

Karen Cheng

Professor James Yeh

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The Chair

The men are holding up well as the hour of death draws near.

Or so the Brenham Daily Banner-Press wrote on February 7, 1924.¹ Later that evening, between the hours of 12:00 and 2:00 a.m., five Black men would be executed by electrocution for the first time in the state of Texas, each facing their murder in rapid succession at the Huntsville Penitentiary's Walls Unit. They called the chair Old Sparky. They called the convicts just that—convicts, criminals, slayers, evil-doers—and always, an emphasis on their Blackness.² One reporter described the events as a *harvest of death*.³ Another called it a carnival. Others, an orgy. A ritual. No one ever called it what it was—a state-sanctioned mass lynching that would set the stage for decades of violently racialized punishment to come.

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*W.M. Miller, appointed warden... will shock the men into eternity.*⁴

A timeline of events:

¹ “Five negroes to be electrocuted at State Prison,” *Brenham Daily Banner-Press*, February 7, 1924, 1.

<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1180190/>

² This emphasis presents itself in turns of phrase that I fear transcribing: *the negroe's body shook convulsively... giant black from Newton county... negro slayer...* I worry that, through the mere act of retyping these journalistic accounts, I am reproducing the violence they could not escape.

³ Marquart, James W. *The Rope, The Chair, and The Needle* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 19.

⁴ “Five Negroes Go To Their Deaths in Electric Chair,” *Brenham Daily Banner-Press*, February 8, 1924, 1.
<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1179699/>

12:00 a.m. New state legislation is enacted, formalizing state-sanctioned electrocutions as the primary method of capital punishment.

12:02 a.m. Charles Reynolds is strapped by prison guards into The Chair. His arms, his legs, his hips, his chest. He is ever alone; it would be decades before families of those sentenced to death are granted the right to view the end of their loved one's life.

Somewhere in between Asked if he had any last words, Reynolds speaks: *I have broken the law. I am ready to die. I have religion and I am not afraid to meet my maker.*⁵

Somewhere in between Three surges of electricity, at 2000 volts each, pulse into the body.

Somewhere in between A physician leans over, placing a stethoscope over a still chest.

12:16 a.m. Charles Reynolds of Red River County is pronounced dead at the age of 27.⁶

Thus inaugurated the so-called harvest of death. And they didn't stop there: next came Ewell Morris, 22, followed by George Washington, 38, Mack Matthews, 57, and finally, after an hour-long reprieve, Melvin Johnson, at the age of just 19. By 2:05 a.m., the so-called harvest had come to a close. For the years to come, though, a longer, quieter one would simmer across the town of Huntsville. Through 1972, a total of 361 people would be executed—63% of them Black—and the media would continue to sensationalize their deaths at the expense of their personhood.⁷

⁵ "Death Holds Carnival Within Prison Walls." *Gainesville Daily Register*, February 8, 1924, 1. <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph1326965/hits/?q=>

⁶ Marquart, 19.

⁷ *Ibid*, 21.

*And then there is a loud crunch, a noise from outside death row—and all the chaplains raise their voices. But the noise swells into a whine, the whine to a snarl that overcomes their voices. It mounts high, subsides, mounts, subsides, then fades away.*⁸

Huntsville, Texas is a community of 46,000 people located an hour north of Houston. The town, renowned for housing the state's first prison and the nation's busiest death chamber, contains the history of countless executed lives, including these first five. A 54-acre facility (think: over 40 football fields large,) the penitentiary's red brick walls afforded it the nickname of Walls Unit.⁹ To get there, you exit the I-45 highway, take a left off of a busy Main Street (just past the doughnut shop), and drive a mere three blocks to arrival.

Its proximity to the city center is striking: in contrast, Virginia's Greensville Correctional Center is located twenty miles north of the eponymous town populated by just 800, and Alabama's Holman Correctional Facility is situated far, far away from any "Main Street" equivalent. Out of the public eye, the majority of death chambers don't embed their presence in a town's history or legacy; in fact, they seem to refuse it. Whether by choice or by circumstance, Huntsville has come to embrace its reputation as the *prison city* of Texas.¹⁰

As you drive through Huntsville, reminders of The Chair are inevitable. An image of it even headlines a Google Maps search of the town (The Chair, which sits now in the Texas Prison

⁸ Marquart, 30-31. An eyewitness statement. This is Joe Byrd testing the equipment.

