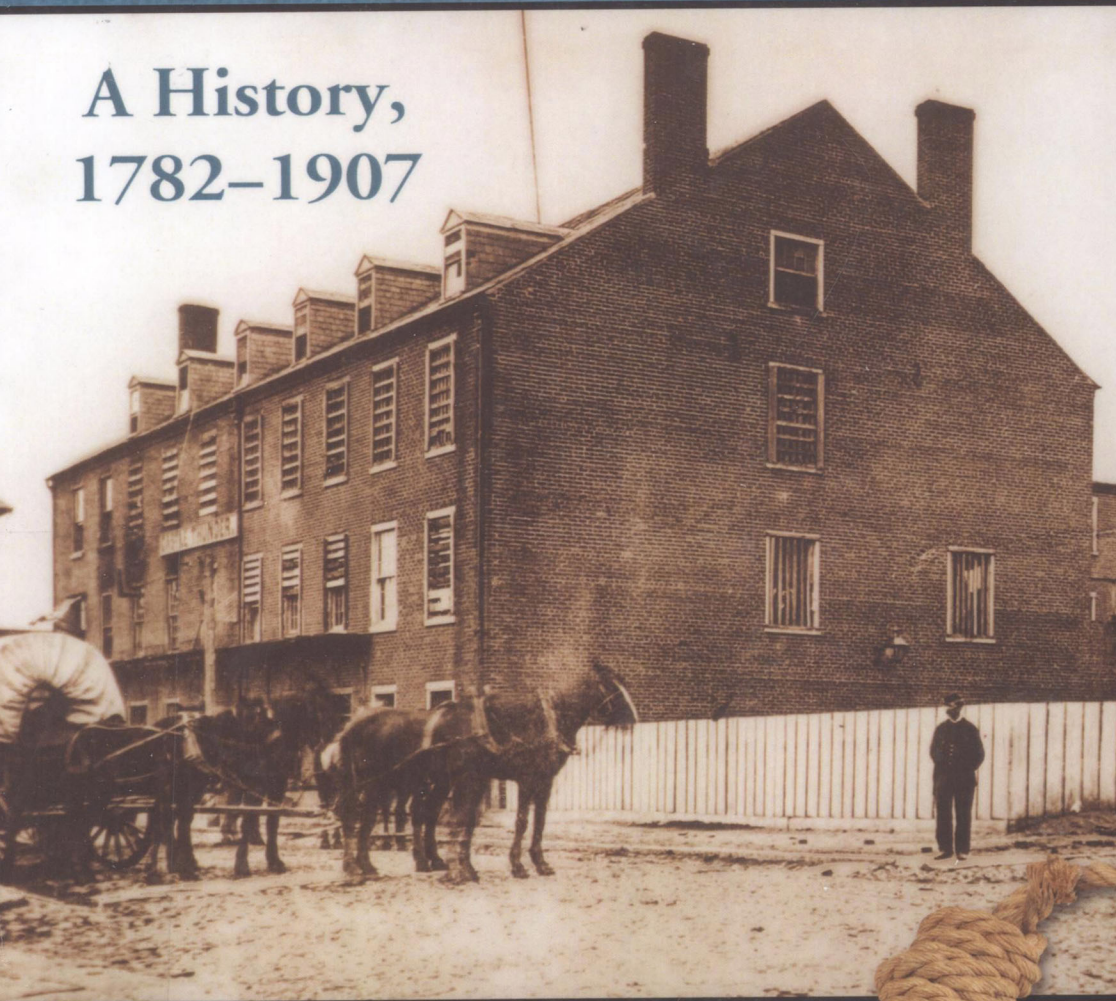


Public Executions *in* Richmond, Virginia

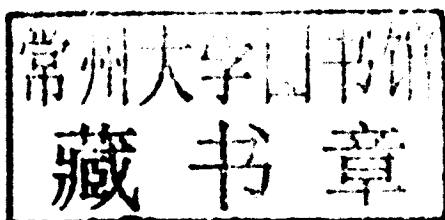
A History,
1782–1907



Harry M. Ward

Public Executions
in Richmond, Virginia
A History, 1782–1907

HARRY M. WARD



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On the cover: Castle Thunder, a Confederate Prison (Library of Virginia); noose © 2012 Shutterstock

