

Kentucky murders Part 1 1897 - 1936.

One of the most sensational Kentucky cases was the brutal murder of Pearl Bryan in 1896. 21 year old Pearl was the youngest of twelve children and came from Greencastle, Indiana. She had done well at school and was very popular. At the time of her death, she was five months pregnant. Her body was discovered at Alexandria Pike, near Fort Thomas, on February 1, 1896 by a sixteen year old farmhand in the orchard owned by his employer, John Lock. He reported the find to Colonel Lock who immediately informed the police.



To their horror, officers found that Pearl had been strangled and then decapitated. The head was not found. At this time, police had no means of identifying the victim but were able to get a strong lead from the unusual shoes that she had been wearing, which through the good record keeping of a shoe factory and a retail store in Greencastle, the purchaser was identified. Pearl had been reported missing by her brother and together with the fact that she had bought the only pair of size 3 shoes out of a batch of 12 pairs sent to the shop and other details discovered by the autopsy, it was clear that this was her body. Her heartbroken family were able to identify the clothes found on her at the scene as belonging to Pearl.

Pearl had been having a relationship with a 26 year old dental student in Cincinnati named Scott Jackson, by whom she had become pregnant, something completely socially unacceptable in these times. Jackson had broken off the relationship but when informed of Pearl's condition told her to come to Cincinnati, where he would arrange for her to have a backstreet abortion. Pearl agreed to this, but told her parents that she was going to Indianapolis to visit friends.



Scott Jackson & Alonzo Walling (left).

19 year old Alonzo Walling had also attended the Indiana Dental College and knew Jackson. He, Jackson and Pearl were seen together and on the morning of January 30th, the three got into a fight, with Pearl complaining that Jackson had not kept his promise to her, (regarding the abortion). They all dined together the next night and Jackson spiked Pearl's drink with cocaine before they left in a cab. Unbeknown to Pearl, the cab was to take them to the scene of her murder near Fort Thomas. It seems that Jackson at first tried to strangle her and then pulled a knife. She fought back as best she could and grabbed the knife causing serious injuries to her hand and fingers. She managed to escape momentarily but Jackson caught up with her and cut her throat. He proceeded to cut her head off and to arrange her clothing to make it look like a rape scene. The head and the knife were placed in one of Pearl's cases and later thrown into the Ohio river. Dr. Tingley, Coroner of Campbell County, examined the body at the scene and later gave evidence at the trial.

Jackson was arrested on February 5, and was taken to the mayor's office where Mayor Caldwell interrogated him at length. Later in the police station, Jackson was thoroughly searched and blood spatters were found on his clothes and two deep scratches discovered on his arm which Pearl had inflicted while fighting for her life. He was to ask one of his jailers if Walling had been arrested but when challenged as to why, refused to give any further information. Walling was arrested two days later and subsequently also charged with the murder. He provided some details of the crime and was able to direct police to where he had hidden the coat worn by Jackson on the night of the murder which was blood stained and showed damage to the sleeve where Pearl had scratched Jackson. The police later interrogated both men in the morgue in the presence of Pearl's body, lying in an open casket, but without obtaining a confession. They were placed in the Hamilton County Jail to await trial.

The trials taking place separately with Jackson's opening on April 22, 1896 after an initial postponement, and lasting until May 14 before Judge Helm. The evidence against him was overwhelming and it did not take the jury long to convict him.

Walling's trial commenced on May 20, 1896, and lasted until June 18. Much of the evidence was the same and he too was convicted. Both were sentenced to death.

Feeling locally was running high and both men feared that they would be lynched and in fact refused to leave the jail when other inmates made a mass break out.

