

I remember the first time I laid eyes on it from my position in center-field. The old brick building was shrouded in darkness, its indirect illumination coming from the ballpark lights. “They used to have ‘ol sparky in that place,” a teammate called out, when he noticed my interest in the building. I’d been a resident of the city of Milledgeville for about a year and had soaked up a little history about the town. But I couldn’t fathom that this building had housed the state’s electric chair. Even in the dim light, it didn’t even look like any prison I’d ever seen. I chalked it up as another attempt by one of my new southern friends to have some fun with an unsuspecting Yankee. Sort of like their offers to take me snipe hunting.

Forty-five years later, I received a message from a reader who had seen my story of a murder in Jackson County in the

Autumn 2021 issue of *Georgia Backroads* magazine. The reader wanted me to consider doing a story about the old state penitentiary. The thought took me back to that evening of church league softball, standing in the outfield at Walter B. Williams Park staring at the last remnants of the Georgia State Prison.

When Milledgeville was chosen to become the state capital in 1803, sixteen acres of land was set aside for the first state penitentiary. When the institution was finally completed in 1816, it opened with mixed reviews, from the belief that it would reform prisoners to the notion that the facility was an eyesore, located too close to the governor’s mansion and local businesses. The prison population was predominantly male, with prisoners learning trades including blacksmithing, wagon and cart manufacturing, cabinet-making, shoemaking, glassmaking, tailor-

ing, and saddle and harness crafting.

During the Civil War, prisoners were trained to produce rifles, bayonets, and other material needed by Confederate soldiers. When General Sherman approached Milledgeville on his March to the Sea in late 1864, Governor Joseph E. Brown pardoned most of the prisoners, with the stipulation that they take up arms to defend the capital city. Many of them deserted, and the prison was later burned.

After the war, the state began the practice of leasing out convict labor, primarily to help reconstruct the war-ravaged state. This arrangement was cost-effective since the state didn’t have to provide room and board. Convict labor continued until the state abolished the system in 1908, in reaction to widespread abuses. The economic repercussions were immediately felt by both the private sector and the state. The increased cost of labor forced

DOING TIME

The Story of Georgia’s Penitentiary System

BY JAY JARVIS

The State Prison Farm, prior to 1910.



BIRD'S EYE VIEW- GEORGIA PRISON FARM
MILLEDGEVILLE, GA
1898-1900

some companies out of business. Without access to cheap prison labor, many brick and mining companies failed, and iron and coal production suffered. The same legislation that ended the convict lease system ushered in a new system of forced labor known as the chain gang.

The state capitalized on the economic benefits of the chain gang. Advocates of “good roads” programs argued that using state convicts to build roads was the best way to modernize the state’s economy and get the convicts out of their cells, providing them with vigorous labor outdoors. Those prisoners deemed unable to perform manual labor, such as juveniles, females, and older persons, were sent to the prison farm.

Located three miles west of Milledgeville, the State Prison Farm was built on approximately 4,000 acres acquired by the state in 1899 from former Milledgeville Mayor T. F. Newell. Today, the area is near the intersection of Ga. Highways 22 and 212. A large, wood-frame structure housed inmates, who were used as laborers to raise crops and livestock. Captain Kinchen Rambo Foster supervised the establishment of the farm. He was already a successful farmer in northwest Georgia. In 1891 he had under cultivation 600 acres of land, with crops of grain, clover, oats, wheat, strawberries, tobacco, and cotton. At the prison farm, he supervised the cultivation of more than 1,000 acres in corn and cotton the first year, which turned out to be quite profitable for the state.

When a fire destroyed the wood building, plans for a replacement were drawn up by architect A. C. Bruce, Atlanta’s first member of the American Institute of Architects. He based his design on early nineteenth century prisons in upstate New York, which served as models for most prisons until the 1920s. Work on Georgia’s prison began in March of 1911. The building was expected to meet the state’s needs for a century.

