

South Carolina puts Brad Sigmon to death in first US firing squad execution since 2010

Kate Randall
9 March 2025

South Carolina's execution chamber was the scene of a bloody, gruesome spectacle Friday when death row prisoner Brad Sigmon was killed in the first execution in the United States by firing squad in 15 years.

The revival of the firing squad, a relic most associated in the US with the execution of deserters during the Civil War, is an indication of the ruling establishment's intent on keeping the state-sponsored assembly line of death moving no matter the brutality of the method.

Sigmon, 67, was convicted and sentenced to death for the 2001 bludgeoning deaths of his ex-girlfriend's parents. He chose the firing squad over the electric chair and lethal injection due to his fear that these methods would prove more painful. South Carolina keeps the details of its lethal injection protocol secret.

In a Wednesday filing to the US Supreme Court, Sigmon's attorney had sought a stay of execution, asking the high court "to consider whether South Carolina's compressed execution timeline and arbitrary denial of information relating to the South Carolina Department of Corrections lethal injection drugs violate Due Process."

The high court rejected Sigmon's request for a stay of execution without comment and with no recorded dissents. The South Carolina Supreme Court refused to grant Sigmon a reprieve earlier in the week. Governor Henry McMaster, a Republican, declined to commute Sigmon's death sentence to life in prison.

When it was clear that there would be no last-minute reprieve, Sigmon was led into the death chamber at the Broad River Correctional Institution in Columbia, South Carolina and strapped into a metal chair with leg restraints and a strap over his head. The state spent \$54,000 in 2022 to construct the firing squad area within its execution chamber, next to the electric chair,

which prison authorities said could not be moved.

In a final statement read before his death, Sigmon said he wanted his "closing statement to be one of love and a calling to my fellow Christians to help us end the death penalty." He added, "An eye for an eye was used as justification to the jury for seeking the death penalty. At that time, I was too ignorant to know how wrong that was. Why? Because we no longer live under the Old Testament law but now live under the New Testament."

A target was placed over Sigmon's heart and a hood placed over his head. Three volunteer shooters selected from the prison staff stood out of the view of witnesses, who sat behind shatterproof glass. The executioners were armed with rifles loaded with .308-caliber Winchester 110-grain TAP Urban ammunition, a type of bullet commonly used by police marksmen.

These bullets are designed for rapid expansion and fragmentation upon impact, minimizing penetration while maximizing damage to critical organs like the heart. The bullets shatter upon hitting hard surfaces like the rib cage, creating extensive internal injuries intended to cause swift unconsciousness and death through rapid blood loss.

There was no warning before the executioners fired their weapons simultaneously at about 6:05 p.m., causing the witnesses to flinch. After he was shot, the condemned inmate appeared to take two short breaths and a blood stain appeared on his chest. He was pronounced dead about three minutes after the shots were fired.

In a statement, his lawyer, Gerald "Bo" King, said that Sigmon's death was "horrifying and violent."

"He chose the firing squad knowing that three bullets would shatter his bones and destroy his heart," King said. "But that was the only choice he had, after the

state's three executions by lethal injection inflicted prolonged and potentially torturous deaths on men he loved like brothers."

King said that "there is no justice" with Friday's execution. "Everything about this barbaric, state-sanctioned atrocity—from the choice to the method itself—is abjectly cruel," he said. "We should not just be horrified—we should be furious."

Before the murders, King said, Sigmon was "a hard worker and a loving brother who worked factory shifts as a teenager to make sure his brothers and sisters could eat." He said that Sigmon became a "tortured" man because of an undiagnosed mental illness that caused "irrational and impulsive episodes," something he tried to treat with street drugs. Sigmon was likely in the grips of a psychotic episode when he beat to death his victims, Gladys and David Larke.

Like many of those on death row, Sigmon suffered from childhood abuse and trauma. His father was an alcoholic who physically abused him, and the young Sigmon often intervened to protect his mother from his father's violent outbursts.

Lethal injection was introduced in the 1970s, with prison and state authorities seeking a method that appeared less violent to observers. But in numerous cases, inmates have groaned and writhed strapped to the gurney before succumbing to the lethal chemicals, or have been removed from the execution chamber alive, only to face another date with the executioner.

Some US states have faced difficulty securing the drugs needed for lethal injection because of a European Union ban on pharmaceutical companies selling drugs for use in capital punishment. Sigmon faced two prior execution dates that were called off: on June 18, 2021, which was postponed because South Carolina could not obtain the lethal injection drugs; and on May 13, 2022, which was delayed due to legal challenges regarding the state's execution protocols and lack of the availability of the needed drugs.

Autopsies of prisoners executed by lethal injection have found frothy, bloody liquid filling the lungs' airways, which some doctors say indicates the condemned person experienced the agonizing sensation of drowning before they died.

Before Sigmon, Ronnie Lee Gardner was one of three prisoners executed by firing squad, all of them in Utah, since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death

penalty in 1976. His brother, Randy Gardner, publicly opposed Brad Sigmon's firing squad execution. He described the method as "barbaric" and "cruel and unusual punishment," which is banned by the US Constitution.

Randy Gardner said, "I didn't witness my brother's execution, but I got to see his body after. I've got the autopsy photos of what it looked like, and it's just mutilated my brother's body. I think it's terrible." He said he now opposes all methods of execution, adding: "To me, it's revenge."

South Carolina currently has 27 inmates on death row, according to the Death Penalty Information Center, down from over 60 who were on death row before executions were paused in the state for 13 years due to the inability to obtain lethal injection drugs. Many inmates had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment or died in prison from natural causes before executions resumed.

Of the 1,613 people executed in the US since 1976, 1,428 died by lethal injection, 163 by electrocution, 15 by lethal gas (including 3 in Alabama in 2024 by nitrogen asphyxia, the latest method), 4 by firing squad, and 3 by hanging.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact