

# **The Adams Electrical Company**

**by Gordon Bond**

*Trenton's  
Industrial  
Heritage  
Included  
Rubber, Wire  
Rope, Ceramics,  
Cigars and  
Electric Chairs*

If you've ever driven up Route 29 into Trenton, you've probably seen the huge neon letters attached to the Warren Street Bridge as its trusses arch off to the left over the Delaware River and on into Pennsylvania. Put up in 1935, they declare with an iconic, if perhaps now-ironic pride:

#### TRENTON MAKES—THE WORLD TAKES

These days, it might be easy to be puzzled by such oversized bragging. But the slogan reflects how much of the city's history is indeed steeped in industrial might. Its furnaces kept American troops supplied with iron during the Revolution and most people will be at least vaguely aware of the Roebing name. At its height, Trenton supplied the world with such things as rubber, wire rope, ceramics and even cigars.

But you might be surprised to learn that among the other things Trenton made for the world to take were electric chairs.

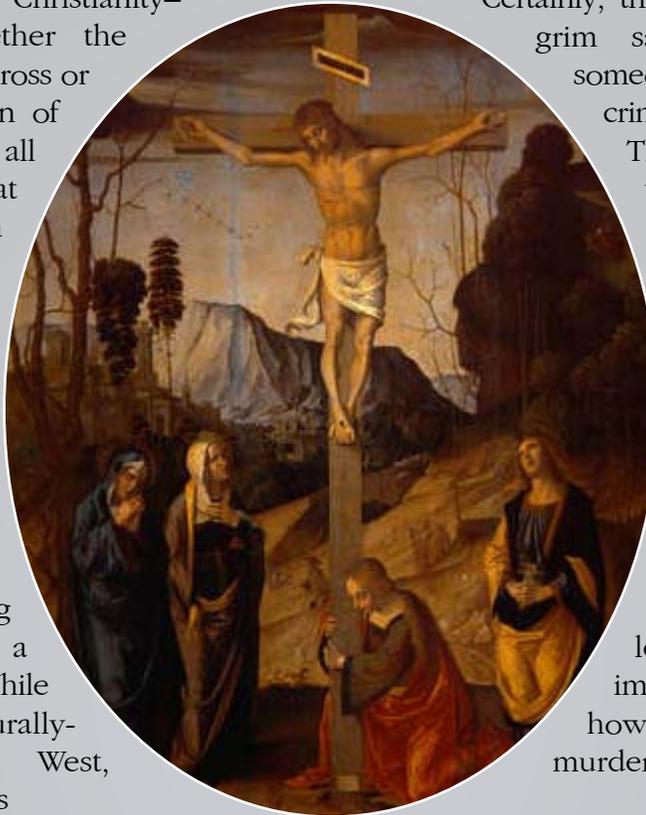
#### The Death Penalty

The death penalty has been part of communal systems of justice for as long as there have been written records of them. As might be expected, they are largely reserved for the most egregiously antisocial of acts: murder. That is, the intentional taking of human life not in justifiable self-defense or in a state-sanctioned war. Over the years, the list of eligible offenses has been expanded to cover a wider array of the sorts of things different societies have deemed as taboo behaviors. In cultures where systems of justice operate within perceived moral codes, often prescribed by religion, the list has come to also encompass sexual transgressions, from rape and incest to adultery and homosexuality. Political systems often incorporate the threat of pain of death to protect themselves against treason, military desertion or extreme insubordination—and, it must be said, to get rid of dissidents.

For much of its history, there has often



been little practical distinction between corporal punishment and capital—if the means of execution happen to make the condemned suffer, so be it. Perhaps the most readily available example of this can be found as the central iconography of Christianity—the Crucifixion. Whether the simple abstraction of a cross or a graphic representation of Jesus Christ’s suffering, all are evocative of what was a fairly common method of capital punishment for the Roman Empire. While not exclusive to the Romans and not always involving a cross, per se, all crucifixion is basically affixing someone to a structure and leaving them to hang and die a slow, painful death. While perhaps most culturally-embedded for the West, however, crucifixion was certainly not the only slow, painful means used at the time of dispatching the condemned. Indeed, there is a macabre, if rather creative, list of methods: burning at the stake, the breaking wheel, stoning, crushing, drawing and quartering, slow slicing, disemboweling, impalement, dismemberment.



*Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, by Marco Palmezzano (Uffizi, Florence), painting ca. 1490*

There were two points to such methods. One was to indeed *punish* someone. A quick and easy death seemed too good for someone guilty of murder or treason—somehow lacking in a sense of “justice.” But the added bonus was that by doing it out in the open, where the public could see not only the execution itself but the resulting corpse, it would be a pretty clear billboard

advertising what would happen to anyone else contemplating doing the same thing.

Growing apace with methods of capital punishments was the moral debate over whether vengeance really equaled justice.

Certainly, there is some cathartic if grim satisfaction in seeing someone guilty of a terrible crime suffer for their deeds.

Thought for what a victim or their family suffers easily weighs against sympathy for the guilty. However, in indulging that base desire, was the society sanctioning it less “civilized”?

Executions were often seen by the masses as much as entertainment as moral lesson. It is also impossible to quantify how many would-be murderers were somehow deterred from going down that path from fear of ending up being put to death. We

still debate the value of such capital punishment as a deterrent.

That such questions were also on the minds of people early on is reflected in the concept of “cruel and unusual punishment.” That exact phrase goes back at least as far as the English Bill of Rights in 1689, and was likely percolating around for some time before. It would be echoed in the American Bill of Rights and the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: “Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.”

Of course, what exactly defined a punishment as “cruel and unusual” would be

left for the American courts to hash out. Anything that caused undue suffering, humiliation or didn't fit the crime was the basic idea—but what about capital punishment? Some argue it is in of itself “cruel and unusual” and should be abolished. But others argued that while the basic idea of the death penalty was sound, it was the *means* by which it was carried out that needed to be adjusted. The emotional distress between hearing the sentence and it being carried out notwithstanding, the final act of death should happen as quickly and painlessly as possible—as “humane” as possible.

So began a quest for more civilized, humane ways to execute the condemned. Beheading has been an old means. A good sharp blade and an accurate swing can, presumably, get the job done fast enough that the person suffers little. Trouble was, however, it was subject to human error or sloppiness. There are many examples of multiple swings being required to the extreme distress of the condemned. The guillotine was invented in France as a means of mechanizing the process and taking out some of the risk of a botched execution. It worked well enough that France was using it right up to when it abolished the death penalty altogether in 1981. Still, there were nagging stories—albeit anecdotal—of severed heads exhibiting movements that indicated even a perfect execution wasn't as immediate as thought.

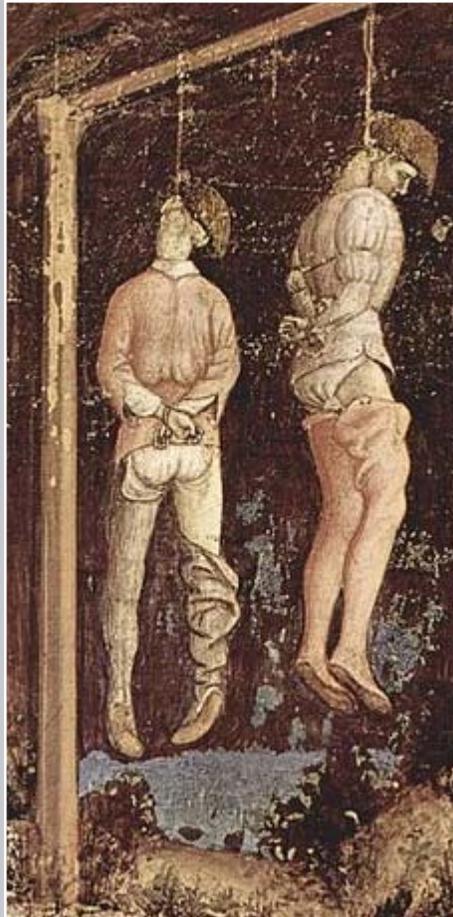
Firing squads go back to bows and arrows—Saint Sebastian is usually depicted as

being executed by a squad of Roman auxiliary archers back in 228 AD. Firearms made it more likely that well-placed shots could bring death quickly enough to be humane, but here too, there was always the risk of error. Despite this, a firing squad was employed as late as 2010 in Utah when the condemned requested it. It has always been popular with the military given the ready availability of guns on the battlefield.