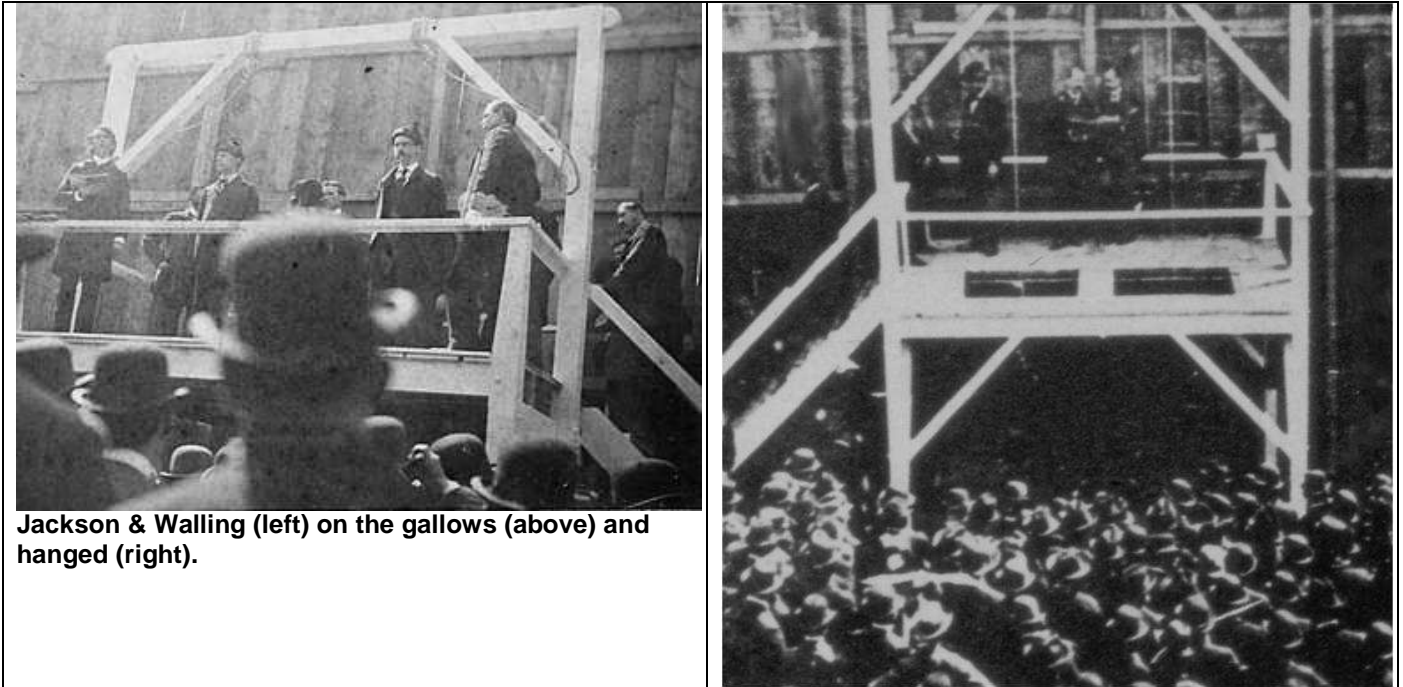
Governor Bradley signed the death warrants which were delivered on February 17th, setting the executions for 7.00 am on Saturday, March 20, 1897. The hangings were to take place on a white painted gallows erected at the rear of Campbell County Jail in Newport. The scene was protected from the public gaze by a high wooden stockade.

Just before the appointed hour, Jackson asked to speak to the minister attending them and to Sheriff Plummer telling them, "I know that Alonzo Walling is not guilty of the crime of murder." Plummer halted the hanging and telegraphed the news to Governor Bradley who telegraphed back that he would require more information but would commute Walling's sentence if Jackson would confess to the crime and disclose what he did with the head. This was put to Jackson who replied that he had nothing further to say.

Therefore, the execution was re-scheduled and commenced at 11.30 am when the two emerged from the jail wearing new suits and ascended the fourteen steps to the gallows. Neither of them made a last minute confession. Jackson's last words were, "I have only this to say, that I am not guilty of the crime for which I am now compelled to pay the penalty of my life.". Walling's were, "Nothing; only that you are taking the life of an innocent man and I will call upon God to witness the truth of what I say."

After the preparations were made and the Rev. Mr. Lee had sang a hymn and said prayers, the drop finally fell at 11.41 am. It was reported that Sheriff Julius Plummer gave each man a five foot

drop. However the photo of the execution indicates a longer drop as neither man's head is visible above the platform. Jackson was certified dead at 12.01 and Walling at 11.55. Reports vary as to whether they suffered much with some papers claiming that they died in great agony whilst others claim they suffered very little. Neither man's neck was broken and both died from asphyxia.



Jackson & Walling (left) on the gallows (above) and hanged (right).

It is somewhat unclear what part Walling played in the murder but he was definitely present, doing nothing to prevent it and assisting, at least in the disposal of the head and Jackson's bloody coat. This was a case that was very much front page news with a number of newspapers following it assiduously and reporting every development and giving substantial coverage to the final act. The executions were photographed, which was sometimes allowed at this period.

