

Execution of Curtis Richardson in 1854

By Jerry Long
c.2024



Daviess County, Kentucky Celebrating Our Heritage, 1815-2015
(Evansville, IN, M. T. Publishing Company, Inc., 2015, p.8-9):

Daviess County Bicentennial Chronology
200 Historical Events
By Jerry Long

1854, Nov 1 :

Curtis Richardson, a white man, was legally hanged. He was convicted of having killed a Mr. Lanfier / Langfier near Knottsville on 25 December 1853. The 1883 History of Daviess County states that he “was executed on a hill in the southeastern part of Owensboro, since known as ‘Hangman's Hill’”. It took place near the corner of Breckenridge Street and the Texas Railroad, the scaffold was about 50 feet south of the railroad tracks and the hill from which the crowd watched was on the north side of the tracks. The execution was carried out by Sheriff Thomas Landrum in front of a crowd of about 2500. His was the 2nd of five legal hangings in Daviess County; the first was when a Negro was hanged in 1838 for rape; two legal hangings occurred in 1905 and the last was in 1936.



Louisville Daily Journal, Louisville, KY, Monday, 9 January 1854, p.3:

Man Killed. – On Christmas evening, in Knottsville, in this county, Curtis Richardson killed William Lampiere, by stabbing him with a knife. Richardson was examined the next day, and trial committed to the Daviess county jail to await his trial at the next March term of the circuit court. – *Owensboro Gazette*.



**The Tri-Weekly Yeoman, Frankfort, KY, Thursday, 21 September 1854, p.3
& Louisville Daily Journal, Louisville, KY, Tuesday, 19 September 1854, p.2:**

The Trial of Richardson. — The case of Commonwealth against Curtis Richardson for the murder of William Laryfiere was called on Tuesday The most of that day was consumed in empanelling a jury and examining witnesses A great majority of the jurors summoned had formed or expressed an opinion. Only four of the regular pannel of twelve were accepted, and after this, greater proportion of those called were found to be incompetent. The debate commenced on Wednesday and closed about noon the same day. The prosecution was conducted by Alf. Allen, Esq. Commonwealth’s Attorney and William R. Kinney, Esq. of Hartford; the defence by John H. McHenry, of Owensboro, Benj. P. Cissell, of Union, and all acquitted themselves with eminent credit. The jury retired and after an absence of about an hour returned with a verdict of “Guilty” Sentence has not been pronounced nor the day of execution fixed up to the time this paper goes to press. *Owensboro, Gazette*.



The Tri-Weekly Commonwealth, Frankfort, KY, Monday, 30 October 1854, p.3:

On the 1st of November Curtis Richardson will be hung in Owensboro.



**History of Daviess County, Kentucky
(Inter-State Publishing Co., Chicago, IL, 1883, pp.300 & 413:**

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT.

[page 300] Collins's History of Kentucky [1874, p.153] says : " But two cases of hanging have occurred in the history of the [Daviess] county, a negro man for rape, in 1838, and Curtis Richardson, Nov. 1, 1854, for murder." The latter had murdered a man near Knottsville, and was executed on a hill in the southeastern part of Owensboro, since known as "Hangman's Hill." He had been famous for killing men, and seemed to know from the start that he would continue in his career of crime until he should meet with a violent death either at the hands of the law or otherwise. In earlier life he witnessed the execution of some criminals up the river, and remarked on the occasion that he would be

hung himself some day. He undoubtedly inherited gross and violent passions, and his attorneys in his last trial endeavored to mitigate his punishment by proving that he had a decided mania for homicide. He actually seemed to have some ambition to show himself off on the scaffold before a large assembly.

Thomas Landrum was the Sheriff who executed the sentence.

The negro above referred to was a slave belonging to Mr. Shauntee. The scaffold from which he was hung was erected near where St. Stephen's (Catholic) Church now stands. He was executed by E. C. Jett, Sheriff.

