

Robert Lee Tarver put to death in Alabama's electric chair

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15 April 2000

Robert Lee Tarver Jr, 52, was put to death shortly after midnight on Friday morning, April 14 in Atmore, Alabama in the state's electric chair. Tarver had been convicted of the 1984 murder of convenience store owner Hugh Kite in rural Alabama. Tarver maintained his innocence until the end.

Tarver had originally been scheduled to be put to death on February 4, but on February 3 the US Supreme Court granted him a stay of execution. Tarver had appealed his death sentence on the basis that Alabama's exclusive use of the electric chair constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. On February 22, the Supreme Court denied Tarver's appeal by a 5-4 vote and lifted his stay, allowing the execution to proceed.

Tarver's lawyers had likened the state's use of the electric chair to torture, saying that it violated basic standards of decency, and that it excessively burned the bodies of condemned prisoners. When John Evans was put to death in Alabama in 1983, the electrode on his leg caught fire, and smoke and sparks were seen coming from his head. Evans was still alive after two volts of electricity and finally died after a third electrical surge. The Alabama electric chair is known as "Yellow Mama," referring to the antiquated chair's bright yellow color.

Alabama, Nebraska and Georgia are the only states that utilize electrocution as the sole means of execution. While Florida had also exclusively used the electric chair to execute death row inmates, earlier this year the state changed its policy to allow prisoners to choose their method of execution. This freed the way for the state to resume executions, which had been blocked by death row inmates' appeals to the Supreme Court on the basis of cruel and unusual punishment. Terry Sims, 58, and Anthony Bryan, 40, were executed in February in Florida.

The Georgia House voted overwhelmingly in February to phase out electrocution in favor of lethal injection, fearful that the Supreme Court would ban the electric chair. The legislation is now before the state Senate.

Alabama has carried out 22 executions since the reinstitution of the death penalty in 1976. There are 185 people on the state's death row, including 12 juveniles and 2 women. The state does not forbid the execution of the mentally retarded. There are no federal laws outlawing the execution of juveniles and the mentally impaired, although international treaties ban such practices.

Nationwide, 28 of the more than 3,500 individuals on death row have been put to death this year, bringing to 626 the number executed since 1976. Texas and Virginia carried out close to half of these executions—Texas, 211 and Virginia, 76.



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