



Sentenced Beyond the Seas: Convicts to Australia

- Jenny Joyce

Background

After the American Revolution Britain could no longer send its convicts there. As a result, gaols became overcrowded, and convicts were kept in hulks (decommissioned and often unseaworthy naval vessels). A new solution for dealing with the convicts had to be found. In May 1787, the eleven ships that formed the First Fleet set off from Portsmouth, arriving in Sydney in January 1788.

Convict Career

- Conviction in their place of origin
- Records of imprisonment, including Hulk records
- Transportation
- Assignment
- Permission to marry
- Tickets of Leave
- Certificate of Freedom
- Conditional/Absolute Pardon

Convict Locations

- **NSW** ~80,000 convicts. Convict transportation 1788-1840. A couple of exile ships arrived 1848-1849, but the local population greatly objected and transportation was completely ceased in 1849.
- **Norfolk Island.** Two periods of settlement – 1788-1814 convicts were transferred from Sydney. After settlement on Van Diemen's Land had been established, Norfolk Island was considered less suitable, so the convicts were transferred there. In 1825 Norfolk was resettled, this time as a place of secondary punishment. From 1840-1850 ~2740 convicts were transported directly there. The settlement was finally closed in 1853.
- **Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania)** ~76,000 convicts 1804-1853, which includes those transferred there from NSW and Norfolk Island. Convicts were sent there from NSW from 1804. Transportation directly from England 1812-1853. Included two major locations of secondary transportation – Sarah Island and Port Arthur.
- **Moreton Bay.** Settled 1824 as a place of secondary punishment. From 1849-1850 ~660 Exiles arrived. Two ships came directly from the United Kingdom, and about 130 others came from

other Australian colonies. Up until 1842 referred to as the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement of the Colony of New South Wales. From 1842 until separation it is referred to as the Free Settlement of Moreton Bay. In 1859 Queensland separated from NSW and became a separate colony.

- **Port Phillip** ~1750 Exiles or Pentonvillians sent 1844-1849 on eight ships
- **Western Australia.** Settled in 1829 as the Swan River Colony with free settlers. In 1832 it was renamed the Colony of Western Australia. From 1850-1868 convicts who had served part of their sentence with good behaviour were sent out as a work force. 9674 men were sent.

Available records

The availability and survival of records varies from colony to colony. New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) have the best records, despite the fact that many NSW records were destroyed by the government in 1863 and 1870, and some destroyed in 1882 in the Garden Palace fire.

Conditional and Absolute Pardons

There were two main types of pardons available:

- **Conditional pardon** – Convict was free as long as they remained in the colony (within "Government Limits") until original term expired
- **Absolute pardon** - sentence was entirely remitted – they were free both within and outside of the colony and could return to Britain
- After 1845 two classes of CP
 - 1st valid everywhere except Europe (for those who would have received AP)
 - 2nd valid only in the colonies, including NZ
- From 1846 could go to any place except country or colony from which transported
- From 1847 could go anywhere except Great Britain and Ireland

Websites for Convicts (General)

- **Convict Records:** <https://convictrecords.com.au/>. Has records for 145,796 out of estimated 160,000 convicts. No original material
- **Findmypast**
- **Ancestry**
- **Biographical Database of Australia:** <https://www.bda-online.org.au/>
- **FamilySearch**
- **The Proceedings of the Old Bailey:** <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>
- **Digital Panopticon** <https://www.digitalpanopticon.org/> tracing London Convicts in Britain and Australia 1780-1925
- **Ireland-Australia Transportation Database 1791-1868:**
<https://www.nationalarchives.ie/article/penal-transportation-records-ireland-australia-1788-1868-2/>
- **Convicts to Australia:** <https://perthdps.com/convicts/>
- **Trove:** <https://trove.nla.gov.au/> Gazettes include information on convicts receiving tickets of leave, certificates of freedom, pardons and escapees
- **Censuses for NSW, Norfolk Island and Van Diemen's Land.** Images from them can be found on *Ancestry*. The 1828 census is also on *Findmypast*. There are also published versions of them which are available in many libraries.

Websites for New South Wales Convicts

- **Convict Indents (digitised) index 1788-1801:** <https://mhnsww.au/indexes/convicts/convict-indent-index/>
- **Convicts Index 1791-1873** (NSW State Archives): <https://mhnsww.au/indexes/undefined/convicts-index/>
- **Convicts Guide** (NSW State Archives): <https://mhnsww.au/archive/subjects/convicts/>
- **Convicts assignments Index 1821-1825** (NSW State Archives): <https://mhnsww.au/indexes/convicts/convict-assignments-index/>
- **Applications to Marry:** Indexes to Convicts's Applications to Marry 1825-1851 on State Archives website (<https://mhnsww.au/indexes/convicts/convicts-applications-to-marry/>). *Findmypast* – Registers of Convicts' Applications to Marry 1825-1851 – permission and refusals
- **Colonial Secretary's Papers 1788-1825** (Online indexed – State Archives NSW) <https://mhnsww.au/indexes/colonial-secretary/colonial-secretarys-papers-1788-1825/> (Online indexed – Ancestry) <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/1905/>
- **Colonial Secretary Letters Received 1826-1896** (Index - State Archives NSW) <https://mhnsww.au/indexes/colonial-secretary/colonial-secretary-letters-received-1826-1896/>
- **Colonial Secretary's Letters, 1826-1856** (Online indexed – Ancestry) <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/61481/>

Websites for Norfolk Island

- Most of the same places that cover NSW should be checked for Norfolk Island convicts, as well as the general websites.
- **Australian History Research:** <https://www.australianhistoryresearch.info/>
- **Convict ships to Norfolk Island:** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convict_ships_to_Norfolk_Island
- **Norfolk Island Guide** (NSW State Archives) (<https://mhnsww.au/guides/norfolk-island-guide/>). NSW State Archives also holds other records that are not online.

Websites for Van Diemen's Land Convicts (Tasmania)

- **Links to Tasmanian Indents** at <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/family-history/convicts-in-van-diemens-land-now-tasmania/convict-life/convict-records/what-is-online/#indents>.
- **Female Convicts Research Centre:** <https://femaleconvicts.org.au> for female convicts of VDL.
- **Founders & Survivors:** <https://foundersandsurvivors.org/> documents around 24,000 convicts researched from birth to death.
- **Tasmanian Name Index:** https://libriestas.ent.sirsidynix.net.au/client/en_AU/names/ has access to many records, including convict records. Search for name, then narrow down by filtering on Convicts (filters on left of screen).
- **List of Tasmanian Convict Records online:** <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/family-history/convicts-in-van-diemens-land-now-tasmania/convict-life/convict-records/what-is-online/#articleBody>.
- **Convict Life:** Guide available at <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/family-history/convicts-in-van-diemens-land-now-tasmania/>.
- **Links to Tasmanian Female Factory records** at <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/family-history/convicts-in-van-diemens-land-now-tasmania/convict-life/convict-records/what-is-online/#femalefactory>.

- **Censuses in Tasmania** There are numerous censuses for parts of Tasmania only at Libraries Tasmania (<https://libraries.tas.gov.au/#search>). Select Tasmanian Archives, then search for 'census.' Narrow your search down to digitised items only. See also the censuses in NSW.

Websites for Queensland Convicts

- **Queensland Archives:** <https://www.qld.gov.au/recreation/arts/heritage/archives/collection/convicts>. Indexes to convicts and early settlers. Includes a link to pre-separation records held at State Archives. See entry for "Commandant's Office, Moreton Bay"
- **State Library of Queensland Research Guides:** <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/collections/family-history/family-history-research-guides>
- Index to those sent to Moreton Bay 1824-1839 on *Findmypast*, and there are further records at the Queensland State Archives for those who are able to visit in person.

Websites for Victorian Convicts

- **Register of convicts, 1842-1854** (Public Record Office Victoria) <https://prov.vic.gov.au/explore-collection/explore-topic/register-convicts-1842-1854>
- <https://www.qld.gov.au/recreation/arts/heritage/archives/collection/convicts>. Indexes to convicts and early settlers. Includes a link to pre-separation records held at State Archives. See entry for "Commandant's Office, Moreton Bay"

Websites for Western Australia Convicts

- **Fremantle Convict Database:** <https://fremantleprison.com.au/history-heritage/research/convict-database/>
- **State Records Office Convict Guide:** <https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/state-records-office-of-western-australia/convicts>