

How Convict Leasing and Chain Gangs in N.C. Helped Build the Foundation for Early State Parks, 1915 to 1935

STATE CONVICTS SENT TO McDOWELL FOR ROAD WORK.
(Special to Daily News.)
Statesville, May 27.—Attached to westbound passenger train this afternoon was a car containing a squad of 28 state convicts which were on their way to Old Fort, where they will engage in the construction of the State Central Highway across the Blue Ridge mountains. The convicts were from among the number which has been at work on the Elkin and Alleghany railroad, and all of them except two were white men. The two negroes were exchanged at the Statesville station for the only two white convicts with the force at work on the Statesville Air Line railroad, about 20 miles north of Statesville, giving Statesville a force of 60 odd negro convicts and the central highway a force of 28 white convicts. The state no longer works whites and blacks together when it can be avoided.

Seven colored convicts from the State penitentiary were added Tuesday to the squad of State prisoners who are engaged in building the road from Chimney Rock through the Hickorynut Gap to the Buncombe County line. The road is completed to within one and a half miles of the Buncombe line.

A MATTER OF RACE

May 28, 1915 | Greensboro Daily News, page 8

June 18, 1915 | Western North Carolina Times, page 1

These two small blurbs mention race with regards to convict leasing. The first one discusses that the convict roadwork is going to be segregated moving forward, and the other one mentions Black prisoners being sent to help build a road near Chimney Rock. Even though specific mentions about race were infrequent in newspaper articles about convict leasing at the time, the prison population for the South is disproportionately Black. Prison records show that from 1915 to 1916, for instance, Black men made up 68 percent of the prison population in the state.

- [Source: DigitalNC / now Greensboro News & Record](#)
- [Source: DigitalNC / now Times-News, Hendersonville](#)
- [Record of prisoners, 1915 to 1916, NC DNCR Digital Collections](#)

Good Roads.
Good roads have been a potential agency for the welfare of the State. In obedience to the dictates of common sense, business requirements and the progressive spirit of the age, the people of North Carolina have determined to have good roads. During the last four years, we have built twice as many miles of improved highways as in all our preceding history. We now have about 15,000 miles of well graded, surfaced roads. In January, 1913, we had about 5,000 miles. We have built 10,000 since then.
During the last four years, the Central Highway has been built from the Atlantic Ocean over the coastal plain, over the hills of the Piedmont, over the Blue Ridge to the Canyon of the Great Rocky Mountains. The section of this road from Old Fort to Ridge Creek, and a section in Madison County were built by State convicts. Within the last four years, the highway from Charlotte to Asheville has been completed. The State convicts built that difficult section from Chimney Rock to Hickory Nut Gap. Similar highways have been built across the State and into every section. Road building goes on with increasing momentum. No community will be without them unless it be satisfied to deny itself the improvements of modern life in this day of enlightenment and progress. The old country road of rocks and mud and steep hills, consuming energy, forbidding progress, is past. With good roads communities are correlated, markets are available, schools and churches are accessible, land rises in value, progress is inevitable. Our highways are immeasurably finer than "the king's highway" of old, and they are the tracks for the swift and powerful vehicles.
The automobile is the modern machine for local transportation. They are rapidly coming into universal use. We cannot get along without them, and they cannot get along without the good road. Their indispensable efficiency is not available without the graded, surfaced highway. They are monopolizing the roads, and they make road building and road maintenance far more expensive. They should bear a large part of this burden. The tax on them might be increased, and their owners would not complain provided the money be applied to the betterment of the roads.

CONVICTS ON HICKORY NUT GAP ROAD NOW

State Engineer Falls Says That If the Sun Shines Today Motorists Can Go to Chimney Rock.

State Highway Engineer Falls stated yesterday that the convicts sent to the Hickory Nut Gap road by the state had been making temporary repairs on the road, and that it was in fair condition now for travel. Mr. Falls said he drove the distance from Chimney Rock to Asheville in one hour and fifty minutes without serious trouble of any kind. He said: "If the sun shines today you can say to the people of Asheville that they can go to Chimney Rock through Hickory Nut Gap with moderately careful driving, but if it rains the road will be muddy."
Speaking of the work being done on the road, Mr. Falls said that the sixty-six convicts were beginning the work of rebuilding the highway at the Rutherford county line about a mile below Bat Cave and that they would work toward the Gap at the Buncombe-Henderson line. Superintendent Peoples, for the state, and Superintendent Stuart, of the highway commission, are in charge of the convicts. The camp is located about a mile and a half above Bat Cave and men and supplies are transported to and from their work by automobile trucks. He declared that the work will move on with much better headway than when the road was first constructed, on account of the fact, he stated, that modern implements will be used altogether.

HUM OF INDUSTRIAL ACTIVITY PREVAILS AT CHIMNEY ROCK

Work On Playground Of Eastern America Getting Under Full Headway.

Chimney Rock, July 17.—The hum of industrial activity prevails throughout this entire region. The cost of these improvements range from the building of a \$100,000 mountain camp to the \$1,000,000 concrete dam now under construction, and which will bring into existence Lake Lure, covering more than 1,500 acres.
Just north of here, hundreds of convicts and laborers are rushing to completion through the Hickory Nut Gorge a hard surfaced scenic highway from Chimney Rock to Asheville. This short cut route is expected to be ready by September 1st. It will reduce the distance between these two points from 40 miles over the present route to 24 miles via the new route through Hickory Nut Gorge. When completed, this new

PATH TO THE PARKS

January 5, 1917 | Charlotte Observer, page 2

July 29, 1917 | Asheville Citizen, page 13

July 23, 1925 | Forest City Courier, page 2

These clippings demonstrate the importance of the Hickory Nut Gorge Highway, now U.S. 64, which was completed by prisoners. In a 1917 address to the legislature, Governor Locke Craig highlights the need for "good roads" for cars, specifically mentioning the "difficult" section at Chimney Rock (left article). The road had to be rebuilt after a flood, and there was a lot of pressure to complete the work quickly. That summer, prisoners worked on building a temporary road to accommodate the busy visitation season at Chimney Rock (middle article). The park itself also made several improvements, including a road through the park, but the highway was a key part that made travel from Asheville and from Charlotte much easier by car (right article). Chimney Rock was a private park during the 20th century and until the state purchased it in 2007. More than 300,000 visitors now come to Chimney Rock State Park each year via that same road.

