattered into the woods. One by one, the enforcement recaptured the escapees, taking most of them alive but killing one escapee and injuring several others.⁷² This dramatic and bloody debacle was an embarrassment to state officials. It made California’s penal system appear a vestige of the “Wild West” with convicts running loose in the hills and vigilante posses in pursuit. Folsom state prison had a reputation for its dungeon and harsh disciplinary regime and lacked a wall to prevent escapes. Thus, the whole catastrophe led officials to believe that there need to be improvements to the management and built environments of incarceration.

One of the most vocal advocates to reform of California’s prison system was Archibald Yell, the new Folsom warden after Wilkinson resigned in the wake of the escapes. In 1904, upon his arrival, Yell demanded the entire overhaul of incarceration in California. He found that reformation was an “absolute and utter impossibility” under

⁷² Bookspan, *A Germ of Goodness*, 46–47.; “Armed Convicts Commit Murder in the Folsom Prison,” *San Francisco Call*, 28 July 1903. Retrieved from *California Digital Newspaper Collection*.

the present system. Yell recommended the disestablishment of both Folsom and San Quentin, which he believed to be corrupt and unmodern beyond hope for improvement and advised a new prison system based on the budding science of penology, which promised to rehabilitate prisoners into civilized, Christian men.⁷³

One concern to Yell was the built environment and geography of the prisons. The crumbling infrastructure and lack of walls at Folsom made escape likely and rehabilitation impossible. Further, Yell observed that the granite quarries at Folsom were dwindling, making it more and more difficult for the state to profit from the mode of resource extraction that the original boosters of Folsom had in mind. Yell suggested selling the prisons, believing the locations in the San Francisco bay and along the American River in the Central Valley would be valuable to potential buyers. However, the lack of security at Folsom and difficulty in attaining water at San Quentin made them ill-suited to the “civilized Christian penologists” who would guide the new system.⁷⁴

While he espoused visions for reform, Yell imagined a carceral geography that focused on access to markets and natural resources, even more ambitiously than those who constructed the same prisons he hoped to dismantle. In place of the current system, Yell looked westward to the Pacific Ocean. He suggested prisons constructed off the coast of California on islands with sufficient water, farmland, and building-stone. In addition to preventing escapes like the one in July 1903, the islands would provide proximity to coastal merchants, who would purchase commodities produced with prison

⁷³ Biennial Report Prison, 1904, 96.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

labor. Moreover, the prison could purchase supplies for cheaper than by rail, and the island-prisons would have access to fuel from oil wells off the shore of California.⁷⁵ Thus, Yell pictured an oceanic carceral geography that expanded capitalism, state power, and civilized, Christian influence westward into the ocean, fulfilling another iteration of Manifest Destiny.

Archibald Yell's vision for a new prison system never materialized quite as he imagined it, and Warden J. J. Smith replaced Yell in 1909, possibly because of Yell's condescending ridicule of legislators and other officials who disagreed with his ambitions. However, a similar system did emerge by World War II that did not require overhauling the entire penal state. Within decades of Yell's proposition, thousands of inmates worked in state highway camps, constructing roads to the most rural, unpopulated regions of California including the same foothills where R. M. Gordon and his followers escaped decades earlier. Expanding capitalism into the mountains and forests rather than oceans provided access to timber capital and mining operations rather than oil and eastern markets. Drawing on Progressive Era ideas about the value of outdoor labor, advocates situated the highway camps in the same discourse about moral reform and new penology that Yell professed. In the same vein, prison farms received more appropriations from the state, allowing for agricultural employment and education, and by the end of the 1930s, the state envisioned and planned a new institution centered around a farm with modern rehabilitation in mind.

The notion of reformatory prisons across a network of islands was not too far off from how California prisons developed when reduced to its ideological foundation. At

⁷⁵ Ibid, 97-8.

the core, Yell's vision centered around using incarceration to engage the natural world in a manner that would expand capitalism and transform society's rejects into civilized men. I argue that while prisons had long sought to transform and master those within the walls, in twentieth-century California, this mastery drew influence from environmental thought about evolution, masculinity, and the benefits of recreation and outdoor labor. The decades of conflict over San Quentin and Folsom state prisons in the previous century revealed a tension between rehabilitative and capitalistic priorities for incarceration. Road camps and prison farms remedied this tension, using nature to pursue both. However, a drive to incorporate incarceration into a broader geography of capitalism weighed more heavily as the state pursued these programs.

Three important developments emerged in Progressive-Era penological thought that influenced Yell and later officials in their programs of prison reform. First, state actors such as wardens and politicians believed that inmates lagged in an evolutionary development from animality and savagery to manhood and civilization. During the early Progressive Era, penology shifted from spiritual conceptions of reform to more scientific and Darwinist approaches.⁷⁶ Sociological interpretations of *Origin of the Species* situated humans—no longer unique in a divinely designed and ordered world—in the realm of animals. Men still possessed a residual primitive instinct, carried through a history of evolution. August Drahms, the chaplain and moral instructor at San Quentin explained, “The criminal is an anomaly in civilization, because he represents primitive conditions under modern forms and an instinctive savagery not yet eliminated in past

⁷⁶ Benjamin Justice, “‘A College of Morals’: Educational Reform at San Quentin Prison, 1880–1920,” *History of Education Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (October 2000): 284, <https://doi.org/10.2307/369554>.

racial evolution through the process of evolution.”⁷⁷ Progressives believed the primitive manliness was a danger to society if not properly tamed. Middle and upper class men could escape civilization to sport hunt or recreate outdoors. Men of other classes, however, threatened the urban civilized order with their animality expressed through vice, immorality, and physical degradation.⁷⁸ For progressives, reformers, and others that held closely to this Darwinist framework, prison offered a useful tool for transforming men who had not achieved manliness.

For Drahm, evolution and crime was highly racialized. Echoing writers from the previous century who argued that California’s abundant natural resources attracted foreign criminals, Drahm detested the new wave of immigrants. While early immigration into North America brought the most “sterling” stock of the Old World, the door had been left too open and encouraged a “promiscuous invasion” of less desirable races. Immigrants and African Americans composed what Drahm called the “non-native” population of prisoners, and he argued that their disproportionate incarceration was evidence of their evolutionary backwardness.⁷⁹ Both race and class then fit into evolutionary conceptions of crime in the early twentieth century.

Second, these actors maintained a faith in experts to analyze and understand inmates and prescribe individualized programs of treatment, reflecting the “Gospel of Efficiency” that governed state conservation ideology at the time.⁸⁰ Like the individual

⁷⁷ August Drahm, *The Criminal, His Personnel and Environment: A Scientific Study* (New York : Macmillan, 1900), 59.

⁷⁸ Marti Kheel, *Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

⁷⁹ Drahm, *The Criminal*, 169-171. Drahm wrote that the “negro” was “virtually non-native” in his discussion of immigration of crime and incorporated them into his analysis of foreign criminals.

⁸⁰ Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890–1920* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999).

cells and contagions that infected the human body, experts could examine and prescribe solutions to the moral, physical, and mental shortcomings of individual inmates. The warden at Folsom State Prison in 1912 explained how each inmate who entered the prison received an examination by numerous prison officials including himself and the physician.⁸¹ Officials explained that “The very moment a man reaches the gate and is turned over to our care we begin the effort to fit him to go out again. Men should leave prison better than when they enter and the betterment should be all-sided—mental, moral and physical.”⁸² Humans, like the rest of nature, could be known and improved by qualified academics and doctors who brought scientific mastery into state control over people and natural resources.⁸³

Third, Progressive-era beliefs about the outdoors prison officials’ approaches to health, built environments, and labor. Theodore Roosevelt in 1913 wrote that the convict-lease system should be abolished in favor of “farming and outdoor life,” which were “of course advisable throughout the country.”⁸⁴ Officials wrote that many prisoners entered prison “nervous, exhausted, and showing in many ways the results of irregular and intemperate living.”⁸⁵ The state board of prison directors wrote in 1916, “Unquestioningly, many men are brought to crime through unhealth. Mischief is more prevalent in unsanitary than in sanitary prisons,” repeating Drahms assertion that certain environments brought out latent behavioral disorders in men.⁸⁶ Leo Stanley, the San

⁸¹ Biennial Report Prison, 1912, 11.

⁸² Biennial Report Prison, 1912, 135.

⁸³ Justice, “A College of Morals.”

⁸⁴ Theodore Roosevelt, “The New Penology,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 46 (1913): 5.

⁸⁵ Biennial Report Prison, 1912, 11.

⁸⁶ Biennial Report Prison, 1916, 8.

Quentin physician who served from 1913 to 1951 and was notorious for his sterilization program, greatly influenced California prison officials' approach to health. Stanley detested the conditions of the medical department upon his arrival. Lacking proper ventilation or sufficient windows, the "old hospital" was closed off and crowded. The miserable environment lacked the two elements essential for every cure: light and air. Further contributing to the improper sanitary conditions, "whites, negroes, and Indians comingled indiscriminately."⁸⁷ He and the new warden, James A. Johnson, concurred that undertaking a transformation of the prison medical department was an immediate priority.⁸⁸ Progressives incorporated outdoors, open space, and fresh air into how they planned to transform criminals into productive citizens.

Since the construction of San Quentin, farming was a consistent practice in California prisons. During the nineteenth century, prison farms fit into the state's model for self-sufficiency within the prison system, hoping to grow enough food to offset the costs of maintaining the facilities. In the first decades of the twentieth century, wardens and other officials had frequently advocated for funds to expand prison farms so that the prisons could produce their own food. In 1910, the Folsom warden wrote favorably of an experiment to grow tobacco and corn on the prison site, recommending that the state authorize funds for an expanded irrigation system that would allow the prison to grow crops for both prison consumption and shipment to other state institutions.⁸⁹ By the

⁸⁷ L. L. Stanley, "Tuberculosis in San Quentin., Tuberculosis in San Quentin," *California and Western Medicine, California and Western Medicine* 49, 49, no. 6, 6 (December 1938): 438. Stanley, 438.

