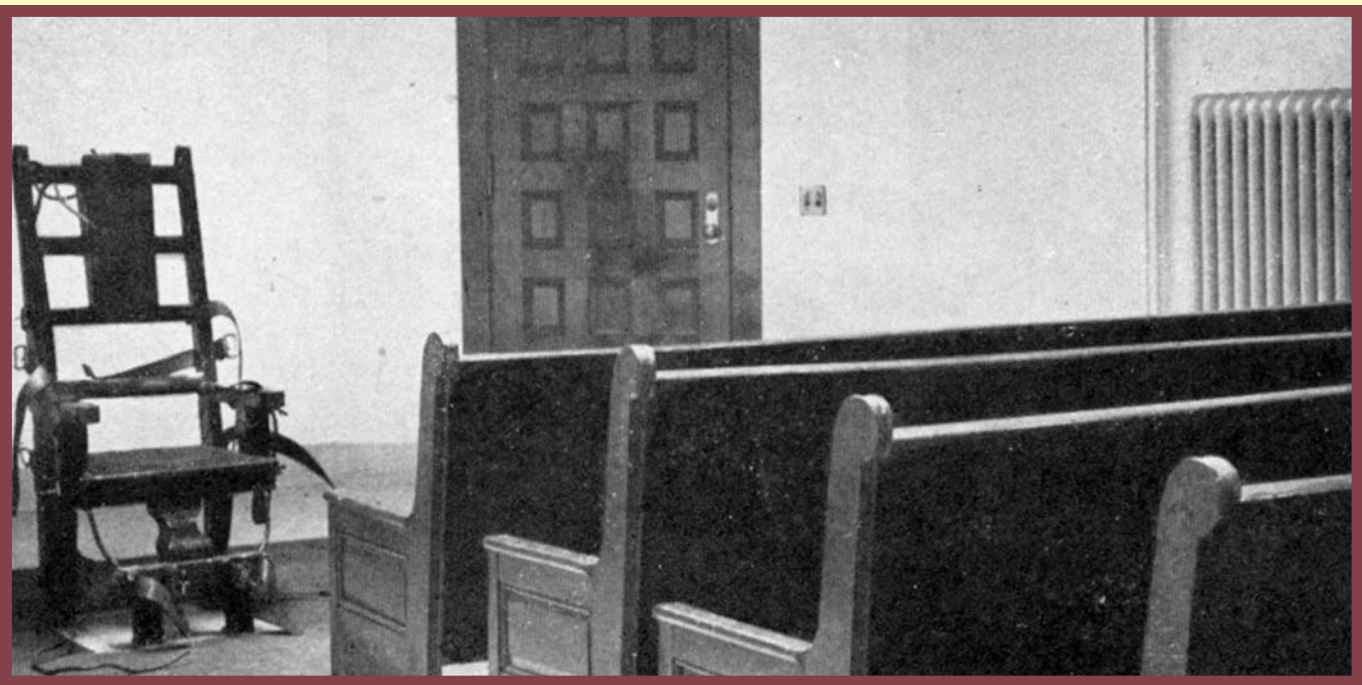


# A CHRONICLE OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT



The Sing Sing death chamber as it appeared around 1928. From the Sing Sing execution files, Ossining Historical Society, Ossining, New York.

"Death to the transgressor." The sentence of death was first etched in law in the Code of Hammurabi of Babylon, 1800 B.C. The seventh century B.C. saw the death sentence as the only punishment for crimes under the Draconian Code of Athens.

Executions were imposed by stoning, drowning, impaling, burning, dismembering and crucifixion. Hanging and beheading became the usual methods of execution in Europe by the ninth century A.D., and colonial America brought from the old world punishment of death for serious crimes against social and religious rules. In 1692 Massachusetts sent 19 men and women to the gallows because they believed them to be witches.

In the early colonies a perpetrator could be executed for any of over 200 crimes including horse theft, trading with Indians and adultery.

Pennsylvania was prominent in the early reform movement, repealing the sentence for all but first degree murder in 1794, due to efforts by Dr. Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence and founder of the Prison Society.

Hanging day was a popular public event, often drawing thousands to an execution, witnessing the gruesome spectacle. In 1834 Pennsylvania was the first state to move executions inside prison walls, out of public view.

Seeking humane and "painless" execution, a wooden chair with electrodes at head and foot was developed and connected to an electric generator manufactured by Mr. George Westinghouse of Pittsburgh. In August 1890, William Kemmler, a New York state inmate, became the first convict executed by electrocution.

For the next seven decades, hundreds of condemned prisoners were put to death by electrocution for murder, treason and other crimes. In 1953 Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were electrocuted at Sing Sing for selling A-bomb secrets to the communists.

In the 1960's opposition to the death penalty grew, sparked by the plight of Caryl Chessman, a "three strike" felon sentenced to death for kidnapping. Chessman spent 12 years on death row, his writings published internationally, before inhaling potassium cyanide in California's gas chamber.

In 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court (*Furman v. Georgia*) declared state death penalty statutes "cruel and unusual" because they gave juries discretion to impose death without guidance, resulting in arbitrary decisions. In response, the states reenacted statutes requiring the finding of aggravating (more terrible) and mitigating (less terrible) circumstances and predicating the sentence upon such findings, eliminating the arbitrariness. Since then, Pennsylvania and most states have adopted lethal injection as their method of execution. Gary Heidnik, the Philadelphia "house of horrors" murderer was last to be executed in this state in 1999. Presently 238 inmates occupy "death row" the longest since 1981.

Thirty-eight states and the Federal government have capital statutes. In 2002, 71 convicts were executed. 53 were white. 18 were black. 69 were men. 2 were women. All had taken the life of another human being. "May God have mercy on their souls."