On January 31, 1911, Milledgeville’s *Union-Recorder* newspaper described the concrete and brick two-story structure: “The first or ground floor will be used for



Inmates pick cotton in the Prison Farm’s early days.

a dining room and kitchen, boiler room and guard room. The dining room will be 42’ x 200’, well lighted and ventilated and large enough to seat 200 prisoners. The kitchen will be large, well arranged, with a back oven, pantry and store room, and a small track in the floor so that meals can be served on roller trays. The second or main floor will be used for the offices and guards, with ample hospital space for white and colored prisoners, separate. The lodging hall is 42’ x 200’ and is so arranged that it will comfortably accommodate 250 prisoners and will be fitted with the latest improved bunks. The front of the building will be 137’ x 56’ with the long dormitory extending 310’ x 62’.”

The State Prison Farm housed some notable inmates in its early days. Ezra Allen Miner, better known as Bill Miner, served multiple prison terms in the western United States and Canada for stagecoach and train robberies. The end of the line came following his last train robbery, which took place in Hall County, Georgia, on February 18, 1911. Miner and two accomplices robbed a Southern Railway passenger train bound for New York. The train was stopped at White Sulphur Springs, about four miles northeast of Gainesville. The trio used dynamite to breach a safe and escaped with close to \$1,000. They were apprehended within days in nearby Lumpkin County. They gave the authorities fictitious names but a detective in Gainesville recognized Miner.

Miner’s trial began and ended on

March 3, 1911, and he was sentenced to 20 years. He eventually made his way to the prison farm in Milledgeville on July 8, 1911. He escaped on October 18, at age 70, and got as far as Augusta before he was recaptured on November 3. When he returned to Milledgeville, he was shackled in leg irons and handcuffs. On the morning of June 27, 1912, the guards found his leg irons and handcuffs bolted to his prison cot. Miner had escaped again, this time with two inmates. He was recaptured on July 3 in a swamp near Toombsboro, about 20 miles away. He had swallowed swamp water when the small boat the prisoners had stolen capsized, causing severe gastritis, which ultimately led to his death on September 2, 1913.

Milledgeville’s State Prison is most infamously known for housing Leo M. Frank, the Jewish superintendent of the



Remnant of a license plate grave marker at prison cemetery.



Key ring belonging to Warden J. E. Smith

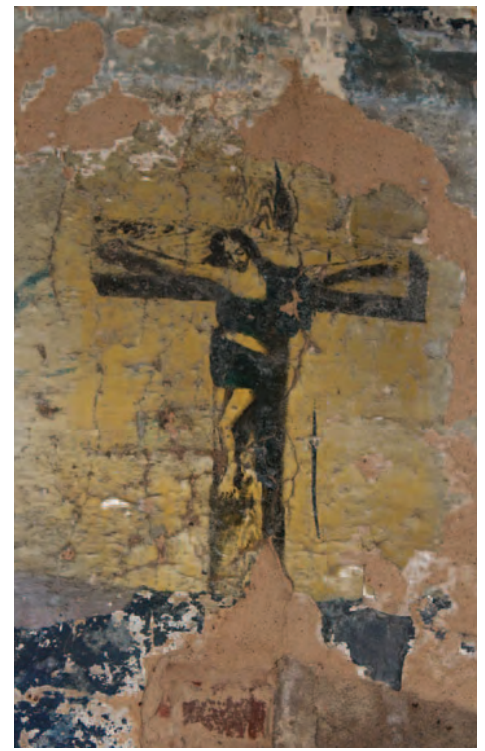
National Pencil Factory in Atlanta. Frank was accused of the murder of Mary Phagan, a 13-year-old girl who worked at the pencil factory. Phagan's body was found in the basement there on April 27, 1913. Frank's trial began on July 28, and he was found guilty on August 25. The following day, Judge Leonard Roan ordered that Frank "be hanged by the neck until he shall be dead, and may God have mercy on his soul."

For two years, Frank's attorneys pursued appeals to the Georgia Supreme Court and United States Supreme Court. When those failed, they reached out to outgoing Georgia governor John Slaton. Slaton reportedly reviewed more than 10,000 pages of documents and visited the crime scene. On June 21, 1915, he commuted Frank's sentence to life imprisonment.

