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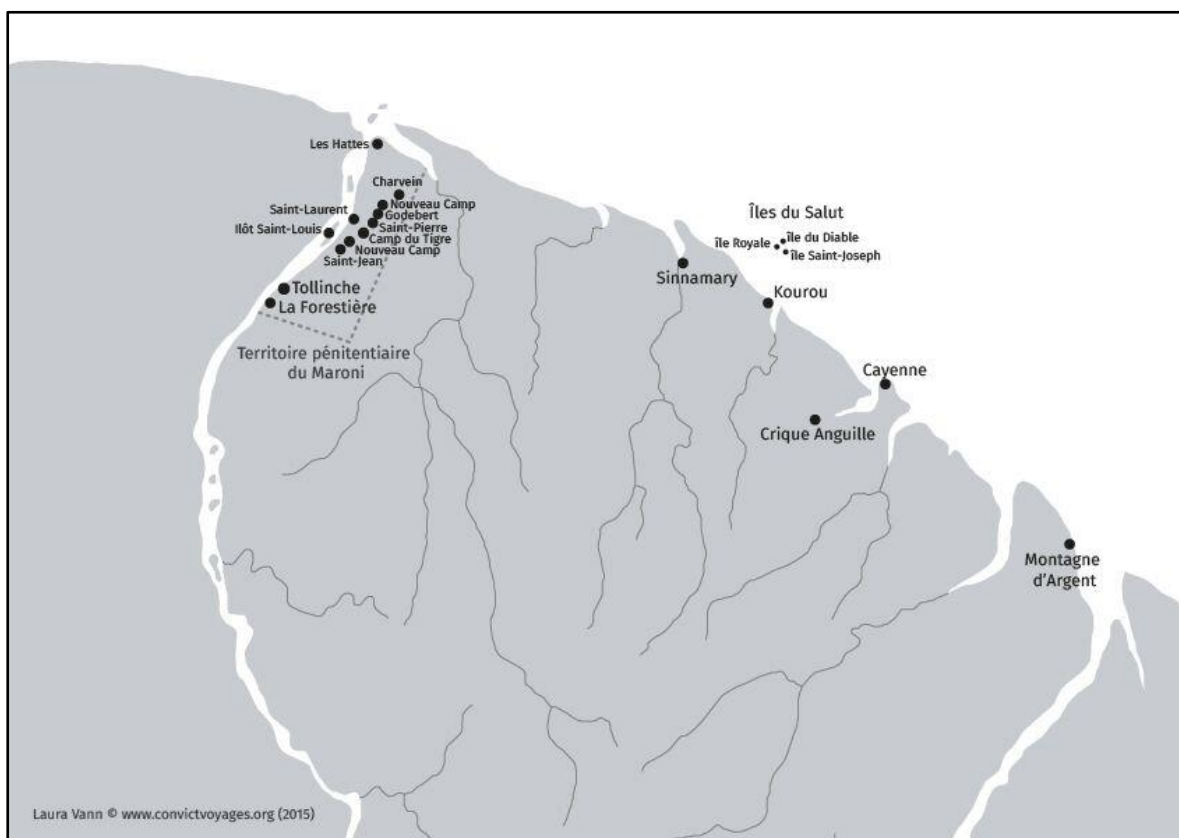
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The Penal Colonization of French Guyana 1852 -1953

Jean-Lucien Sanchez

The penal colonization of French Guyana with convicts began in 1852. Officially, it began with the law of 30 May 1854 on the execution of the sentence of hard labor (called the law on transportation). Napoleon III (during the Second Empire), decided to establish the execution of the sentence of hard labor not within France, but in the colonies, specifically, in French Guyana. Previously, prisons where those convicted to the penalty of hard labor – either for a specific period or for life – served their time in port prisons of Brest, Toulon and Rochefort. The objective of this law, inspired by the penal settlement model implemented by Britain in Australia, was threefold: 1) it allowed the métropolis (France) to get rid of convicts (that is to say close the port prisons in France and avoid the risks of reoffending associated with released convicts); 2) it provided the colony with an abundant and cheap workforce while also allowing the most deserving convicts to settle when released; 3) it assisted in founding a settlement society and participating in the development of a part of the French colonial empire. To further this third objective, Article 6 of the Law on transportation created a “doublage”: *transportés* sentenced to less than eight years of hard labor were required at their release to remain in the colony a time equivalent to the duration of their sentence. Those sentenced to more than eight years had to remain in the colony for life. This allowed the prevention of the return of convicts to France and forced them to settle, temporarily or permanently, in the colony of French Guyana.



The choice of French Guyana was not neutral. Most settlement attempts conducted in the eighteenth century with a free population resulted in failure. Very soon, because of its distance

from the metropolis, the colony began to receive political opponents: refractory priests to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and deportees following the coup d'état of *Thermidor* and *Fructidor*. In addition, French Guyana lacked a sufficient workforce due to the abolition of slavery in 1848. On 10 May 1852, 301 *transportés* landed in French Guyana, in the *Îles du Salut*, located opposite the city of Kourou. From there, the convicts reached the "*Grande Terre*" and colonized eastern French Guyana, settling in camps or on floating pontoons located mainly in Cayenne, *La Montagne d'Argent*, *La Comté* and Kourou. Then, in 1857, the convicts colonized the west of French Guyana and founded the town of *Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni*, in tribute to the governor of the colony Laurent Baudin. Following this, different sub-camps were set up on the periphery of the city including *Les Hattes*, *Saint-Pierre*, *Saint-Louis*, *Saint-Maurice*, *Sainte-Marguerite* and *Saint-Jean*. By a decree dated 30 May 1860, this carceral complex located along the Maroni River officially became the prison territory of Maroni (*territoire pénitentiaire du Maroni*) and *Saint-Laurent* officially became a prison town (*commune pénitentiaire*) in 1880. The *transportés* were employed to "the heaviest work" of the colony, as well as public works. Those observing good behavior were eligible for assignment; that is to say to be employed by individuals, businesses and public services in the colony, or were able to benefit from an agricultural or industrial concession. *Transportés* were divided into three classes: those of the first class could get interesting jobs like *garçons de famille*, that is to say assigned in private households, nurses, employed in the kitchens, employee to the scriptures, boatmen, *porte-clef*, that is to say auxiliary supervisors, etc. Those in third class were subject to the toughest jobs – logging, farming, mining, digging, etc. In case of misconduct, the convicts could be sent to disciplinary camps, like Charvein, and could also be tried by a special court, the *Tribunal Maritime Spécial*. Besides the death penalty, this court could sentence them to a maximum of five years in solitary confinement (especially in case of escape) they had to undergo on the *Île Saint Joseph (Îles du Salut)*. The convicts considered most dangerous or that the prison administration wanted in particular to monitor were imprisoned on the *Île Royale (Îles du Salut)*. In all, 52,905 *transportés* were sent to colonial prison of French Guyana.

Concurrently, following the insurrectionary events of 1848 and 1851, the decree of 8 December 1851 organized deportation to Algeria and French Guyana: 2,816 individuals were sent to French Guyana. After an amnesty in 1859, deportation for political motives to French Guyana continued with the law of 9 February 1895 which designated the penitentiary of the *Îles du Salut* as the receiving site for those condemned to deportation and confinement in a fortified enclosure in accordance with the law of 8 June 1850. The first and most famous political prisoner was Captain Alfred Dreyfus, imprisoned on *Île du Diable* from March 1895 to June 1899. Following him, another 37 deportees were also incarcerated in French Guyana, mainly as a result of convictions for collaboration with the enemy during World War I. But unlike the *transportés*, they were not subjected to forced labor.

Nevertheless, facing the very high mortality rate encountered among the prison population, the French government decided in 1867 to send all European *transportés* to New Caledonia (officially a site for the execution of the sentence to hard labor since 2 September 1863). Only colonial *transportés* continued to be directed to French Guyana (notably Algerians). But in 1887 convoys of *transportés* were resumed for those sentenced to more than eight years of hard labor before they all returned to French Guyana following the suspension of convoys to New Caledonia in 1896. But alongside *transportés*, a new category of convicts appeared in French Guyana in 1887: the *relégués*. Sentenced under the law of 27 May 1885 regarding the relegation of repeat offenders (*loi sur la relégation des récidivistes*), convicts were mostly petty repeat offenders guilty of simple theft or vagrancy offenses. Those who could provide for their own needs on site benefited from the regime of individual relegation (*relégation individuelle*): they were relatively free and could contract

work commitments or could get industrial or agricultural concessions. But those who were too poor – the vast majority – were classified to the regime of collective relegation (*relégation collective*) and were interned in the penitentiary of *Saint-Jean-du-Maroni* and its sub-camps (*La Forestiere, Tollinche, Saint-Louis, Nouveau Camp* and *Tigre*), where they were subjected to forced labor. Relegation, unlike transportation, was perpetual and 17,372 *relégués* were sent to French Guyana.

In addition to these three categories (*transportés, déportés* and *relégués*), we must also add 1,000 men sentenced to reclusion from Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guyana known as “colonial *réclusionnaires*” or “second category of transportation,” and who were incarcerated in the colonial prison of French Guyana. Alongside these men, there were also women – *transportées* and *reléguées*. The *transportées* had the choice of serving their forced labor sentence in prisons (*maisons centrales de détention*) located in France or in the colonial penal colony: 394 women made the choice to go to French Guyana. But the *reléguées* were required to serve their sentence in a colony: 519 women were sent to French Guyana. On site, the *reléguées* were incarcerated in a “convent-penitentiary” under the custody of the Sisters of *Saint-Joseph-de-Cluny*. They were primarily intended to become wives for convicts and their living conditions were very difficult. Because of their very high mortality rate, the government decided to put an end to the relegation of women in French Guyana in 1907.