[page 413] Diary of Mr. Joseph Thomas:

1854.

Nov. 1, C. Richardson hung by T. Landrum; about 2,500 persons present.



Messenger & Examiner, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 26 December 1883, p.1:

THIRTY-THREE YEARS.

The Interesting Reminiscences of Maj. Kinney of His Practice
at the Criminal Bar for the Third of a Century.

SOME STRANGE CASES.

(Sunday Courier-Journal.)

"How long have you been practicing law!" asked a Courier-Journal reporter of Maj. W. R. Kinney yesterday.

"Nearly thirty-three years."

"You must have been right young when you began, or you are older than you look to be. Which end of the dilemma do you take?"

"I am not as old as I look to be, and I am somewhat sensitive on that point besides. I was licensed by Judge John Calhoun, at Greenville, Ky., in 1851, when I was just fifteen years and six months old."

"You have been engaged in a large number of criminal cases, have you not?"

"I have been on one side or the other of nearly four hundred criminal cases, besides my civil practice."

"Will you give the Courier-Journal some reminiscences of your experience in the trials of persons charged with crime? "

"If you consider them of enough importance. I have no objection," replied the Major, as he began to realize that he was under journalistic indictment. "My first employment was in the prosecution of a young man named Ricardson, at Owensboro, for Killing a Swede named Langfear. I was only sixteen years old, and was employed to assist Col. Alfred Allen, of Hardinsburg, who was Prosecuting Attorney. The accused was convicted and hanged....."



**Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 1 September 1904, p.5, &
"Many Early Daviess County Families Were Involved In 1854 Hanging Trial",
The Kentucky Explorer, March 1993, Jackson, KY, pp.65-66:**

LAST LEGAL HANGING IN DAVIESS COUNTY

At the present time it is of the greatest interest when the last legal hanging took place in Daviess County. Comparatively few people in Owensboro and Daviess County can remember when on November 1, 1854, Curtis Richardson paid the penalty with his life on the gallows for the murder of William Lanifer.

Several of the older attorneys in the city recalled the trial. Richardson killed Lanfier at Knottsville, on the spot where Gus Clements' store is now erected. The killing took place on December 25, 1853, and it was nearly a year until the case was tried out. Judge Kincheloe was the judge of the Daviess Circuit Court at the time of the trial and Alf Allen was commonwealth's attorney. The former resided at Hardinsburg and the latter at Elizabethtown and their district was much more extensive then than now.

The court appointed Attorney Cecil to defend Richardson, together with other counsel. He was given able talent in his fight for life.

The indictment was returned against Richardson at the March term of court, 1854. The witnesses for the commonwealth were Charles Able, Joseph McDonnell, James H. Payne, Walter Bartlett, William Holmes, Sam Able, William Geary, Abraham M. Smith, Thomas M. Clay and Frances Milloy.

The witnesses for the defendant were Ainson Higdon, Charles M. Smith, William Proctor, J. D. Carrico, Thomas Milloy, A. D. Hull, Joseph T. Carrico, William Higdon and Lester T. Brown.

There were several continuances in the trial, but the case at last went to trial on September 12, 1854.

The jury was composed of Jonathan G. Taylor, James H. Holmes, Ridgeley Griffith, Samuel G. Harrison, S. R. Ewing, Francis L. Beard, Andrew Jones, Samuel Harrellson, Meredith McGhee, Isaac Riggs, George Mattingly and Isom Culver.

The trial was completed in one day and when the case was given to the jury it was out only a short time.

The indictment returned against Richardson was in the old common law term. An exact copy of it follows:

COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY:

Daviess County and circuit to-wit: Circuit Court, March term in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and fifty-four.