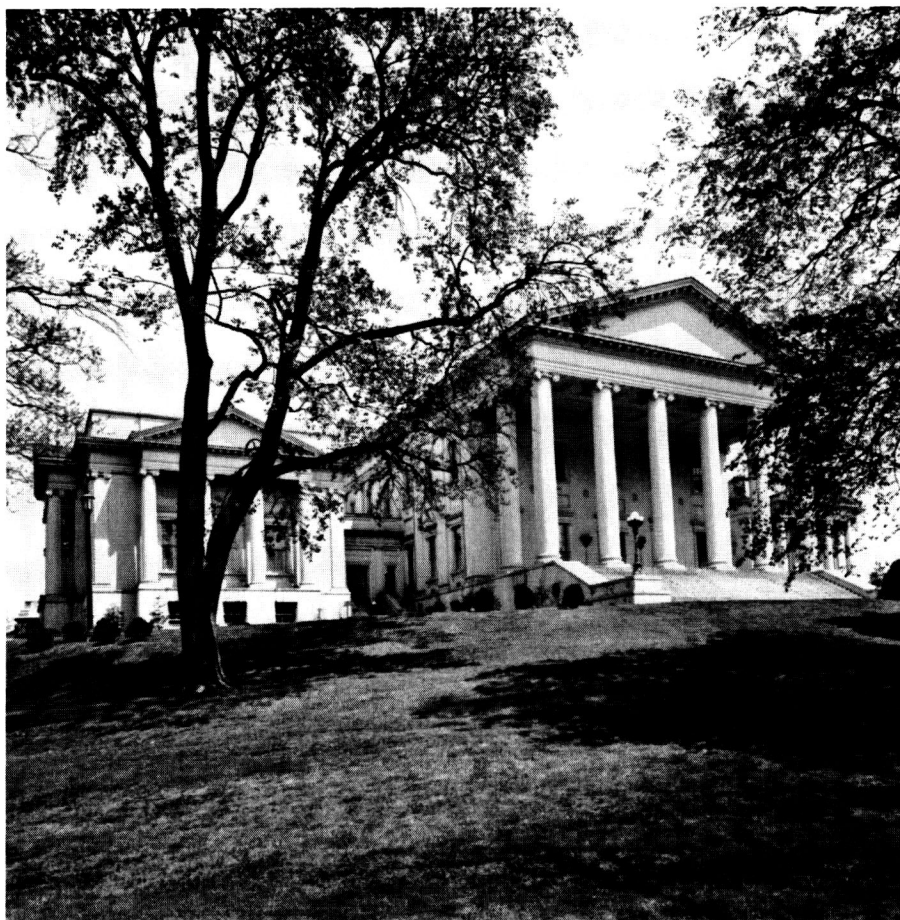
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Public Executions
in Richmond, Virginia



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Advantages toward research always occur when an author chooses a topic close at hand. One does not have to scrape about a region, nation, or even worldwide to gather information. The convenience is extended when the subject involves a capital city (of the state and the Confederacy) and is a commercial, cultural, and geographical center. Also importantly the area under review is a large urban one. The early Richmond newspapers, highly competitive with each other, brought to life the daily activity of a multiethnic society. The Library of Virginia in Richmond holds as complete a collection as possible of the city's early newspapers, easily accessed through microfilm. The library also has a comprehensive archive of other print media relating to the city's history. I thank members of the reference staff of the Library of Virginia, particularly Ginny Dunn, Sarah J. Huggins, William Luebke, Edwin Ray, and Lisa Wehrman. Although this project did not require the primary use of the splendid Virginia Historical Society, this institution served as a backup facility. The author also made use of the small, limited library collections and photographic services of the Valentine Richmond History Center. The Boatwright Library of the University of Richmond was a valuable basic resource, and I thank James Gwin, the head of Special Collections, reference librarians Rochelle Colestock, Susan Opdycke, and Marcia Whitehead, and especially the two facilitators for securing interlibrary loans, Betty Tobias and Amita Mongia. Helpful assistance was also given by Darlene Slater Herod and Michael Whitt of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society.

