

Darby Campbell-Firkus
HIST 6994

Murfreesboro Dark History

Rutherford County Courthouse

35.84821321903435, -86.39201058852802

Rutherford County Courthouse, S Public Square, Murfreesboro, TN 37130

The Human Fly (1923)

Public Spectacles

In the early 20th century, daring individuals traveled as stunt entertainers, some of which would scale the exteriors of tall buildings, often going by the nickname “The Human Fly.”

April 06, 1923, two strangers rolled into downtown Murfreesboro, a trick bicycle rider and his partner Ray Royce—one such Human Fly. The 25-year-old Royce secured permission from Murfreesboro city officials to climb the Rutherford County Courthouse without the use of equipment by telling them that he was experienced with kind of work and just starting for the season.

A crowd of about 200 people gathered on the square and raised a collection of \$12. At 8 p.m., illuminated by a fire truck spotlight, he nimbly climbed the building’s brick exterior, up past the second-floor courtroom and onto the roof. He made his way up the cupola, a difficult feat considering the clock and irregular shape. Finally, he scaled the bell tower and stood astride the weathervane on top of the building some 200 feet from the ground.

According to a 1923 Tennessean article, “He descended to the ledge just under the courthouse clock where he stopped for a rest. Parties on the roof called to him there to come on down as the crowd was satisfied. Instead he started back to the top.” It had begun to rain softly. His hands slipped on the wet metal. As the crowd watched in horror, he fell 40 feet to his death on the courthouse roof below. The article continues, “Life was extinct when local citizens reached his body. His neck was broken and a hole was knocked in his head by the plunge to the roof.”

His body was carried across the square to Crafton-Sweeney’s undertaker parlors to be held pending word from his family in St. Louis. As it turns out, Ray Royce was a stage name. Many years later, he was identified as James A. Dearing of St. Louis. In one version of the story, the man was a lone stranger; his body was displayed under glass for five days at Sweeney’s Funeral Home, never identified, and laid to rest in an unmarked grave in Evergreen Cemetery. However, Evergreen cemetery has no such record of Ray Royce or James A. Dearing.

(\$12 in 1923 is about \$187 in 2020)

“Human Fly Killed by Fall From Murfreesboro Courthouse Steeple: St. Louis Man Loses His Footing and Plunges Forty Feet to Sudden Death.” April 07, 1923.

The Tennessean. “‘ Mink Slide’ describes city’s past: Human Fly’s’ climb, death.” December 25, 1991.

Murfreesboro Post. Mike West. “Cover Story: The Legend of the Human Fly ... Resolved.” September 14, 2008. https://www.murfreesboropost.com/community/cover-story-the-legend-of-the-human-fly-resolved/article_1c821fb5-ef6f-5fe5-87bf-a00fef4402e0.html

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A Tale of Three Cousins

Murder, Civil War

If you’re from the Murfreesboro area or a Civil War buff, you’ve no doubt heard of Sam Davis, whose boyhood home is now a house museum in Smyrna, Tennessee. Davis was a Coleman Scout, a group of Confederate spies responsible for acquiring the size, readiness, and movement of Union forces in Tennessee. In November of 1863, Sam Davis was hung while refusing to reveal the source of the papers he carried. His famous last words: “I would rather die a thousand deaths than betray a friend.”

Two of Davis’s cousins’, Dewitt Smith Jobe and Dewitt “Dee” Smith, stories are not as well known.

Like Davis, Jobe was a Coleman scout, often traveling by night and sleeping during the day. One morning in August of 1864, Jobe awoke to the sound of twelve Union soldiers surrounding him, guns drawn. He quickly began chewing the orders he carried. They demanded the papers as he resisted and swallowed them. They tied a bridle rein around his neck, interrogating him about the content of his papers.

Jobe refused.

They pistol-whipped him, knocking out his teeth. They gouged out his eyes. Still, he gave them nothing but curses, so they cut out his tongue. The soldiers handed him a pencil and paper, offering him one last chance to save his life.

For the last time, Jobe refused.

They attached the reins to a horse and, with a single blow, sent the horse galloping, Jobe dragging behind. Finally, the soldiers strung him up by the feet from a tree and left his body to the elements.

The third Confederate cousin, Dewitt “Dee” Smith, deserted the 45th Tennessee Infantry shortly before Jobe’s death. According to local folklore, upon hearing of the torture and death of his second cousin to die at the hands of Union soldiers in the span of a year, Smith was enraged and set out to kill Major General Rosecrans.

