

Guillotine history

Guillotine history is a fascinating one. French physician Joseph-Ignace Guillotin did not invent the guillotine, but did try to convince France to adopt some sort of new machine as a more humane method of capital punishment.

The 18th century French physician Joseph-Ignace Guillotin did not invent the guillotine, but had the unfortunate luck to be forever associated with the machine made famous during the French Revolution. Monsieur Guillotin's only connection to the device lies in his efforts to convince the French National Assembly to adopt some sort of new machine as a more humane method of capital punishment.

During this period in Europe, capital punishment was the typical sentence for criminals guilty of crimes ranging from murder to petty theft. How that criminal would meet his death, however, depended on his social status. Noblemen and women were honored with a dignified beheading, following in the tradition of ancient Greeks and Romans who believed there was no more honorable way to die.

Commoners, however, were not afforded the luxury of a quick death. The Spanish were fond of the Garotte method, which mechanically twisted a rope about a prisoner's neck until he strangled. Burning at the stake was popular for crimes of witchcraft and heresy. The criminal was typically placed in a barrel surrounded by pitched tinder set to flames. Many criminals were simply hanged.

The most common form of punishment for your everyday thief throughout Europe, however, was drawing, hanging and quartering. Originally invented to punish William Maurice in 1241 for an act of piracy, this method was used on male criminals for crimes of high treason or property theft. Women were never subjugated to this form of capital punishment because the required nudity was considered immodest, even after death. Thus, male criminals were strapped, or drawn, over a rack and dragged behind horses to the site of their execution. At the execution site, the criminals were slowly hanged, but cut down before losing all consciousness. After being stripped, the prisoners' testicles and penis were cut off. The stomachs were split open and the intestines removed and burned. The body was then divided into four quarters.

Capital punishment in the pre-guillotine era was a deliberately gruesome public display meant to scare the populace into obedience. Although most criminals were hung before burning at the stake, the sight of flames devouring human flesh would make the masses shudder. The body parts of quartered criminals, par-boiled and displayed on the city gates, were a threat to all who dared repeat the condemned's crimes. Despite what appeared to be the public's avid support for such bloody spectacles, European rulers were beginning to fear appearing barbaric.

Leaders became even more introspective as the 18th century Enlightenment movement swept

the continent. Thinkers of the day, such as Voltaire, Locke and Diderot, called for more humane methods of meting out capital punishment to criminals. Beheadings and hangings were even borderline barbaric because the criminal still suffered greatly before death. Hangings were imprecise as criminals kicked and flailed until their neck finally broke. Swords wielded by executioners did not always cut cleanly and precisely, forcing them to resort to hacking. Furthermore, if beheading was to be used for all crimes, the executioner's stamina would not suffice for the scores of common criminals cramming European prisons.

Thus, the idea of a beheading machine began to germinate. On the advice of Dr. Antoine Louis, the Secretary of the Academy of Surgery in France, the German engineer Tobias Schmidt built the first official beheading machine in Paris. The original design was two fourteen-foot upright planks of wood joined by a crossbeam at the top. The interior edges of the planks were grooved and greased to guide the falling blade, which was weighted and operated through a pulley system. The entire contraption sat upon a platform reached by twenty-four steps. Its premier was a success as the highwayman, Nicholas-Jacques Pelletier, was beheaded in one stroke, his head rolling into a wicker basket.

The machine was originally called the *Louissette* or *Louison* after the technical expert, Dr. Antoine Louis. But the name was quickly replaced by 'guillotine'. The guillotine became the most popular form of execution in France and many parts of Europe. The guillotine proved quite effective during the French Revolution (1789-1799). As liberty, equality and revolution caused social upheaval throughout the country, scores of noblemen and women were dragged out of their homes and executed. Having abandoned the platform and those twenty-four steps that petrified criminals could never navigate anyway, the populace erected the guillotine on flat ground and systematic beheadings of the nobility were performed.

As the popularity of the device grew, the machine -- dubbed 'the widow' by the masses -- was enhanced. Newer versions introduced the more effective 45-degree angled blade, shallow depressions to correctly align the prisoner's head, a metal bucket to catch the head, and a metal tray to catch the blood.

The guillotine remained a popular form of capital punishment well into the 20th century. The device was widely used by Germany, Greece, Switzerland, and Sweden. But under pressure from newly enlightened European countries, France outlawed capital punishment in 1981. In September 1977, Hamida Djadoubi was the last person to be guillotined in France.

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