Hanging has been a longtime tool of the executioner to the point of becoming iconic. Still, it was certainly as vulnerable to human error as any other method. The basic idea of a humane hanging is that the person drops quickly and the noose snaps the neck, bringing death before the condemned is aware it's happening. But when it goes wrong, it can be gruesome indeed. Too short of a drop and the condemned hangs there, thrashing about, even wetting themselves until

they choked to death. Too long a drop and decapitation could result. Hardly the fast, painless method that would meet the criteria against “cruel and unusual.”

Nevertheless, it remained the primary means of execution in the United States right to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a new technology seemed to bring an even more efficient method. It was against this backdrop of an odd hybrid of inflicting death but seeking a humane way of killing that a Trenton electrician would find himself called upon to design New Jersey's own electric chair.



Detail from a painting by Pisanello, 1436–1438.

## The Electric Chair

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century broke, it promised to be the new age of electricity. Coal-fueled steam had been at the chugging heart of the industrial revolution in the 1800s and had produced wonders enough. But electricity—now there was something amazing! It had enthralled and taunted humanity since the first hominid looked up in awe at a lightning storm. The very idea of tapping into that raw power was even part of the American creation myth—Benjamin Franklin and his kite remains part of our national iconography. As the nation was increasingly wrapped in a web of wires, practical electrical power began powering all manner of new appliances or improving old ones, offering to remove the drudgery from everyday life. The 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition at Chicago dazzled visitors with displays of the then still-novel electric light. As early as 1904, the washing machine was being powered by electricity. In the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if it was new, modern and progressive, it was electric.

That electricity could also be dangerous certainly wasn't unknown. When he tried to replicate Franklin's lightning rod experiments in 1753, for example, Georg Richmann, a Swedish physicist at the Imperial Court of St. Petersburg, Russia, was killed when he failed to properly insulate himself. But, so long as proper safety precautions were followed, it could be safe enough. The evolution of the electrician from amateur experimenter to a professional trade set safety standards and practices through apprenticeship systems, licensing and labor unions.

Electricity, it seemed, was the miracle of the modern age, one that elevated mankind into an ever more civilized state. It was likely

only a matter of time before someone applied this new urbanity to making even the distasteful task of execution more humane. The story of how that came about tells, albeit perhaps a bit apocryphally, how in 1881 a dentist from Buffalo, NY, Dr. Alfred Southwick, witnessed an inebriated man accidentally electrocute himself by touching a live electric generator. It seemed to happen so quickly and painlessly that it set the good doctor thinking.



Dr. Alfred Southwick

The tales maintain that, as a dentist, he designed a chair—as opposed to a table or other format—because that's what he was used to. It was built by Harold P. Brown and Arthur Kennelly, both employees of Thomas Edison—Kennelly was the chief engineer at the West Orange facility. Given Edison's involvement with the development of practical electric power, the light bulb, and the famous feud with George Westinghouse over AC or DC, it is often said that Edison himself came

up with the first electric chair. While the project certainly progressed with his blessings and promotional skills, there is no evidence he had any hands-on involvement. But with the equipment built, Dr. Southwick lobbied New York's then-Governor, David B. Hill, to make electrocution the legal means of execution in the state in place of hanging. He worked towards that end on the state's Electrical Death Commission between 1888 and 1889 and, on January 1, 1889, the first law permitting use of the electric chair in a capital case was passed.