Slaton's decision was unpopular, leading to riots and a march on the governor's mansion. The governor declared martial law and called out the National Guard. When his term ended on June 26, 1915, police escorted him and his wife to the railroad station. They left the state and did not return for ten years.

Prior to the governor's commutation of his sentence, Frank was moved to the State Prison Farm, presumably for his safety. Inmates in the large dormitory were given freedom of movement until 8 p.m. After that time, they were required to obtain permission from a guard before moving around. Sometime after 11 p.m. on July 17, 1915, a 45-year-old inmate named William Creen, serving a life sentence for murder, approached Frank from behind and slashed his throat with a knife, partially severing his jugular vein. Two physicians serving time at the prison, Dr. J. W. McNaughton, of Swainsboro, and Dr. L. M. Harrison, of Columbus, rendered aid until the prison surgeon Dr. George B. Compton arrived.

Frank was still recuperating in the infirmary on the night of August 16, 1915, when a small band of armed men walked in unmolested, took Frank from his bed, and drove him back to Marietta, where he was lynched. A crowd estimated



Crucifixion drawing just prior to the demolition in 2018.

at more than 2,000 gathered the next morning to view the ghastly sight.

Until 1924, the legal method of execution in Georgia was by hanging, with sentences carried out by the sheriff in the county or judicial circuit where the crime was committed. On August 16, 1924, the Georgia General Assembly passed a law that abolished death by hanging and introduced death by electrocution. Executions were mandated to take place within the walls of the state prison at Milledgeville or wherever the state prison might be thereafter. The warden would be assisted by a qualified electrician, two physicians, a prison guard, and two assistants. The condemned were permitted to have their attorneys, relatives, friends, and a member of the clergy present. Two holding cells and the death chamber were built by Manly Jail Works, of Dalton, for \$4,760 (Manly Steel, the parent company of Manly Jail Works, is still in business today).

Most sources say that prisoner Richard McCauley built the first electric chair. The first electrocution happened on September 13, 1924, when 20-year-old Howard Hinton was executed for a sexual assault that took place in Dekalb County on August 16, 1924. In 1926, the state attorney general issued a ruling that coun-



Prison dormitory, 1915. The cot marked with the X (left, second from bottom) is reportedly where Leo Frank was attacked.



Prison entrance just prior to the demolition in 2018.

ties must pay the state \$75 for each prisoner sent to be electrocuted, to cover the cost of the electrician hired to carry out the task. Through the years, 162 death sentences were carried out using the electric chair at the State Farm.

By 1935, the prison was hopelessly overcrowded, and many inmates were disabled and unable to work on the farm. The state received federal assistance to construct a new prison in Reidsville, which opened in 1938. The facility in Milledgeville was then used as a manufacturing facility for metal parts used by the Naval Ordnance Plant in Macon. After World War II, it became a warehouse for several owners, including the J. P. Stevens Company. Most recently it was utilized as a recycling center. In 2013, when the owner became delinquent on taxes, the property went up for sale to satisfy the outstanding taxes. There was no buyer, so Baldwin County took ownership.

Efforts to preserve the original structure were attempted for decades. In the late 1970s, an application was filed with the United States Department of the Interior to add the building to the National Register of Historic Places, which was approved in 1979. A 1996 article in the *Marietta Daily Journal* described plans by the Georgia Prison Historical Society to solicit grant funding to purchase the property. Most recently, Edwin Atkins spearheaded a Facebook group dedicated to saving the building.

Atkins's great-grandfather, Reverend Edwin C. Atkins, served as chaplain of the State Prison Farm from 1923 to 1936. Rev. Atkins lived in a house on the property and was responsible for leading thousands of prisoners to faith during his tenure. Colorful frescoes of the crucifixion and other religious themes, still visible decades after being painted by inmates on the walls, were enduring testimonies to the impact Atkins had on these men.

In 2018, Rev. Atkins's great-grandson and namesake sought permission to film a documentary about the history of the building on site. He also approached Baldwin County with a proposal to purchase the building. He was given permis-

sion for the filming, but the county didn't commit to a sale.