NEWARK DAILY

Volume XLIV. Number 59 NEWARK, OHIO, SATURDAY, MAR

HANGED

By the Neck Until They Were Dead.

Jackson and Walling Were Both Strangled.

ing the note Walling shook hands with deputy sheriff Mauer, and immediately afterward Jackson stepped forward and shook hands with the deputy warmly. Jackson burst into tears and as the deputy left him he was still weeping.

At 9:15 o'clock today it was announced that Jackson had made a confession and Governor Wm. O. Bradley was immediately notified of the fact in the interest of Walling.

The execution was to have occurred at 9 o'clock, but the hour was postponed until word could be received from the Governor. Jackson in his statement positively declared that Walling was not guilty of murder. The Governor's answer to Sheriff Pitzer was that he could not believe either man and that both were sane. At 11:15 o'clock the

BRADLEY'S DECISION.

He Takes No Issue in the Confession of Jackson and Walling.

Frankfort, March 20.—The following is the full text of Governor Bradley's refusal to receive Jackson and Walling:

The common law imposing the same penalty in the execution to have been committed in its form in this state. The confession shows that Earl, first, was killed by drugs administered to produce an abortion. If this be true, the taking of life with such an intent for the unborn, the child was killed first.

Had death been caused by drugs, death, if administered, the effect of which should manifest an after abortion by Jackson etc. The second confession was not made and from which death or great injury would probably result, but from which, according to the medical opinion, death would necessarily result.

After the pardons were administered the time passed, so had every reason to see



Clarence Williams and "The Hanging Extra". Clarence Williams was an illiterate 25 year old black man who shot and killed his girlfriend, Josie Tilman, on March 22, 1899 in Claysville. Williams and Jose were talking in a shop doorway on that afternoon when another man called to her from across the street. Josie started over to see him and Williams called her back. At this point, she began to run and he fired three shots at her, one of which proved fatal.

Williams escaped from the scene but an arrest warrant was issued for him and he was captured an hour later in a cornfield at a nearby farm. He immediately enquired as to whether Josie was dead and informed the officers that he had only meant to scare her. (At this time, in fact, Josie was still alive, she did not die until the following day). The murder weapon, a loaded revolver, was still on him. Williams was taken to jail at Paris in Bourbon County

The coroner's inquest ruled that Josie had been murdered by Williams.

Judge Charles Webb, assisted by S. B. Rogers, was appointed to defend Williams at his trial which took place on July 5, 1899 in the Bourbon Circuit Court, before Judge Cantrell. Williams was prosecuted by Commonwealth Attorney Franklin. The trial lasted just half a day and it took the jury a mere 20 minutes to reach a guilty verdict and recommend death. Judge Webb lodged an appeal but on Monday, September 29, the Court of Appeals affirmed Williams' death sentence and Governor Bradley fixed Monday, December 11 as the date of execution.

The gallows was bought from Lexington and erected on the Friday morning on the south-western side of the jail. Hundreds of people came to see it. The death warrant was read to the prisoner by Sheriff Bowen on the Saturday morning.

Williams received the Rev. Webster on his last Sunday and told him that he was resigned to his fate and knew that Josie would have forgiven him. He wrote a note thanking jailer Kiser for all his kindness to him.

At 6.50 on the Monday morning, Williams was led from the jail and mounted the gallows with a firm step, wearing a black suit with a rose in the lapel. 50 witnesses who bore written invitations were admitted into the enclosure. J. C. Graves, an elder of the church, sang a hymn and delivered a prayer. The pinioning of Williams' legs was completed and hood and noose put in place. The drop fell at 7.05 and he was pronounced dead at 7.15, his neck being broken by the drop. He was reported as being the "gamest person" ever executed in Kentucky. The Bourbon News published a "Hanging Extra" edition on the afternoon of the execution, with the front page entirely given over to the case.

Williams had previously served two years in prison for shooting and killing Will Warren.

HANGING EXTRA! THE BOURBON NEWS.

CHAMP & CO., Editors and Owners. PRINTED EVERY TUESDAY AND FRIDAY.

THIRTY-NINTH YEAR. PARIS, BOURBON CO., KY., MONDAY, DECEMBER 11, 1899.