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from 1608 to 2002 (although there are important omissions). The major problem with this file is that it did not provide the locale of executions (e.g., counties or urban sites), other than the states where they occurred. Other locator help comes from the *Daily Dispatch*, post-Civil War, listing on New Year's Day the important events of the previous year, which includes executions. I thank reader-commentators of the book: Stephen A. Northrup, executive director of Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty; William M. Welsch, president of the American Revolution Roundtable — Richmond; William W. Childs, Jr., deputy chief, Parole and Probation (Virginia District 27); and Dr. Lynn Sims, U.S. Army historian (ret.). Deborah S. Govoruhk transformed typewriter print into computer copy and also applied her superb editorial skills. Lissa Searfoss restored illustrations.

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PREFACE

When Americans view their history, they tend to look away from the pervasive violence and injustice of the past and accept it as part of “the good old days.” Most historians pass over the horrors and meanness that were so attached to everyday living. One kind of horror that historians have been reluctant to come to grips with is the prevalent legal homicide of the past regularly jutting out from the landscape and touching the very being of most everyone. In Richmond, as elsewhere in the country, citizens turned out by the thousands for a public hanging. In 1818 an estimated 12,000 people witnessed the hanging of Robert Gibson, a curious fact since the 1820 census gave the city a population of 12,046. Indeed the public executions took place in a carnival atmosphere, with crowds following the progress of the condemned person on the route from the jail to the gallows and mixing with the throng of persons from all walks of life, including men, women, and children. Vendors hawked refreshments, the most popular being lemonade and watermelon. Other than gallows humor and shouting, the crowds behaved with reasonable decorum, although on occasion cordons of police officers had to use strong-arm tactics. One important aspect of the public executions, accepted as one of life’s necessary rituals, was that they attuned the American psyche, demanding affirmation of divine justice, collective redemption, and vicarious sacrifice.

Public executions, lasting everywhere in America until the mid-nineteenth century and in many locales until well into the twentieth century, validated the ruling elite’s insistence that mandated ritual death was a necessary tool for inculcating, in the minds of the more distressed citizens, fear that would act as a deterrent to crime. Common folk went along with their political and spiritual leaders in unquestioning acquiescence to public executions. Only with the passage of time, emerging in the modern era, did enough revulsion surface to compel some reform with an eye towards

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View of the City from Gamble's Hill, April, 1, 1865 (Library of Congress).

humaneness. But even then, an eye-for-an-eye public blood lust has persisted to our own time, with change only in reduction of the number of actual executions and finding supposedly less painful ways of committing legal homicide — but without much success abolishing dubious hidden criteria of race, gender, and status.

“The good old days — were they really good?” asked archival historian Otto Bettmann in 1960. “On the surface they appear to be so,” he said. Mainly concerned with the period from the end of the Civil War to the early 1900s, Bettmann concedes that historians have left us a picture of these times that “receded into a benevolent haze ... with the image of an ebullient, carefree America.” This “gaiety was only a brittle veneer that covered widespread turmoil and suffering. The good old days were good

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for but the privileged few. For the farmer, the laborer, the average breadwinner, life was an unrelenting hardship. This segment of the population was exploited or lived in the shadow of total neglect. And youth had no voice." The "period's dirty business" was "swept under the carpet of oblivion." Americans need to merge their country's ugly past with the present and future; hence a less cataclysmic destiny, contrary to much of the current vision for America, will emerge.¹

The story of public legal homicide in Richmond embraces a wide span, officially lasting from 1782 to 1869, when jail yards became the gallows site. This latter arrangement endured until 1908, when the penitentiary became the sole location for executions in the state. During the interim period of 1869–1907, only twelve witnesses and a few officials and ticket holders were admitted into a small jail yards to witness an execution. For Richmond executions (not so for Henrico County and penitentiary executions), however, large crowds were still able to view hangings. This was because the Richmond jail, post mid-nineteenth century, was situated at Fifteenth and Marshall streets adjacent to the old "usual place of execution," bordered by the Shockoe Valley hillside; spectators merely had to assemble on the hill to view the gallows inside the walls of the jail yard.