They didn't have to wait all that long for their first opportunity to try it out for real (various unfortunate animals were killed in tests, but no humans). On March 29, 1889, William Kemmler murdered his common-law wife, Tillie Ziegler, with a hatchet. He was sentenced to the dubious honor of being the first man to die in the electric chair on August 6, 1889 at New York's Auburn Prison. The

condemned man took his seat calmly and received 1,000 volts. At first, the doctor pronounced him dead, but someone noticed he was still breathing. A second examination proved he was still alive and the doctor was said to have called out, "Have the current turned on again, quick—no delay." The problem was, it took time for the generator to build up again, so if Kemmler was at all conscious, he would have been aware and possibly in some distress for some eight agonizing minutes. The second jolt did the job, but caused blood vessels to burst and bleeding. The flesh around the electrodes singed, producing a smell that led some witnesses to think he had actually caught fire. The next day's headlines screamed the sensational story of what amounted to a botched execution. George Westinghouse later quipped "They would have done better using an axe." While he perhaps had a point, he was also miffed that the state used the direct current (DC) championed by his rival, Edison.

Dr. Southwick, who was present, had a very different reaction, despite the obvious glitches. He was reported as having proclaimed, "There is the culmination of ten years work and study! We live in a higher civilization from this day."

### **Adams Electrical Company**

In 1907, the New Jersey legislature officially outlawed hanging as the preferred means of carrying out executions. Electrocutation was to be *the* method and George O. Osborne, Keeper of the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton found himself in need of an electric chair—not exactly an off-the-shelf kind of item. The most obvious place to begin was calling in an electrician. Carl F. Adams, who would later be described as a man of ponderous reserve good nerves and calm temper of mind, seemed a logical enough choice. Born in 1868, he was the founder of Adams Electrical Company and had already

earned a reputation around Trenton.

The increasingly widespread availability of electric power meant there was a reasonable trade to be found in installing electric lighting, particularly on commercial properties. In 1897,



**Adams installed the new lighting at the Trent Theatre**

Carl F. Adams, identified as an electrical engineer and contractor, had been awarded the contract to light the new addition to the Trenton Fire Clay and Porcelain Company. The *Trenton Evening Times* reported that "[w]hen completed there will be about 750 lights of 16-candle power." He had already installed the lighting on the existing older building the previous winter.

The next year, he published notice that he moved from 103 East State Street to 16 East State Street, including an office, supply department and "first-class repair shop." By 1901, he also had a factory on Hamilton Street, manufacturing "the Backus motor fans . . . This is the only plant of its kind in the city," according to *The Trenton-Evening Times*. By

1903, he had begun getting jobs for the city of Trenton itself, including wiring an new firehouse on Broad Street.

But the road to that meeting with the warden was paved by some rather high profile jobs. In 1903 his company was hired to install the electric lighting at the Trent Theatre. But it was probably a job at the State House the following year that got him the most attention—both good and bad, depending on one’s perspective. It had been noticed that the chandelier hanging in the rotunda always swung, even when it wasn’t windy outside. That in of itself wasn’t an issue. But when the maintenance people took a closer look, they realized that there was nothing in how it was constructed to permit the flexibility demanded by that natural swinging, causing dangerous wear. In other words, it might come crashing down at any moment and people who worked in the building after a while learned to walk quickly when they had to cross the rotunda space. Adams was hired in October of 1904 to take it down and replace it with a modern electric light chandelier.

As an aside, local theater-owner I. C. Mishler, who owned the State Theatre in Trenton, bought the old chandelier and had it installed—with safety improvements—at another theater he had opened in Altoona, Pennsylvania. Sadly, it was destroyed as part of a huge fire that consumed not only the theater, but an Elks Home and Oliver Robert furniture store, with an estimated \$500,000 damages.

Not that it was all smooth sailing for the Adams Electrical Company. Adams was frequently at odds with the labor unions involved with the electrical trade. Indeed, the State House job was delayed by a dispute with the Building Trades Council. Adams had an eye towards an “open shop”—non-union. Ten union workers walked off the job as a protest against the use on non-union labor. This would pit Adams against the Council well on into February of 1905.

One of the striking electricians, Albert Hutloff, was short on cash to support his family. So, he picked up a small job at a house on the west side of town for E. M. Fleron, a competitor of Adams.’ This irked Adams as there was supposed to be an agreement that no contractors would hire the strikers. They may have been competitors, but giving in to the labor unions would impact everyone. Fleron, in turn, wasn’t very happy at Adams either and accused him of trying to intimidate Hutloff into quitting the extra job.

