***SLAVERY by Another Name*** - **FILM SYNOPSIS**

***Slavery by Another Name*** challenges one of Americans’ most cherished assumptions: the belief that slavery in this country ended with the Emancipation Proclamation. The film tells how even as chattel slavery came to an end in the South in 1865, thousands of African Americans were pulled back into forced labor with shocking force and brutality. It was a system in which men, often guilty of no crime at all, were arrested, compelled to work without pay, repeatedly bought and sold, and coerced to do the bidding of masters. Tolerated by both the North and South, forced labor lasted well into the twentieth century.

Even before Reconstruction ended in 1877, many Southern states began enacting an array of laws intended to re-subjugate newly freed blacks and provide cheap sources of labor. Vagrancy, loitering, riding the rails, changing jobs, even talking too loudly in public – these behaviors and more – all became crimes carrying stiff fines or sentences. Although these statutes made no mention of race, Southerners knew that they were created as instruments of white control. The result was a huge increase in the numbers of blacks arrested and convicted. Arrest records uncovered in Alabama show that many convicted African Americans actually had committed no crime at all.

Initially, to save money on prison construction and later to actually generate revenue, states and counties began leasing “convicts” to commercial enterprises. These included small-time entrepreneurs, provincial farmers, large plantations and corporations. Soon leasing became a highly profitable business. Prisoners were leased to nearly every industry in the South including coal mines, sawmills, railroads, brickworks and plantations. These prisoners lived and worked under unspeakable conditions, often worse than during slavery before the Civil War. Many were tortured or died in captivity.

Forced laborers included untold numbers beyond just “convicts.” Many were victims of peonage or debt slavery, an illegal but widespread practice of coerced labor to pay off debts. Others were victims of laws that made it a crime to leave employment for another job, keeping many blacks working under intolerable conditions as sharecroppers or elsewhere, rather than face the terrifying possibility of being arrested and sent to a slave mine or forced labor camp.

Anchoring the film are the stories of three black men who were entangled in the treacherous systems of forced labor: John Davis, Ezekial Archey, and Green Cottenham. Davis was a twenty-two- year-old sharecropper leased to John Pace, a plantation owner and head of a notorious network that was heavily involved in the sale and trade of black laborers. Davis’ testimony helped convict Pace of debt slavery. Archey, a prisoner forced to labor in the mines, wrote to the Alabama inspector of prisons about horrid conditions, which ultimately led to reforms. Cotthenham was the free grandson of a former slave who, more than twenty years after the abolition of slavery, was arrested at the age of twenty-two on a fictitious charge of vagrancy and leased for $12 a month to a prison coal mine that had recently been acquired by U.S. Steel Corporation. At the mines, he worked fourteen to sixteen hours a day under nightmarish conditions and died there only months later.

Despite repeated appeals to the Department of Justice that forced labor constituted slavery, the system was condoned for decades at the highest levels of government. Key to this was a loophole in the Constitution: the Thirteenth Amendment that abolished slavery in 1865 specifically permitted involuntary servitude as punishment for “duly convicted criminals.” American presidents ignored or turned a blind eye on this issue. Theodore Roosevelt at first tried to effect change, but eventually capitulated. Woodrow Wilson, who harbored vehement anti-Negro attitudes, strongly backed the politics of Southern leaders to ensure there’d be no change to the status quo.

Incredibly, it was not until December 12, 1941, five days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, that the federal government began to take the first steps that would eventually unravel the practice of forced labor. Concerned that enemy propaganda would focus on America’s treatment of African Americans as second-class citizens, the Justice Department under Franklin Roosevelt devised a legal strategy for prosecuting whites who continued to hold slaves. Finally, in 1951, almost ninety years after the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation, Congress passed the first explicit statutes making any form of slavery in the United States indisputably a crime.

The film includes interviews with several key historians. In the last few decades, several scholars – including Mary Ellen Curtin, Pete Daniel, Talitha LeFlouria, Risa Goluboff, Adam Green, and Khalil Muhammad – have written about labor, civil rights, and involuntary servitude expanding our knowledge of the limits of emancipation, and the use of law as a tool of racial coercion and economic exploitation.

Author Douglas A. Blackmon is also a part of the story: a white son of the South who grew up in Mississippi during the uneasy integration of blacks and whites, he first stumbled upon the story of forced labor in writing an article for *The Wall Street Journal* about the U.S. Steel Corporation’s use of forced black prison labor in the Pratt mines outside Birmingham in the early twentieth century. The article, and the overwhelming response it generated, fueled a seven-year quest to bring this largely unknown history into the mainstream.

To encourage reconciliation and redemption, ***Slavery by Another Name*** highlights the stories of descendants of forced labor as well as those whose relatives benefitted from it – many of them, having no previous knowledge of the scope or breadth of forced labor. It is through these shared histories that we see the impact of uncovering the past in efforts to reconcile our present and move positively into the future.

For more information and resources about this history, visit [www.pbs.org/sban](http://www.pbs.org/sban).