The jurors of the grand jury, empaneled, charged and sworn to inquire in and for the county and circuit of Daviess aforesaid on their oath in the name and by the authority of the commonwealth of Kentucky aforesaid, present that Curtis Richardson, late of said circuit, yeoman at the county and circuit aforesaid, on the twenty-fifth day of December, in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and fifty-three, not having the fear of God before his eyes, but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the devil in and upon one William Lanfier, alias William Langfier, in the peace of God and the commonwealth then and there being feloniously, willfully and of his malice and aforethought did make an assault, and that the said Curtis Richardson, with a certain knife, the value of one dollar which he, the said Curtis Richardson, in his right hand, then and there had and held the said William Lanfier, alias William Langfier, and upon the right groin of him, the said William Lanfier, alias William Langfier, then and there feloniously, willfully and of his malice aforethought, did strike and thrust, giving the said William, then and there, with the knife aforesaid, in and upon the right groin of him, the said William Lanfier, alias William Langfier, one mortal wound of the breadth of two inches, and of the depth of six inches, of which said mortal wound

the said William, on the said twenty-fifth of December, eighteen hundred and fifth-three, the said William Lanfler, alias William Langfler, at the county aforesaid, of said mortal wound, died, and so the jurors aforesaid, do say that the said Curtis Richardson, the said William Langfier, alias William Langfier, in the manner and form aforesaid, feloniously, willfully and of his malice aforethought, did kill and murder contrary to the form of the statute in such cases made and provided against the peace and dignity of the commonwealth aforesaid.

ALF ALLEN, Attorney for the Commonwealth.

Information given by William Able, Charley Able and others.

Upon the back of the indictment is the following return of the foreman of the jury which tried Richardson:

"We, the jury, find the within named defendant, Curtis Richardson, guilty of murder. Signed. ANDREW JONES, FOREMAN."

The last order in the Richardson case is the sentencing him to hang. It follows:

"This day came the attorney for the commonwealth and the prisoner again being brought into the court in the custody of the jailor, and it being demanded of him whether he had anything further to allege why the sentence of the law should not be passed upon him, and having responded that he had nothing further than he had already alleged, it is therefore considered by the court that the said Curtis Richardson, the prisoner, be hanged by the neck until he be dead, on the first day of November, next, at such a place as may be fixed upon by the sheriff, in this county, whereupon he is remanded to the jail, from whence he came, there to remain until the first day of November, 1854, and that the sheriff of this county on that day cause execution of this judgement and sentence."

The sheriff was Tom Landrum, of Calhoun. Captain F. L. Hall and Josia Veach were deputies who assisted in the hanging.

The hanging took place near the corner of Breckinridge Street and the Texas railroad. The scaffold was about fifty feet south of the railroad track. It is said that Richardson rode from the jail on his coffin. Thousands of people witnessed the hanging from the small hill now on the north side of the railroad track. The hanging was public and took place on the edge of what was once known as Murray's woods.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 19 February 1905, p.3:



John Carico, who was one of the guards for Roy Green during the last ten days of his life, has been, in a manner, connected with both the legal hangings that have taken place in Daviess county. The first hanging was that of Curtis Richardson for the murder of William Lanifer. With the second, everybody in Owensboro is thoroughly familiar.

Richardson was hanged fifty years ago. He was a young man, only about twenty or twenty-one years old, and is said to have killed Lanifer in sudden heat and passion. The killing occurred on Christmas day, 1853, in a saloon owned by William Abell at Knottsville, which was then a mere clump of houses, most of them logs.

Then Fourteen Years Old.

At the time of the killing Richardson was employed as a farm hand by James T. Carico, father of John Carico. John Carico was then fourteen years old. Mr. Carico says that on Christmas morning he went into the room occupied by Richardson and found him engaged in sharpening a knife. He whetted it with unusual care, so much so that Carico wondered why he was taking such pains with it and asked him concerning it. Richardson said he was going to kill a man. Being asked who he intended to kill he replied that he was going to kill James Payne, bar tender at William Abell's saloon. Young Carico begged him not to do so and cried when Richardson refused to promise. When he had sharpened the knife to his liking, he put it in his pocket and started to the village about a mile away.

