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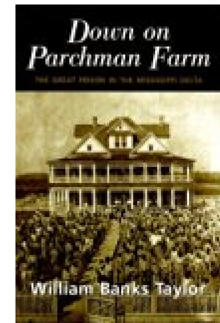
William Banks Taylor. *Down on Parchman Farm: The Great Prison in the Mississippi Delta.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999. xv + 255 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8142-5023-5.



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The

The "White Chief" Was Right

For many people the name "Parchman" immediately conjures up images of black convicts dressed in prison stripes toiling away under the oppressive Mississippi sun on a delta landscape that is as depressing as it is flat. This image is in no small part due to Parchman's location in the heart of blues country. As Mississippi's state prison – or penal farm, to be more precise – Parchman Farm was home to thousands of Mississippi blacks whose musical tastes and talents led them to memorialize their misery and despair in songs that remain popular even today. This legendary image of Parchman, captured in song as well as in literature, has spurred scholarly indictments of the institution as the epitome of southern injustice: racist, oppressive, archaic, exploitative, and ultimately, "worse than slavery" [1]. William Banks Taylor, in his book *Down on Parchman Farm*, attempts to break through the fog of Parchman's reputation to provide a more accurate, objective description of the institution and its place in penal history.

Taylor, who is a professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Southern Mississippi, has already written a book about Mississippi's prison system entitled *Brokered Justice: Race, Politics, and Mississippi Prisons, 1798-1992 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993). In his current book,* Down on Parchman Farm*, Taylor focuses on the state's penal farm, tracing its history from its creation in 1901 to its federally-mandated transformation into a modern correctional institution in the 1970s. He agrees with the critics of Parchman that wholesale changes were needed by 1972 when a federal court ruled on behalf of African American plaintiffs from Parchman in the case of* Gates v. Collier_. By that point the prison was grossly inefficient and the inmates were forced to live in conditions that were unfit for human habitation. But that is not how it had always been at Parchman, Taylor argues. Federal intervention did not fix what many considered to be an inherently flawed system. Rather, it reformed an institution that had been "among the most effective [prisons] in the nation" until the 1950s (203). It reformed a once-great institution whose demise did not begin until state officials began to abandon the penal philosophy of one of the South's most notorious race-baiting demagogues, Mississippi Governor James K. Vardaman, the "White Chief."

When Vardaman became governor in 1904 he combined his view of African Americans with his progressive ideas concerning crime and punishment to become "the philosophical and political architect of Mississippi's twentieth-century penal system" (33). The White Chief was a reformer in that he sought to make rehabilitation rather than punishment the chief characteristic of Mississippi's state prison. But his social Darwinist views also led him to believe that blacks as a race would never rise above the status of manual laborer. Consequently, his plan for the thousands of newly-purchased acres that made up Parchman Farm, and the blacks that made up 80 percent of the state's convict population, was that of a penal farm where the inmates received vocational training and an appreciation for honest toil – all of which, in

Vardaman's opinion, would be beneficial to the state, its citizens and the convicts themselves.

By arranging it so that Parchman's board of trustees was elected by the people, that its employees were appointed by the governor, and its purse strings held by the state legislature, Vardaman made sure that an effective system of checks and balances governed the penal farm. In addition, Parchman stayed above the political fray by virtue of its financial independence. It was designed to be a money-generating plantation like any other in the delta. Mr. Vardaman's farm resembled its neighboring plantations in more ways than garnering profits though. Parchman had no walls or jail cells, just barracks called "cages" dotting the landscape in a pattern similar to that found in sharecropping. Rows of cotton stretched as far as the eye could see and long lines of African Americans worked the rows everyday but Sunday from sunup to sundown. An incentive program, which promoted some of the inmates to positions as house servants (in the superintendent's home and elsewhere) and "trusties" (armed convict guards), inspired most inmates to behave themselves. Those not motivated by the prospect of promotion were introduced to "Black Annie," a heavy leather strap of antebellum vintage.

This setup, according to Taylor, wasn't perfect, but worked well. Parchman produced profits and the convicts were appeased by good food, conjugal visits, an institution-sponsored black market and opportunities for rest after exhausting work in the fields. The objective of having productive laborers led prison officials to keep the convicts healthy and content. Therefore, Taylor asserts, there "is no reason to believe that Mississippi's convicts were subjected to any more abuse than those incarcerated in other states' prisons. By all accounts, the workload was no more demanding than that on Delta plantations employing free labor" (63-4). In fact, the author contends that "life at Parchman Farm was a step up for many of its inmates" (56). So much so that some refused to leave when offered clemency. Attempted escapes were few and recidivism was low. In sum, Taylor concludes that "most convicts were remarkably content" and "everybody was about as happy as possible" (130).

This state of affairs generally lasted until the 1950s. There was a brief low point for the institution during the 1920s when the Vardaman faction lost its hold on political power and his successors began tinkering with his penal system, but that development was arrested beginning in 1936. In that year, the first of several good superintendents were put in charge of Parchman and they succeeded in dispensing justice Vardaman-style. However, by the time the last of these men resigned in 1956, Parchman Farm was well down the road to destruction.