⁹ Rimer, Sara. "WORKING DEATH ROW: A Special Report. In the Busiest Death Chamber, Duty Carries Its Own Burdens." *The New York Times*, December 17, 2000. <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/17/us/working-death-row-special-report-busiest-death-chamber-duty-carries-its-own.html>.

¹⁰ Massingill, Ruth, and Ardyth Broadrick Sohn. 2007. *Prison City: Life with the Death Penalty in Huntsville, Texas*. New York: Peter Lang.

Museum—a mere seven-minute drive from its initial home—is on display to the public and can be viewed for just \$7, or \$4 for children).¹¹ Just a mile south of the penitentiary is the state-owned cemetery, where the bodies of the executed lay. Here, in Huntsville, death is a fact of life.

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*My name is Ewell Morris. I will be twenty-one years old next month.*¹²

Written on August 11, 1922, Ewell Morris' signed confession was published by the Victoria Advocate on his day of execution. The full confession is the only public documentation I could locate that features one of the five's own thoughts—albeit under the constraints of being a police-mandated confession. There is only so much of this story that the archive allows us to tell; a limited number of opinions act as a testament to the truth. Special attention to this confession can be a revisionist act against the prevailing history, for through it, we get a glimpse of the side of the story that tends to lay idle, always in the shadows.

When white landowner Oliver Marshall bought the vacant half of the land that Morris's family rented, Marshall *came right on in and [took] half of the field and plow[ed] it up*. Marshall wanted Morris to plow up his part of the land, too; he commanded him to *work it just as he said*. When Morris declined to follow those unfounded orders, Marshall *would ride over on our half and cut weeds down*. After that, he threatened eviction from the property they called home. Morris, barely twenty years old at the time, found himself in an impossible situation: *I thought he was liable to shoot me. Some of the*

¹¹ For the mere cost of one overpriced drink, a version of The Chair can be viewed right here in Williamsburg, too, at the heavy metal bar two blocks from my apartment; it resides in the very back, among a growing pile of crushed PBR cans.

¹² "Ewell Morris Executed." *The Victoria Advocate*, February 8, 1924, 2. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/436673208/>

neighbors around there let me have signs that that was none of Mr. Marshall's business and let me know that I either had to kill him or he would kill me.

Morris ends his confession by recounting to us how, on a sun-sweltering Thursday in August, he proceeded to borrow a shotgun, sell his chickens for shelling, and wait for Mr. Marshall to return home. But he didn't get the chance to write about what happened next: the pleas for insanity, the affidavits, the rehearing requests that the courts heard and denied in succession. He didn't get to write about how his uncle, Thomas R. Bivings, fought for him tirelessly.¹³ Multiple times he filed an affidavit declaring Morris had become insane since the trial, and multiple times the judge denied the claim. Following a request in January 1924, Governor Neff and Acting Governor Davidson also declined to interfere.¹⁴ A month later, Morris became the second person to be executed by electrocution in Texas.

Gaps in information can drive a story, and in so doing, they challenge the dominant narrative. I see my work here as an attempt to reveal the absences within the archive. Between the lines of Morris' confession, there is evidence of the racial motivations behind his story, and the historical context that lay beneath the simplified story of *a crime was committed, a punishment was enacted*.

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*I would like to thank all of the supporting people who helped me over the years...They are like the sky. It is all part of life, like a big full plate of food for the soul. I hope I left everyone a plate of food full of happy memories, happiness and no sadness. I'm done warden.*¹⁵

¹³ "Ewell Morris Executed," *The Victoria Advocate*, 1

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ "Death Row Information." n.d. https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/death_row/dr_info/jonesquintinlast.html The final words of Quintin Jones, who, while on death row, became an activist, writer, and friend to many. Despite a state-wide clemency campaign and the wishes of the victim's family, Jones was executed in May of 2021. Like many others, his life is mourned statewide, by those who knew him and those who didn't.

Drive a mile southeast of the Huntsville Walls Unit and you'll arrive at the Joe Byrd Cemetery. Over 3,500 memorials have been documented throughout the property since its inception in the 1850s. Owned by the Texas Department of Corrections, death penalty victims and others who died in prison lay here, unless requested or claimed by a loved one. The burial grounds were named after Joe Byrd, a state executioner who oversaw electrocutions through the final decade of The Chair's activity.¹⁶ To live and then die and then be buried at the hands of the executor seems to me a final and lasting punishment; a message that even in death, the state refuses to loosen its unyielding grasp on its chosen victims.

