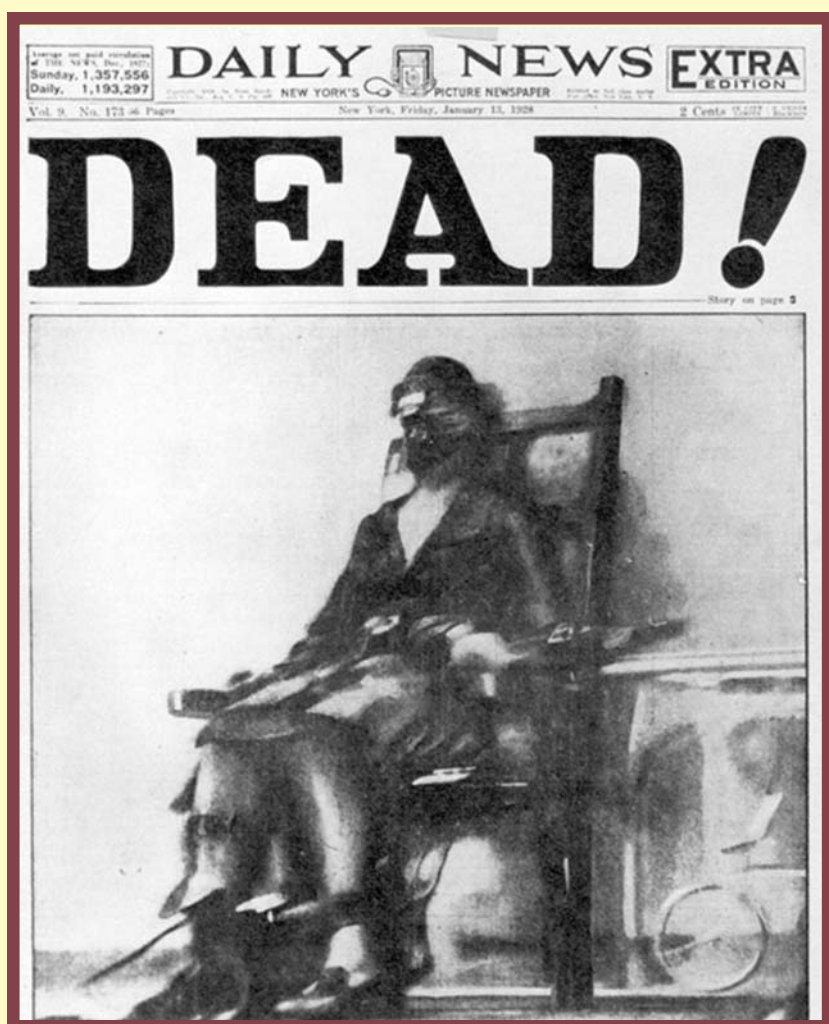


CAPITAL PUNISHMENT: A HISTORY OF AMERICA'S ELECTRIC CHAIR



Electrocution of Ruth Snyder, as seen in *New York Daily News*, January 13, 1928. The only known photograph of the electric chair in use, it was taken secretly by a camera hidden in reporter Tom Howard's sleeve. To this day, the publication of this photograph remains controversial.

On August 6, 1890, international media attention focused on a prison chamber in upstate New York: William Kemler, who had brutally axed his wife to death, was about to become the first man to die in the electric chair. The date marked the culmination of a pitched legal and public relations battle between Thomas Edison, who owned the U.S. patents for direct current electricity, and Pittsburgh's own George Westinghouse, who owned the U.S. patents for alternating current electricity. Both feared that the State Commission in New York would choose their company to supply current to the electric chair, which would inevitably generate negative publicity. Despite Westinghouse's efforts, New York used one of his AC generators to power its electric chair that August morning, and word quickly spread around the globe of a horrifically botched execution.

But New York had heralded the introduction of the electric chair as a great leap forward – a scientific solution based on advanced American technology – and the public was generally willing to persist with what the *New York Times* called this “great experiment of electrical execution.” Many hoped that electrocution would replace the “barbarities” of hanging and provide a “painless” death. Whether the electric chair was painless, or in fact, cruel and unusual punishment, as many others maintained, 26 states eventually adopted the technology. Over 4,000 men, women, and children were legally electrocuted in this country alone through the course of the twentieth century.

As his source image for these paintings, Warhol used a photograph of the infamous electric chair at Sing Sing prison in New York. This chair claimed the lives of many notables, including Martha Place (1899, the first woman electrocuted); Ruth Snyder (1928, of whom we have the only known photograph of a person being electrocuted); and Ethel and Julius Rosenberg (1953, convicted of treason for selling secrets to the Soviet Union). Ironically, the Sing Sing electric chair was no longer in use by the time Warhol began his work. In fact, after a brief hiatus in capital punishment nation-wide in the 1970s, most states switched to lethal injection as a primary means of execution. Although it is still technically on the books in four states, the electric chair probably saw its final use last May when Alabama electrocuted Lynda Lyon Block.

Jessie Ramey,
Phd candidate
in history,
Carnegie Mellon
University