One of the main culprits behind Parchman's demise was the shift in attitudes towards punishing criminals. By the 1940s "Northern liberals [had] soured on the old penology" and considered penitentiaries to be inefficient and inhumane (83). Parchman was downright barbaric. The criticism only became more deafening when, in light of the civil rights movement, Parchman came to be seen as little more than a revived antebellum slave plantation. In an attempt to appear more progressive, the legislature forced Parchman to adopt a number of reforms such as parole. But parole only robbed Parchman of its best inmates who had guarded and set good examples for the others, and destroyed the otherwise successful incentive program. In an attempt to improve Parchman's image, fewer prisoners were assigned fewer hours in the fields, and spent more time watching the newly installed televisions. The convicts then grew more uncontrollable and the problems they created only drew more attention to the farm.

Although Mississippians could blame northern liberals for disrupting the status quo, it was clear that many of the problems at the prison were home-grown. For instance, in 1934 Mississippi's legislature abolished Vardaman's board of trustees and put Parchman in the hands of the governor. As a result, Parchman became "a pork barrel of gubernatorial patronage, and one that was fraught with potential for graft and human abuse" (77). Politicians began to take advantage of the situation, which resulted in several high-profile scandals that engendered more negative publicity. Most of Parchman's loudest critics were "reformers" in the Mississippi legislature who succeeded in passing legislation enacting parole, vocational training, and the building of a maximum security unit at Parchman. These reforms modernized Parchman, but it remained an ill-conceived, unworkable amalgamation of a plantation and a penitentiary.

By 1972, Parchman was in desperate need of wholesale change and got it courtesy of U.S. District Judge William C. Keady. But in replacing the penal farm with "a cellblock prison conforming to the now homogenized national model of criminal corrections" (197), Taylor argues, Keady created a prison that "is certainly no better, and arguably much worse, than the one that existed in 1972" (199). The new and improved federal version of Parchman, he says, has undoubtedly improved the standard of living for Mississippi's convicts, but has been a

failure on penological grounds. Since 1972, he points out, the rate of recidivism in Mississippi has "risen a great deal" (199). In addition, desegregation at Parchman has resulted in the emergence of a divisive, race-oriented gang culture that has led to an increased number of convict-on-convict assaults and murders. The convict population remains well over 70 percent black and the costs of running the prison have risen prodigiously.

Taylor makes it clear that he is no fan of the modern approach to criminal corrections. In his opinion, the philosophy which guided Parchman during its heyday constitutes the most effective approach to punishing and rehabilitating the country's criminals. This assertion is quickly dismissed, he complains, because of Parchman's negative image. This is why he sought to separate fact from fiction, as it pertains to Parchman's reputation, in this book. Taylor is to be commended for looking at Parchman from a different perspective. He has succeeded in providing a fairer, more objective view of a notorious, yet significant, southern institution.

Where Taylor falters a bit though is in his controversial assertion that "the Parchman of the mid-fifties realized the traditional goals of corrective justice, including the health and general welfare of its convicts, to a much greater extent than the Parchman of the late 1990s" (199). Although the author puts forth a convincing argument that the traditional approach to corrective justice is superior to modern forms, many will wonder if the health and welfare of those convicts who had to spend nearly every waking hour laboring in the fields for the state was actually better than that of those who currently reside in Parchman's relatively comfortable cells and have access to libraries, counseling and numerous rehabilitation programs. In addition, the Parchman of the 1950s, unlike its modern-day counterpart, threw together convicts of every stripe, regardless of age, mental capacity, or the nature of the crime they committed. And because the convicts were not separated from one another by bars of steel, as they are today, it was not unusual for the strong and the depraved to prey on the weak and the naive.

Taylor is also to be faulted for disregarding the negative aspects of Parchman while attempting to show the farm in the best light possible. Considering the purpose of the book, it is understandable why the author did this, but if one is to provide an accurate history of Parchman it should include both the good and the bad. On page sixty-six, Taylor mentions that "gross negligence" on the part of the superintendent resulted in a fire in which thirty convicts died, but never explains what exactly happened. In addition he mentions reported cases of "racial abuse" (133). What is meant by this is unclear, and one supposes it could range anywhere from the use of racial slurs to murder. Taylor never provides statistics on how many would-be escapees were gunned down by the trusties who oftentimes earned a pardon for their marksmanship. In one instance he mentions that "several prisoners crossed the gun line and fell prey to" trusties but leaves us without a firm number of victims nor with any idea of what happened exactly (137).

Although it is unfair to fault Taylor for this, it is regrettable that some of the strongest evidence for his argument comes in the form of anonymous interviews. The author makes good use of statements by former prisoners, black and white, who also saw much that was good and logical in Vardaman's approach to rehabilitating criminals. One only wishes that they had access to the 350 hours of testimony that Taylor said he collected for the book. It is worth pointing out that David Oshinsky, who takes a much more negative view of Parchman in his book *Worse Than Slavery*, also collected oral evidence from former inmates who likewise saw redeeming qualities in the old Parchman, especially when compared to the new.

Although it has its flaws, *Down on Parchman Farm* is a well-written, convincingly-argued book. Taylor has provided a significant rebuttal to the assertion that Parchman Farm was worse than slavery, though not everyone will buy his argument that it compares favorably to the prisons of today. Though not the last word, it is a welcome addition to the historiography of an important southern institution, and one that will be of value to historians of the twentieth-century American South.

[1] David M. Oshinsky, _"Worse Than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

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