The Building Trades Council was playing for keeps as well. They called a strike for six of their members who had been working for Adams. Five walked off the job but one stayed. He was immediately kicked out of the organization and they vowed to boycott Adams’ entirely, throwing their full support behind the other men who were on strike. Adams had intended to become an open shop by April 1<sup>st</sup>, but retaliated by locking out the union workers in January of 1905. Three construction jobs ground to a halt around Trenton—at the Second Regiment Armory, the home of C. C. Haven and the Second Presbyterian Church—because of labor unrest with the Building Trades Council. In the case of the armory, it was the presence of a worker who belonged to the National Association of Steamfitters, which the American Federation of Labor did not recognize as being legitimate. “All of the large jobs now in course of construction are shunned by labor union men because of the Adams matter or the lockout of plumbers by the Master Plumbers Union,” reported *The Trenton Evening-Times*.

This time, management stuck together and responded in kind. Six electrical contractors locked out between twelve and fifteen union electricians as a result of an agreement they had all signed with the Electrical Contractors Association to have open shops. This was part of a larger protest by the Manufacturers and Employers Association against what they saw

as the sympathetic strike policy of the Mercer County Building Trades Association. The irony, of course, was that the employers were organizing together for their common interests in order to protest their workers from doing the exact same thing. In any event, this time Adams wasn't directly involved since he had locked out union workers the previous month, but the newspaper reports trace the entire mess back to his initial fight.

Not that any of this seems to have hurt him. Later in 1905, he received \$262 contract to install lights for New Jersey Supreme Court and, the following year, he created an "elaborate electrical display" at the State Street Theatre and St. Mary's Cathedral as part of the celebrations surrounding the silver jubilee of the ordination of the Rev. Monsignor John H. Fox. This was a big deal to the community and Adams' participation was duly noted in the papers.

By the time New Jersey needed an electric chair, Carl F. Adams was an established businessman who had done other electrical work for the State Penitentiary before. He was a logical choice. The only problem was that he had no experience whatever with such a contraption as he was now being asked to build. But, he wasn't about to let that stop him.

### **New Jersey's Electric Chair**

The obvious place to start for Adams was right in his own New Jersey backyard—with the Wizard of Menlo Park himself. Edison has gone down in pop-history as something of a father to all things electrical, up there with Franklin and his kite. In reality, for example, Edison did not *invent* the electric light bulb—

historians identify some twenty-three inventors of the incandescent light bulb going back to 1802. What Edison *did* do, however, was to improve upon the design and materials, while taking advantage of things (like better vacuum technology) that were unavailable to earlier

researchers. And, he was a tireless—some might say shameless—promoter that shoved his name out before the public in away few others did. Be that as it may, Edison and his employees *did* have a wealth of practical experience when it came to understanding the underlying principles of physics and what kinds of equipment would be needed. The "power grid" was still new, so it wasn't merely a matter of a chair that could be plugged into an existing socket. There would be a host of materials and equipment needed in support of the chair proper, plus safety considerations that would protect operators and witnesses as well as systems

that could be about as failsafe as possible. A botched execution—whether from operator error or mechanical failure—wouldn't do at all.

Adams also took a trip to Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, New York, to examine their existing chair—nicknamed with macabre humor "Old Sparky." This was the same chair that executed Martha Place, the first woman executed by electrocution. She was born Martha Garretson in East Millstone in Somerset County, New Jersey. After a failed first marriage, she went to work as a domestic for widower William Place in Brooklyn, NY. Martha seems to have been jealous of her husband's affection towards his teenage daughter, Ida. Several times, the police were called to diffuse altercations. On February 7,



Martha Place of East Amwell, NJ became the first woman to be executed by electrocution at Sing Sing Prison in New York.

1898, after yet another apparent argument with Ida, Martha threw acid into the 7 year old girl's face, blinding her and then suffocated her to death. When William came home that evening, Martha attacked him with an axe, severely wounding him, but he was able to crawl away and get help. Police found Martha upstairs with gas escaping from the burners in an apparent suicide attempt. She was convicted of the murder of Ida Place and the attempted murder of William and sentenced to death on March 20, 1899.