⁸⁸ Stanley, "Tuberculosis in San Quentin., Tuberculosis in San Quentin."

⁸⁹ Biennial Report Prison, 1910.

1920s and 1930s though, ideas about evolution and transformation of prisoners through expert analysis influence farm programs and integrated them into reformatory practices.

Warden J. J. Smith, who replaced Archibald Yell in 1909 pursued a similar albeit less dramatic, reform to Folsom's management and labor system. Upon arrival, Smith lamented that the quarry was not achieving the profitability the state had hoped for, at a time when the income and capacity to employ prisoners was declining. Each year, it became clearer that the quarry, where one third of Folsom inmates were employed, could no longer be the primary industry to sustain the prison, if it ever was.⁹⁰ The rainy winter kept men in their cells, and summer heat waves prevented productive work.⁹¹ The granite was not unlimited as boosters had written decades before, and the climate conditions that skeptics of the Folsom institution noted proved to be an actual barrier to employing the men year-round. Officials in the nineteenth century advocated for the quarry based on its productive potential despite opposition from reformers, but by the early twentieth century, the quarry no longer met the profit-driven ends.

Prepared to try something new, Smith began experimenting with different farming practices to make cultivation more profitable for the state. Rather than just growing food for prisoners and guards, Smith spearheaded experimentation with commercial crops for markets. In 1910, the incarcerated workers grew eleven hundred pounds of excellent quality tobacco and one hundred dozen brooms of first-grade corn. In the dairy department, Smith wrote eagerly about the expansion of infrastructure including a new separator and churn, and a "modern," concrete barn equipped with

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Biennial Report Prison, 1916, 133.

electric lighting. Inmate cleared one hundred and forty additional acres of “unused land” for cultivation, more than doubling the agricultural operation from just a few years before. Because of Smith’s expansion and the labor of incarcerated workers, nearly all the vegetables consumed at the prison grew just outside the walls, and the state used the surplus at other facilities.⁹²

Soon after Smith’s expansion of Folsoms farms, between 1913 and 1915, officials experimented with reformatory farming institutions. The first was Frye Ranch in Napa County. The warden of San Quentin sent prisoners under thirty whom he deemed “susceptible of reformation.” At the ranch, the prisoners raised cattle, horses, mules, chickens, and hogs and aided in the general upkeep and maintenance of housing. Local residents resisted, expressing a similar animosity to prisoners in their community as their predecessors decades earlier under Estill’s authority, when locals berated the private leaser for letting prisoners wander free. Their opposition halted the project for almost three years. Perhaps unconvinced about the potential for the Frye Ranch or exhausted with the local resistance, the warden did not speak enthusiastically to the state senate about the project. He suggested that it was not advisable to set up a more permanent infrastructure and “[did] not advocate for any large appropriations.”⁹³ A similar short-lived project emerged a few years later with the State Industrial Farm for Women at Sonoma, which opened in 1922. After a number of women’s clubs across the state introduced and lobbied for a bill to designate the reformatory farm, the state legislature acquired 645 acres. The environment presented challenges to the reformers.

⁹² Biennial Report Prison, 1910.

⁹³ Biennial Report Prison, 1916, 20.

Fewer than 30 were arable, and a fire in March 1923 burnt the main building, including the residences, beyond repair. The women's clubs could not convince the state senate for further appropriations, and by June, the state discharged or paroled the few dozen women imprisoned at the farm.⁹⁴ The Frye Ranch and State Industrial Farm failed because of outside pressure from locals, a lack of enthusiasm in the senate, and various environmental challenges to the agricultural projects. However, the projects did influence and foreshadow the development of agriculture as reform in following decades.

The educational program at San Quentin offered agricultural classes as early as 1916.⁹⁵ By 1928, hundreds of prisoners were enrolled in agricultural classes such as practical farming, dairy farming, and landscape architecture. The education director eagerly wrote about expanding the breadth of the curriculum to include other vocational training.⁹⁶ Further, physicians and other officials wrote about the benefits to health from farm labor. Leo Stanley expressed enthusiasm for the farms, praising the acquisition of new land for cultivation in 1928, and explaining the double benefit of providing outdoor labor and healthy food to prisoners.⁹⁷ Stanley also took it upon himself to report on the health of the dairy and meat animals in the prison farm, as the productivity from these departments directly contributed to the food supply and health of prisoners.⁹⁸

While officials hoped farms could relieve some of the congestion in the prisons, an inadequate amount of land made it difficult to employ a significant portion of the

⁹⁴ Bookspan, *A Germ of Goodness*, 80.

⁹⁵ Biennial Report Prison, 1916, 15.

⁹⁶ Biennial Report Prison, 1930, 79.

⁹⁷ Biennial Report Prison, 1930, 61.

⁹⁸ Biennial Report Prison, 1932, 48.

population. In the 1920s, both San Quentin and Folsom prisons expanded the land under cultivation. In 1924, the warden at Folsom ordered inmates to cut and till a nearby forested hillside in preparation for cultivation and negotiated terms with the local water company to provide irrigation to the new land. This expansion came after a denial by the legislature to authorize a new plant to replace the quarry. The new farmland, he hoped, would help ease the pressure of a large and growing population of inmates.⁹⁹ Between 1910 and 1930, Folsom's prison farm grew from 240 acres to 1200 acres, but there was very little expansion in either San Quentin or Folsom's farms during the Great Depression despite consistent recommendations to employ more prison in agriculture.¹⁰⁰ In 1936, the 1200 acres at Folsom employed only about 100 men compared to 322 in Folsom's highway camps.¹⁰¹

Despite the failure of the modest prison farm for women in Sonoma years earlier, the state and California's citizens seemed more prepared for a reformatory women's facility by the end of the 1920s. Eleanor Miller, the only female legislator in California at the time, introduced a bill to construct a women-only institution, and transfer all of the women prisoners at San Quentin, which had incarcerated women since the beginning of California's prison system. An advocate of temperance, the interests of women and children, and religious morals, Miller casted herself as a political embodiment of the traditional role of women. She imagined the new institution based on domesticity and traditional femininity, writing, "Old-fashioned religious and moral teaching, coupled with obedience to home-rule and strict temperance principles

⁹⁹ Biennial Report Prison, 1924, 11.

¹⁰⁰ See Biennial Reports Prison, 1930-1938.

¹⁰¹ Biennial Report Prison, 1936, 71.

would be the best solution of our crime problems.”¹⁰² The senate passed Miller’s bill and appointed a board to determine a proper home for California’s women prisoners.

A board comprised entirely of women, chaired by avid prison reformer Rose Wallace, recommended a site in the Tehachapi Mountains of Kern County believing it could support agricultural work. Abundant water, a proper climate without punishing summers, and good soil all stood out to inspectors. Wallace and the board consulted and received endorsement from experts including the state architect, engineers, soil experts, and doctors. However, opponents argued that the site was a desert wasteland, and a lack of water resources threatened to repeat the issues experienced at San Quentin where the state had to constantly update and replace costly water infrastructure to keep up with demand. Wallace and other advocates finally secured the women’s prison in Kern County, but employed women in feminized industrial labor such as sewing, canning, and laundry rather than farming.¹⁰³

The success of agricultural classes and farms within San Quentin and Folsom encourage reformers to pursue the more ambitious project of constructing a prison that centered around agriculture and rehabilitation. The state acquired 2,600 acres of fertile land in Chino Valley, where officials hoped to build a prison with the primary goal of reforming prisoners. The new facility would incorporate a vocational program with an onsite farm for hundreds of prisoners offering hope of rehabilitation. In 1941, the California Institution for Men opened and was the first large-scale minimum security

¹⁰² Rose Miller in Bookspan, *A Germ of Goodness*, 85.

¹⁰³ Bookspan, 85.

institution in the United States.¹⁰⁴ The construction of the prison at Chino in a sense fulfilled the hopes of James Woodworth and other nineteenth century reformers six decades earlier who had hoped for a similar institution at Folsom. Unlike Woodworth and his contemporaries, twentieth century reformers drew on Progressive Era ideology that supported the notion that the outdoors had transformative qualities.

At the same time that Folsom Warden Smith experimented with growing cash crops and surplus produce in 1910, he pursued a more ambitious project outside the prison grounds, putting prisoners to work building a road nearby. Smith boasted that the project saved the county about five thousand dollars.¹⁰⁵ Desperate to find other profitable means to keep men from being idle, Smith and others insisted that the state allow an expansion of the model of employing incarcerated workers on road construction. In 1915, the state legislature complied with the request and authorized the use of prison labor offsite from the prisons as well as in counties where prisons were not located. They made this concession despite skepticism about security with offsite prison labor and without allowing for the termination of the Folsom quarry, which they believed still necessary to provide material for the wall yet to be built.¹⁰⁶

While more moderate than his predecessor, Archibald Yell, Smith's work still proved a modernizing force for California prisons and laid the infrastructure for more sweeping changes to the penal system. Smith wrote only about the fiscal benefits of his programs, but later officials incorporated the penological discourse favored by Yell, Drahts, and Stanley. By WWII, California's prison system included a vast network of

¹⁰⁴ Biennial Report Prison, 1938, 12-13.

¹⁰⁵ Biennial Report Prison, 1910.

¹⁰⁶ Biennial Report Prison, 1916, 20.

highway camps and large farms at many institutions, all under the objective of making landscapes productive and making criminals into men.

Smith's experiment with the road construction in 1910 was an early iteration of the highway honor camp program that employed over thirteen hundred by 1940. The initial impetus for expanding farm programs and developing road camps in California's prison system was the need to ensure the productivity and profitability of prison labor. As was the case with the construction of Folsom State Prison, state officials felt driven to make the prison self-sufficient as well as productive for California capitalism more broadly. However, soon after launching the road camp program the prison officials, overseers, and politicians picked up Progressive Era discourse about outdoor transformation to justify the camps. Using discourses about evolution and masculinity, state actors and other advocates argued that the outdoor labor aided in the rehabilitative program. Situating incarcerated workers in distant, outdoor spaces ensured the security necessary to justify the program, aided in the development and settlement of rural California, and, officials believed, offered the best environment for developing prisoners' masculinity and citizenship.