Richardson had a grudge against James Payne. Both of the men had helped William Abell to build a log structure in which his saloon was kept. Abell had promised Richardson to give him the position as bar keeper, but had given the place to Payne. Shortly after the saloon was opened Richardson went and asked for a drink of whisky. Payne refused to set out the whisky until he was given the money. This angered Richardson and caused him to resolve to kill Payne.

After leaving the Carico home Richardson went to the saloon in Knottsville and took a seat with the intention of waiting until Payne came from behind the bar and then killing him. Payne suspected his design and did not come from behind the bar. After Richardson had been in the saloon for some time a gang of young men began slapping each other's hats off. Richardson was not one of the bunch. Willie Lanifer slapped Richardson's hat off. "Don't do that again, Willie," Richardson told him. Presently Lanifer again slapped his hat off. Richardson almost instantly stabbed Lanifer in the groin and hastily left the saloon.

Richardson's Arrest.

He went to the Carico home and, telling Mrs. Carico that he was going down the river on a flat boat that was passing, got a shirt from his room and started across the field in the direction of the river. After proceeding a short distance he saw two riding along the edge of the woods into which he intended to go. Turning back he saw William Abell riding toward him. He immediately threw up hands and awaited the approach of his pursuer. Abell approached and struck him over the head with a club, felling him to the ground and cutting a gash in his forehead.

Richardson was placed on a horse and taken back to Knottsville. He was taken into Abell's saloon, where Abell drove a spike into the floor and chained Richardson to it. After Richardson had been chained for some time he learned that Lanifer was in a dying condition, but that he was still conscious. He began begging to be allowed to see him in order that he might beg his pardon. Abell said, "No, you killed him and you shall not see him." The crowd in the saloon took the matter in hand and released Richardson. He was taken to where Lanifer was lying and kneeling by the side of the bed, asked Lanifer's forgiveness. Lanifer could not speak, but took Richardson by the hand and nodded his head, indicating that he forgave him.

Richardson was brought to Owensboro and placed in jail and in the following November was hanged. He held up bravely to the end.

Richardson was the son of a half-blood Indian an herb doctor.

A few months before killing Lanifer, Curt Richardson saw the hanging of Robert and Mose Kelly at Hawesville. After the hanging Richardson remarked that he expected to end his life on a scaffold just as those men did. It turned out that he was tried by the same judge and prosecuted by the same prosecuting attorney as were the Kellys. A brother of Richardson was hanged in Missouri.



Owensboro Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday, 28 February 1905, p.3:

GOT THEM MIXED.

Sheriff Esq R. C. Jett Had No Hand in Hanging Richardson.

Esq. Jett who has been spending the winter at Worthington, was in the city Monday, and while here called attention to an error regarding the connection of his father, R. C. Jett, with an execution in this county The statement was made that he had officiated at the execution of Richardson, in 1854, which was not correct, as he was living in Hancock county at the time and continued to live there until 1861, when he died. Mr. Jett was sheriff of the county when a negro was hanged in the western part of the city about 1836 and executed the sentence of the court.



Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 11 October 1942, pp.1B & 8B:



Indians killed by Bill Smothers, before Owensboro was even started may not have been considered murdered, by him, and the white man he killed, may have been a justifiable murder as evidenced by the fact that "Honest Bill" was cleared of the charge, yet there were murders in early Owensboro

The first murderer convicted was hung on a scaffold which was erected in Main street, near Cedar, on a spot where later the first St. Stephen's church was built. History didn't even stop to record the name of the convicted man, other than to say that he was a negro, and was a slave belonging to a Mr. Shauntee, and the offense for which he paid with his life, was rape.

Nearly 20 years later, on Nov. 1, 1854, as history tells it, another man, Curtis Richardson, also paid with his life for murder. Richardson was hung on a hill in the southeastern section of Owensboro, called Hangman's Hill, and probably now a part of what is known as Seven Hills.