CLARENCE WILLIAMS

THE MURDERER OF JOSIE TILMAN,

Expiates His Terrible Crime Upon the Gallows.

IMPRESSIVE SCENE AT THE EXECUTION

Williams' Own Story.
The following is Clarence Williams' own story of his life, as related by him to the News:
My father is Peter Williams, and my mother is named Ellen Barrett. My mother left him when I was a small boy to come with His Thompson, and I stayed with my father for about two years until he located near Red Sea. I left him. After that I stayed in town with Martha Palmer for one year, and after that I stayed in Louisville the balance of my life, until I got into this trouble.

The public called me a mean man, straight because I wouldn't let anybody talk me over. I was a good man and carried a gun to protect myself. The first time I ran away from home I asked him to let me go hunting and that night when I came home he jumped on me and beat me until I could hardly stand up. If I wanted him I was the black sheep of the family so I left home and stayed with Ted Howe, and my father came after me and said he was going to

Williams' Last Statement.
I won't be working to see Monday but will see all I have for my brother (Wednesday, December 10.) I hope all men and boys will take my advice and not be wasters or drinkers or a gun get the best of them, look what a woman has brought me to. I have to suffer death for people getting up in the mean town and judging themselves. Take warning of me and give your company. If you get together in the company you keep, and you will find out that you will get through the world better if you put your company.

A friend named in a friend named, I will say that if Edward Long had been brother to me he would not have treated me any better. There was nothing to be gotten that I asked him to do for me but what he did.

I am to hang dead by this week in a few days, to which I was sentenced by the June term of court. I did not

His Last Hope Given
Charles D. Webb, Williams' who used every means in his power to save Williams from execution, received the following letter from Williams:

CHARLES WEBB OF RED EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT
Franklin, Ky., Dec. 10
Dear D. Webb, Sir:
Paris, Ky.

Referring to the case of Clarence Williams, I am in the Governor's office but the attached letter do not show names for the sentence of I sincerely. Very truly,
J. A. EARLEMAN,
Prison Warden

Search of Williams
Clarence Williams, who stood guilty for the murder of Josie, the paragon, was kept here about twenty-five or thirty weeks before the

In February 1905, there were no less than 13 men awaiting execution in the state of Kentucky, all for murder. Five in Jefferson County at Louisville, two in Fayette County in Lexington, two in Daviess at Owensboro, two in Kenton County at Covington and one at Hopkinsville in Christian County (for the Pembroke murder)

Two of these men were Roy Green and Robert Mathley, the ones in jail at Owensboro. Roy Green, a 17 ½ year old black man, originally from Rockport, Indiana, had beaten to death James Coomes of Slaughterville in Webster County, on July 31, 1904 in an old shack at the fair grounds. He then stole \$28.00 and made off. He visited his sister in Evansville for a week before travelling to Louisville, where he was arrested on August 12. Green confessed to his crime while he was being transported back to Owensboro. He told police that after killing Coomes with the plank, he had pulled off a large splinter and forced it through the victim's throat and into the ground. In his statement, Green said he was drunk at the time on whiskey that Coomes had given him. The Owensboro jail had an armed guard to prevent Green being lynched. The trial took place between Wednesday, August 31 and Saturday, September 3, 1904 with Commonwealth's Attorney, Ben D. Ringo, prosecuting, assisted by County Attorney LaVega Clements. Green pleaded not guilty and did not take the stand in his defence. The jury took just 31 minutes to reach a verdict and recommend death. There were cheers in the court from the witnesses when the verdict was read out. An appeal to the Kentucky Court of Appeals was denied on January 13, 1905 and on January 20, Governor Beckham set for February 17, as the execution date. Green remained in good spirits and ate well while awaiting execution.

The gallows was erected on the north side of the County Jail, behind a twenty feet high wooden fence. Fifty witnesses, including several women, had obtained witness tickets. One of these ladies had previously witnessed a double execution by guillotine in France and was keen to see an American execution. It was reported that several hundred men and women sought a view from the knot holes of the wooden fence which surrounded the gallows. At dawn on Friday, February 17, 1905, Green mounted the gallows where he addressed the witnesses stating, "Good people, I want to say that I did this awful crime and I have repented of it. Mind what your mothers tell you and leave whiskey out. Don't do as I have done, for I have done wrong this far." Deputy Sheriff, Harry Cooper, sprang the trap at 7 am and Green took eleven minutes to die, his neck not being broken by the drop.