The highway aided in the states development of rural, mountainous regions of California, incorporating new spaces into the broader geography of capitalism, resource extraction, and transportation. One warden of San Quentin explained, "I feel safe in saying that this plan must be developed to an extent that will make it possible to build links in the main highway and also to construct laterals in mountain counties that might

otherwise remain untouched for many years.”¹⁰⁷ The highway commission praised the prisoners for doing their part in the war, constructing “an important link of the California state highway through an exceptionally rugged and remote country and under sever climatic conditions, as the work was continuous through three winter seasons of heavy rainfall.”¹⁰⁸ One of the first projects under the 1915 law was a portion of a new highway running between San Francisco and Eureka – which today is the scenic Highway 101. The state highway commission collaborated with the state board of prisons to construct a stretch “traversing a country as rugged and picturesque in character and as remote from civilization as any portion of California: in a virgin state, sparsely settled by homesteaders and accessible by trails only.”¹⁰⁹ In 1918, with San Quentin prisoners’ completion of a highway stretching northward from San Francisco, the California Governor William Stephens and Highway Commissioners camped in the redwoods to inspect and celebrate the “connecting link” between Eureka and the “outside world.”¹¹⁰ By emphasizing the pristine wilderness, the commission contrasted these environments with the typical concrete structures to which prisoners were accustomed. The convict labor system allowed the state to affordably develop rural regions where natural obstacles such as a harsh climate or steep terrain made highway construction difficult. The convict labor not only provided solutions to the fiscal problems that prisons encountered with unemployment, but also the reach of the state and capitalism to remote regions of California.

¹⁰⁷ Biennial Report Prison, 1916, 17.

¹⁰⁸ “First Biennial Report of the California Highway Commission,” (State Printer: Sacramento), 1919, 109.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹¹⁰ Biennial Report Prison, 1920, 106.

Another benefit of the road camps was that they alleviated some of the environmental challenges to maintaining such a densely populated prisons. Throughout the early twentieth century, San Quentin continued to have water shortages, necessitating the constant improvement of the water infrastructure in the county. The Mediterranean climate of the San Francisco bay brought dry springs and summer, and the infrastructure did not always deliver promised quantities. In 1916, the Marin Water and Power Company failed to provide sufficient water to the reservoir above San Quentin, and the state compelled the firm to install a new pump to the reservoir to ensure sufficient supply for the prison.¹¹¹ Highway camps mitigated the problems of the water shortages in California's prison system. In addition to technological solutions to water shortages in prison facilities, state officials recommended expanding the highway camps to extend the carceral geography and reduce the strain on natural resources and within the prisons. The capacity to provide sufficient water, sanitation services, housing, and outdoor recreation all weighed in prison officials' minds, offering further reason to expand highway camp programs.

Officials believed that prisoners were better suited than free labor for the more remote and difficult to reach sections of highway. The remoteness of the location provided the "ideal conditions" for the early experiment in offsite work camps because it ensured security and helped prisoners enter more pristine, wild spaces. Working prisoners in distant rural areas made escape difficult, and many inmates were

¹¹¹ Biennial Report Prison, 1916, 18.

enthusiastic to work outside of prison grounds.¹¹² Future sites were chosen for their “remoteness from civilization” and “rugged character.”¹¹³ By the 1920s, wardens boasted not only the productive capacity of the prisoners, but also the role of road camps in disciplining the prisoners. Prisoners at Folsom and San Quentin, they observed, behaved better so that they would be assigned to the camps, and the camps themselves aided in the overall control and transformation of incarcerated men.¹¹⁴ By sending the men into “virgin country,” the state could make accessible new frontiers for settlers.

The highway commission boasted the better health and food conditions the prisoners received. The state board of prison directors praised the system: “wholesome conditions at the camp, the outdoor life reflected in improved health, and the spirit displayed by these men promises much for future good citizenship.”¹¹⁵ To San Quentin physician Leo Stanley, labor programs such as the road camps and farms offered important health and moral benefits. Stanley wrote that men who were not employed developed muscular atrophy, a sense of entitlement, and aversion to labor altogether. The unhealth and moral deprivation caused by unemployment risked greater recidivism and immorality outside prison walls. Outdoor labor in particular provided health benefits because it situated men in spaces with fresh air and sunlight. By working outdoors, Stanley and others believed, prisoners gained physical fitness and other health

¹¹² “Second Biennial Report of the California Highway Commission,” (State Printer: Sacramento), 1920, 105.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹¹⁴ Biennial Report Prison, 1924, 10.

¹¹⁵ Biennial Report Prison, 1922, 106.

benefits that contributed to stronger character and better behavior.¹¹⁶ The California Highway Commission and the State Bureau of Prisons tried to ensure that the men remained in good health. Each camp had a physician, and a dentist could arrive upon demand. The Highway Commission reported that men benefited from adequate lighting and heating. The sanitation at the camps met regulations set by the Commission of Immigration and Housing, and the commission proudly boasted that the prisoners received much more food than the “convict ration.”¹¹⁷

In a similar manner to the health benefits from the camps, the wardens encouraged men who were not working to engage in outdoor recreation such as baseball and other athletic games to maintain health and prevent idleness. These games made for “physical fitness, good disposition, and are also helpful in discipline.”¹¹⁸ To wardens and prison physicians, the outdoor labor and recreation helped transform prisoner’s bodies and in turn, improved their moral well-being.

Despite Stanley and other officials’ praise for the physical benefits, the labor itself was more difficult and dangerous for prisoners than free laborers. The men worked eight hours per day, six days per week, year-round through heavy rains in the winter and under the grueling summer sun.¹¹⁹ The prisoners were largely comprised of unskilled laborers, or as one overseer put it, “simple-minded laborers.”¹²⁰ Unlike the free workers that worked alongside incarcerated laborers, the incarcerated men had to

¹¹⁶ Biennial Report Prison, 1916, 103.

¹¹⁷ “First Biennial Report of the California Highway Commission,” 108.

¹¹⁸ Biennial Report Prison, 1918, 12.

¹¹⁹ “First Biennial Report of the California Highway Commission,” 106.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

use hand tools in the place of machinery.¹²¹ They worked primarily with pick, shovel, and wheelbarrow leveling ground for the roads. Free laborers operated the steam shovels and other machinery, leaving the hand tools to the incarcerated workers.¹²² Lacking skills and frequently rotating, prisoners worked only the most difficult labor in the highway camps. In addition to the chronic stresses that backbreaking, exposed work must have caused, the camps used explosives to clear obstacles, putting the workers in “extremely hazardous” conditions, in the words of the highway commission.¹²³ In 1919, one fatal accident occurred by a blasting operation in Mendocino County, “for which no one was to blame,” according to the overseeing engineer.¹²⁴

Officials believed that the outdoors and all the physical benefits it provided to inmates could aid the moral and psychological development of prisoners who were not yet fully men. In 1916, the California State Highway Department praised California prisons for providing workers, who worked as efficiently, if not, more efficiently than free labor for considerably less than half the cost.¹²⁵ The prison made men “extremely sensitive and temperamental,” meaning each prisoner “must be handled like a child.” However, “when carefully handled and properly treated,” the prison worker became efficient and productive. The road camps not only provided profit to the state and humanitarian conditions to the prisoner; they also created an environment that allowed for the social conditioning of prisoners. Thomas Bedford, a division engineer who led a camp in the Yuba River Canyon wrote, “If there is a spark of manhood left in him, it

¹²¹ Ibid., 109.

¹²² Ibid., 107.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Biennial Report Prison, 1916, 10.

comes to the surface and he is prepared, as well as may be, to re-enter society.”¹²⁶ Thus, to be qualified for road camp work, the prisoners had to demonstrate the capacity to develop their manliness. The greatest benefit to the men in the view of the state was the capacity of outdoor labor to reinvigorate the masculinity of incarcerated workers who had been made backwards and unmanly from harsh environments and biological disposition. In addition to this metaphysical transformation from primitive, unmasculine offenders into manly citizens, the officials believed that the highway camps provided incentives for better discipline in the prisons. The warden of Folsom in 1936 wrote, “I feel that the prospect of road camp assignment is one of our greatest factors in maintaining discipline.”¹²⁷ Assignment to the camps then was certainly desirable to the men, likely for the escape from incarceration within the brick and stone confines and high walls that contained them.

However, not all men were prepared for this transformation. The frequent, repeated offender was “weak” and “dissolute,” both physically and mentally unfit for work. Further, officials worried the camps would provide practical limitations to other components of moral reform programs. For example, the education director expressed concern that the prisoners in the camps would not be able to take classes that the permanent institutions at San Quentin and Folsom offered. The remoteness of the camps proved an obstacle to education, one of the major foundations of twentieth century penological theory about prisoner rehabilitation. Consequently, the education and

¹²⁶ “First Biennial Report of the California Highway Commission,” 109.

¹²⁷ Biennial Report Prison, 1936, 69.

religious director of San Quentin expanded the program into the camps, offering evening classes and services to the incarcerated workers.¹²⁸

In the mid-1920s two problems emerged that threatened the capacity of the prison system to conduct adequate moral transformation: overcrowding and political organizing by prisoners. The overcrowding prevented the warden from providing sufficient space for “industrialization or for proper recreation, exercise, and adequate sanitary facilities.”¹²⁹ According to the prison directors, the immigration of “unusual number of persons of evil character,” contributed to the growth in the prison population, echoing the xenophobic discourse of the foreign criminal frequently articulated by their predecessors.¹³⁰ To accommodate this growth, the wardens sent more prisoners to the work camps. The number of prisoners in the camps from San Quentin more than doubled between July 1926 and July 1928 from 243 to 548.¹³¹

Many of those incarcerated in the California prison system did not see the road camps or other social engineering tools such as the expanded medical and education departments as sufficient. Incarcerated workers organized under the Industrial Workers of the World (popularly known as Wobblies) to stage numerous strikes in this period. In November 21 1927, seventy-one incarcerated IWW workers marched into the warden James Johnston’s office demanding the release of a leader, J. H. Childs, whom the warden had ordered to solitary confinement for involvement in a previous strike. The Wobblies stated that they would not work until the Johnston released Childs. Furious,

¹²⁸ Biennial Report Prison, 1928, 74.