Sure He Would Die

Richardson, it is said, had murdered a man near Knottsville. It was not his first murder, for records and testimony indicated he had killed many men, and had often made the remark that he too would die in a violent manner. He started his career in crime early and boasted that he would die at the hands of the law or at the hands of some other person — in fact, shortly before he committed his last crime he witnessed a hanging at a point up the river and made the remark, “I’ll hang too, some day.”

History contains little of the trial however, it does show that evidently Richardson had inherited gross and violent passions and in the trial which ended in his death, his attorneys attempted to prove a form of insanity and that the man had a decided mania for homicide. A large assembly witnessed that execution for he had many acquaintances.

On the night of May 27, 1853 Robert McFarland, prominent farmer, was murdered while in his bed. McFarland lived about 10 miles south of Owensboro in the Panther Creek bottoms. He had sold a large load or possibly several loads of tobacco in Owensboro, and supposedly had much money in his dwelling. It was in the summer, and the night was so hot McFarland had left the door to his room ajar. Four white men entered the bedroom with an axe, and struck the sleeping man between the eyes. His wife was awakened but the murderers escaped and McFarland's death was instant. No clue was ever found of the killers.

Ten years later, Nov. 29, 1862, Willis Fields who was a son-in-law of Robert McFarland also met a violent death, his body being found by the side of his buggy a short distance from home with many stab wounds in it. He had left his home to come to Owensboro. It was in the winter and a light snow had fallen. Neighbors who came upon the scene found tracks leading back to Fields' home. The crime was said to have been committed by “Tony,” one of his negroes, whom he had ordered to spend the day shelling corn. Tony apparently had other plans for the day and was enraged at the order. So, a story of the murder says, Tony, watching his master leave in the buggy, stealthily overtook him, attacked and stabbed him, then hastily returned home and continued about his work in the crib to avoid suspicion. It was said that Tony himself was killed shortly thereafter.

Approximately a decade later Joshua Duke, a merchant, died from pistol wounds received when he engaged in a pistol fight with Lod Duke following an argument over money matters. The two men had conducted a clothing store, and were respected citizens. Judge Triplett acquitted Lod because evidence showed that following the argument, Joshua left the building and returned with a pistol in hand and fired the first shot, even though an attempt had been made to restrain him by J. M. Carlin, a witness to the shooting.

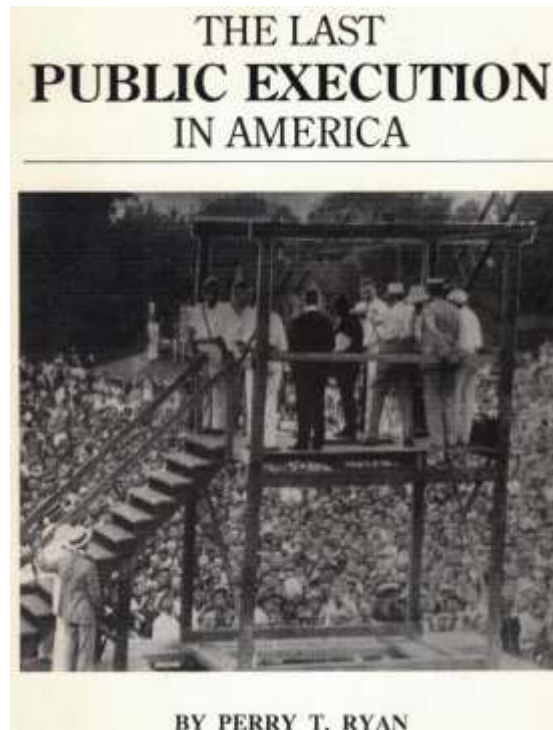
There is no record of murders other than court proceedings, and not all suspects were tried. There is mention of the murder of a store-boat keeper, by the name of Roberts, on Green river, the latter part of 1846. Three men, a Mr. Harris, a Mr. Pugh and a Mr. Galloway, were tried before a magistrate, but nothing further is recorded.