The second hanging at Owensboro in 1905 was that of 40 year old widower Robert Mathley, (white) who was convicted of shooting to death his 17 year old ex girlfriend, Emma Watkins, who was pregnant by him. Emma had formed a new relationship with her cousin James Gregson and Mathley was very jealous of this. Shortly before 9 pm on the night of Sunday, June 26, 1904, Mathley asked Emma to marry him. When she declined, he shot both James and her. The two victims were sitting in the same room of the home of Will Warren on Cherry Street on June 26, 1904. Mathley first shot James, the bullet shattering his spine, leading to his death two days later in hospital. He then fired a single round at Emma, who died at the scene. Mathley remained in the house and was arrested by four police officers soon afterwards. His trial lasted four days, with the verdict being delivered on Wednesday, August 31, 1904 (the same day that Green's trial started). Once again, Ben D. Ringo was the Commonwealth's Attorney, assisted by County Attorney LaVega Clements. The all male jury retired for just 52 minutes before unanimously finding him guilty and sentencing him to death. Tears appeared on Mathley's face as the verdict and sentence were read. Mathley appealed to the Kentucky Court of Appeals on the grounds of insanity, but judge Barker affirmed his conviction and sentence on April 26, 1905.

In late June 1905, Mathley attempted to escape from prison by overpowering his jailer and stealing the keys. He was quickly foiled.

Mathley attempted suicide the night before he was hanged by cutting his left wrist with a finger nail of his other hand.

His execution was carried out at dawn on July 7, 1905, on the same gallows used for the Green hanging. Again admission by the general public was not permitted, but several individuals climbed onto roofs to look down into the enclosure. Dr. T. N. Compton, pastor of the First Baptist Church, read a psalm and prayed.

Mathley had to be supported on the trap as the preparations were made and trembled violently as the black hood was drawn over his head. Deputy Sheriff James Jones sprang the trap door at 4.46 and Mathley was pronounced dead at 5.01, his neck having been broken by the drop.

On the same morning George Holland was hanged at Hopkinsville for the Pembroke murder committed in 1903.

20 year old Floyd Frazier was hanged at Whitesburg in Letcher County for the rape and murder of 30 year old Miss Ellen Flanary, a widow and mother of four, at Pert Creek, in Letcher County, on May 21, 1907. The body of Mrs. Flanary was discovered near her home beneath a heap of rocks, stabbed in the chest, with her throat cut and several bone fractures. Floyd Frazier, aged 18, who came from a very good family, was found nearby with bloody clothes and was arrested. The first trial resulted in a hung jury, but the second trial in Perry County convicted him and sentenced him to hang. This verdict was overturned by the Court of Appeals and a third trial was held in Knott County which reinstated the previous verdict and sentence. On Friday, February 4th, Frazier's appeal was dismissed. Governor Wilson duly set May 19, 1910 as the day of execution. Frazier made no public confession to the crime. The drop fell at 1.30 and Frazier was pronounced dead 11 minutes later. Some 5,000 people witnessed the hanging.

On May 25th 1910, Roger Warren became the last man to hang for murder, as against rape or rape murder, when he was executed at Frankfort, using the same gallows that had been used for Jackson and Walling and some 20 other men.

Kentucky passed a law stipulating that all executions from June 15, 1910 should be carried out in private by electrocution at the State Penitentiary in Eddyville and the electric chair shown below was constructed for the purpose. Eddyville was known as the "Castle on the Cumberland" due to its architecture. The chair was housed in the basement of Cellhouse 3. The execution room, electric chair and controls cost around \$7,000.



Shortly after midnight on Friday, July 8th, 1911, 18 year old James Buckner became the first murderer to die by electrocution in the state. He had been convicted of stabbing to death police

officer Robey in May at Lebanon in Marion County. Robey had gone to investigate a disturbance and arrested Buckner and another lad, Jesse Smith. They turned on Robey and stabbed him 16 times. The two were quickly re-arrested and taken to jail in Louisville as it was feared they might be lynched.

The prison doctor at Eddyville, R. H. Moss nearly got electrocuted too, as he moved to examine Buckner before the electricity was switched off.

Between midnight and 1.30 am July 13, 1928, seven murderers went to the electric chair, one after the other. Four were white and were reportedly near collapse and three were black and sang beforehand in the holding cells. There would be a total of 162 electrocutions, 138 for murder, 21 for rape and three for armed robbery, between July 1911 and July 1997.