¹²⁹ Biennial Report Prison, 1924, 10.

¹³⁰ Biennial Report Prison, 1927, 14.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

the warden gathered several guards to escort these prisoners into solitary confinement, as well. As they were escorted away, the Wobbly prisoners remained avid in their resistance, singing union songs and muttering threats to the guards.¹³² Johnston later reported to the legislature his success in quelling periodic strikes by “criminal syndicalists.” Immediately after his condemnation of the protesters, he recommended an expansion of the highway camps because of their success in disciplining the prisoners.¹³³ The warden was confident in the highway camps and their disciplinary and transformative capabilities. If the camps provided the rehabilitative results that Leo Stanly and highway engineers boasted and men could remain “honorable” and loyal resisting the urge to escape, then of course the Wobblies were just misguided dissidents deserving of punitive reaction.

By 1942, the California prison system underwent a transformation that was almost as radical as Folsom Warden Archibald Yell’s vision for an expansion of incarceration into the ocean. Nearly fifteen hundred inmates worked in rural areas across the state building roads that connected transportation infrastructure to new markets and nodes of resource extraction. Incarcerated workers built the stretch of road that is now Highway 101, making timber capital accessible to San Francisco and other cities. The prison at Chino seemed to promise a new model of incarceration that focused on rehabilitation and vocational training with the large, on-site farm. The geography of incarceration had expanded into the hinterlands of California and seemed to masculinize and civilize men in the process.

¹³² “I.W.W. Mutiny at San Quentin,” Sausalito News, Number 47, 24 November, page 1.

¹³³ Biennial Report Prison, 1924, 10.

The transformation that the reformers sought with the highway camps beginning in the 1910s echoes in the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. New Dealers hoped that by working young, working-class men outdoors, they could civilize and masculinize them just as they had with prisoners in the highway camps. Conservationists considered CCC workers “human resources,” to be conserved just as they did with natural resources.¹³⁴ The parallels with discourse around the highway camps in the decades preceding the New Deal suggests that conservationists focus on social transformation and goal of conserving “human resources” has its origins in the incarcerated labor rather than the CCC.

While both expanded through the period, there was certainly always more enthusiasm for and more men employed in the highway camps than the farms. This was for two reasons. First, the camps situated inmates deeper in the nature, in spaces that could not contrast more from the typical conceptions of incarceration. This provided a more convincing means of total social transformation of the inmates from backwards and undisciplined into masculine and civilized. Second, while the farms promised potential for prisons’ self-sustainability and education for prisoners, the road camps presented a stronger economic argument by using prison labor to expand the reaches of capitalism, extraction, and settlement into rugged environments.

Despite the fervor for rehabilitation throughout the Progressive and New Deal eras, California prison system still entered the 1940s in crisis. Overcrowding seemed a rampant and insurmountable problem, and wardens warned about idleness, disorder, sanitation problems, and shortages just as they did with every time too many inmates

¹³⁴ Maher, *Nature's New Deal*.

entered the system. In 1939, a hunger strike brought to light egregious conditions at San Quentin including poor food quality, the overuse of punitive measures such as the “dungeon,” and mismanagement by the board of directors. In 1939, some legislators the directors of misconduct, incompetency, and neglect of duty after Governor Culbert Olson ordered investigations that found the board’s leadership led to the inhumane conditions that prompted the strike.¹³⁵ The farms and the highway camps may have helped with discipline and rehabilitation, but they did not offer the broad transformation some boosters had hoped. The Wobblies still protested, and prisoners still engaged in hunger strikes despite all the attempts at reform including the highway camps and agricultural programs. The camps in particular better served the underlying goal of incorporating incarceration into a system of natural resource extraction and using prison labor to extend capitalism into the hinterlands. In the end, the Progressive Era reformers resolved the tension between productivity and rehabilitation by using conservation ideology and promoting outdoor labor as transformative. This alliance, however, served the economic interests more than the rehabilitative ones.

¹³⁵ Bookspan, *A Germ of Goodness*, 102–4.

Chapter 3: From Watts to Crescent City, 1942-1990

In the summer of 1965, the community of Jamestown, a small Gold Rush town in the Sierra foothills celebrated the construction of the Sierra Conservation Center, a new prison capable of housing and training 1,200 men for work in California's conservation camp program – by this time, a network of facilities was tasked with wildfire suppression, flood control, road maintenance, and other work pertaining to natural resource management. Sounding more like a place built for John Muir than a criminal offender, the Sierra Conservation Center was the third such facility in the state, with the California Conservation Center in Susanville and the Southern Conservation Center near Chino both in operation since 1963. These conservation centers were prisons that housed and prepared inmates for employment in California's network of conservation camps.¹³⁶ The construction of the camps had much to owe to the advocacy of Democratic Governor Edmund "Pat" Brown who had overseen an expansion in the program from fewer than one thousand men at the time of his election in 1959 to around five thousand six hundred men in 1966, at the height of the camp program just a year after Sierra Conservation Center's opening.¹³⁷

The same summer, just weeks after the Sierra Conservation Center opened, a rebellion erupted in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, marking the beginning of the decline of Brown's popularity and contributing to his loss of the governorship to Ronald Reagan three years later. After police brutalized a black man they suspected of driving under the influence, a scuffle between police and onlookers quickly escalated to

¹³⁶ Biennial Report Prison, 1964, 10.

¹³⁷ Biennial Report Prison, 1966, 12.

a full-blown uprising in Los Angeles's historically poor and black Watts neighborhood, where residents protested the segregation and uneven development that still plagued post-war California. By the third day of the uprising, Brown called in nearly four thousand National Guards to the city to quell the uprising. The Watts Rebellion came largely as a surprise to white California. After all, Governor Brown had pushed for the controversial Rumford Fair Housing Act, preventing discrimination by landlords, among other civil rights victories, and California's Democratic legislature and governor prided themselves on their progressivism, compared to other states, especially the South.¹³⁸

The summer of 1965, with the construction of Jamestown's prison and eruption of Watt's Rebellion, illustrates the broader themes in the post-war political ecology of California penal state. For one, the events of that summer tell a story about the environmental injustices of uneven development in California's history. Black residents migrating from the declining agricultural regions of the South populated Watts in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1926, the city of Los Angeles annexed Watts to increase its tax-base to pay for the Owen Valley Aqueduct that supplied water to the budding metropolis. While their incorporation into the city helped bring water to the arid basin, the residents of Watts did not benefit from the project and continually struggled with water security, especially after the WWII, which brought new wartime workers to the neighborhood. After the war, water security was a major concern for community leaders. Historian Patricia Adler summarizes: "The never adequate sewers stank in the

¹³⁸ Ethan Rarick, *California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown* (University of California Press, 2006), 314–40.

summer, there was not enough water to flush the toilets, not enough pressure to fight fires, and health facilities were inadequate.”¹³⁹ At the same time, the state used the conservation centers to invest in economic development where officials believed rural, white communities were in need of “long range conservation programs.”¹⁴⁰ This uneven development favored rural, white communities over urban communities of color. The state relocated convicts, who were increasingly black men from urban centers like Los Angeles, to rural communities such as Jamestown to aid with extractivist economic development. The state prioritized conserving and extracting natural resources over the environmental injustices urban communities faced.

Secondly, Jamestown’s new prison and the Watts Rebellion highlight the politics of fear surrounding urban disorder and natural disasters. Inmates incarcerated at the conservation center received training on wildland fire suppression and flood control to protect rural and suburban, white communities from natural disasters. The incarcerated workers, who were disproportionately men of color, demonstrated their heroism to California’s white civilians, earning a degree of cultural citizenship that eased racial tensions and anxieties accompanying the rise of black power movements in the 1960s.¹⁴¹ Like other post-war liberal penal reforms, the conservation camps prioritized making white citizens *feel* safe from the racial, urban disorder, and black

¹³⁹ Patricia Rae Alder, “Watts: From Suburb to Black Ghetto :: University of Southern California Dissertations and Theses (11),” accessed May 7, 2018, <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll36/id/102492>. 270. Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (University of Virginia Press, 1995). Fiege, *The Republic of Nature*, 318–57.

¹⁴⁰ Biennial Report Prison, 1960, 15. Janssen, “When the ‘Jungle’ Met the Forest.”

¹⁴¹ Janssen; Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement*.

radicalization they witnessed in the media.¹⁴² Meanwhile, low water pressure, inadequate wooden housing, and a lack of funding for local fire departments all contributed to the combustibility of Watt's built environment during the uprising.¹⁴³ The conservation camps were thus a component of California's "ecology of fear," that prioritized developing natural disaster mitigation infrastructure in wealthy, white areas at the expense of poorer communities.¹⁴⁴ While they made white Californians feel safer from floods, fires, and race riots, the camps and other penal welfare programs were insufficient in ameliorating the environmental injustices and underdevelopment that contributed to Watt's residents' grievances.

Finally, both the Sierra Conservation Center and Watts Rebellion marked a turning point in the carceral and environmental history of the United States. The construction of the Sierra Conservation Center was the crowning moment in Governor Brown's expansion of the camp program – a central component of California's penal welfare state after the war.¹⁴⁵ Any credibility that Governor Brown and Democrats earned with white Californians by putting California's black and brown convicts to work fighting forest fires was immediately lost when Watts erupted in flames. The Watts Rebellion, along with other urban and indigenous uprisings that followed, was the trigger for the mass incarceration and hyperincarceration that ensued in its wake.¹⁴⁶ The uprising demonstrated that penal welfare projects – of which the Sierra Conservation

¹⁴² Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁴³ Horne, *Fire This Time*, 36.