There were murders every year, but courts were lenient when the murderer was shown to have been abused by the dead. Self-defense, in this new country, was duly considered in all courts for men had to be able to take care of themselves.

Mention of crime in an old diary that covered a period of 30 years follows: 1 On October 19, 1854. T. Burgess shot D. Murphy who died four days later. On October 5, a man by the name of Tom Sale shot his wife. On May 27, 1857, a man by the name of G. W. Farrow died from kicks

given by Hugh B. Lea. On October 5, 1863, Gregory Arns died of a stabbing received three days previously. The following year on August 18, Q. D. Mitchell was killed by a negro picket. A lynching was reported on May 21, 1866, when "Tom," a negro boy was hung on the court house square. Tom had been tried on a charge of rape before City Judge Washburn. On his way to the jail an unknown party threw a rope around his neck, and the other end over a tree limb. The father of the injured girl is supposed to have drawn the prisoner up. Three years later another negro was hung at the same spot for a similar offense. A saloon brawl at an establishment a mile from Owensboro on July 17, 1870, resulted in the death of Mike Donahue. The murderer was said to have been Link Ballard. In an election brawl in 1874, George W. Swoope was said to have killed Perry Riley in the court house yard near the polls. Swoope was finally acquitted on the ground of self -defense, a plea that often brought acquittal in the early days. A year later a Nick Neal was said to have killed Henry Gearhardt, two miles from Grissom's Landing, by stabbing him. Three other men, whose names were not given, were said to have been wounded in the affray which was referred to as a "drunken spree."

There were many other violent deaths, no doubt, but the ones recorded above were the ones of which there was mention in available records.



(Lexington, KY, Alexandria Printing, 1992) pp.160-162:

CHAPTER 22

PREVIOUS DEATH SENTENCES IN DAVIESS COUNTY

The first public hanging was conducted on November 1, 1854. Curtis Richardson, who was part Indian, was convicted of murdering William Lanifer on Christmas Day of 1853. A fight began

when Lanifer slapped Richardson's hat from his head; Richardson then stabbed Lanifer. This hanging occurred about fifty feet south of what is now the intersection of Ninth and Breckinridge Streets in Owensboro. Richardson reportedly had seen a hanging in nearby Hawesville, Kentucky, and had stated, "I'll die like that someday." When Richardson was transported to the scaffold, he was taken from the county jail in the back of a wagon, where he sat on his own coffin.

On February 17, 1905, Roy Green, a seventeen -year-old black man, was privately hanged for using a plank to beat to death James Coomes....

The third hanging , also conducted privately , was that of Robert Mathley, a white man who was convicted of shooting to death a pregnant seventeen-year-old girl, Emma Watkins. With whom he had been in love.... This hanging took place on July 7, 1905....

The hanging of Rainey Bethea, conducted on August 14, 1936, for the June 7, 1936, rape of Mrs. Lischia Edwards was thus the fourth and last death sentence to be ordered by the Daviess Circuit Court. Although other private hangings were conducted [in the U.S.] afterward, it was the last public execution in America.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 14 August 2014, pp.1B & 3B:

Daviess County has seen five executions in 200 years

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

Seventy-eight years ago today, America saw its last public execution — in downtown Owensboro, about where the Owensboro Convention Center sits today.

If you've lived here any time at all, you probably know that story.

But did you know that Daviess County juries have sentenced only five men to death in the past two centuries?

And none since 1936?

The first man hanged here, in 1838, was a slave belonging to the Shauntee family.

The man, convicted of rape, reportedly rode through downtown Owensboro on the back of an ox cart.

At Second and Locust streets, Sheriff Richard Jett helped the man stand on some boxes on the cart, took the noose from a rope that had been thrown over a tree limb and slipped it around the man's neck.

Then, someone cracked a whip, and the oxen slowly lumbered away, leaving the man to choke to death at the end of the rope.

Curtis Richardson, age 20 or 21, was the second man to die on a gallows here.