The first victim of his murderous rampage was a local man named Burgess that was rumored to have given up Jobe’s location to the Federal army. He shouted from the gate of Burgess’s home for him to come out. When he did, Smith shot him without a word. He ordered the family out of their home before burning it to the ground.

One night he entered the tents of 16 sleeping Union soldiers and cut the throats of 15 while they slept, leaving the survivor to tell others that he was coming for them. On another occasion, Smith left a note pinned to a body reading, “Partial payment for my murdered friend, Dee Jobe.” He is said to have hunted down 50 men before meeting his end.

In late 1864, Smith was ambushed by two young men as they rode down a country lane. Demanding Smith surrender, he shot one in the face in reply, but he was shot by the second man who fled to his nearby house. Smith gave chase, managed to wound the man, and while in the act of burning the assailant’s house, was hit with a load of buckshot. Finally captured, he was taken to the courthouse turned hospital here in Murfreesboro. He bled to death on the same wooden floors we walk today.

Smith’s desertion and death are facts, but much of the story surrounding a killing spree has changed and been exaggerated over the years. However, the myth of a Confederate avenger persists today.

“Remembering Rutherford: Diary provides real story of Confederate renegade.” *Daily News Journal*. November 22, 2014.

Whittle, Dan. “Tragic story of Jobe, Smith seldom told.” *The Daily News Journal*. April 02, 2006.

Harber, Susan. “Harber’s History Lesson: Spymaster Henry Shaw was leader of Coleman Scouts.” *Daily News Journal*. May 15, 2017.

Hodges, Anthony. "Hodges: Coleman's Scouts and a Cousin's Revenge." *Chattanooga Times Free Press*. October 25, 2015.

Pittard, Mabel Baxter. "The Coleman Scouts: A Study." 1953. <https://tennessee-scv.org/colemanscouts/mp.htm>

Tucker, Greg. "Few Know the Courage and Suffering of Dewitt Jobe." Rutherfordhistory.org <http://rutherfordtnhistory.org/few-know-the-courage-and-suffering-of-dewitt-jobe/>

Soule College

35.85130103254111, -86.39267296313746

The Three Sisters in Black

Murder, Civil war, Executions, Public Spectacles, Crime

Founded in 1851, Soule College offered an unequaled “traditional southern education for women in cultural studies and social graces” on Maple Street in Murfreesboro. It was a three-story building situated on 4 ½ acres with old-growth trees. The college was used as a hospital during the Civil War for both the Union and Confederate armies in turn, and the bullet holes and bloodstains remained on the brick and wooden floors. After the Battle of Stones River, the Confederacy buried over 100 soldiers in a mass grave located in the lot adjacent to the college. The bodies were later moved to Evergreen Cemetery. Several hanging executions took place in the lot across the street due to the law that they had to be carried out within 1 mile of the courthouse. Despite the death and suffering, the oddest stories of Soule College are not connected to the Civil War or capital punishment, but rather three sisters linked to a murder that shocked the nation.

In 1892, Virginia Oceania Wardlaw was hired as the president of the college. She was described as a charming, brilliant, fascinating educator that “brought a light to Murfreesboro.” Wardlaw was a charter graduate of Wellesley College and expanded the curriculum to include music, drama, science, languages, geology, European and Constitutional history, along with vocations like dressmaking, bookkeeping, typewriting, and law.

In 1903, Virginia and her sister, Mary Snead, bought the school from the church-affiliated trustees. At first, the school flourished under their leadership. Coming from wealthy Southern families, the Wardlaw and Snead names were “synonymous with distinction in education,” and the two educators were described as “brilliant ... women of fine character and gentle demeanor.”

Soon thereafter, their older, recently widowed sister, Caroline Martin, arrived from New York and took over management of the school’s finances. Her daughter, 16-year-old Ocey, enrolled as a student. Mary’s two sons, John and Fletcher, also joined the faculty. The three sisters were distinct figures in the community, always covered from head to toe with black dresses and veils.

After Mrs. Martin joined the administration, odd happenings began to occur. They were known to call carriages late at night to visit a local cemetery and talk gathered around a grave. It was common knowledge that none of the black carriage drivers would pick them up. Students were moved from room to room without reason, the sisters continually roamed the building, and they kept a “mystery room” in the College that no one was allowed to enter. On one occasion, when Ocey was ill, a doctor was called but not allowed to enter the room where Ocey was being held; rather, she was rolled into the hall. Ocey married her cousin Fletcher, allegedly forced by the sisters—possibly to cover up a pregnancy that had occurred out of wedlock. They were remarried twice after that.

It wasn’t long before rumors spread among students, staff, and community of occult and other strange activity. It was a widely held belief that Caroline Martin possessed supernatural powers,

and the family was all under her spell. Concerns about Ocey were heightened by her seemingly forced seclusion and alleged to be suffering from some debilitating illness. Bills were unpaid as enrollment plunged.

In 1907, the Wardlaw sisters and family left the area, leaving the school to new owners. Virginia Wardlaw was then employed at Montgomery College. Sister Mary returned to her former home in Oglethorpe, Ga. Her sons, John and Fletcher, went first to Christiansburg and then to Lynnville, Tenn., where they ran a sawmill business. Caroline and Ocey returned to New York, but within a few months joined Virginia at Montgomery College. Soon the college was in financial distress, and the community was hearing tales of strange behavior. The Murfreesboro experience was repeated; only this time, not everyone survived.

Ocey Snead was found drowned kneeling in a few inches of water in a bathtub of an unfurnished house in East Orange, N.J. in 1909 with a suicide note pinned to her clothes nearby. The coroner found morphine in her system and concluded that she had been dead 24 hours before Virginia reported her death. The investigation, manhunt, and trial that followed was a national media spectacle to rival the murders of Sharon Tate or Nicole Simpson. Evidence surfaced that the sisters had taken a large life insurance policy of \$32,000* on Ocey that far exceeded their means to pay the premiums. Likewise, Ocey owned several parcels of valuable property in her name alone through her father's will. Testimony showed that on several occasions, the sisters had tried unsuccessfully to get Ocey to make a will leaving them the property. Virginia had claimed to be alone with Ocey prior to finding her, but witnesses swore they had seen Caroline there that day as well.

When warrants were issued for the three women, Mary surrendered, but Caroline evaded capture for several weeks. When she finally stood trial, Caroline failed to plea insanity but negotiated a sentence of seven years for involuntary manslaughter. In less than a year, she was found to be insane and transferred to the New Jersey State Hospital for the Insane at Morris Plains, where she mysteriously died a year later. While awaiting trial, Virginia Wardlaw starved herself to death in her prison cell as she fed her food to rats. Mary was released after Caroline's guilty plea. She didn't return to Murfreesboro until missing jewels were discovered in the First National Bank of Murfreesboro vault belonging to Virginia Wardlaw two decades later, which once more brought national attention to their connection here.

This might sound like the end of the story, but the investigations didn't stop there. Looking back over their lives, a trail of bodies stretched out behind the Wardlaw sisters. Statements from neighbors and medical personnel familiar with the death of Caroline's husband, a wealthy businessman and war veteran many years her elder, also suggested a pattern of physical abuse and possible death by poisoning. After a fight with his aunts, John Snead had died in an "accidental" fire whereafter they collected \$12,000 in life insurance. Similar life insurance policies were collected on Caroline's late husband and a nephew that died mysteriously. Perhaps in light of Ocey's two children's death in infancy, the most unsettling piece of evidence uncovered was the infant bones found in Caroline's New York apartment.

*\$32,000 in 1909 would be \$910,000 in 2020

The Chattanooga News. "Mystery Murder Case Revived by Jewel Discovery." 1930-01-31

The Daily News-Journal. "Mrs. Martin Proved Maniac With Supernatural Power." 1930-01-31

The Home Journal. "Wardlaw Jewelry Is Located Here." 1930-01-31

Sloan, Eugene. "Soule College." *Rutherford County Historical Society Publication No. 11*. 1978.

Montgomery Museum of Art and History. "The Black Sisters."

<https://montgomerymuseum.org/the-black-sisters>

Tucker, Greg. "Sinister Soule Sisters Leave Lock Box." <http://rutherfordtnhistory.org/sinister-soule-sisters-leave-lock-box/>

Ibid. "Diamonds Revived Murder Mystery." <http://rutherfordtnhistory.org/diamonds-revived-murder-mystery/>

Ibid. "Rutherford County Hosted 'Three Wicked Witches.'" <http://rutherfordtnhistory.org/rutherford-county-hosted-three-wicked-witches/>

Ibid. "Three sisters in black: An unsolved mystery." <http://rutherfordtnhistory.org/three-sisters-in-black-an-unsolved-mystery/>

Rutherford County Jail

302 W Main St.

35.84667640031977, -86.39399796684394

Murder, Executions, Crime, Public Spectacles

Shortly after the original courthouse was constructed in 1811, the Murfreesboro settlers built a two-story jail nearby. After a few decades, the wooden structure was too small for the booming county and deteriorating, so it was rebuilt in 1852. It was used to hold Confederate prisoners of war by the Union army, who attempted to set fire to the structure before leaving, but the Confederates retook the square before any succumbed to the fire. However, the jail did burn down in 1887 and was rebuilt a block away. The jail typically housed offenders convicted of lesser crimes or those who couldn't pay their taxes or debts. Fines were also imposed for crimes like drinking to excess (especially on Sunday), adultery, careless driving, and other small transgressions.

Early American settlers believed public humiliation and torture were the most effective crime deterrents. Many methods of punishment left permanent scars, marking the offender for life. While sentences were handed out at the courthouse, they were carried out at the jail. Many methods of disciplinary action were torturous. Prisoners would be strung up by their thumbs and forced to hang for hours on end. Tennessee didn't outlaw the practice until 1904. Those sentenced to die were often hanged at the jail. Most of the executions were reserved for murderers and occasionally thieves. When the convicted weren't hanged, they were branded with a hot iron with an "M" for murderer or "T" for thief. Punishment was typically a public affair.

One form of punishment was spending days in stocks or a pillory, during which time the convicts were subjected to crowds hurling insults and refuse at them, along with enduring physical abuse from the public. An even harsher form of this punishment was called cropping, wherein a criminal's ear was nailed to a post. People gathered would throw objects until the convict would tear his own ear off to escape. The practice was called cropping owing to the fact that if they didn't tear their own ear, it was cut off by the police officer when they had served their time. In addition to disfigurement, the missing ear would signal to anyone they met that they were a criminal. Cropping wasn't outlawed in Tennessee until 1829.

Another common punishment was flagellation. More forceful whippings, like those often administered to enslaved individuals in pre-Civil War America, are much more dangerous. Lashes with a leather instrument can permanently damage the internal organs and muscles, resulting in severe blood loss, shock, risk of infections from tearing of the flesh, and even death. Most offenders received 1 to 50 lashes at the whipping post, sometimes in conjunction with branding. This form of punishment was more commonly visited on enslaved persons, often enough that records of sale often included commentary on whether or not they bore scars.

In 1805, one enslaved man was convicted of larceny. He received 50 lashes, was branded on both cheeks, and had both of his ears nailed to the pillory.

National Banner and Nashville Whig. 1827-11-10
The Nashville Daily Union. "Court Recorder." 1863-05-20

Campbell-Firkus, Darby. "Destination Death: Dark Tourism and the Tennessee State Prison."

Tennessee Genealogy Trails History Group. "Slave Laws of Tennessee."
<http://genealogytrails.com/tenn/slavelaws.html>

Van Orsdale, Edwin D., "Historical Evolution of the Law of Larceny" (1895). Historical Theses and Dissertations Collection. Paper 109.

A slave being whipped in "The Lash," 1863

CREDIT: Stephens, H. L. (Henry Louis), artist. "The Lash." C1863. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Stones River National Battlefield

Stones River National Battlefield

35.87465925155906, -86.4272309948786

Civil war, Mass Death

The Battle of Stones River is often overlooked when considering significant battles of the Civil War, but it is noteworthy as one of the conflict's bloodiest battles. You can't escape the Civil War when it comes to the history of Murfreesboro. Most historic structures boast bullet holes, bloodstains, ghosts, and a tour of duty as a hospital.

Dawn of December 31, 1862, the Confederate Army advanced over frost-covered fields and forests, firing the first shots of the Battle of Stones River as Union soldiers were making fires and coffee to fight the winter chill. Taken by surprise, many died as they ran for their lives in the confusion.

The advance continued over the course of the morning, shattering the Union's right flank. The rocky forested area they fought became known as the "Slaughter Pen" for its bloody resemblance. Sam Watkins of the First Tennessee Infantry remarked on the bloodshed saying, "I cannot remember now of ever seeing more dead men and horses and captured cannon all jumbled together, than that scene of blood and carnage. . . the ground was literally covered with blue coats dead."

The Union Army regrouped and held a tree line at Nashville Pike and Stones River, where the Confederate artillery could not reach. They used the terrain to their advantage, cannon fire and bullets tearing through four waves of Confederate assaults. The field earned the nickname Hell's Half Acre. The carnage was described by J. Morgan Smith of the Thirty-second Alabama Infantry, saying, "We charged in fifty yards of them and had not the timely order of retreat been given — none of us would now be left to tell the tale.... Our regiment carries two hundred and eighty into action and came out with fifty-eight."