In 1931, 535 Indochinese people convicted for essentially political reasons were sent to French Guyana. They were installed in camps located on the territory of the Inini, specially created in 1930, and placed under the sole authority of the governor. These Indochinese convicts, who frequently revolted, were then repatriated little by little until 1964.

From 1923, the colonial prison of French Guyana appeared as a failing institution following a report on French Guyana by the reporter Albert Londres. Similarly, the French Parliament regularly denounced the cost of this institution, which never achieved agricultural self-sufficiency and had to be constantly supplied with food and credit by the metropolis. In 1933, the Salvation Army, led by Captain Charles Péan, arrived in French Guyana to help convicts released from colonial prison who were often subjected to a miserable regime after their release because of “*doublage*”. At the same time, the Salvation Army led a public campaign in the metropolis for the abolition of the colonial prison in French Guyana as did the deputy of French Guyana, Gaston Monnerville. These factors pushed the French government to abolish transportation to French Guyana by a decree law (*décret-loi*) on 17 June 1938. But it was not until 1945 that the same decision was taken for relegation. The Doctor Lieutenant-Colonel Sainz was appointed Director of the Colonial Prison Service in May 1944 and was commissioned by the Colonial Office to liquidate the colonial prison. He organized repatriation convoys to France and Algeria of convicts, released volunteers, and those still under sentence. The last convoy traveled in August 1953.

The archives of the colonial prison of French Guyana are available at the *Archives nationales d'outre-mer* (ANOM). The ANOM keeps the French Colonial Office archives. The management of the prison was effectively under the control of the Colonial Office whose records can be found in the series [H, Ministère des Colonies. Administration pénitentiaire coloniale et bagnes de Guyane et de Nouvelle-Calédonie \(FR ANOM COL/H1-FR ANOM COL/H5693\)](#). Other collections concerning the colonial prison of French Guyana are available at the [Archives nationales](#), at the [Archives départementales de Guyane](#), at the [Archives départementales de la Charente-Maritime](#), at the [Archives de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit](#), at the [Archives des Sœurs de Saint-Joseph de Cluny](#), at the [Archives des Jésuites de la Province de France](#), at the [Archives des Sœurs de Saint Paul de Chartres](#) and at the [Archives communales de Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni](#).

The remains of colonial prisons have been the subject of a major campaign for valorization and restoration in French Guyana. Today, it is possible to visit the [Îles du Salut](#), managed by the *Centre National d'Etudes Spatiales*, which has a museum dedicated to the colonial prison on the *Île Royale* and whose the chapel decorated by the convict Francis Lagrange has been restored. After a major restoration campaign, the transportation camp (*camp de la transportation*) of *Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni* now houses [a museum of the prison](#) run by the *Centre de l'interprétation de l'architecture et du patrimoine de Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni*. Objects of the colonial prison also kept in the [Musée des Cultures Guyanaises](#) and in the [Musée départemental Alexandre Franconie](#), located in Cayenne. Remains of the Indochinese prison ([bagne des Annamites](#)) are still visible today near the town of Montsinery/Tonnegrande and the Iracoubo church of *Saint-Joseph* ([l'église Saint-Joseph d'Iracoubo](#)) still boasts a beautiful interior decorated by the convict Pierre Huguet. In France, there are also a few museums that have collections related to colonial prison of French Guyana like the [Musée Ernest Cognacq de Saint-Martin-de-Ré](#), the [Musée des Beaux-Arts de Chartres](#), the [MuCEM de Marseille](#), the [Musée du Fort Balaquier de La Seyne-sur-Mer](#), the [Musée des Troupes de Marine de Fréjus](#) and [l'espace pédagogique de la mémoire pénitentiaire de l'Ecole nationale d'administration pénitentiaire d'Agen](#).

Further Reading

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Online Sources

[Criminocorpus](#) has many articles and virtual exhibitions about colonial prison of French Guyana. This website on the history of justice, crime and punishment has many virtual exhibitions related on the penal colony of French Guyana (as the [Penitentiary of Saint-Jean-du-Maroni](#), [art in prison](#), [historical photographs](#), postcards from prison [here](#) and [there](#), and other prisons like those of [New](#)

[Caledonia](#) and [Australia](#)). The hypermedia review *Criminocorpus* also hosts a dossier with many articles dedicated to [colonial prisons](#).