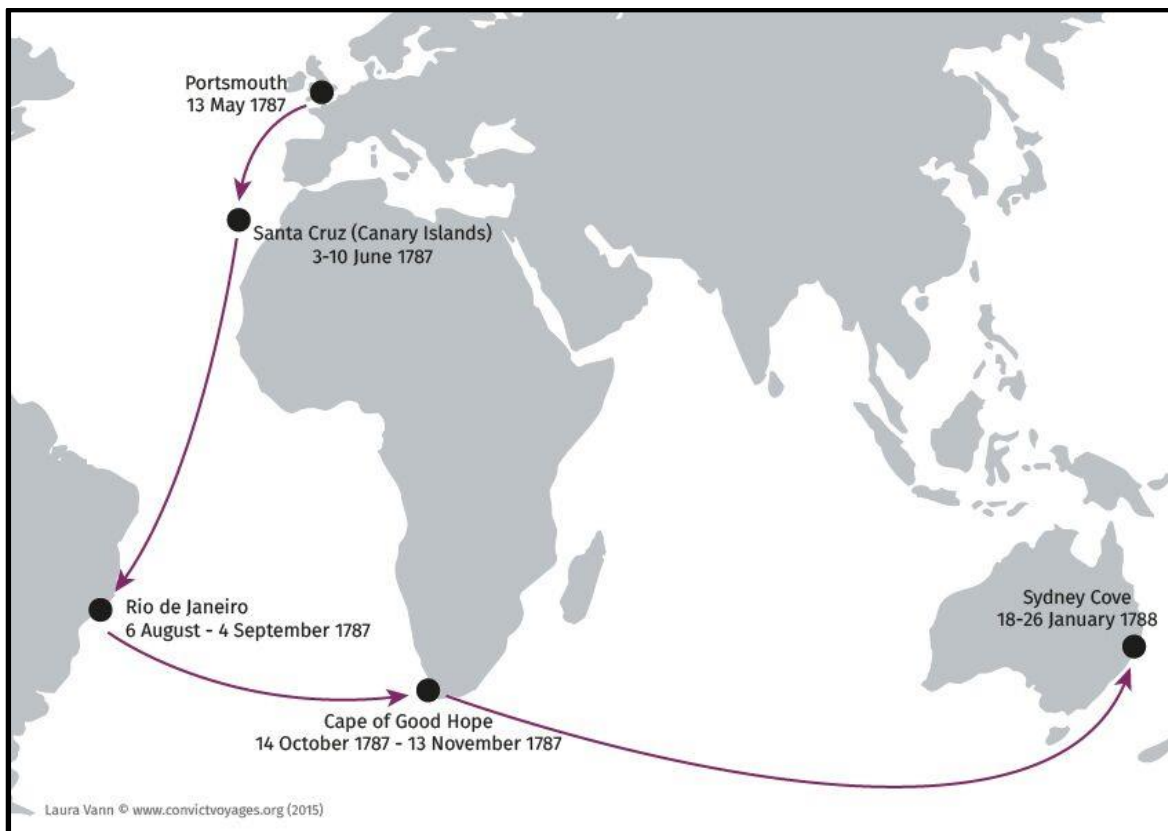


## New South Wales: Transported to a "Thief Colony," 1788-1849

Katherine Roscoe

The first fleet set off from Portsmouth for New Holland (as Australia was known) on 13 May 1787 under the command of [Captain Arthur Phillip](#). Eleven vessels carried 736 convicts - 548 of which were men and 188 of which were women, along with 25 convict children. They were matched by around the same number of marines, ship's crew, officials and their families. Setting sail from Portsmouth, the fleet travelled via Tenerife and Rio de Janeiro to the Cape of Good Hope, which was their final supply stop before heading to Australia.



Eight months after leaving Britain, the convicts and crew arrived in Botany Bay on 18 January and set anchor in Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788. This is the day now celebrated annually as Australia Day. Sydney Cove, named after the British Home Secretary, was an ideal settlement site as a deep-water harbour that also boasted shelter and fresh water. There are [many first-hand accounts](#) of the First Fleet's journey to, and arrival in, Australia. Many describe feelings of homesickness and despair in this alien environment. Equally prevalent are feelings of wonder at the beautiful landscape and a curiosity in the Eora, the local Indigenous people.