¹⁴⁴ Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles And The Imagination Of Disaster* (Henry Holt and Company, 2014).

¹⁴⁵ Janssen, "When the 'Jungle' Met the Forest."

¹⁴⁶ Hernández, *City of Inmates*, 195.

Center and conservation camps were a component – were inadequate in quelling urban disorder and crisis, validating the ideas of the soon-to-be Governor Ronald Reagan and other conservatives who pushed for more punitive “law-and-order” measures.¹⁴⁷

Moreover, while the conservation camp program helped secure capital investment in rural communities, globalization and environmental degradation changed the economic conditions in rural California, where whites demanded new employment. Rural communities witnessed the success of the conservation center prisons in buffering Jamestown from deindustrialization by providing employment to guards. White, rural Californian demanded prisons of their own to transition out of extractive economies and put their political support behind the conservative politicians who employed racialized discourse to promote an agenda of mass incarceration.

Before 1965, the carceral ecology of California employed convict labor to develop natural resource economies in white, rural communities and mitigate the “ecology of fear” and racial anxiety. After 1965, conservatives capitalized on fear of black, radical criminals to promote hyperincarceration. The state dislocated an increasingly black, urban, and poor population of convicts to rural communities to provide white Californians with employment after the decline of economies that historically depended on a single natural resource such as timber. Thus, incarceration shifted resources, transformed landscapes, and contributed a complex hierarchy of environmental citizenship.

¹⁴⁷ Ethan Rarick, *California Rising*, 314-340.

World War II provided the impetus and opportunity for a dramatic shift in the California Prison system. In 1942, the board of directors – which had been completely replaced in 1940 because of perceived shortcomings of the previous board – declared that they had revised the entire system in pursuit of a program guided towards the “protection and welfare of society” and rehabilitation of offenders.¹⁴⁸ Inadequate resources during the Great Depression caused a decline in the quality of the prison facilities by the early 1940s, but the war effort put the inmates to work improving prisons, working in the forestry camps and factories, and developing a sense of civic duty. The board wrote, “from destructive institutions of despair, they have become havens of hope, where inmates can look forward to rejoining their fellow men outside.”¹⁴⁹

The new board reorganized industry in prisons to aid the war effort, guiding incarcerated workers toward a sense of patriotism and responsibility. Mobilizing inmates to work on projects for the war effort, the California state prison system shifted to a more enthusiastically rehabilitative model. At San Quentin, inmates continued to work in the jute mill, which had provided burlap sacks to California’s agricultural industry since 1882, but the jute products now went to the US military. Other inmates worked to the advantage of the US Navy manufacturing mattress covers, repairing valves and flanges, and constructing anti-submarine steel cable nets.¹⁵⁰ In addition to

¹⁴⁸ Biennial Report Prison, 1942, 1.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 48.

providing necessary labor given the wartime shortage, the board believed that the new industries invoked a patriotic spirit among the inmates.¹⁵¹

By the end of the war, hundreds of men were working in the “honor camps,” laboring to aid the state in forestry, fire suppression, and agriculture, in addition to the usual duties of highway construction and repair. While espoused as a “revolutionary step in California penology” by the board of directors, the officials who initially planned the program had more economic and militaristic goals in mind. On September 24, 1942, representatives from the Department of Corrections, the California Division of Forestry, the Division of Natural Resources, the US Forest Service, and others met in Chino to discuss the role that incarceration could play in ensuring the protection of natural resources and security during the war. According to DeWitt Nelson, the supervisor of San Bernardino National Forest, fire prevention was necessary to protect vital utilities such as roads, powerlines, and irrigation. In 1940, a small fire in Cajon Pass cut off 80 percent of the electricity to Los Angeles. Moreover, food production in San Bernardino watershed amounted to 50 million dollars, and there were numerous Army installations near the forest. As for Northern California, representatives worried that the smoke that could linger for four to six weeks after a fire reduced visibility and made the region vulnerable to attack. Further, lumber was more vital than ever, and they could not risk a reduction in timber capital. The committee determined strategic locations for the camps based on security and economic concerns, and presented their findings to the legislature to acquire appropriations for the project.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 20.

While the original planners for the camp program had the war in mind, the new board of directors praised the outdoor labor for its rehabilitative ends, providing incarcerated workers a sense of patriotic pride. The board expanded the highway camp system and modified it to resemble the Civilian Conservation Camps from the decade before. Inmates aided orchardists and farmers who requested help in producing vegetables and crops for the war effort, in a “Food for Victory” program.¹⁵² The California Department of Natural Resources, the State Board of Forestry, and the State Parks Commission cooperated in a program to employ prisoners in a broad range of projects. Prisoners worked to build roads, telephone lines, dams, and water supply systems as well as construct parks, clear underbrush, and maintain trails – all for fifty cents a day. With the wartime industries and new camp program, the board believed the prisoners could rehabilitate themselves through a newfound sense of civic duty and responsibility. The board wrote, “This work is being done with a will and with an ungrudging devotion to duty which men in civil life can well emulate.”¹⁵³ Open space and free will provided inmates a chance to exercise their “honor” and personal responsibility, demonstrating their preparedness to reenter society, but the real benefit was the manpower to protect California’s natural resources and ensure security during the war.

Perhaps most importantly, many prisoners worked to suppress fires and build fire lines, thus protecting California’s forests from “increased fire hazards not only from natural sources but also from possible sabotage,” in the words of the Chino prison’s

¹⁵² Ibid., 23.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 19.

warden.¹⁵⁴ Military officials and the general public feared that Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants posed a threat to war-time security. One manifestation was a fear that Japanese people would ignite forests in the Pacific states, damaging war-time industries and timber capital necessary for the war effort. This fear culminated in the forced displacement and incarceration of many innocent people of Japanese descent in internment camps. In these camps, the state used nature to attempt assimilation in a similar manner to the contemporary prison conservation camps and highway camps earlier in the century.¹⁵⁵

A regime of liberal penal reform characterized the decades after World War II, especially in the 1960s. In this period, penologists and prison officials looked beyond the walls of the prisons, not only seeking to transform the individuals inside, but also communities outside.¹⁵⁶ Richard McGee, the Administrator of the California Youth and Adult Corrections Agency, explained that the California penal system was tasked with solving “problems of race relations, cultural assimilation, employment, chronic poverty, social and family disorganization, and of persons inadequate to handle the stresses of modern life.” The prison system needed to confront problems outside of the walls. He attributed these problems to demographic transition and its impact on both urban and rural spaces, writing, “As California's booming population continues to increase ... as its farmlands become suburbs and its cities grow into sprawling metropolitan complexes ...

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 142.

¹⁵⁵ Connie Chiang, “Imprisoned Nature: Toward an Environmental History of the World War II Japanese American Incarceration,” *Environmental History* 15, no. 2 (2010): 236–67.

¹⁵⁶ Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, “Guns and Butter: The Welfare State, the Carceral State, and the Politics of Exclusion in the Postwar United States,” *Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 1, 2015): 87–99, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav239>.

as the impact of technological change and automation mounts, California must strengthen its efforts to prevent and control crime.”¹⁵⁷ The demographic growth and associated environmental and industrial problems appeared to contribute to crime. Thus, the criminal justice and penal state needed to address welfare issues as well. As other historians have demonstrated nationally, Great Society era reforms entangled social and penal welfare solutions to urban crises, setting the stage for future expansion of the carceral state.¹⁵⁸ This “guns and butter” tradeoff and symbiosis between penal and social solutions resulted from white anxiety about perceived urban disorder. Expansions of law enforcement and welfare programs sought to pacify and appease marginalized, especially black, communities, thereby preserving the “first civil right” – that is, the right of white, middle class communities to protection from the potential disorder arising from inequality and racism.¹⁵⁹

By 1965, the conservation camp program employed nearly fifty-six hundred inmates in forty-one camps, three thousand of whom were in one of the three conservation centers tasked with training workers and providing more permanent bases for the network. Prisoners worked in fire suppression, flood control, road building and maintenance, construction of hydraulic infrastructure, and search and rescue operations, among other tasks that the Division of Forestry, Department of Natural Resources, and US Forest Service determined. The camps differed from other penal welfare programs in discourse and intent, framing the benefits to incarcerated workers in metaphysical

¹⁵⁷ Biennial Report Prison, 1962, 1.

¹⁵⁸ Elizabeth Hinton, “‘A War within Our Own Boundaries’: Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society and the Rise of the Carceral State,” *Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 1, 2015): 100–112, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav328>.

¹⁵⁹ Murakawa, *The First Civil Right*.

terms that shared more in common with New Deal discourse about the CCC than other post-war welfare. The state focused on the benefits to the white communities over the physical bodies and welfare to the incarcerated workers and their communities. Rather than fitting into the other packages of reform that emphasized parole and quantifiable treatment, the camps served to demonstrate the state's capacity to simultaneously mitigate the risks from natural disaster and urban disorder. Further, the conservation camps protected natural resource such as watersheds and timber capital to ensure the viability of rural economies. The California penal state continued to expand these programs only as long as they served these purposes.

In general officials in California kept the camp program discursively distinct from other penal reforms of the period. For example, in 1948, as the state experimented with continuing the program after the war, there was no mention of the honor camps when the board lauded its new rehabilitation program including narcotic treatment and vocational training.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, Governor Brown's expansion of the conservation camps paralleled a distinct program called Improved Correctional Efficiency which focused on quantifiable rehabilitation through narcotic and other treatment programs.¹⁶¹

From the end of the war through the 1960s, officials framed the benefits from the camps more abstractly, in terms of masculinity and honor carried from the CCC and highway camps earlier in the century. In the early twentieth century, progressives and New Dealers hoped to change men through outdoor labor, exposing them to healthful environments that would masculinize and civilize them. As CCC director Robert

¹⁶⁰ Biennial Report Prison, 1948, 29-32.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 9.