He climbed the scaffold on Nov. 1, 1854, sentenced to die for the Christmas 1853 stabbing death of William Lanifer at William Abell's saloon in Knottsville.

That November morning, Richardson climbed into the back of a wagon at the county jail on the Courthouse Square.

Sitting on his coffin, he rode through the city to a gallows that had been built about 50 feet south of the current railroad tracks on Breckenridge Street in what was then known as "Murray's Woods."

Sheriff Tom Landrum slipped the noose around Richardson's neck, and several thousand people watched him die.

The son of a herb doctor was the second member of his family to die on the gallows.
A brother was hanged in Missouri.

On Feb. 17, 1905, the mercury hung near zero as 17-year-old Roy Green walked from the jail, where the Hampton Inn & Suites is today, to an enclosed gallows just outside at 7 a.m.

Inside the high privacy fence stood 150 legal witnesses.

Green, then a 16-year-old bawdy house piano player, had stabbed a 35-year-old Breckinridge County farmer to death and robbed him on July 31, 1904, at the old fairgrounds at 18th and Triplett streets.

"Mind what your mothers tell you and leave whiskey out," he told the crowd. "Don't do as I have done."

A preacher read the 23rd Psalm and said a prayer.

When he said, "Amen," the trap beneath Green's feet was sprung.

Fourteen minutes and 30 seconds later, he was pronounced dead of strangulation.

On July 7, 1905, Robert Mathley, 39, was led from the jail at 4 a.m. on a rainy Friday to the same gallows where Green had died.

He was convicted of the June 27, 1904, shooting deaths of 17-year-old Emma Watkins, with whom he was infatuated, and Jim Gregson, her cousin.

Five hundred people applied for tickets to the hanging.

Most didn't get them.

At 4:40 a.m., after a prayer and a short speech, Mathley was dropped to his death.

His neck snapped, but his feet touched the ground.

Deputy Sheriff Robert Abell hastily dug a hole beneath the body, so the feet would swing free.

Sixteen minutes later, Mathley was pronounced dead.

On Aug. 14, 1936, Daviess County's most famous hanging became America's last public execution.

Rainey Bethea, a 22-year-old Virginia native, was sentenced to hang for the June 7, 1936, rape of Elischa Edwards, a wealthy 70-year-old widow, who was also strangled.

At the time, rape was punishable by public hanging at the county seat.

But murder meant death in the electric chair at Eddyville.

Bethea was sentenced only for rape, so the execution would be public.

The case attracted international attention because the sheriff at the time was 43-year-old Florence Shoemaker Thompson.

And America became obsessed over whether she would be the hangman.

But a former Louisville policeman performed the duty at 5:47 a.m. that day.

Bethea was pronounced dead of a broken neck.

Newspaper estimates of the crowd went as high as 20,000.

But most accounts of the hanging were grossly exaggerated, local officials said at the time.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 11 February 2016, pp.1B & 3B:

Pair of men succumb to gallows during 19th century

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

The hanging of Rainey Bethea for rape in downtown Owensboro on Aug. 14, 1936, was America's last public execution.

That event is well documented in local history.

But four men died on the gallows here before that day — two in the 19th century and two in the 20th.

Here's the story of the first two.

Sometime in 1838, a slave belonging to a man named Shauntee rode through downtown streets on an ox cart on his way to becoming the first person to die on a Daviess County gallows.

Local history records nothing of his crime other than it was for rape.

And it doesn't mention his name.

Finally, the ox cart stopped at the corner of West Second and Locust streets.

Sheriff Richard Jett took the noose and slipped it over the man's head.

Then, he tightened it around his neck.

The condemned man stood on top of a stack of boxes and looked at the angry crowd gathered around the makeshift gallows.

Someone cracked a whip and the oxen slowly lumbered away.

He felt the boxes slip from beneath his bare feet.

He swung backward, then forward.

His legs kicked, searching for a toehold on life.