Richmond's public executions seem to have hit full pace during the Civil War. Already the images of death were everywhere. The huge military hospital complex on Chimborazo Hill and lesser army medical-surgical facilities regularly turned out corpses and assorted human limbs. During the war persons went to the gallows for espionage and counterfeiting. The army introduced to the Richmond public military hangings and firing squads, chiefly reserved for deserters, at camps in and around Richmond.

In some ways the Richmond of 1782–1907 was slightly more humane than Virginia's history as a whole. There were none of the burnings at the stake and hangings in irons, infrequently occurring before the American Revolution. Amazingly there were no lynchings in the Richmond vicinity, although there were several close calls. Still, at one time or another persons went to the gallows for murder, accessory to murder, rape, attempted rape, horse stealing, burglary, robbery, arson, espionage, revolt, and counterfeiting. Murder became almost the only capital crime. Almost without exception those who were put to death were drawn from the lower classes of society. Most gallows victims were also black.

What is remarkable is how public executions brought the whole community together as did no other event. Many women and children were spectators. There did seem to be a preponderant number of the very poor

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at the hangings, and blacks usually outnumbered whites, understandable being that most gallows victims were African American.

One might argue that the executions elicited the transforming hand of God. Invariably the condemned criminal bore witness to a born-again experience and on the scaffold declared the anticipation of being “soon with God in Glory.” A religious service usually transpired at the gallows, with the chief celebrant being a “minister of the gospel” or a Catholic priest. The proceedings consisted of prayer, preaching, hymn singing, and sometimes a testimonial by the condemned person. Often more than one clergyman participated, and the ceremony took on an ecumenical quality. Baptist African American preachers most frequently participated in the execution ritual.

A marked incongruity that becomes apparent in the study of public executions is that, despite the enormous size of crowds witnessing such events, there is a paucity of recorded impressions. As mentioned already concerning historians, there seems to have been a general reluctance to admit having been attracted to such morbid displays. Almost totally, contemporary diaries and journals omit references to the ritualized mandated deaths. A foreign hanging or guillotining was likely to receive much greater reportage in a Richmond newspaper than a similar local event. As time went on, the local press increasingly amplified coverage of executions as well as that of the relevant court cases. Hence newspaper sources form the spine of this study, and the reportage sheds much light on the character of citizens and the social milieu of the times.

Richmonders hardly blinked an eye over mass executions of poor African Americans, from the death retribution of some two dozen blacks connected with the budding Gabriel revolt of 1800 to the electrocution of the seven alleged Martinsville rapists in 1951. The author, however, has been unsuccessful in tracking down an actual source for a statement in the *Daily Dispatch* for January 9, 1903, referencing an execution about to take place in Manchester (later part of Richmond): “Four negroes were hung just outside of the corporate limits of Manchester about one hundred years ago, for the murder of Mrs. Betty Morrisette.” The reporter may have been mistaken; Elizabeth (Betty) Morrisette was still alive in 1809, at which time, incidentally, a mass hanging of four slaves for the murder of an overseer occurred in Mathews County.

The narrative that follows is probably more complete in detailing slave executions than those for whites. For the antebellum period “the Auditor of Public Accounts: Condemned Blacks Executed or Transported,

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1783–1865” at the Library of Virginia affords a comprehensive listing regarding convictions, sentencing, and executions of slaves in the state; the researcher only has to cull out City of Richmond and Henrico County cases from those of the state at large. There are some instances regarding slaves, and elsewhere certainly so concerning whites, where there is no record of follow-up and no mention of actual execution occurring. In such instances, except when the crime was so degrading that execution must have been evitable, the author excludes mention of an execution taking place. While executions from neighboring counties per se do not come under the purview of this study, some of those hangings involving the City of Richmond (such as the condemned person’s being lodged in the city or Henrico jail or a sizeable contingent of Richmonders attending the execution) receive coverage in this study. For points of comparison, a few executions elsewhere in Virginia and the United States are mentioned.