The battle paused on New Year's Day in order for both sides to tend to the wounded. Civilians searched the battlefield for their loved ones among the wounded and dead.

The fighting renewed on January 02, 1863, and the Union army retreated across the Stones River. As the Confederates attacked, they came within range of fifty-seven newly-assembled Union cannons massed on the west side of the Stones River. General Crittenden watched as his guns went to work, later remarking, "Van Cleve's Division of my command was retiring down the opposite slope, before overwhelming numbers of the enemy, when the guns ... opened upon the swarming enemy. The very forest seemed to fall ... and not a Confederate reached the river."

By the time the fighting was over, more than 3,000 men lay dead on the field. Nearly 16,000 more were wounded. Some of these men spent as much as seven agonizing days on the battlefield before help could reach them. The two armies sustained nearly 24,000 casualties, which was almost one-third of the 81,000 men engaged. This was the highest percentage* of

casualties of any major battle in the Civil War, higher in absolute numbers than the infamous bloodbaths at Shiloh and Antietam earlier that year.

Stones River National Cemetery
35.84559730502676, -86.39191051595314

3501 Old Nashville Hwy, Murfreesboro, TN 37129

Cemetery

Within Stones River National Battlefield park boundaries is Stones River National Cemetery, 20.09 acres with 6,850 mostly Union soldier interments—2,562 of which are unidentified. At the time, most Confederate dead were taken to their hometowns or the nearest southern community. Some, however, were buried in a mass grave south of town. They were later reinterred in another mass grave, Confederate Circle in Evergreen Cemetery in Murfreesboro.

*31.4% casualties, 3.8% killed, 19.8% wounded, and 7.9% missing or captured

This is only a brief summary of the battle. For more information, visit the National Park Service's website.

American Battlefield Trust. "Stones River. Murfreesboro."
<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war/battles/stones-river>

National Park Service. "The Battle of Stones River."
<https://www.nps.gov/stri/learn/historyculture/battle0.htm>
<https://www.nps.gov/stri/learn/photosmultimedia/video.htm>

History.com. "Battle of Stones River." <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/battle-of-stones-river>

Trail of Tears
35.880742661393334, -86.43426927075843
Mass Death

Prior to colonization, the land upon which Murfreesboro rests was inhabited by the Chickamauga Cherokee and ceded to white settlers as part of the 1785 Treaty of Hopewell. Notable indigenous figure Black Fox (also referred to as Enola, Inali, Enoli, or Inyali) was the Principal Chief of the original Cherokee Nation in the early 1800s. He resided a short distance away and eventually led a band of Cherokee to relocate, though some descendants still reside in the area today. The Cherokee and Creek continued living in the area, as evidenced by newspaper reports of settler and Cherokee conflicts. After decades of conflict and several broken treaties, with the support of

President Andrew Jackson, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 passed and began one of the darkest periods in American history.

“Families at dinner were startled by the sudden gleam of bayonets in the doorway and rose up to be driven with blows and oaths the weary miles of trail that led to the stockade...they saw their homes in flames, fired by the lawless rabble that followed on the heels of soldiers to loot and pillage. [...] A Georgia volunteer, afterward a colonel with the Confederate service said: ‘I fought in the Civil War and have seen men shot to pieces and slaughtered by thousands, but the Cherokee removal was the cruelest work I ever knew.’”

The Northern Route, a portion of the forced death march known as the Trail of Tears, passes through Murfreesboro. During the last week of October and the first week of November 1838, a group split into two detachments at Woodbury and one of those groups passed through Murfreesboro. The main route through Murfreesboro started at East Main Street from the direction of Woodbury. The route passed through what is now Stones River National Battlefield during their forced emigration to Indian Territory and is part of the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail.

The detachment of 4,000 Cherokee originally planned to go through Murfreesboro to the south, but a toll road made that path more costly, so instead, they traveled through Jefferson (present-day Smyrna). The residents of Murfreesboro would have stood witness to the column marched through the streets.