Transportation had been in use by the British in a systematic way since 1771. Convicts were useful as a mobile labour force, so they were sent to bolster existing industries, often supplementing other forms of coerced labour, such as slavery. Alternatively they were sent to protect strategic interests as convict soldiers. However, toward the end of the eighteenth century concerns were raised that having European convicts labour alongside non-Europeans could upset racial hierarchies that

underpinned colonial authority. The end of transportation of convicts to America thanks to the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) occasioned a crisis in convict management. With hulks overflowing, and a failed attempt to send convicts to Das Voltas Bay (present day Namibia), New Holland was chosen as the site for a radical new penal experiment in August 1786. Unlike transportation to America, the imperial government would bear the costs both of transportation and of the convicts once in the colony. As a result, the Colonial Office was particularly keen for the colony to become self-sufficient as soon as possible.

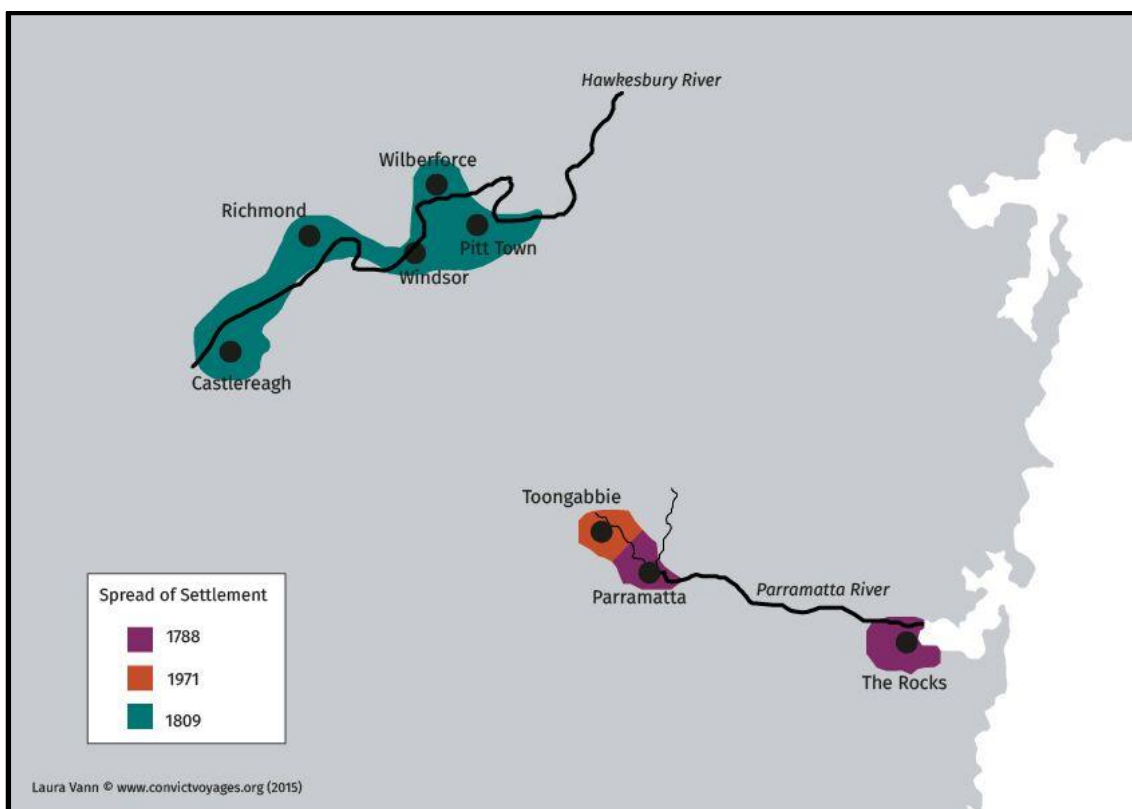
The journey from conviction to New South Wales comprised many stages and sites of punishment. After sentencing, male convicts were removed to hulks. These were decommissioned vessels anchored in ports in Plymouth, Portsmouth and on the Thames to be used as “mobile labour depots.” Convicts spent an average of 7 months on board [hulks](#) in cramped and damp conditions. They spent their days working in gangs at hard labour like loading supplies onto vessels and draining riverbeds. Female convicts, on the other hands, waited in regional prisons to be called to London to board ships for transport. From the 1840s male and female convicts were sent to British penitentiaries, such as Millbank and Pentonville in London. In the latter, convicts spent 18 months being “reformed” through solitary confinement and moral instruction, and “trained” in literacy and skilled labour – to prepare them for transportation to Australia. Then, convicts were selected on the basis of their skills as labourers and screened for ill health. It was in the best interests of the colony to send only convicts who would survive the journey and be ready to undertake hard labour once there.