While she wasn't the first woman to receive a death sentence, she would be the first to die in the new electric chair. This novelty rekindled debates over the ethics of executing women, no matter how awful their crimes. Additionally, this came at a time when women's rights advocates were agitating for suffrage, adding a perhaps unexpected wrinkle to the "equal rights." Some seemed to take great pleasure in pointing out that if these women wanted to be treated equally in the rest of society, so too should they be subject to the less-desirable equity of capital punishment. The papers seemed to take great pains to describe the plain-looking Martha in unflattering terms—in contrast to the sympathy they showed a more physically attractive murderess not long before who was spared.

There is another aspect of Martha's story, however, that engages historians even today. Her brother was supposed to have said she had been struck in the head during a sledding accident when she was 23 and had never been quite right after that. Could her outbursts of apparent rage—including the last one—have been the result of brain damage? Doctors cleared her as sane and then-Governor Theodore Roosevelt declined clemency.

Carl Adams gathered his information, researched vendors for the parts and submitted a bid to the State of New Jersey to build and install its first electric chair. In June of 1907, the appropriations bill was signed allotting \$10,000

for the construction of a "new death building." Adams received \$1,640 that October for his part, with the promise that it would be all ready to go within six weeks—they had an execution scheduled for that December.

The "death building" was an annex with six cells at one end—"death row"—and the electric chair apparatus at the other. Curiously, New Jerseyans protested the construction—not out of an objection to the death penalty, but disgust at the idea of bringing "the scum of other counties brought here [to be] put out of existence in the state prison in old historic Trenton."

The first person to be sent to "the chair"—"getting the chair" had entered the American lexicon—was Saverio DiGiovanni, a 34 year old Italian immigrant working at a wool mill in Raritan. In September of 1907, he had shot and killed Joseph Sansome for motives that were never clearly established. His trial took two days and the jury spent just 15 minutes to return a verdict of guilty of first-degree murder. When the judge, James Bergen, sentenced him to death by electric chair, DiGiovanni, who spoke little English, didn't react. It was only when someone interpreted the sentence that he broke down. It's hard to say what brought him to that pitiful state—or if he would have been sentenced to death today. He was described as a five-foot five bullnecked man that had the scars of many other altercations. It is said that his mood changed from boasts that no "electric chair" could kill him to weeping over a wife and baby back in Italy.

It was a sort of Catch-22—on the one hand, having a long time between sentence and execution only draws out the agony. But on the other, time needs to be permitted for possible appeals. DiGiovanni's lawyers did indeed appeal, but Governor Edward Stokes turned it down and set the execution for December 11<sup>th</sup>. Hence the hurry for Adams to finish the job.

The execution took place at 5:57 a.m.

without a hitch. DiGiovanni wept and prayed but offered no resistance. 2,400 volts were passed through him for a full minute. A second jolt was administered as a matter of procedure, to make certain he was indeed dead, but witnesses were pretty sure he had died instantly. His body was buried in an unmarked grave at Our Lady of Lourdes Cemetery in Hamilton.

Watching it all was Carl F. Adams, proud of his handiwork. Years later, he would recall how he felt the crime was a revolting one, and that he had “no feelings for a man like that.”

### **The Adams Electrical Co. Papers**

If one is going to engage in the business of making electric chairs, having “no feelings for a man like that” is a prerequisite. Still, regardless of how one feels about the death penalty, there is still something a tad unsettling about viewing it through the lens of a business. There is a collection of papers from the Adams Electrical Company pertaining to electric chair orders in the Special Collections department of Rutgers University’s Alexander Library in New Brunswick. They form a strange, yet compelling narrative. Perhaps the most strange—though it is admittedly unclear how it came to be included—is a photo of the last man to be executed in the Middlesex County jail by hanging. He is identified as Fred Lang, “Who shot and killed his niece [illegible] at Burnhams[?] Corner Bonhamtown, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1906 by shooting her in the neck.”

Fred Lang was from South Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and he shot his niece, Ms. Gate Gordon, on April 20, 1906 at her home in Bordentown, NJ. She had rebuffed his proposal for marriage. It is difficult to say, but the overall-clad young man looks quite possibly to be mentally handicapped. Whatever the case, it is the remarks handwritten, albeit not completely legible, in pencil on the back that are most strange: “From M. Yuro[?] To My Dear Friend (‘Pickel’)

1927.” What an odd gift for someone you call “Pickel”!

