In the late eighteenth century, British prisons were full to overflowing. Under the law of the time, people could be imprisoned for many years for small crimes. So, in 1786, the British government decided they needed a new prison settlement, or penal colony, where they could send some of their convicts (convicted criminals).

Even though there were over 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clan groups living in the land that would later be called Australia, the British government declared that the land belonged to the British Empire, and would be a good place for the first new penal colony. The first fleet of ships carried over 700 convicts to the new colony in New South Wales. Over the next 80 years, more than 150,000 convicts were sent to the Australian colonies.