- [Source: DigitalNC / Charlotte Observer](#)
- [Source: DigitalNC / now Asheville Citizen-Times](#)
- [Source: DigitalNC / now Daily Courier](#)

BOARD OF TRADE WANTS STATE TO PUT CONVICTS ON THE HIGHWAYS

"Asheville Day" Will Be Observed at the Top of Mount Mitchell—New Station Authorized By the Southern Railway.

At an important meeting of the directors of the local board of trade yesterday afternoon, that organization went on record as favoring the placing of all able bodied state convicts on the highways of the commonwealth and decided to observe "Asheville Day" at the summit of Mount Mitchell soon while the chairman of two committees announced the appointment of their fellows and interesting reports were submitted. The meeting was one of unusual interest and was largely attended by the members of the governing board of the organization. With the decision to arrange a celebration at the top of Mount Mitchell, it was announced that the Southern Railway company has made arrangements to construct a passenger station at the lumber mills of Feary and "rocket" to be known as Mount Mitchell station for the convenience of passengers on Southern trains who desire to ascend the mountain over the line of the Mount Mitchell railroad.
The resolution requesting the state to place convicts on the highways in this state in line with the policy of the North Carolina Good Roads Association which held its recent annual meeting here and which adopted strong resolutions favoring the discontinuance of the use of convicts on road construction work upon the termination of the contracts which are in force at the present time. The industrial committee will give special attention this year to the location of small industries and the footing of those already established here was the statement of the chairman, Frank M. Weaver, who said that the members of the committee have adopted this policy for the approaching year as one of wisdom. Chairman A. C. Grooms, of the publicity committee, reported the holding of a meeting last Friday to consider the special request of Dr. Joseph H. Pratt, state geologist, for aid in the publication of a road map of the state which the North Carolina Good Roads Association is preparing to publish. It is expected that a definite announcement will be made as to the beginning of active work in connection with the production of this map.
Many bookings. The secretary reported that the issue of 15,000 books of last year has been exhausted and he was instructed to secure bids for the publication of a new edition. The demand for Asheville literature has been great during the past few months.

RAILWAY TO ROADWAY

July 23, 1915

Asheville Citizen, page 7

Demands for more roadways lead to calls to transfer the convict labor force from working on railroads to building roads and highways. Interestingly enough, this article also mentions the opening of the new Mount Mitchell railroad, just shortly before it became a state park.

Source: DigitalNC / now Asheville Citizen-Times

ESCAPES FROM ROADS; LANDS IN A HOSPITAL

Mark Washburn, Tired of Wandering Through Mountains, Gets Himself Shot in Foot.

Had not Mark Washburn, colored, an escaped Buncombe county convict, wandered into Perley and Crockett's camp near Ridgecrest Sunday night and engaged in a row with another negro, the chances are that he would still have Sheriff E. M. Mitchell guessing as to his whereabouts in the county.

As it was, the negro quarreled with another negro and in the end this other negro shot Mark in the foot. Mark is in the Mission hospital here, recuperating.

Since his escape from the road forces two weeks ago, Washburn has led the sheriff and his deputies a merry chase. Two or three times the officers have been on the trail of the man, only to have him elude them in the mountains.

However, Sheriff Mitchell intends to take ample precautions to see that the wily negro doesn't get away this time.

As soon as Mark is able to be up and about the hospital, a guard will be stationed over him. When he gets a little stronger, he will be moved to the county jail and from there back out on the roads.

If he continues to improve at his present speed, Mark's friends at Camp No. 1 can expect him back within the next few weeks.

ESCAPE

August 1, 1917

Asheville Citizen, page 3

Though prisoners were now leased to the state instead of private companies, the work remained very difficult. They were still in chains, doing outdoor physical labor. There were also many accounts of brutal treatment by supervisors — for being a "criminal" and for being Black — note the tone of this article.

Escapes were common, and this article talks about a Black prisoner who escaped road assignment in the Black Mountains. He found himself at a camp (possibly what is now Camp Alice at Mount Mitchell), which was run by Perley and Crockett, the lumber company that was still operating at the time and later ran the passenger railroad to the summit.

Source: DigitalNC / now Asheville Citizen-Times

HANGING ROCK WORK STARTS OVER

R. F. C. FORCES, SUPPLEMENTED BY STATE CONVICT SQUADS. RESUME CONSTRUCTION OF HIGHWAY TO MOUNTAIN TOP—CONCENTRATION OF LABOR ON PROJECT TO BE ADOPTED BY STATE.

Prof. J. C. Carson, who is head of the federal relief work in the county, advises the Reporter that work will be resumed August 2 on the construction of a road to Hanging Rock.

Prof. Carson says the crew of R. F. C. workers who have recently been grading the Seven Island road, as well as the squad of federal laborers on Walnut Cove projects, will be put on the Hanging Rock project.

Recently a crew of State highway convicts from the camp near Meadows, under the supervision of E. O. Cressman, have been at work on the Hanging Rock road. It is learned that the services of this force will probably be continued, as the State is expected to adopt the Hanging Rock highway as a public proposition.

The grading of the Hanging Rock highway has progressed well on to