The county undertook an assessment that revealed that homeless persons had been living in the historic old structure. Portions of the second floor were so badly deteriorated that one official nearly fell through the floor. A consultant hired to evaluate the building noted that two sections were in danger of imminent collapse. A local contractor submitted a proposal to tear down the building in exchange for salvageable material from the old prison and surplus county equipment. The building was officially condemned on May 17, 2018, and demolition began at the end of July.

This came as a shock to Edwin Atkins, who didn't get word about the assessment or plans to level the building. Steve Oney, the author of a book about the Leo Frank case, said that the site, "Almost certainly would have qualified for grant money and attracted donations from benefactors, especially those interested in the Frank case, which has inspired a Broadway musical and a television miniseries. It remains one of the most intriguing criminal mysteries of the 20th century and a touchstone for students of Jewish history."

During a visit to the site in 2003, Oney arranged to have the infirmary door, which once stood briefly between Leo Frank and



Photo of prison taken just prior to the demolition in 2018.



Edwin Atkins
with Georgia's
first electric chair.

the lynch mob, transferred to the Breman Jewish Heritage Museum in Atlanta.

A set of keys belonging to Warden J. E. Smith surfaced in 2019. Brittany Rhodes, a graduate student at the University of North Georgia, discovered the keys in 2002 while she and her mother were going through unsold items in an estate sale. After studying the Leo Frank case, she realized they possibly were the same keys used to unlock the prison's infirmary door that fateful night in 1915.

With the building in ruins, Atkins turned his attention to the prison cemetery. Situated on a rise overlooking the 4,000-acre prison farm, the cemetery has more than 600 graves of men and women, based on ground-penetrating radar. Steel license plates, manufactured on site by the prisoners beginning in 1929, mark the gravesites with a designated number rather than a name. Once the prison closed, these graves were left unattended and neglected.

In 1986, the *Macon Telegraph and News* interviewed former inmate Forrest Turner about his brief incarceration at the prison. Turner, who was 70 years old at the time of the interview, had recently visited the old prison property. He recalled that inmates who died in prison were given a pauper's burial if a family member didn't claim the body. He vividly remembered buzzards violating the shallow graves and flimsy pine coffins. While he was imprisoned there, he marched past the cemetery while on work details, noting "it was sad

when you'd come by here. You didn't know what day you'd wind up here." At the time of his visit, there were about thirty rusted grave markers visible; the majority knocked down and covered when the power company cut the right-of-way through the cemetery in the late 1970s.

Turner couldn't understand why someone had not tried to better mark the graves. "These were precious people to somebody," he said.

Edwin Atkins formed the Friends of Red Hill Prison Cemetery, LLC to raise public awareness of the burial ground. The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation placed the cemetery on its 2022 list of the top ten places in peril in the state. Historical documents place the number of gravesites between 600 and 2,000. After decades of neglect, underbrush obscures most of the graves. The

group hopes to involve multiple state agencies and educational institutions in the cleanup and restoration of the site. As research continues, a database has been created listing those interred on the property. There are plans to place granite markers at each grave, and Atkins envisions a day when the state or county governments might build a nature or bike trail to give families and the public access to the site. Cherokee roses, which became the state flower in 1916, were planted around the perimeter of the cemetery when Rev. Atkins was the chaplain. Surviving specimens are still present and can be transplanted, or added to, to beautify the property.

For Edwin Atkins, who worked on theatre and movie productions in New York and Hollywood, life has come full circle. When his great-grandfather passed away at the age of 93, he left behind more than 600 sermons and letters from his time as prison chaplain, including an envelope marked "Executions." The envelope contained handwritten details of each of the 144 electrocutions he attended. Sometimes he would host the families of the condemned prisoners for dinner.

Now it's as if Atkins has received a life sentence, of sorts. He is committed to continuing the work his great-grandfather started, to provide dignity for those laid to rest at Red Hill. ■

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Thermal imagery from
above shows a portion
of the graves on the west
side of the cemetery.