

Notes on The Transportation Act of 1718

“In 1718, the British Parliament passed the Transportation Act, under which England began sending its imprisoned convicts to be sold as indentured servants in the American colonies. While the law provoked outrage among many colonists -- Benjamin Franklin equated it to packing up North American rattlesnakes and sending them all to England -- the influx of ex-convicts provided cheap and immediate labor for many planters and merchants. After 1718, approximately 60,000 convicts, dubbed "the King's passengers," were sent from England to America. Ninety percent of them stayed in Maryland and Virginia. Although some returned to England once their servitude was over, many remained and began their new lives in the colonies.” [Source: *All Things Considered, National Public Radio Online, July 24, 2004*]

“The causes of the 1718 Act derive from the convergence of a number of factors. Fears over rising crime and disorder after the end of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1714, a contested Hanoverian accession to the British throne, inappropriate punishments for lesser felonies (misdemeanours), concern over crowd behaviour at public punishments, and a new determination by parliament to push through the legislation despite colonial opposition resulted in the passing of the Act. Transportation thus became a regularly available sentence for the courts to hand down to those convicted of non-capital offences as well as capital crimes.” [Source: *Wikipedia 2007*]

“In 1718, the British Parliament passed the most significant of its many transportation acts. Despite amending and supplementary legislation in later years, its basic principles were in force for the rest of the eighteenth century in both America and the new colony founded in 1788, New South Wales. Thousands of British and Irish convicts crossed the Atlantic and Indian Oceans under this statute, heading in opposite directions to lives of forced work. Transportation did not begin with this act, but it regularized it and led to a great increase in the number of convicts crossing the seas.” [Source: *Bruce Kercher, Perish or Prosper: The Law and Convict Transportation in the British Empire, 1700–1850*]