The voyage to Australia averaged 4 months, longer than transportation to anywhere else, bar from Odessa to Sakhalin and from France to New Caledonia. Convicts were kept below deck in separated bunks or hammocks. Weather and good behaviour permitting they were sometimes allowed onto deck to exercise and breathe fresh air. Mundane problems such as seasickness and stomach upsets resulted in unpleasant conditions at the start of the journey. However, as the journey progressed, diseases could emerge that seriously threatened the health of those on board. Scurvy, fever and dysentery were particular threats. After a 7-fold increase in on-board mortality on the Second Fleet, the government required naval-trained surgeons to superintend every vessel from 1792; further regulations were imposed by the government to improve the health on board ships from 1800 onwards. This included bonuses for ship-masters for landing healthy convicts, increased salaries from the treasury direct to Surgeon-Superintendents, and awarding Surgeon-Superintendents complete authority in all cases reacting to discipline and medicine. Hygienic routine was used to combat disease, including ventilation of lower decks, deck scrubbing, and washing of clothes, bedding and persons. However, bad weather, lack of fresh food and contaminated water could all pose a threat across the long journey. Female convicts experienced far less rigid security than their male counterparts who were considered mutiny risks. Female convicts were allowed on deck far more frequently than men, and convict transports carrying women were not accompanied by a military guard. Though their journey only took half the time, emigrant ships from Europe to America had a death rate almost twice that of convict transports to Australia.

From 1788-1842, 80,000 convicts were transported to New South Wales, of which 15% were women and 85% men. Around 2/3 were English, and the remaining 1/3 were mostly [Irish](#). The majority had been convicted of petty larceny or of receiving stolen goods and were sentenced to 7-year sentences for theft. Those serving sentences of 14 years or life had usually had death sentences commuted for violent crimes. A small minority were political prisoners – including dissidents from the 1798 Irish rebellion or, in the 1830s, radicals such as the Tolpuddle Martyrs and the Swing Rioters. The vast majority of convicts from Britain were from urban areas, whilst most of the Irish came from the

countryside. Young adult convicts were preferred as they would make better labourers and be able to bear children for longer. Most female convicts were single, which was desirable because the imperial administration wanted to expand the reproductive potential of the colony. Like men, they were transported mainly for theft, most often for stealing items such as clothes, fabric, money and jewellery. These were objects they would come across in their jobs, as the vast majority were domestic servants.

As a land without commercial industry, and with transportation there incurring substantial costs for the British government, the main aim of the penal colony in the early years was to become a self-sufficient agricultural settlement. Governor Arthur Phillip instructed convicts to clear ground for public farms to feed the colony when rations ran out after 2 years. Other convicts were employed in the construction of roads, bridges and buildings. Once male convicts became free they were granted 30 acres, and to encourage family units, an additional 20 acres was given to men with a wife, with a further 10 acres per child born. However, the sandstone soil of Sydney was not well suited to growing wheat and maize. As a result, public farms were established further afield (at Parramatta and Toongabbie). It was hoped that convicts would continue to cultivate land in these custom-built communities after the expiration of their sentence, but they were reluctant to do so. Instead, from 1794-5, there was a land rush along the highly fertile banks of the Hawkesbury River many settling without official land grants, which meant no rent was paid to the Crown. This land proved so fertile that it soon produced half of the food for Sydney, becoming known as “the granary of the colony.” In 1809 the importance of the Hawkesbury region to the colony was made official with the establishment of five towns (Richmond, Windsor, Wilberforce, Pitt Town and Castlereagh) along its banks.