This portion of the Trail of Tears was particularly brutal. The groups rounded into camps were often larger than the populations of major cities at the time. Contagious diseases spread like wildfire through the Cherokee. Because this was a later march, many of the available resources were depleted by earlier groups. Starving, exposed to the elements with only what they could carry on their backs, and often met with violence—an estimated 4,000 of the original 15,000 Cherokee that set out died on the journey. The ground was regularly frozen solid, so they were often unable to bury their dead. Many of the deaths were the elderly, children, and infants, which tragically weren’t strong enough to survive the brutal trek.

Aboriginal Map of Tennessee, 1866. The map shows “Black Fox’s Camp” in the relative position of what is now Rutherford County.

Campbell-Firkus, Darby. “Liberty Hill: Smyrna, Tennessee. Historic Structure Report.” 2018. <https://www.mtsuhistpres.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Liberty-Hill-HDP-2018.pdf>

De Gennaro, Nancy. “Bill to save Smyrna’s historic Johns-King home fails in Tennessee General Assembly,” Daily News Journal, April 23, 2018. <https://www.dnj.com/story/news/2018/04/23/bill-ketron-mike-sparks-liberty-hill-johns-king-home-choke-trail-tears-civil-war/528260002/> (accessed April 24, 2018).

Historic Photograph, Colorized “Tollgate, Nashville Pike, near Forts, Murfreesboro, Tenn.” Trail of Tears Tennessee, National Park Service.

Mooney, James. *Historical Sketch of the Cherokee*. Original text circa 1898.

“Nashville, August 18, 1802,” *Tennessee Gazette*, Nashville, Tennessee, August 18, 1802.
Report stating that over the past two weeks inhabitants along the Stones River had horses stolen three times and was then believed to be done by Cherokee or Creek individuals.

Native History Association. “Native American Historical Sites in Tennessee.”
http://www.nativehistoryassociation.org/midtn_sites.php

Standley, Max D. “The Trail of Tears.” Image.

Trail of Tears Route according to 1832 Matthew Rhea map. Vanderbilt University.

Public Executions, Lynchings, & the Resurrectionists

Old Salem bridge over Lytle Creek

35.840889468846214, -86.3964582265317

Murder, Executions, Crime, Public Spectacles

591 Old Salem Rd

Public Hangings and Resurrection Attempts

In the late 1870s, a string of burglaries and arson plagued Murfreesboro. On May 16, 1879, John Hall and Burrell Smith, gang members and former slaves, attempted to rob the farm and general store of John S. Pugh near Murfreesboro. Pugh was awakened by a barking dog. When he confronted the thieves in his stable, he was shot and killed.

After a \$1,000 reward was offered following the murder of Major John S. Pugh when one of these robberies was interrupted, and the store owner and burglars exchanged fire. A prisoner named his former cellmates, two African American men John Hall and Burrell Smith, as the culprits. They had previously been imprisoned for larceny and burglary. They “confessed” to several robberies, arson, and the murder. However, during their trial, the men protested that they had wrongfully accused and that the witnesses gathered by Sheriff Arnold were lying.

Before 1910, executions were public spectacle drawing crowds in the tens of thousands out of “morbid and illimitable curiosity,” often with a carnivalesque atmosphere with drunken revelry in the streets, food being served, vendors peddling wares, and children being excused from school to join in the festivities. On February 20, 1880, John Hall and Burrell Smith were executed by hanging in Murfreesboro in such an atmosphere. The execution drew 12,000 mostly white attendees—three times the population of the city. Seats sold for \$0.25. 2,000 African Americans came to pay their respects. Their community was noted as reserved and somber leading up to the executions.

It appears the indignities suffered by those sentenced to die in Tennessee were not limited to death. Having received multiple solicitations for their bodies while alive, they agreed to let their bodies be used for medical experimentation in exchange for “necessaries and other attentions during their confinement.” One doctor offered Hall \$15 for his cadaver, but his wife refused the money. The hanging lasted thirteen minutes. Smith reportedly “suffered a horrible death” with his body convulsing for at least five minutes. Once they were pronounced dead and cut down, their bodies were taken to separate doctors in Nashville and Murfreesboro. Drs. Burn and Murfree of Murfreesboro conducted a resuscitation experiment in the “presence of a number of physicians, medical students and reporters.” They stripped the bodies, wrapped them in hot wet blankets, readjusted their necks, administered artificial respiration, and applied electricity to different portions of the brain and spinal cord along with other stimulants. “Soon slight, but increasing movements could be seen, the pulse beating feebly until the temperature was raised to 103 degrees. The eyes opened and appeared as if directed to different objects in the room. With

the regular breathing, muscular contraction, the peculiar expression of the face and eyes, and the sound of each inspiration and expiration of breath, the bodies presented a life like appearance. Dr. Steger then stated the object desired had been accomplished.” They then retained the cadavers for dissection. Sometime later, Burrell Smith’s skull turned up at the jail and was reportedly used as a tray for the jailor’s keys.

