

History of The Texas Department of Corrections

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Episode 34:

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As early as 1829, efforts were made to establish a prison system for the state of Coahuila-Texas. The congress had guaranteed the Anglo-Mexican citizen the right to trial by jury. Huntsville was selected as the site for the prison system by the Congress of the Republic of Texas. The First Legislature of the State of Texas in 1846 authorized the purchase of one hundred acres of land for about \$5 per acre. The only buildings were small log structures with cells and heavy bars, which housed three inmates during the first year of operation in 1849. These first small buildings were not enclosed by a fence or wall.

By 1925, there were 397 inmates within the walls, with forty men guarding them. As the number of inmates increased, more buildings were erected to accommodate them, and finally these buildings were enclosed in a twelve-foot brick wall, which helped with security.

The first prison farms were established on the outskirts of Huntsville. The farms helped with the expenses of keeping the inmates busy and feeding them. Through the years, the prison system operated various shops and plants, including a tailor shop, machine shop, bakery, wagon factory, cotton mill, furniture factory, shoe shop, and electric plant.

A massive construction program was begun under the administration of Lee Simmons. Inmate labor and prison-made bricks were used to construct dormitories and other facilities.

Early records show that school in the prison system consisted of the "3 R's" and a few selected advanced subjects. In 1967, the Windham School District was established and offered educational opportunities for all inmates. It was fully accredited by the Texas State Board of Education by 1970. In 1974, a four-year college program was begun.

In 1957, the Fifty-Fifth Legislature changed the name from the Texas Prison System to the Texas Department of Corrections.

In the past, the Texas Department of Corrections has had its share of problems: overcrowding, inner violence, brutal guards, lack of funds, and sanitation problems, to name a few. However, many of these problems have been overcome with improved housing, more industry, better educational opportunities, and better trained personnel.

Unique exhibits and information highlighting the history of the Texas Department of Corrections, its employees, and its inmates can be found at the Texas Prison Museum in Huntsville.