



George Stinney Was Executed at 14

More than 70 years later, his family in South Carolina is trying to prove that he was innocent of murder and the victim of a racist justice system in the Jim Crow South BY JESSE WEGMAN

According to the official 1944 sentencing report, George Stinney Jr. was “legally electrocuted.” But to call what happened to him legal is to say only that the 14-year-old black boy’s fate was decided in a courtroom, by a judge and jury, rather than by a throng of angry men with a rope.

In truth, George Stinney was lynched in slow motion in the Jim Crow-era South.

On March 24, 1944, George was arrested and charged with the murder of two

young white girls, Betty June Binnicker, 11, and Mary Emma Thames, 7. They had been found beaten to death in a ditch in rural Clarendon County, South Carolina.

A month later, he was tried and found guilty. He was executed on June 16, 1944—the youngest person put to death in the U.S. in the 20th century. (In 2005, the Supreme Court declared the death penalty unconstitutional for




Betty June Binnicker, one of the two girls George Stinney was convicted of killing in 1944

minors.) At just 95 pounds, he was so small that the guards struggled to strap him to the electric chair before he was electrocuted.

The lawyer representing George had never represented a criminal defendant before and called no witnesses in his defense. The trial lasted just three hours,

followed by a 10-minute deliberation by the jury that sentenced him to die.

 To learn more about the Jim Crow South, watch a video at www.upfrontmagazine.com

SOUTH CAROLINA PENITENTIARY

COLUMBIA, S. C.

ELECTROCUTION

RECORD OF

F. P. C. **5 U OI 12**
3 W O 13

Number **260** Name **George Stinney, Jr.** Color & Sex **CM**
County **C larendon** Alias
Convicted of **Murder**

Sentenced **April 24, 1944** To Death by **Electrocution** Judge **P. H. Stoll**
Time **June 16, 1944**

Admitted **May 28, 1944** Admittance Deferred by **held as safkeeper No 397**
until **May 28, 1944** when the statutory period of **20 days** before execution
of death sentence began to run.

Age **14** Height **5-1** Weight **95** Hair **Negro** Eyes **Dk maroon**
Complexion **Black** Build **Small** M. S. W. **Single**
Occupation **None** Religious Faith **Baptist** R.&W. **Yes 7th**
Residence **Sumter, S. C. (Shannon Town)** Born **Sumter County, S. C.**
Nearest Relative **George Stinney** Relationship **Father**
Address **Sumter, S. C. (Shannon Town)**
Prominent Scars **Small scar top of right hand, base of forefinger.
2 spot scars left shank, lower.**

Remarks **FBI No record-
Legally electrocuted, Friday, June 16, 1944. His deceased body was
delivered to Job's Funeral Home of Sumter, S. C. at request of his father
to be taken to Sumter and there prepared for burial at a cemetery
yet to be determined.**

The official sentencing report describes George Stinney's execution; police photos taken when he was arrested (left).

"I don't think they cared whether he was guilty or innocent," says Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, which represents poor death-penalty defendants. "If they had proof-positive evidence that he was not guilty, I don't think that would've changed anything."

Unconstitutional Trial?

There's strong evidence that George Stinney was in fact innocent, and that his prosecution was riddled with unconstitutional errors and misconduct. Last January, a group of lawyers and civil rights advocates argued before a South Carolina court to either retry or exonerate him, 70 years after his execution. The court hasn't yet ruled on the petition.

"When I looked at the case and what was there and studied it, it was

George Stinney's trial lasted just three hours. The jury took 10 minutes to sentence him to die.

appalling," says Miller Shealy Jr., one of the lawyers helping the Stinney family in their quest to clear George's name.

According to one of George's sisters, Amie Ruffner, she and George were together all afternoon on the day of the murders, and had encountered the two girls only briefly. But the authorities never spoke to Amie or any other member of the Stinney family—they had been run out of town on the day of George's arrest.

"My father came home and started packing up stuff to go," says George's

other sister, Kathrine Robinson, who was 10 at the time. "We didn't know what was going on. All I know is George was not there." She never saw him again.

At trial, the sole piece of incriminating evidence was the word of the local police chief, who testified that George "made a confession and told me where a piece of iron about 15 inches long [was]." No warrant had been issued for his arrest, and no lawyer was at his questioning.

Not that George Stinney's court-appointed lawyer did anything to help during the trial. The lawyer failed, among other things, to challenge the makeup of the jury, which was all white in a county that was nearly three-quarters black. He failed to cross-examine the prosecution's witnesses, or to call Amie or any other witness who could have corroborated George's alibi. And he failed to appeal the death sentence.

'It Needs to Be Left as Is'

The hearing last January was a reminder of South Carolina's difficult Jim Crow past. And it was clear from the proceedings that not everyone would see a new trial as belated justice.

"I believe that he confessed," says Frankie Bailey Dyches, the niece of one of the victims, who was born after the 1944 killings. "He was tried, found guilty by the laws of 1944, which are completely different now—it can't be compared—and I think that it needs to be left as is."

But Shealy argues that South Carolina owes George Stinney a different result this time around, even if exonerating him prompts an onslaught of appeals in other Jim Crow-era cases. He says, "The state really needs to say, 'This was wrong.'"

With additional reporting by Alan Blinder of The New York Times.

Jim Crow by the Numbers

3,446

Number of blacks lynched in the U.S. between 1882 and 1968

1,342

Number of blacks registered to vote in Louisiana in 1904, when the black population of the state was more than 650,000

86%

Percentage of people executed in South Carolina from 1940 to 1950 who were black

"GEORGE STINNEY, YOUNGEST EXECUTED." DAY TO DAY/SOUNDPORTRAITS.ORG

SOURCES: ARCHIVES AT THE TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE; SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION; ESPY FILES