Under Lieutenant Governor Francis Grose, land grants to ex-convicts rose to 80 acres, and officers were granted even larger land grants of 100 acres. These officers were each assigned 10 convicts on full rations to work the land, which would become the model of the assignment system. In 1819

John Thomas Bigge was commissioned by British parliament to write a report on transportation of convicts to Australia at the penal settlements at Van Diemen's Land and New South Wales. Bigge recommended that land grants should no longer be awarded to convicts in all Australian penal settlements. Instead, land grants should be awarded solely to free immigrants with capital who would have convicts assigned to them as labourers. Under the assignment system, the settler would be responsible for providing their convict with food, clothing and accommodation. Bigge estimated that this would reduce the costs for the British government by £24 and 10 shillings per convict. Settlers were not allowed to punish their assigned convicts, instead they would be tried by a bench of magistrates or a higher court to a term of punishment in a road party, chain gang or penal station. Male convicts who committed an offence whilst in the colony were assigned to "iron gangs" who built roads or bridges in chains in remote areas of the colony. After completing a sentence there, and behaving well, convicts would be moved to road or bridge Parties who worked without irons, though convicts could be assigned to these parties directly after arrival in the colony. In gangs of between 50 and 60 men, Assistant Surveyors oversaw the construction of major projects like the Great North Road between Sydney and the Hunter Valley. If the work was longer-term, accommodation of timber or bark huts was built, but often men lived in tents and moved along as the road progressed. Convicts in road gangs were disciplined by flogging or in mobile solitary confinement carts. Punishment was supposed to be regulated by the Visiting Magistrate, but the mobile nature of the work made government surveillance partial at best. On the other hand there were increased chances for escape thanks to the proximity of rural bushland.

Between 1814 and 1819 the number of convicts arriving in New South Wales doubled every year. The end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 caused a crime wave in Britain, as decommissioned soldiers returned home to an economy that was already stagnant. Many of those convicted of theft at this time were transported to New South Wales. Governor Lachlan Macquarie proposed that the minority of new arrivals who were not assigned needed to be accommodated as a whole and subjected to stricter discipline. He hoped increased government control over the convicts would improve both their productivity and encourage moral reformation. Francis Greenway designed a 3-storey Georgian building to house 600 convicts – a third of the convict population at the time. Twelve rooms held double rows of hammocks, with spy holes for warders to try and prevent any misbehaviour, in the form of gambling or homosexual activity. After opening in Hyde Park in May 1819, male convicts who arrived in Sydney Cove were walked uphill to the barracks where they would be mustered in the yard. Some convicts were assigned immediately. Those with useful trades were kept in the barracks to work for the government on public works. The convicts were rewarded for their service with better rations, but the price they paid was a loss of freedom. They were subject to a strict daily routine meted out by the yard bell and were only able to earn money for themselves on Saturdays.

The barracks were also the administrative hub of the convict system, housing the Court of General Sessions and the Superintendent of Convict's offices from 1830. Here fortunate convicts were awarded pardons or tickets of leave, whilst those found guilty of misdemeanours were flogged. From the mid-1830s there were rumours that corruption and immoral behaviour were rife within the barracks, which was worryingly central to the colonial settlement. An 1844 Select Committee into rising crime rates found the barracks to have a "demoralising influence" on those convicts incarcerated there. As no new convicts arrived in the colony after the abolition of transportation in 1840, the barracks were closed as a convict depot in 1848.

The Parramatta Female Factory (1818) was the first purpose-built colonial establishment for the accommodation and employment of convict women. It served as a prison, convict depot, hospital