The reader will quickly recognize the interlocking areas of the City of Richmond and Henrico County. The situation is much like other situations in the United States, where one leaves one jurisdiction and immediately enters another. Even today Richmond and the county are as one city. For a long time the Henrico County Courthouse was located at Twenty-Second and Main streets, in downtown Richmond. Henrico’s executions were held inside what is today’s Richmond corporate limits.

1

“USUAL PLACE OF EXECUTION”

The macabre drama that played out in Virginia's small capital city may seem inconsequential on the larger stage, but it was replicated in numerous other American communities. The state capital was moved from Williamsburg in 1780, largely to put it further from the reach of any invading British army. In 1782 Richmond was incorporated as a city. By the end of the Revolutionary War the city could boast three hundred houses, many of which had been rebuilt after the city-wide conflagration during the raid of British troops under General Benedict Arnold in January 1781.

Before the Civil War Richmond's population grew slowly, largely due to the western migration of Virginians. Inhabitants numbered four thousand in 1795; 12,000 in 1820; 26,000 in 1840; and 51,000 in 1870. Population spiraled thereafter, hovering around 200,000 (800,000 metro) in modern times.¹

Despite its small size and retaining some of its frontier character, antebellum Richmond spun out a vibrant economy. Located at the head of navigation of the James River in central Virginia, it became an important entrepôt. Agricultural products came into the city for export. By the time of the Civil War there were forty tobacco factories in the city. Flour milling had a worldwide reach. There was also brick making, and the adjacent counties of Powhatan, Goochland, and Chesterfield comprised the major coal supplying area in the country. Not surprisingly, Richmond, by mid-nineteenth century, had a distinct polyglot population, made up of one-fourth each native whites, slaves, Germans, and Irishmen. Society was sharply divided between retailers, professionals, and industrial managers on the one hand and industrial and service workers on the other, with always a small corps of vagrants.

Indeed the city of Richmond had somewhat of a humorous interplay

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of petty criminals and alcoholics, not to mention the goings-on of juvenile delinquents and boy gangs. The city magistrates during the nineteenth century frequently assigned culprits to the “cage” (the holding cell at the jail) or to a whipping. Not unlike modern times when youngsters of Oregon Hill (Richmond’s preeminent poor section) might expect to wind up in the adjacent state penitentiary, it was as if some residents were bred into crime. Such a propensity did not necessarily produce hardened felons, but it did help to create among attendees at execution sites not only rapport with those condemned but also a lightheartedness, with profuse gallows humor, that exuded a carnival atmosphere.

Various annexations have enlarged the city’s bounds. During the Civil War the city contained 2.4 square miles; in 1973, with the last annexation, it covered 62.8 square miles. Some of the sites mentioned in this study were not included within the city during early times but were at a later period, one example being the village of Manchester across from downtown Richmond, incorporated into the city in 1910.

There were enough hangings in Richmond that citizens only had to be informed of the “usual place of execution.” Richmond’s executions primarily took place at the lower northeastern end of the hill (today’s location of the VCU Medical School), in Shockoe Valley, near Shockoe Creek (no longer extant above ground today). The site may be more precisely defined as being on the northwest corner of today’s Fifteenth Street and Broad Street. Adjacent to the then Negro Burial Ground, it presently is under an Interstate 95 overpass.² Consistently, a Friday was selected as execution day, probably because that day was customarily also reserved for days of publicly proclaimed “humiliation and prayer.”³

Other sites used by the city for one or several executions were the penitentiary (two executions), the state farm of the penitentiary (one execution), Castle Thunder, Victor’s Old Mill (Shockoe Valley), a gulley near the almshouse (Shockoe Valley), and the city jail (when located in Shockoe Valley): at least one execution each was held in a field in Manchester (across the river and now part of the city) and the Manchester Courthouse jail yard. A few of the Gabriel conspirators condemned in 1800 were hanged just outside the city, near Brookfield plantation. Some of the hangings (selectively) held in adjacent counties, a few miles from the city, in which there seemed to be a large number of Richmond attendees are included in this study, along with the hangings of condemned men who had been assigned to Richmond jails for safekeeping.

Henrico County was more flexible in the choice of execution sites.