Fechner explained in 1939, “Our purpose is not only to rebuild forests and lands, but to rebuild men.”¹⁶²

Both the prison highway camps and the CCC sought this goal.¹⁶³ The San Quentin Warden in 1948 explained that “Men sent to our camps have benefited from the healthful work, the feeling of gratification for the responsibility entrusted to them, and through the earnings which are placed to their accounts for future parole needs.”¹⁶⁴ Similarly, in 1952, the board wrote that the benefit to the men included “Placing of inmates in a wholesome outdoor atmosphere where they are not only doing a service to the State but also gaining self-reliance plus a small wage to aid them-selves and/or their dependent families.”¹⁶⁵ The primary benefits according to the department of corrections was to be health, the wages, and the sense of citizenship earned from the camps. In 1958, the Department of Correction and other cooperating agencies changed the name of the “honor” camps to “conservation” camps, which they believed better reflected the goal of dealing with “conservation and development of both natural and human resources.”¹⁶⁶ This discourse reveals a tension between the goals of the conservation camps. At the same time that the men were supposed to proving their citizenship, references to incarcerated workers as “human resources” reduced them to economic objects.

¹⁶² Maher, *Nature's New Deal*. Retrieved from *oxfordscholarship.com*. See chapter 3.

¹⁶³ See previous chapter and Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁶⁴ Biennial Report Prison, 1948, 66.

¹⁶⁵ Biennial Report Prison, 1952, 19.

¹⁶⁶ Biennial Report Prison, 1958, 15.

As a penal reform measure, the most tangible impact of conservation camps on the prison system was their use as a means to ease the strain of overcrowding in California's prison. The camps served as a preventative measure to help quell the threat of riots or political uprisings within prisons. The board of directors admitted as much with the establishment of the forestry camps during WWII, writing that amongst other war-period reforms the camps minimized "the ever present danger to the state of prison riots and attempted escapes," and ensured the "convenience and protection of the law-abiding population of the state."¹⁶⁷ Throughout 1950s and 1960s, the state officials expressed paranoia with an overcrowding problem and its potential to produce "idleness." This idleness, they believed, lowered the morale, resulted in economic losses to the state, promoted homosexuality, and encouraged disorder and rebellion. In 1952, officials described idleness as "the foremost evil" in prisons, suggesting an expansion of the forestry camp program to ease the strain on other institutions.¹⁶⁸

While officials wrote that the camps benefited the health of prisoners, the labor instead burdened bodies rather than improve them. The "plain drudgery" and "back-breaking physical effort," of wildland fire suppression must have taken a toll on incarcerated workers' bodies. They often had to labor through the night to hold back fires, constantly exposed to the smoke and heat.¹⁶⁹ The camps had to contend with water shortages and scarcity in the California summers, and inmates often had to construct multiple 10,000-gallon concrete storage tanks as well as pressure and piping systems

¹⁶⁷ Biennial Report Prison, 1942, 15.

¹⁶⁸ Biennial Report Prison, 1952, 33.

¹⁶⁹ F. H. Raymond, "The Division of Forestry in the Conservation Camp Program 1969," (Sacramento: State Publisher) 11-12.

just to support the camps.¹⁷⁰ The distance of the camps from cities or other prisons made the logistics of medical care and food supplies a constant challenge.¹⁷¹ Deaths and injuries while fighting fires or floods occurred, but were not frequent. In 1954 three Folsom inmates died fighting a fire, and in 1956 a fire injured three and killed seven inmates.¹⁷²

Further, there was little economic benefit to the incarcerated workers themselves. Rules around the meager wages prisoners earned meant they had little control over the money that the state afforded them. Prisons retained twenty percent of the low wages in a trust that awaited inmates for their eventual release. Two-thirds paid for the welfare support of prisoners' families if those families were on public relief. Inmates could spend the rest on supplies from the camp canteens.¹⁷³

While the claims to improved health and rehabilitation may be dubious, the incarcerated workers certainly earned a degree of cultural citizenship through their work in the camps. One woman wrote to the California Department of Correction, commending the camp near her community in Magalia: "We call them our 60 men. We don't know who they are and we don't want to. We know they aren't the same men all the time; but it's a mighty nice feeling to know you have neighbors like that in time of need, flood, fire or what have you."¹⁷⁴ To residents, the criminal history and the cultural differences they may have experienced with their incarcerated neighbors did not matter. The contribution the men made to the communities redeemed them in the eyes of white,

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷¹ Janssen, "When the 'Jungle' Met the Forest," 14.

¹⁷² Janssen, 14.

¹⁷³ Biennial Report Prison, 1960, 16.

¹⁷⁴ Biennial Report Prison, 1952, 38.

rural Californians. In 1955, the Christmas floods followed a Pineapple Express storm that brought as many as thirteen inches of rainfall in a three-day period to central California. Men from the Iron Mine Honor Camp in Placer County rescued three people stranded in the nearby Rawhide Mine. At the same time, other inmates aided a rescue of a family cut off by the floods, while Miramonte Honor Camp workers held together a make-shift earth dam to prevent floodwaters from reaching a community east of Fresno. In addition to the work assigned by the state during the flood, inmates pooled together funds to buy candy and gifts for the children of the town of Weott, which was completely flooded. The San Joaquin County Supervisors adopted a formal resolution expressing “thanks and gratitude from the entire community.”¹⁷⁵ In 1960, a flood devastated homes in Myers Flats leaving the town in wreckage for the second time in five years. After crews from the High Rock Conservation Camp arrived to help with the salvage work, thirty-five community letters wrote to the incarcerated workers, “we can never thank you men enough for your help in our time of need.”¹⁷⁶ The presence of conservation camps imbued a sense of security for the surrounding rural residents. One man wrote to the Department of Corrections, “We have the sure knowledge of fire protection, emergency flood control, search crews for lost or injured sportsmen, and blood donations for the critically ill of the community.”¹⁷⁷ In 1964, two thousand residents of Crestline, a small mountain resort town, signed a petition to Governor Brown, announcing an appreciation week for their local Pilot Rock Conservation Camp,

¹⁷⁵ Biennial Report Prison, 1956, 15.

¹⁷⁶ Biennial Report Prison, 1960, 14.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

and erected a statue of soot-blackened convict fire fighter.¹⁷⁸ They told Governor Brown that with the camp there, they community felt safer from natural disasters.¹⁷⁹

In addition to protecting rural, white communities from natural disasters, the prisoners labored to preserve timber capital and other natural resources. In 1951, forest fires left thousands of acres of productive timberland “charred and desolate” in the Plumas, Modoc, Stanislaus and Sierra National Forests. The state put conservation camp inmates to work, and in just ten days, a crew of incarcerated workers planted more than two hundred thousand Ponderosa and Jeffrey Pine in Plumas National Forest alone, performing similar work in the other forests.¹⁸⁰ In 1954, the Board of Directors praised the contribution of the camps to the conservation of natural resources, pointing to the work of 1,900 incarcerated workers, who put 266,098 hours into fighting 321 forest fires, protecting the state’s valuable timber capital. Based on the success of the firefighting that year, the board recommended expansion of the camp to the “ultimate extent possible.”¹⁸¹ In addition to the benefit of the conservation camps in protecting timber, the road camps continued to open up new frontiers to capital and the state. In 1956, convict workers completed the Angeles Crest Highway, stretching fifty-five miles across the rugged San Gabriel Mountains at elevations up to eight thousand feet, making recreational areas in the Angeles National Forest more accessible to Los Angeles’s middle class residents.¹⁸² Road camps like this continued to be as valuable as

¹⁷⁸ Biennial Report Prison, 1964, 14.

¹⁷⁹ Al Bruton, “Community Says Thanks to Convict-Fire Fighter,” San Bernardino Sun, Volume 70, 28 April 1964.

¹⁸⁰ Biennial Report Prison, 1952, 19.

¹⁸¹ Biennial Report Prison, 1954, 40.

¹⁸² Biennial Report Prison, 1956, 15.

they had earlier in the century as inmates “performed unskilled jobs in remote areas where labor by free personnel would be virtually impossible to obtain,” in the words of the board of directors.¹⁸³ In 1966, incarcerated workers spent six million hours fighting fires in California, which would have cost the state eleven million dollars in minimum-wage civilian fire fighters.¹⁸⁴

Governor Brown, after after he took office in January 1959, made the expansion of the camp program a central tenant of his criminal justice reform explaining that the conservation program “combines protection and development of our great natural resources with the rehabilitation of men – at a savings to the taxpayer.”¹⁸⁵ Under Brown’s expansion, the program rapidly rose from 979 inmates in December 1958 to 1,821 in December 1960. In 1959, the state opened seven new permanent camps, three mobile camps, and started work on California Conservation Center in Susanville. The board explained that the expansion prioritized natural resource development: “Each camp is, or will be, located in an area of the State where there is need for a long range conservation program.”¹⁸⁶ The mobile camps, a new development under Brown’s expansion, made incarcerated labor useful to areas where there was no need for long-term work or where harsh winters made permanent camps unfeasible.¹⁸⁷ While Governor Brown and the legislature pushed for the expansion, numerous other actors were responsible for the details of growing conservation camp program. The

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Biennial Report Prison, 1966.

¹⁸⁵ Biennial Report 1960, 14.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

Department of Corrections consulted advisory committees representing industry, labor, and the California Department of Natural Resources.¹⁸⁸

Discursively, the Department of Corrections and other proponents of camp expansion centered the benefits to the natural resources, writing rehabilitation as a secondary benefit. In a 1962 report to the California legislature summarizing the benefits of the camps, the Board of Directors listed all the ways that the program paid off. It provided the state a “reservoir” of labor to battle forest fires that threatened to “deplete a major state natural resource,” saving California millions of dollars in timber. After citing all the other benefits to natural resources and California’s citizens, the board explained that the crews benefited too, learning “teamwork,” “maturity,” and a “sense of responsibility.”¹⁸⁹ The development of “personal responsibility” that the inmates could demonstrate to a parole board was perhaps the most frequently cited benefit to the incarcerated workers. In 1966, the board summarized camp rehabilitation as giving inmates “a chance to demonstrate personal responsibility while performing useful and needed work.”¹⁹⁰ Considering that the responsibilities of the camps focused on the protection of natural resources as well as the security of rural communities, the emphasis on learned “personal responsibility” suggests that the pride from contributing to the development of rural economies alone was a benefit to inmates.