Much of the rest of the collection is paperwork that would be perhaps tedious were it not for electric chairs. But it demonstrates how following the successes at New York and New Jersey, state after state that had death penalties began to explore passing laws abolishing hanging in favor of electrocution. The Trenton job was not to be a one-off project—electric chairs and their apparatus was going to be a new product line for the busy electrical company.

George Osborne, Keeper for New Jersey State Prison, was pleased enough with Adams’ work to recommend him. When E. F. Morgan, Superintendent of the Virginia penitentiary, applied to Osborne for guidance in getting an electric chair for his state in 1908, Osborne sent him straight to Adams. Just three months after the first execution in Trenton, Adams was being asked to submit a bid in Virginia. Perhaps they would have preferred to give the contract to someone from their own state, but it was hard to argue with Adams’ practical experience and rave reviews. Evidently, Morgan was invited to come and visit the Trenton facility and Adams was shrewd enough to make certain the press knew of this unusual trip. “On my arrival at my office I find the copies of the *Daily State Gazette*,” Morgan wrote back to Adams, “with a very complimentary notice of my visit to your city, for which please accept my thanks.” Schmoozing aside, Adams price evidently also impressed Virginia, as Morgan was pleased to tell him that the state board charged with awarding it “gave you the contract, and would be glad to have you begin work at your earliest convenience.”

The deal cost \$3,700 with the terms of 1/3 cash with the order, 1/3 upon delivery, \$500 when machine is ready for operation and the balance after first execution. That last bit caused Adams a small grief when by August

28, 1908, he wrote to Morgan, "I expected to be called to Richmond before this time by you, but apparently there are no one as yet to pay the death penalty in the Electric Chair. Kindly let me know if you can, when I may expect a check for the balance. You thought that it would not be necessary for me to wait until you had a man. I have waited for some time and as the money would be very acceptable just now, I trust that you will speak to your board about it and see if they cannot let me have the balance. I assure you, whether you pay me now or later, I will be on hand when the first man goes off."

On September 1, 1908, Morgan replied that he had "placed your letter before my Board on yesterday for their consideration. They declined to issue check, because it is such a short time before we will have an execution." Adams would have to wait until October 13<sup>th</sup> for an execution and to be paid the rest.

Evidently, it all went off without any problems. By March 27, 1909, Morgan reported to Adams that "[w]e have five subjects for the electric chair to be executed the same day, April 30<sup>th</sup>. Please quote me price on extra helmet and leg electrode complete, and 2 extra helmet sponges."

Morgan then makes mention of a "problem" he had: "It is possible that you are not familiar with all the types of negro heads and consequently it has not occurred to you that there could be such wide departures from the normal shape, therefore I suggest that if it can be done, that the helmets be made so as to be flexible to some extent at least. Our last experience demonstrated the necessity for such an arrangement, as the current dried out the sponge on each side of the head (which was pyramidal in shape) and showed itself in sparks."

Adams replied, ". . . we will make an extra helmet of a design which will be more flexible in order to meet your special requirements in the execution of negro criminals . . . We will

not make any charge to you for the reason that we want you to feel perfectly satisfied in every respect and be successful with our apparatus. We also appreciate the very kind interest that you have taken in our equipment and therefore feel that it is no more than is right that we should take care of you in every detail."

If nothing else, he took care of his customers and kept up a good reputation. The market, of course, was still rather confined, so one displeased client could spell ruin. Each success fed another. When, on April 13, 1910, he wrote to the State Penitentiary of Frankfort, Kentucky, "[f]rom current reports we notice that you [*sic*] state has passed a law substituting electrocution for hanging as the mode of inflicting the death penalty," he could refer them to both Osborne in Trenton and Morgan in Virginia for honest testimonials of "it's successful workings." Then, when Osborne heard that Pennsylvania's House of Representatives were "contemplating installation of electrocution plants," he wrote a letter of introduction for Adams to Justice Robert A. Balfour in Philadelphia on February 3, 1911, telling how "Mr. Adams, installed the electrocution plant in this State in 1907, and we have had 17 electrocutions, all being successful in every respect. I have referred him to you, and no doubt he will be able to give you valuable suggestions."

