

Two executions in one week

Blind man dies by electric chair in Tennessee, Texas inmate executed amid claims of false testimony

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The US will conclude 2019 having sent 22 individuals to their deaths. Executions took place in just seven of the 29 states which still have the death penalty: Florida, nine executions; Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia, three each; Florida, two; and South Dakota and Missouri, one each.

Tennessee

On Thursday, December 5, Lee Hall, 53, was executed inside the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville, Tennessee. He chose to die by electric chair, which is a method allowed by Tennessee law.

Hall was convicted and sentenced to death in 1992 for the 1991 murder of his estranged girlfriend, Traci Crozier, by throwing a lit container full of gas into her car while she was in the front seat. Crozier sustained severe burns and died the next day.

Hall had to be led into the execution because he was legally blind. His attorneys say this condition was caused by glaucoma that was not properly treated while he was in prison. According to witnesses to his execution, his last words, spoken from the electric chair, were, "People can learn forgiveness and love and to make this world a better place."

Nashville Scene reported that witnesses saw what looked like smoke coming from Hall's shrouded head during the execution. The state later told Kimberlee

Kruesi of the Associated Press that it was "steam and not smoke as a result of the liquid and heat." Whichever story is true, it would have been a gruesome spectacle for those in attendance.

According to Hall's attorneys, in addition to being blind, he suffered from severe cognitive impairments and had suffered abuse growing up. He had always expressed remorse for Crozier's death. Hall said he had been drinking and smoking crack cocaine before the crime and never intended to kill her, only to burn her car, something which he had done before.

Up until his execution, Hall's attorneys had been calling on Tennessee Governor Bill Lee, a Republican, as well as state and federal courts for a reprieve to allow full consideration of an issue they say kept Hall from receiving a fair trial.

Earlier this year, one of the jurors who voted for his death sentence admitted that she had been raped and abused by her former husband, something she had failed to disclose during jury selection. She said she "hated" Hall due to her personal history. However, the governor, the Tennessee Supreme Court and the US Supreme Court all declined to halt Hall's execution as a result of this juror's admission.

Texas

Travis Trevino Runnels, 46, was executed on Wednesday, December 11, at the Texas State

Penitentiary's Huntsville Unit. He died by lethal injection of one drug, pentobarbital.

Runnels declined to make a final statement. Prison officials announced his time of death as 7:26 p.m., less than an hour after the US Supreme Court turned down his final appeal, allowing his execution to proceed.

Runnels had already been serving a 70-year sentence for aggravated robbery when he killed 38-year-old prison supervisor Stanley Wiley in the Clements Unit boot factory in 2003, slicing his neck to the bone.

Runnels admitted his guilt in Wiley's killing from the start, so the question at his trial would come down to whether he would be sentenced to death or life in prison. In order to give him the death penalty, a jury had to unanimously agree that Runnels would pose a future danger, even while in prison.

During the 2005 trial in Wiley's murder, his defense team said that he had killed the prison officer because he was tired of Wiley "messing with him." However, his lawyers at the time called no witnesses and didn't present any evidence on his behalf.

His defense did not tell the jury about his brain dysfunction and violent and troubled family history. Nor did they relate that Hall's uncle had been shot by the police and that his great-great-grandfather had been lynched in 1910 by a mob in Dallas, Texas.

However, the prosecution's key witness was an investigator with the state's Special Prosecution Unit tasked with handling prison crimes, A.P. Merillat. This supposed expert testified at trial in Runnels' case that incoming inmates, even those with a capital murder conviction, would be given a mid-level "G3" security classification. This meant that they would be free to come and go from their cells and walk unescorted to activities like church and work assignments, where they could pose a dangerous safety risk to other inmates.

This testimony was untruthful. According to more recent court filings, the Texas prison system at the time was already relying on a committee to make individualized classifications of prisoners. Not long before Runnels' trial, prison officials rewrote their policy to ensure that inmates with a history of assaulting prison staff were barred from "G3" status. Given his crime, Runnels would have been put in solitary confinement upon return to prison.

Runnels' lawyers at the time did not challenge Merillat's testimony. In a recent clemency and state

court appeal, Runnels' attorneys argued that this failure to challenge this "expert" testimony along with the generally shoddy legal representation he received at trial deserved reexamination. The state court, while acknowledging that Merillat's statements were inaccurate, said the claims of false testimony should have been raised earlier and that it may not have made a difference in the outcome of the trial anyway.

The state appeals court and the Texas Board of Pardons and Parole both turned down Runnels' appeal. As his execution approached, Runnels wrote, "As you can see when Texas is set on executing someone it doesn't matter what issues of errors you have, the courts will do what needs to be done."

Runnels was the third inmate executed in Texas this year based on testimony from Merillat.



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