Among the seemingly endless rows of tombstones, you might find one of the five's names, in uneven lettering you can tell was engraved by hand:

GEORGE WASHINGTON

EX.2 FEB 8

1924¹⁷

As you walk closer, a golf ball may make contact with the tip of your sneaker—evidence that people use the memorial grounds of the executed as a golf driving range.¹⁸ To someone, this 22-acre cemetery is as significant as an empty lot of grass. But for others, the memories held within this graveyard are vast: just across the way, you might see a group of men carrying rakes, shovels, flowers, and leaf blowers, caring after the memorials. When no one else will, living inmates take on the duty of

¹⁶ Neucere, Elizabeth. n.d. "Captain Joe Byrd Prison Cemetery." East Texas History. Accessed April 29, 2023. <https://easttexashistory.org/items/show/44>.

¹⁷ "George Washington (1885-1924)." Accessed April 29, 2023. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/11906107/george-washington>.

¹⁸ Notes from a conversation with archival artist Mark Menjivar.

groundskeeper, ensuring that the lives of their brethren are remembered and dignified. Through these acts of solidarity, perhaps they may finally outlast the grip of the state.

—

*The motion is denied. Rehearing denied.*¹⁹

Melvin Johnson was 19 when he lost his life, which is to say he lost his life the moment that one's should begin. In my search, I find little evidence of his own voice. Unlike Ewell Morris, it seems he never got the chance to tell his own story, but instead, like most executed persons, the media and the courts would tell it, with little regard for the person at stake. In their words:

November 11, 1921: *Melvin Johnson, Negro... was given an examining trial before Judge McGinnis at Cleveland Friday, and ordered to jail without bond.*²⁰

November 15, 1921: *An appeal has been filed in the Court of Criminal Appeals in the case of Melvin Johnson.*²¹

June 20, 1923: *The death penalty against Melvin Johnson of Liberty County was affirmed by the Court of Criminal Appeals today. The court overruled a motion for a rehearing.*²²

June 30th, 1923: *The death penalty... was affirmed by the Court of Criminal Appeals today when a second motion for a rehearing was overruled.*²³

February 8, 1924: The final attempt to save Johnson, now 19, from execution.

¹⁹ *Johnson v. the State*, 95 Tex. Crim. 269, 252 S.W. 554 (Tex. Crim. App. 1923), <https://casetext.com/case/johnson-v-the-state-59>

²⁰ "The City in Brief." *The Liberty Vindicator*, 3. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/52517151/>
The papers fail to mention that, at this moment, Morris is just seventeen years old.

²¹ "Appeal is Filed." *The Galveston Daily News*, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/30139342/>

²² "Death Penalty is Affirmed Against Melvin Johnson." *Corsicana Daily Sun*, 1. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/51411089/>

²³ *ibid.*

*The People of Liberty County had tried desperately to secure a pardon for the boy. For an hour Warden Miller held up the execution in the hope a reprieve would be granted. Governor Davidson said he knew nothing of the case and could not interfere. At 2:05 the boy was led to his death. In barely three minutes life had been shocked from his trembling body.*²⁴

Reading this, I can't help but notice that even the media referred to him as a *boy*, not a man. Reading this, I am repeatedly astounded by the words from Governor Davidson, who *knew nothing* about Morris' case and saw that as reason enough to carry on with the execution. It seems that he betrayed the people of Liberty, the people he was elected to serve. And underlying all of these news reports is another message: that the wrath of execution reaches beyond those led to The Chair; that populations and generations are punished too, deeply affected by the loss. Morris's hometown, community, and family refused to accept his sentence as just or final, and fought for his young life until the very last hour. From the beginning, we have had people fighting against capital punishment; and we will until the end.

—

*Swing low, sweet chariot / Coming for to carry me home.*²⁵

They said electrocution was a progressive reform; a solution to the racial violence and lynching in the aftermath of the 1919 Red Summer, which culminated in Texas on May 6, 1922 when three

²⁴ "Five Negroes Go To Their Deaths in Electric Chair," *The Brenham Daily Banner-Press*, 4.