A similar event that was carried out by the State Penitentiary in March of 1879 was the hanging of former slave and confessed murderer Knox Martin near the courthouse in Nashville. Martin constructed the gallows himself. An estimated crowd of 10,000-12,000 gathered to witness the execution. Signs hung in store windows, “Closed on account of the death of Knox Martin.” Notes to teachers asking them to dismiss students for the day included: “Please excuse Joseph—he wants to see the man hung—by request of his mother;” “If you will let the children go to see Knox Martin hung to-day, I will not ask you any more;” and “Please let Thomas go to the hanging. I hope it will do him good.”

Like Hall and Smith, Martin had sold his body before his death. He was pronounced dead and then left to hang for a further fifteen minutes by order of Sheriff Price. Once he was cut down, he was immediately worked over by doctors and stripped naked in front of the crowd before being rushed to a cowshed close by where they worked to revive him while the onlookers crowded the small shack as “nothing could contain the impetuosity of the crowd.” Some of the same doctors from a similar incident in Murfreesboro used comparable methods to try to revive Martin. The doctors commented, “The experiment proved interesting, if not an entirely successful one.” He was finally “dumped” nearly naked at the Medical College for dissection. In a strange twist, a few days later, a man passed through Madison County, Alabama, claiming to be Knox Martin. He said he had been hung, brought back to life by the doctors, and that he was on his way home to Jackson County where he used to live.

Lynching in Murfreesboro

After 1910, the Tennessee State Prison was the site of executions for most of the state’s prisoners sentenced to death. Still, individual county sheriffs conducted hangings, and mobs often lynched individuals without any help from the state. In order to understand the prison system and capital punishment in the early South, we must recognize the racial violence that occurred within and around it.

The available records showed that a large portion of the executions of individuals at the prison were white, which isn’t what you would expect to find with the racial climate and majority of the post-1865 population being African American. “Between 1882 and 1968, 3,437 Black men were lynched in the United States, of which 3,029 occurred in the former Confederate South.” Looking through the newspapers of the time clearly indicates that it was far less likely for an African American man to ever see the courtroom, let alone Death Row than to die at the hands of a mob.

In a February 21, 1880 newspaper, the following were listed as prisoners which were “taken out of jail and lynched by a mob:

Joe Copeland, colored, charged with murder; hanged near Salem bridge.
Jesse Woodson, colored, charged with murder; hanged near Salem bridge.
Joe Woods, colored, charged with rape; hanged near Salem bridge.
Boot Alexander, colored, charged with murder; hanged near Hill's Hill turnpike, about three miles away from the city.
Jim Russell, colored, charged with rape; hanged near Salem bridge."

Campbell-Firkus, Darby. "Destination Death: Dark Tourism and the Tennessee State Prison."

"THE DEATH DROP." *Daily American* (1875-1894), February 21, 1880.

"Gallows and a Barbecue." *Memphis Daily Appeal*. February 21, 1880.

Russell, Carrie. *Reckoning with a Violent and Lawless Past: A Study of Race, Violence, and Reconciliation in Tennessee*, Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 2010.

"Knox Martin's Death Warrant." *Daily American*, March 16, 1879.

"THE DEATH PENALTY: Execution of Knox Martin, the Bell's Bend Murderer..." *Daily American* (1875-1894). March 29, 1879.

The last public hanging in the United States. The death of Rainey Bethea drew a crowd of 20,000 spectators. Owensboro, KY, 1936. Bottom left: a vendor sells beverages to the onlookers. Courtesy Timeline.

Body Snatchers

Evergreen Cemetery

35.85335332130348, -86.38040293318208

Cemetery, Crime

After several reports of the recently-dead going missing in 1890, it drew attention when former Evergreen sexton Aaron Childress asked around to buy a large sack and hire a buggy downtown Murfreesboro on Mischief Night.

Following the lead, Deputy Sheriff Arnold and James Mosby set out for Evergreen Cemetery. They passed Childress with another African American man, Charlie Cathey, who had come down to Murfreesboro earlier that day with a Nashville doctor. The men searched a cornfield adjacent to the cemetery and found the body of a young African American girl, Mollie Dement, in a burlap sack. They began searching for the criminals and soon heard the rumbling of a buggy approaching. They hid to let it pass and stopped them when they came back through, catching Childress and Cathey dead to rights.

