

Have you ever thought about the origins of prison?

One day I was staring out the window with a smirk on my face as I looked across the farmland that surrounded the prison on all sides. Another inmate came over and asked what I was laughing at. I responded with a question of my own: "Have you ever thought about the origins of prison?" He said "no," and I told him, "I was laughing at the irony of this prison being built in the middle of a giant farm."

For most of our existence, us humans were hunter-gatherers. Basically this meant our food came from hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants. We could follow the herds and growing seasons of plants as we moved across the land in pursuit of them. Such a nomadic lifestyle required us to have few possessions because, as our food source moved, we had to pack up and move with them if didn't want to starve.

The human species spent several million years living this way until about 10,000 years ago, when a major shift in the way we obtained our food occurred and it dramatically changed the way we lived. This shift was the invention of farming, and since then things have never been the same.

Now we no longer travel across the land, hunting and gathering our food. With farming, we could just simply grow what we wanted to eat, so we gave up the nomadic lifestyle, settled in one place, and became agriculturalists. This was the birth of our modern civilization. But, something happened that, likely, no one had foreseen. Having control over our food supply meant we could grow more than we needed, and that's just what we did.

For the first time in our existence, we had an excess of food, something that was not possible with our nomadic hunter-gatherer past. But, when you have an excess, you have to store it somewhere, and if it can be stored, it can be stolen, and if it can be stolen, you need someone to guard it. (This could be seen as the origins of policing.) Then, you need to do something with the people these guards caught. This is the origin story of prisons. It's something that most of us don't ever think about, not even those of us that are stuck spending years inside a prison.

Of course, this is an overly simplistic description of events. An entire book can be written on the subject, and many have. But for now, as I sit in my bunk and stare out the window, I can't help but laugh at the irony in the placement of this prison.