²⁵ Valley, Paul. "In the Death Chamber: So Texas Thinks This Is a Humane Substitute for the Electric Chair?" *The Independent*. February 4, 1998.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/in-the-death-chamber-so-texas-thinks-this-is-a-humane-substitute-for-the-electric-chair-1142831.html>.

Dr. George Beto oversaw 14 executions in his lifetime. In an interview, he reports, "The worst was that of a black man who sang "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" as he walked from the cell to the chamber. I couldn't see him at first, I could just hear him coming along the hall. Even today that song makes my flesh creep."

Black men were burned at the stake for allegedly killing a white 17-year-old girl.²⁶ At the time, a thin line separated public hangings and mob lynchings. Old Sparky was to be the thickening solution. The hanging rope would now be used to tow cars.²⁷

A glaring contradiction arises here in that the deaths of three Black men in one day incited the execution of five Black men in two hours, and we call this reform. The trend continues: after the Supreme Court deemed The Chair unconstitutional in the 1970s, its punishment *wantonly... and freakishly imposed* on marginalized bodies, the introduction of lethal injection would go on to kill 575 people, at a rate far surpassing that of the past period.²⁸

It becomes clear that Old Sparky did not reduce violence done to Black bodies, but merely formalized it by taking responsibility away from the individual and transferring accountability to the carceral state, with its intangible limbs that cannot be attacked or repressed so easily. Reform after reform, we see the harm multiply. How long will it take us to realize that unbridled policy change is not a path to *humane treatment*? How many have to die until we realize that the death penalty's very existence is, by nature, a wanton and freakish punishment?

—

*[T]here is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory.*²⁹

One may ask why I have the authority to write this piece, and it is a question I have every time I open these documents. When I began this research project, I was essentially alone, and I wasn't sure

²⁶ "May 1922 Lynchings." *Lynching in Texas*. Accessed April 29, 2023. <https://lynchingintexas.org/tours/show/4>.

²⁷ Marquart 15

²⁸ *Furman v. Georgia*, 408 U.S. 238 (1972). The Court ruled here that execution procedures of the time were deemed inhumane, "wantonly... and freakishly imposed" on marginalized bodies. Rather than abolish the death penalty, states found ways to continue executions within the Court's requirements.

²⁹ Derrida, Jacques, and Eric Prenowitz. "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>.

what was coming my way. I didn't know that I'd be starting from ground zero to uncover this dark history from my home state. Quickly and urgently, I fell into the depths of the archive, my head swimming in a pool of articles, photographs, and other documents for hours and hours at a time. I began to see its dark legacy everywhere. I began to see clearly how this history, and its roots in the harvest of death, continues to haunt us today. The archive, controlled by those in power, fails to remember the livelihood of those on death row and overlooks mistakes made by authority positions. Reduced to a number, reduced to a crime. With this piece, I hope to restore what was lost and undo some of that harm. To peel back the scaffolding that holds the stories of those 928 people sentenced to death during the period of The Chair, beginning with the first five. There are countless other stories I want to tell and need to tell. But it all begins with the harvest.

Much of the information in this story has not survived, swallowed into the margins of what we call history. I know little about Mack Matthews outside of the fact that he was a preacher; I know nothing of George Washington, other than the fact that he shares a name with our first president. What I do know is that no one else is telling the stories of these lives. I base the bulk of my research on newspaper archives, prison ledgers, and court hearings from nearly a century ago. And within those documents, it's evident that those in power—journalists, the police, and the courts—were resounding in their mission to retain the prevailing structure of domination. So, in sum: if no one else is going to write it, I can at the very least try.

As much as this is a story about the man who *has religion*, the 19-year-old with the town of Liberty behind him, or the 23-year-old who just wanted to defend his family farm—as much as it is about these five individuals, this is ultimately a story about the system, which continues its brutal

harvest into modernity. Retaliation is brewing, though, and as we look to those facing the same ultimate fate today, we need to remember the history that these executions are rooted in.

The harvest of death was preceded and followed by rapid and racially charged methods of violence; race-neutral policies add merely an avenue, a right, to conduct more harm to the condemned body under a systemic veil. This little-known history from 1924 cannot remain in the shadows if we are to put an end to capital punishment; it is crucial to understanding the continuation of executions in our state, and even more crucial as we draft a path toward abolition.

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