Although the electric chair had replaced hanging in 1911, a new law came into effect in the early 1920's, following the rape of a 9 year old girl in Lexington that caused public outrage, mandating for hanging for rapists and rape/murderers in the county where the crime occurred. This led to nine hangings, seven for rape, two rape/murder between August 28, 1925 when Ray Ross was put to death in Fayette County and June 1938, when Harold Venison was executed thus in Kenton County. Thereafter, a further seven rapists were executed by electrocution, with Robert Sheckles becoming the last in 1956.

Rainey Bethea.

The US's last fully public hanging took place at Owensboro, August 14, 1936 when 22 year old Rainey Bethea was executed for the rape and murder of 70-year-old Lischia Edwards. Florence Thompson was the sheriff. She had taken over the job from her husband, Everett, some three months earlier after he had died of pneumonia. In law it was her duty to spring the trap herself, although she was allowed to hire someone to do it for her. The idea of a female sheriff carrying out an execution greatly added to the excitement and attention the case received from the press.

Lischa Edwards was a 79 year old widow who lived in a three room apartment at 322 E. Fifth Street in Owensboro. The crime was discovered by her neighbor, Robert Richardson, who failed to get a reply when he knocked on her door on the morning of Sunday, June 7, 1936, after he became concerned about her not leaving for church. He and other neighbors gained entry and found Mrs. Edwards dead on her bed. Coroner Delbert J. Glenn found that she had been strangled and raped during the previous night.

A search of the apartment revealed a broken cheap black celluloid ring with a black "R" against a white background. Police determined that the robber had climbed onto a coal shed roof and then onto a servant's house and onto the roof of a covered walkway and finally onto the kitchen roof and into Mrs. Edward's apartment. It was clear that the perpetrator was familiar with the building. Bethea was the first suspect, he had worked as a servant for several Owensboro families and had been employed at the apartment building where Mrs. Edwards lived. He had served time in Eddyville for burglary but was released on parole after six months. The celluloid ring had been obtained in Eddyville and was identified as belonging to him. So on June 16, a warrant was issued for his arrest on charges of murder and rape. He was arrested by two patrolmen after a worker at Owensboro River Sand & Gravel spotted him hiding beneath some bushes along the Ohio River bank. After arraignment before Judge F.A. Roby, he was transferred to Jefferson County jail in Louisville to prevent the possibility of a lynching. During the drive, he made a verbal confession to the escorting officers and later a written one at Louisville. In this, he stated that the jewellery he had stolen from Mrs. Edwards was hidden in his room. This was found to be untrue and Bethea withdrew this confession only to make another in which he said the jewellery was stashed in a barn near his victim's apartment where the police found it.

On June 22, 1936, Circuit Court Judge George S. Wilton convened a special session of the grand

jury. Commonwealth Attorney Herman Birdhead decided to proceed only with the rape charge as this would permit Bethea to be hanged in Daviess County. The Grand Jury took just one hour and fifteen minutes to return an indictment on the rape charge.

The trial began three days later (the minimum time allowed by Kentucky law) in a packed courthouse. Bethea pleaded guilty. Over the next three hours the prosecution still presented the facts to the jury as they would need to decide the sentence. There was no defence.

At 12:23 p.m., after just 4 ½ minutes, they returned with a unanimous verdict of guilty.

Judge Wilson sentenced him to be "hanged by the neck with his body suspended so as to cause death, between sunrise and sunset July 31. "

The case was taken up by four black lawyers from Louisville arguing that he had not received a fair trial because he was a black man charged with raping a white woman. They presented a motion for a new trial but the deadline for filing had already expired. On July 28, Bethea's new lawyers filed an appeal which was dismissed by the Kentucky Court of Appeals which refused a stay of execution the following day. However, U.S. District Judge Elwood Hamilton in Louisville reviewed the case and on August 3rd ruled that the execution could proceed. On August 6, the Governor, A.B. Chandler, signed the death warrant for Bethea to be hanged at sunrise on Friday, August 14.

The hanging took place in the yard of the County Garage and was the first in Daviess County for 31 years (see Roy Green and Robert Mathley above). It was supervised by Phil Hanna who supplied the hood and rope and had taken part in some 70 executions. He was assisted by Sheriff Lester Pyle, from Carmi, Illinois. It was estimated that some 10,000 people witnessed the execution from all over Kentucky and further afield. The local hotels were all full and according to some newspapers there was a carnival atmosphere in the town.