While the conservation camp program transformed California’s geographic periphery into a more productive landscape, another environmental transformation occurred within the built environments of the typical prisons. The farms that had once

¹⁸⁸ Biennial Report Prison, 1960, 15.

¹⁸⁹ Biennial Report Prison, 1962, 20.

¹⁹⁰ Biennial Report Prison, 1966.

been a central component of life in prison lost their support and attention by the late 1960s and 1970s. Since the nineteenth century, each prison had a farm that supplied food for the prisoners and other institutions if there was surplus production. In 1947, the prison at Chino produced a surplus of milk, pork, and eggs and produced enough potatoes for the inmates.¹⁹¹

The California State Prison at Soledad, completed spring of 1951, was a “medium-security, agricultural-type institution” located on 939 acres of the Salinas Valley that the Department of Corrections had taken possession of in 1946. The prison provided enough for vegetables for its own operation as well as producing a surplus provided to surrounding institutions. Inmates harvested more than one hundred thousand pounds of vegetables in September 1950. As of June 1950, the institution also had 70 dairy cattle, 123 hogs, and 4,000 hens.¹⁹² In the 1948-1950 biennium, the farms save administrators around two-hundred thirty-seven thousand dollars.¹⁹³ By the mid-1960s, however, farms had declined in popularity, and the officials had stopped referring to farms in their reports.¹⁹⁴ While only a small portion of the upkeep for the prisons, the fresh vegetables and meat were surely a boon for the prisoners.

At the same time, prisons continued to contribute to California’s agricultural economy outside prison walls. In 1956, the Department of Corrections opened the state’s only cotton textile mill at San Quentin, marking the “largest single advance”

¹⁹¹ Biennial Report Prison, 1947, 83.

¹⁹² Biennial Report Prison, 1950, 30.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 40-43.

¹⁹⁴ Biennial Report Prison, 1962, 1964, 1966.

corrections in that biennial period.¹⁹⁵ Inmates processed and produced textiles with cotton that was entirely grown in California, which boasted some of the highest volume and value of cotton production nationally. The San Quentin warden hoped that the pilot plant would “create a great new industry in California.”¹⁹⁶

There were a number of factors that contributed to the decline of prison farms in the post-war period. For one, increasing prison populations were difficult to feed with a finite number of acres that each prison had to work. Moreover, increasing water scarcity made it costlier to keep the farms productive. In 1948, the administrators of the prison at Chino reported that the previous two years had been the driest in California history, greatly curtailing the production of grains on the unirrigated lands, and the warden suggested the construction of more irrigation infrastructure to make the farm productive.¹⁹⁷ In 1956, a new Folsom Dam replaced the one inmates had built in the 1880s. The new dam produced hydroelectricity, controlled flooding, and provided municipal water and irrigation. However, it greatly limited the Folsom State Prison’s water resources, decommissioned the old power house, and restricted irrigation at the prison.¹⁹⁸ Further, the improvement of highways and transportation of materials reduced the costs of high-volume orders of food and other goods.¹⁹⁹ These factors – increased population, water scarcity, and access to bulk goods – made prison farms obsolete and costly.

¹⁹⁵ Biennial Report Prison, 1956, 21.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Biennial Report Prison, 1948, 83.

¹⁹⁸ Biennial Report Prison, 1954, 53.

¹⁹⁹ Biennial Report Prison, 1956, 47.

The rise and fall of California Conservation Center in Susanville illustrates the turning point in California's post-war carceral geography. Founded as part of Governor Brown's package to expand the conservation camps, the California Conservation Center (perhaps named such to share an abbreviation with the Civilian Conservation Corps that Brown admired) was a shining symbol of a program that transformed criminals into productive citizens, ensured the viability of California's natural resources, and made rural and suburban white Californians feel safe from urban crisis and natural disasters. However, like the rest of the conservation camp program, the center at Susanville declined as a result of reprioritization of penal welfare. The population of the camps reached a peak in 1966, when the state implemented a probation subsidy program as a "result of new concepts in rehabilitation of persons in state custody." Rather than sending them to camps, the state would keep less serious offenders close to home, where they believed the inmates could be better cared for.²⁰⁰

In addition to the decline in the number of men in centers and camps, the conservation program did not seem to quell disorder as its proponents had hoped. The Watts Rebellion gained national attention, and resistance within prison walls was surmounting. The Board of Directors wrote in 1968 that the camp population had begun to decline as a result of the changing nature of California's criminals. The camps could employ only minimum-security, non-violent offenders, who now constituted less of the prison population than they had in the previous decades. Filling camp quotas required closer administrative attention to determine which higher-risk inmates were suitable for

²⁰⁰ "1973 Report The Division of Forestry in the Conservation Camp Program," (Sacrament: State Publisher), 2.

the conservation program.²⁰¹ Even with this increased oversight, the prison administrators could not ensure the loyalty and discipline of conservation program participants. In 1969, around 240 prisoners at the California Conservation Center went on strike to protest poor food and mistreatment of a fellow prisoner. Officials transferred about one hundred of the men who they called “agitators” and “ringleaders in a short-lived work stoppage “ to higher security facilities.²⁰² More generally, officials sensed the distrust and skepticism that characterized the late 1960s and height of California’s radical prison movement, responding by hiring more officers of color to supervise the camps.²⁰³ James Williams of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People wrote in 1973 that incarcerated workers in the camps “felt isolated from persons representing the environment to which they had to return upon being released,” and that the camps were “a failure in the major area for which it was constructed: rehabilitation of inmates.”²⁰⁴ The conservationist ideology and discourse borrowed from the New Deal CCC had run its course. Conservation camps no longer seemed to have the transformative qualities its proponents had boasted earlier in the decade, and the conservation centers appeared as unruly and radical as San Quentin or Folsom.

Both organized correctional officer labor and the community vehemently resisted when the state proposed the closure of the California Conservation Center in 1972. Rather than pointing to the benefits of the conservation camp program, the

²⁰¹ Biennial Report Prison, 1968, 5.

²⁰² Associated Press, “Prison Officials Transfer 100 Inmates After ‘Strike,’” *San Bernardino Sun*, 11 October 1969.

²⁰³ Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement*.

²⁰⁴ Janssen, “When the ‘Jungle’ Met the Forest,” 723.

Susanville residents and groups representing guards felt entitled to prison in their community. They had invested tax dollars in developing around the prison, and the loss of 280 jobs, a \$2.6 million payroll, and \$26,000 aid to the school system would surely mean collapse. Further, opponents to closure pointed to rising crime rates to validate their belief in the failure of penal welfare programs were not functioning. Roscoe Antrim, president of the California Correctional Officer Association, attacked the probation subsidy program, calling it “inappropriate, unrealistic, and unworkable.”²⁰⁵ Under pressure from the community and the correctional officers, the state converted the conservation center into a medium security prison, preserving the jobs of Susanville residents.²⁰⁶ Geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes that when stakeholders talk about “saving” a place, they often are not seeking a static continuity of past conditions, but rather pursue “particular kinds of change in order to produce the conditions social and cultural reproduction can happen.”²⁰⁷ The organized correctional officer labor and Susanville communities did not want to save the conservation camp program, but rather preserve the relation between the prison to labor and racial geography that whites enjoyed in post-war California.²⁰⁸

Republican Governor George Deukmejian, like Pat Brown, pursued an expansion of California’s penal state, but unlike Brown, law-and-order conservatism not liberalism empowered Deukmejian reforms. Deukmejian entered office in 1983, fittingly coinciding with the centennial of the opening of the San Quentin jute mill and

²⁰⁵ Associated Press, “Guards Rap Closure of State Prison,” *San Bernardino Sun*, 14 December 1972.

²⁰⁶ Capital News Service, “Prison Population Is Climbing,” *Desert Sun*, 8 February 1974.

²⁰⁷ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 141.

²⁰⁸ Page, *The Toughest Beat*.

the opening of the Folsom powerhouse, two developments that solidified the role of incarceration in providing for the broader agricultural and industrial economy of California. Deukmejian secured \$3.65 billion for his eight-year plan to expand the number of prisons to contain the growing number of inmates.²⁰⁹ Under Deukmejian, the environmental story of incarceration takes a turn. The narrative that outdoors and wilderness provided a wholesome environment that transformed lost souls into productive citizens no longer fit. The New-Deal fervor for the CCC had run its course and liberal penal welfare, it appeared, did not deliver on its promise to relieve urban crisis. Instead, a new environmental transformation occurred under Deukmejian's expansion: the transformation and economic development of rural communities that faced the decline of extractivist industries.

Rural, white Californians were more interested in economic benefits than vague ideas about citizenship and honor. The conservation camp program always prioritized economic benefit to the state and private interests. With the decline of rural, extractive economies, communities naturally turned to the next available resource: prisons. Maximum and isolating facilities replaced conservation camps to provide jobs to rural Californians. The tough-on-crime regime and drug war, coupled with declining agricultural, timber, and fishing industries created the pretense for a new carceral ecology in California. Preserving the promises to use incarceration to develop economies, the state abandoned liberal notions of rehabilitation under the discourse of New-Deal conservationism that proved so successful in expanding the conservation camp program.

²⁰⁹ "Governor dedicates prison," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 15 June 1990.

