

Coal Creek War
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Coal Creek War

Essential Questions: What factors led to the Cold Creek War? What was the outcome of the Cold Creek War?

After the Civil War southern states found themselves in debt. Several states decided to raise funds by leasing convicts as workers to industrialists and mining companies. The revenue from convict leasing programs became a significant part of southern state budgets. The state of Tennessee took full advantage of the convict leasing system.

A labor dispute erupted in 1891 at the Tennessee Coal Mining company in Briceville. Coal miners in Tennessee at this time were usually not union members but they would strike if conditions warranted. At first it seemed the miners and the company worked out their differences. The miners went back to work, but problems still existed. Again the miners walked out; this time a compromise could not be reached causing the miners to go on strike.

Mine owners leased convicts from the state to replace the striking miners. Mine owners said the convicts were “a class of labor that could be depended upon”. Also if a convict was injured or died the state would send a replacement at no cost to the mining company. Everyone seemed satisfied except the striking miners. The first action by the miners was not violent. A large number of miners surrounded the convicts' stockade and forced the guards to surrender. The miners marched the guards and convicts to the train station, put them on the train, and sent them to Knoxville.

Governor John Buchanan called out the state militia and led the convicts back to Briceville. The governor met with the miners in Coal Creek and Briceville but nothing was settled. The governor returned to Nashville leaving the militia behind with the convicts. There were more negotiations, but no compromise was reached. The miners took up arms and once again surrounded the stockade, trapping the convicts along with the state militia. The state militia found themselves outnumbered so they surrendered. Once again the miners took the convicts and the militia to the train and sent them to Knoxville.

The conflict escalated and in 1892 the governor sent the Tennessee National Guard in substantial numbers. The troops built a defensive structure named Fort Anderson complete with cannon. Construction of the fort made it possible for the troops to fire into the town of Coal Creek. The miners escalated their efforts against the troops. The strike spread to Oliver Springs, Tracy City, and Inman.

At the beginning of this conflict, most of the general public in Tennessee was against the miners or at least indifferent to their plight. But as time passed and people learned of the miners' conditions and the situation they faced, public sentiment changed. One message sent by the miners to the governor stated, “We struggle for the right to earn bread by honest labor, and...we are opposed to that system of labor that may be involved to our degradation”. Governor Buchanan seemed to have difficulties handling the situation causing members of his own party to turn against him. Buchanan lost his party's nomination for governor. The new governor, Peter Turney, along with the state legislature abolished Tennessee's convict lease system in 1893.

Several miners were arrested and put on trial but only two; P B Monroe and S A Moore were convicted. Neither Monroe nor Moore served over a year in prison. The Coal Creek War was over. Because of the actions of the miners in the Coal Creek area, the convict leasing system was abolished in Tennessee and other southern states followed Tennessee's lead.

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Coal Creek War

Use the text to create a timeline of the Coal Creek Labor Saga.

Put yourself in their shoes and write a journal entry from the perspective of one of the miners on strike. Things to keep in mind: Why were the miners striking? Why were they opposed to convict labor? How did the miners show opposition to each?

Coal Creek War Key

Use the text to create a timeline of the Coal Creek Labor Saga. **Answers will vary**

1891 Miners go on strike to protest use of convicts; issues resolved temporarily

Miners free convicts, march them to train and send them to Knoxville

Governor Buchanan sends in the State Militia

Miners take up arms, outnumber militia and put convicts back on train.

1892 Buchanan sends in Tennessee National Guard

Public sentiment shifts to miners

New governor, Turney, ends convict lease system

Put yourself in their shoes and write a journal entry from the perspective of one of the miners on strike. Things to keep in mind: Why were the miners striking? Why were they opposed to convict labor? How did the miners show opposition to each?

Answers will vary but should demonstrate understanding of the issues related to convict labor and address each of the questions listed above.