On Thursday 13, August Bethea's lawyers said there would be no further appeals and so at 6:00 p.m., August 13, he was given his last meal of fried chicken, pork chops, cornbread, pickles, mashed potatoes, lemon pie and ice cream. After eating it, he wrote a letter to his sister. Late in the evening he was driven from Louisville to Owensboro, arriving there around 4 am the next morning.

Retired police officer Arthur Hash who had been hired by Sheriff Thompson to pull the lever arrived by train and she came to collect him and drive him to the execution site. At 4:20 am, the gallows was tested. At 5:29 am, Bethea was brought to the place of execution in a patrol car and was led to the gallows handcuffed between two deputies.

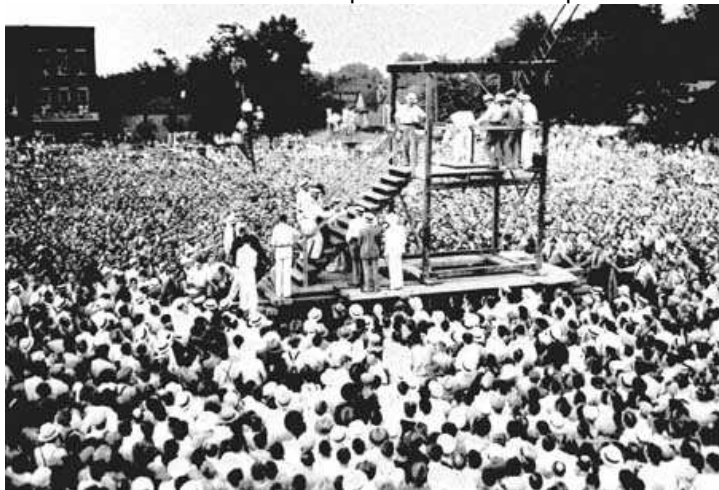
Rainey Bethea in jail in Louisville



Sheriff Florence Thompson



Bethea ascends the steps between two deputies.



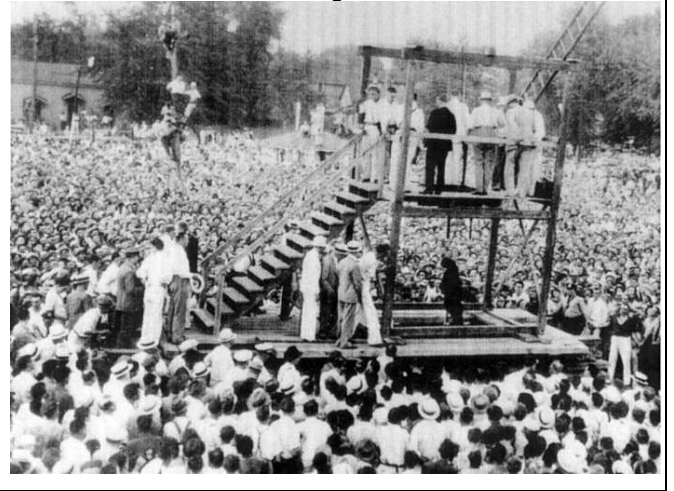
Bethea hooded and noosed



The trap is sprung.



Hanged.



"I will die happy," he said. "I have made my peace with God."

At the foot of the gallows, Bethea said, "Let me take off my shoes. I want to put on a clean pair of socks," Bethea said. This he was allowed to do and put on a clean pair of silk socks. Once on the platform he prayed with Rev. H. J. Lammers, the Catholic priest who had baptized him in jail. The black hood was put over Bethea's head and his hands strapped in front and legs strapped above and below the knee, as was standard practice.

Phil Hanna placed the noose around Bethea's neck and gave the signal to Hash to pull the lever. However, Hash was reportedly drunk and failed to notice. "Do it now!" Hanna commanded sharply. Bethea dropped 8 feet 6 inches the trap, breaking his neck. He was certified dead 8 ½ minutes later but not before several spectators had managed to tear off parts of the black hood as souvenirs. He was buried in Potter's Field in an unmarked grave.

This, the last public hanging in the US, drew very bad press, with many editorials slamming it, principally because they felt that the crowds enjoyed it too much!