By the late 1980s Crescent City and other communities that had depended on logging Redwoods and other forests in Northern California were in the midst of an economic crisis. A host of political, economic, and environment factors including globalization, environmental activism, mechanization, and over-extraction made timber and fishing industries unviable means to keep rural communities afloat and left Crescent City one of the poorest communities in rural California. Del Norte County Assessor Jerry Cochran and his committee tasked with finding new means of economic development felt desperate. “We had to do something,” Cochran explained, “we were dying on the vine.”²¹⁰ The state agreed and appropriated \$232 million for the construction of the largest maximum security prison in the nation, bringing 1,400 new jobs to the community. Located just down the road – a road originally paved by incarcerated workers – from Jedidiah Smith State Park, a major Redwood preserve, the prison appeared to deliver on the county’s hope for growth in the years immediately after its construction.

Within five years, the population of the county increase by fifty percent, from 18,000 to 27,000 and Crescent City tripled. The growth was a shock to residents, many of whom had never traveled farther than Eureka.²¹¹ No longer able to harvest timber or fish at the rates that had sustained the community before, Crescent City residents turned to incarceration as a new form of extraction. Rather extracting natural resources surrounding the area, the state extracted disproportionately black and brown urban

²¹⁰ Bill Walker, “Tiny Del Norte County braces for new prison Windfall bringing more jobs, more revenue and a host of unwanted problems,” *San Bernardino Sun*, 21 August 1989, Page 10.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

residents to support a facility that would provide economic development and employment to the struggling white community.

While the prison appeared to bring the promised economic boom, residents feared there would be other social consequences. Unlike the rural white Californians who welcomed the conservation camps decades earlier, Del Norte county residents worried about the problems that might accompany their new incarcerated neighbors, who were disproportionately black and brown men from Los Angeles and other cities. Sherriff Mike Ross and Del Norte District Attorney William Cornell worried that the prison would attract the drug crime and violence, expressing the same anxieties that prompted the tough on crime wave and mass incarceration.²¹²

After the initial boom of population and capital brought into the new prison communities, the prisons did not produce many jobs for the local residents, who lacked the skills for correctional officer positions, while poverty and rent increased. The state did not invest adequately in roads or other public infrastructure, leaving the struggling communities to compensate. Crescent City went into debt immediately following the construction of Pelican Bay State Prison.²¹³ Other towns including Avenal and Corcoran faced similar issues after the prisons arrived, leaving rural residents resentful of the CDC for failing to deliver on promises.²¹⁴

An environmental history of California's post-war penal state reaffirms the thesis of recent historians, that liberal reforms in the 1950s and 1960s provided groundwork for the expansion of the carceral state and mass incarceration in the 1970s

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ "Governor dedicates prison," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 15 June 1990.

²¹⁴ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 131.

and 1980s. What this story adds is the role of conservationism and ideas about natural resources, transformation through outdoor labor, and the role of incarceration in reshaping bodies and landscapes. The conservation camps and the environmental thought surrounding them helped pave the way for mass incarceration in rural California. Rural Californians came to depend on Governor Browns' conservation centers and camps to provide steady employment.

Conclusion

With the construction and development of Folsom State Prison, the state demonstrated that it answered first to an imperative to reach new frontiers and change pristine landscapes into productive ones. At Folsom incarcerated workers dammed the American River and with timber harvests in the Sierras, quarried stone for the streets of San Francisco, and packed ice to ensure agricultural products could reach more distant markets. Far from an isolated or remote institution as we often conceptualize prisons, Folsom was engaged in a broad economic system that extracted resources and changed environments across the West. This “natural resource colony” model of incarceration triumphed at the expense of reformers’ hope for a rehabilitative model that prioritized the prisoners’ moral and physical wellbeing.

In the highway camps, prison farms, rural reformatories, conservation centers, and other carceral environments in the twentieth century, the California state resolved the tension nineteenth century reformers experienced between rehabilitation and the economic demands of incarceration. Rather than contest the role of incarceration as a mechanism to provide labor for extractive enterprises, reformers incorporated their visions into systems that allowed for both experiments with rehabilitation and capitalist development of rural environments. Progressive and New Deal era ideas about masculinity and outdoor labor fueled penological thought and expansion of the programs throughout the early twentieth century.

In post-war California many approaches resonated in the forestry and conservation camps as the highway camps and farms earlier in the century. While proponents of the camps emphasized individual transformation within the prisoners

engaged in outdoor labor, new developments made the post-war camps distinct from the predecessors. The stated goal of the conservation camps was to provide security and benefits to society at large, and the camps were thus packaged within broader penal welfare reforms that sought to relieve urban crisis and disorder. Moreover, officials emphasized that the conservation camps sought to conserve both human and natural resources, simultaneously situating prisoners as laborers in nature and as resources to be extracted. Equating prisoners with the timber, minerals, and water resources they worked to preserve contributed to the the yes-in-my-backyard rural prison boom in the 1980s as rural Californians demanded economic development at a time when other extractive industries were declining. Thus from the construction of Folsom State Prison to the Pelican Bay Supermax, the state used incarceration as a tool to transform underutilized environments and bodies into productive ones. Environmental thought, from ideas about productivity, gender and labor, evolution, and conservation all contributed to projects of penal reform that ultimately contributed to the “Golden Gulag” in California and the carceral state more broadly.

The conservation camps grew out of politics of fear, intersecting the “ecology of fear” with post-war racial anxieties. The conservation camps emerged during WWII because of the labor shortage and paranoia about potential sabotage by Japanese operatives in California’s forests. When the war ended, the demand for cheap labor reserves and politics of fear continued. In a sense, the conservation camps represented the same ideology that constructed Folsom State Prison. The successful merging of conservationist penology and capitalist interests before the war and the demand for labor in the post-war economic boom created the economic and cultural conditions that

allowed for the mass employment of convicts in rural fringes. White Californians feared floods and fires as much as urban disorder that they attributed to the psychological stresses of poverty. Racial anxieties intersected with fear of natural disasters, both of which, state officials hoped to appease with conservation camps. The camps protected white communities from floods and fires with the labor of convicts – many of whom came from communities like Watts which relied on house-hold water infrastructure such as wells that were not equipped to protect the neighborhoods’ wooden residences from fires.

These men earned heroism and citizenship in the eyes of many, proving to white Californians that criminals from the poor, urban communities of color they feared could change through outdoor labor and responsibility. However, this civic reincarnation was more a spectacle for white Californians and parole boards than it was a grounded rehabilitation effort for incarcerated men. Indeed, the conservation camps conflicted with rather than bolstered other penal welfare programs. The probation subsidy program, for example, drew would-be inmates of rural prisons to local jails near their homes – much to the protest of organized correctional officer labor and rural communities that depended on the convicts’ presence. Moreover, the Department of Corrections and other state divisions founded the conservation camp to fulfil labor shortages and develop rural environments. The “sense of personal responsibility” and other claims about citizenship came afterward, most popular during Governor Brown’s expansion of the program between 1959 and 1965. Thus the politics of cultural citizenship succeeded the establishment and expansion of the camps.

The cultural citizenship centered on pride and patriotism in the eyes of whites juxtaposed the persistent gradations of environmental citizenship that the carceral state exacerbated. Increased access to bulk goods from highways and globalization, rising prison populations, and strained water resources led to the decline of prison farms which historically had been ubiquitous. Prisons once boasted providing all prisoners with fresh vegetables and meat, even exporting surplus to other facilities. In the 1950s, however, the food insecurity within prisons surmounted and demands for better quality and quantity of food became increasingly present in protests, which themselves were becoming more frequent.

Law-and-order conservatism “frontlash” to these protests and environmental degradation replaced rural mills and farms with prisons, transforming timber and crop lands into carceral landscapes. The productivist mandate that incarceration should develop California’s hinterlands, using wasted bodies to transform wasted landscapes governed the construction of both Folsom State Prison in 1882 and Pelican Bay State Prison in 1989. On one hand, the construction of Pelican Bay State Prison represented a return to the politics that caused the decades-long Folsom conflicts. The alliance between the reformers demanding rehabilitation and the capitalists demanding productivity that resulted in the camp programs had severed. Reformers had hailed Governor Brown’s carceral expansion, but harshly criticized Governor Deukmejian’s expansion, which focused on more punitive measures. Environmentalists and water holders who questioned the rapid construction of facilities struggled to voice their concern to the state set on a momentum towards expansion of the state’s carceral geography.

However, the economic interests represented and relation between incarceration, labor, capital had changed. While the construction of Folsom and the conservation camps attended primarily to bourgeois demands for more raw materials for urban metropolises, the expansion of the carceral state was a response to demands from the rural, white working class for employment after environmental collapse and deindustrialization of the undiversified natural resource economies incarcerated workers had helped to develop for over a century. Certainly, capitalist elites profited from the expansion of the carceral state – dubbed the “prison-industrial complex” – but free, white labor had historically resisted new prisons fearing competition from convict labor. Moreover, incarcerated peoples’ relation to labor and capital changed. The prisoners at the new rural prisons were no longer dislocated for their labor to transform rural landscapes. Just their presence was enough. Rather than reserve army of cheap labor for natural resource development, the prisoners themselves were a resource, extracted from urban places like Los Angeles and dislocated to rural communities to fill prisons that officials hoped would keep rural economies afloat.

Today’s emphasis on wildfire fighting as the primary, if not only, duty of the prison camps suggests that they still exist to preserve the uneven geography surrounding California’s “ecology of fear” and save Californian’s tax dollars for costly fires. The incarcerated workers who aided in fire suppression gained national media attention because of how the story contradicts our typical conceptions of incarceration. For one, rather than contained within cages and concrete boxes, images depicted the incarcerated workers in open space and forests. Secondly, this was not just a few convicts enrolled in a pilot vocational program. Nearly half of California’s firefighters were incarcerated

people, proving themselves as citizen heroes rather than backwards delinquents. Moreover, the media attention came as scholars, journalists, and activists increasingly turn attention towards mass incarceration and its historic relation to slavery, Jim Crow, and capitalism. The media framed the firefighters as either exploited workers or rehabilitating citizens, situated in an environment that looked like anything but a prison. Considering over one hundred and fifty years of historical context sheds light on the relation between citizenship, capitalism, and nature, revealing how these seeming contradictions emerged.

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