The body of Mollie Dement was laid out at Dr. Murfree's practice for identification and reinterred on Halloween Day at the expense of Charlie Cathey. An angry crowd gathered outside the jail where Childress and Cathey were being held. After being fined \$50, Childress was released, while Cathey was held for carrying a pistol.

The African American community in Murfreesboro was enraged over the indignation visited on young Mollie. Upon leaving the jail, Childress said he was afraid they would make good on their threats to lynch him.

The Tennessean (The Daily American Sun). "Black Ghouls: Caught Dead to Rights With a Dead Body in Their Possession." November 2, 1890.

MURFREESBORO'S OWN SERIAL KILLER

Bink's Outfitters 11 South Public Square / 118 West Vine Street
35.84559730502676, -86.39191051595314

Murder, Crime, Public Spectacles

Today the City Café can be found at 113 East Main Street, but the oldest restaurant in Tennessee originally stood here at 11 South Public Square. During Prohibition in the 1920s and 30s, the second floor was a venue for drinking and gambling.

Every town has its bullies, and in 1936, Murfreesboro 24-year-old Albert DuBois fit the bill. DuBois was a bootlegger, gambler, morphine addict, and drunk. He had earned the nicknames Bad' un and Bantam—for those that don't know, bantams are a small breed of chicken with a big attitude. He was often described as a nice guy when he wasn't drinking.

Around 11 p.m. on the night of July 12, 1936, there was a lively craps game above the café. George Snow was winning big. The game took a deadly turn when Snow accused DuBois of using loaded dice, and DuBois responded by pulling a knife. Snow hit him hard enough to knock DuBois to the floor, where he continued beating him. DuBois, unable to speak as Snow choked him, began stabbing and slashing.

Snow sustained several slashes to the abdomen and a punctured lung. He was rushed to the Rutherford hospital, and DuBois fled the scene. He was found around dawn in a nearby lumber yard covered in blood. DuBois was initially charged with assault with a knife and attempted murder. After Snow died five days later, the charge was changed to involuntary manslaughter. DuBois was found guilty and sentenced to eight years in the Tennessee State Penitentiary. He only served 14 months of the 8-year sentence.

DuBois's final crime was committed on February 20, 1946, in the office of the De Luxe Cab Company, 118 West Vine St., Murfreesboro. The victim was Albert Willis, a cab driver. Believing that Willis had called the police on him for fighting, DuBois spent the week brandishing a 10-inch blade and telling anyone that would listen that he was going to "kill the coward that turned him in." On the day of the killing, DuBois spent most of the day with buddies at the barbershop and pool hall on the square drinking.

That evening he made his way to the cab company. DuBois confronted Willis, accusing him of having called the cops on him. Willis told DuBois, "I don't want any trouble with you. I'm going home." As Willis got up to leave, DuBois struck him in the head and then stabbed him in the chest. Once again, DuBois fled, and Willis was taken to the hospital, where he died. Some believed DuBois had killed Willis over his refusal to run liquor from Nashville to Murfreesboro.

DuBois was arrested a short time later. While in jail, he bragged that he had already "killed four men, cut twenty-seven, and had never served much time." DuBois argued self-defense at his trial, alleging Willis had made threatening moves, but eyewitnesses testified otherwise. The defense also argued that DuBois wasn't responsible for his actions because he was under the influence of drugs and alcohol. The jury was not persuaded and gave DuBois the death penalty, and all appeals were denied.

On April 11, 1947, the black hood was drawn over his face, and the switch was thrown, but nothing happened. While the prison electrician worked feverishly to correct the problem, Dubois sat quietly. The brief reprieve lasted 15 minutes, setting the record for the number of minutes alive by anyone occupying “Old Smokey.”

For a second time, the switch was thrown, and “the little building trembled as though struck by lightning,” remembered the preacher that attended his execution. “When the body was brought down and laid out, he was still smiling.”

“Funeral Is Held for George Snow: Man Who Was Cut In Fight Is Buried Sunday.” *The Daily News Journal*. July 20, 1936.

“Governor Delays Dubois’ Death Until April 11 Sanity Examinations Ordered; Execution Was To Be Thursday.” *The Rutherford Courier*. March 11, 1947.

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CATEGORIES:

Murder
Civil war
Cemetery
Crime
Public Spectacles
Mass Death
Executions

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