and orphanage for convict children. Women were segregated by behaviour, which determined both the tasks they had to perform and their opportunities for release. As a result of the Bigge Report that recommended stricter discipline for convicts, a 3-tier system was introduced at the Parramatta Female Factory in 1826. The best-behaved first class were eligible for assignment. The second class was the probationary class – though not yet eligible for assignment, they were not being punished for bad behaviour. The first and second class were engaged in the domestic tasks that aimed to reform the women as well as to make the institution self-sufficient. These jobs included wool picking, cloth scouring, carding, weaving, laundry, needlework, cleaning and straw plaiting. The third class was being punished for “misconduct.” They were subjected to hard labour – such as breaking stone – or menial tasks – such as oakum picking - and deprived of indulgences like tea and sugar. Some were subject to extra punishment, including having their heads shaved. As well as a site of labour extraction, and punishment, the Female Factory also fulfilled other roles relating to family and welfare. Men in search of a wife could visit the Female Factory, with a certificate attesting to his good character, and have his pick from a group of eligible “first class” convicts by dropping his handkerchief at her feet. The Female Factory also accommodated children borne out of wedlock by former factory inmates while out on assignment. The medical yard was crowded, understaffed and poorly ventilated, resulting in very high mortality rates of “factory children.” There were also female factories in New South Wales at Newcastle (1818-48); Moreton Bay (1829-39); Port Macquarie (1831-42) and Bathurst (1833-46).

Convicts could be granted legal freedom from penal regimes in several different ways, with certain levels of restriction. Firstly, they could be granted a ticket of leave after having served a fixed portion of their sentence. The minimum time that needed to be served was 4 years for a 7-year sentence; 6 years for a 14-year sentence; and 8 years for a life sentence. This term was increased if the convict had been assigned to more than one master (implying bad conduct). Emancipists, as ex-convicts were known, were then free to work for their own benefit and live or buy property within their district. There were restrictions on their movement and they were required to attend church every Sunday. Conditional pardons freed convicts, without any restrictions, as long as they did not leave the colony. Absolute pardons allowed convicts freedom no matter where they travelled as their crime had effectively been erased by Royal permission. Of course, a small proportion of convicts sought escape into the interior as bushrangers or overseas to locations as diverse as India, New Zealand and Britain.

In the 1830s the attention of the British public was increasingly drawn to the “terrors” of the convict system. With the rise of anti-slavery movement, which led to its abolition in 1834, comparisons were drawn by the anti-transportation lobby between assignment and slavery. The use of chains and the power of masters were visible reminders of tyranny that many claimed was out of sync with Britain’s role as a civilised nation. The movement took hold in the colony. In 1837 a Select Committee into convict transportation to the House of Commons, chaired by Sir William Molesworth, recommended the overhaul or abolition of a flawed system of punishment. Within the colony, the anti-abolitionist movement gained strength with many eager to shed the convict stain as rates of free emigration continued to increase. In August 1840 an [Order in Council](#) was passed that temporarily ceded the royal power to transport convicts anywhere within the British Empire, discontinuing transportation to New South Wales. Over the course of the 1840s the legislative council was put under pressure to resume transportation by the imperial government and by its own members who were landowners desirous of cheap convict labour. A few convict “exiles” and select convict ships continued to arrive in New South Wales. The last convict transport was the *Eden* which disembarked 236 “high class” convicts in 1849.

## Further Reading

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Ian Duffield and James Bradley, *Representing Convicts: New perspectives on convict forced labour migration* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997).

Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A history of transportation of convicts to Australia, 1787-1868* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* (Crow's Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2009).

Stephen Nicholas (ed.), *Convict Workers: Reinterpreting Australia's Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Deborah Oxley, *Convict Maids: The Forced Migration of Women to Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Bob Reece, *The Origins of Irish Convict Transportation to New South Wales* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001).

W.M. Robbins, "Spatial Escape and the Hyde Park Convict Barracks," *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 7 (2005): 81-96.

## Online Resources

A Day in the Life of a Convict, <http://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/stories/day-life-convict>

Australian Convict Sites – UNESCO World Heritage, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1306/documents>

Hyde Park Barracks Museum, <http://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/hyde-park-barracks-museum>

My Place for Teachers, <http://www.myplace.edu.au/home.html>

NSW State Records - Indexes to Convict Records, <http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/state-archives/indexes-online/indexes-to-convict-records>

Parramatta Female Factory Precinct, <http://www.parragirls.org.au/>

State Library of NSW - History of Our Nation, [http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/discover\\_collections/history\\_nation/index.html](http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/discover_collections/history_nation/index.html)

"Botany Bay" Convict Ditty – Australian Folk Songs, <http://folkstream.com/010.html>