But there was only air.

Slowly, he strangled to death at the end of the rope.

Sixteen years passed before the county sentenced another man to the gallows.

The road to that hanging on Nov. 1, 1854, began at William Abell's saloon in Knottsville on Christmas Day, 1853.

Curtis Richardson, either 20 or 21, had spent the morning sharpening his knife to kill a bartender at the saloon.

That afternoon, he walked into the bar.

But the bartender Richardson had planned to kill wasn't working that day.

Since he was already there, Richardson decided to have a drink before leaving.

Over in one corner of the tavern, William Lanifer and a group of his young friends were scuffling and slapping each other's hats off.

The game became more frantic and the group moved across the floor, scuffling and slapping hats.

Richardson ignored them as he sipped his drink.

Suddenly, Lanifer reached out and slapped Richardson's hat to the floor.

Richardson turned slowly and glared at Lanifer.

"You'd better not do that again," he muttered.

The group moved away and Richardson turned back to his drink.

There may have been dares and a few more drinks.

But, for whatever reason, Lanifer strolled back over and slapped Richardson's hat to the floor again.

Richardson furiously whipped out his razor-sharp knife and plunged it into Lanifer's groin.

As Lanifer sank to the floor and the stunned crowd gathered around, Richardson realized what he had done and ran from the building.

He hurried home, changed clothes, packed a few personal belongings and planned to leave the county.

But Abell, the saloon keeper, had grabbed a big stick and was riding to bring Richardson to justice.

He spotted Richardson walking across a field, rode him down and clubbed him unconscious.

Abell lifted the limp body onto his horse and took Richardson back to the saloon.

There, he drove a stake in the floor and chained Richardson to it.

In another room of the tavern, Lanifer was slowly and painfully dying.

Richardson pleaded to see him and beg his forgiveness.

Abell refused.

The April 1854 term of the Daviess County grand jury indicted Richardson on a charge of first-degree murder.

The trial before Circuit Judge Jesse W. Kincheloe lasted one day.

Commonwealth's Attorney Alf Allen asked for the death penalty — and got it.

On Nov. 1, 1854, a chilly fall day, Richardson left the jail, which was then on the southeast corner of the Daviess County Courthouse lawn, and climbed into the back of a wagon.

Sitting on his coffin, he rode to the gallows some 50 feet south of the junction of Breckenridge Street and the current railroad tracks.

The place became known as "Hangman's Hill" for years afterward.

Sheriff Tom Landrum tied the noose around Richardson's neck.

And as hundreds of curious spectators watched, Richardson swung out into eternity.

The son of a half-breed Indian herb doctor, Richardson had attended a hanging in Hawesville a few years months before he stabbed Lanifer.

They say he remarked at the time, "I'll die that way some day."

One of Richardson's brothers also died on a gallows — in Missouri.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 20 April 2023, pp.1C & 2C:

Holmes provided glimpse into frontier Owensboro

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

Daviess County histories provide few glimpses into what life was like in the frontier years. But in 1916, James Holmes of 204 W. Eighth St. gave readers of the Owensboro Inquirer — the evening paper — some insight into the Owensboro he knew as a child.

He was born on Nov. 10, 1825 — making him 91 at the time.....

..... Holmes said he looked out of an attic window in his house at Second and Locust streets in 1838 to see the first legal hanging in Owensboro.

A black man named Shauntee, who was convicted of rape, stood on an ox cart with a noose around his neck.

And then, the oxen were driven away, leaving him to strangle at the end of a rope.

In 1854, Holmes said, he served on the jury of the second man hanged — Curtis Richardson for the murder of William Lanifer in Knottsville.

But Holmes said he didn't attend that hanging.....



Daviess County has had five court ordered executions:

negro	1838	rape
Curtis Richardson	1 November 1854	murder
Roy Green	17 February 1905	murder
Robert Mathley	7 July 1905	murder
Rainey Bethea	14 August 1936	rape & robbery