In effect, clients became salesmen—when a warden somewhere needed information on how to get an electric chair, they would, naturally enough, write to fellow wardens who had experience with them. And, if they were indeed pleased with Adams' service and products, they would send them in his direction. Further, existing clients provided "showrooms" where he could invite prospective customers to see an actual installation for themselves. On February 10, 1912, for example, Adams wrote to Horace E. Flack of Maryland's Department of Legislative

Reference (who was another Osborne referral), inviting him to Trenton where “I could then show you the Plant in all it’s [*sic*] details and have a test prepared giving practically a reproduction of the actual work done by the machine.”

Unfortunately for Adams, not every state contemplating electrocution always followed through. Flack responded how the Representative who introduced the bill to switch over “seems to think that the bill will hardly become a law at the present session.”

The shift from hanging to electrocution often came in the middle of a normal flow of jurisprudence that was still sentencing people to die irrespective of the methods to be employed. This placed a degree of stress on Carl Adams—and gives terrible literacy to the term “deadline.” For if Adams failed to deliver on his contract on time, it would do more than be bad for his business—it would drag out the pending death of someone thus condemned and, with them, the very notion of “cruel and unusual.” It was a pressure Adams evidently keenly felt and frequently passed along to vendors, with earnest entreaties to swiftness.

The most well-documented installation found in the Rutgers’ files is for South Carolina, showing the process from order to execution.

### **South Carolina**

“We accept your proposition [*sic*] of April, 22d, 1912, and agree to pay you 40 per cent on the delivery at the S. C. Penitentiary of the Electric Chair and other necessary equipments and 40 per cent when installed and successfully tested and the balance 20 per cent after the first execution.” Adams had a deadline of June 1, 1912 to complete the installation, pending an expected execution.

What he had proposed was:

Will furnish erected complete one electrocuting plant as follows—One electric chair with high tension platform; one switch board and one testing

resistance box with iron doors; one special resistance box; one controlling rheostatic machine with iron enclosure; one testing lamp board; two head electrodes; two leg electrodes; two sets of sponges; one set of leather straps; duplicate line of high tension lead cables from switch board to service entrance with two double throw switches, distance within hundred foot; one high tension floor box and mast arm with electrode connections and lamp sockets; duplicate set of high tension porcelain fuse blocks and fuses. Supervision of first electrocution. Price Twenty Eight Hundred Dollars.”

He assured the South Carolina Penitentiary and the architects of their new “death house,” Todd & Benson, “I use only the best of materials obtainable and the finest workmanship so there is no possible chance of a break down unless someone should deliberately damage it.”

This was the start of a series of correspondence by Adams and his company with the various vendors for the parts he would need. He used many local, Trenton suppliers. On May 12, 1912, for example, he sent a letter to the Trenton Pattern Works for wooden chair and platform, asking that it be made like the one they evidently also made for his Virginia job. “The most important point is that you have it ready by June 1,” he told them. But he added “I have contracted personally with the State of South Carolina for the installation of electric chair so as not to get into complications with the present troubles of the Adams Electric Company, therefore I will personally pay you for this work just as soon as you have it ready.” He doesn’t elaborate on the “present troubles,” but if he was writing a personal check, it seems to hint at financial. But more on this later.

The Trenton Pattern Works replied that they would “quote . . . on the chair and platform of solid oak finished dark in natural wood and furnished with polished bronze trimmings . . . made in the very best manner with solid oak seat perforated but you to

furnish all straps . . . for the sum of seventy five dollars.”

The straps would come from Joseph M. Middleton, whose letterhead advertises him as a “Manufacturer and Dealer in Harness, Horse Clothing, Robes, Trunks and Valises” at No. 8 North Warren Street, Trenton. In his order, dated May 16, 1912, Adams had Middleton supply:

- 2 ankle straps 3/16” x 20” long
- 2 forearm 3/16” x 25”
- 1 body 3/16” x 4’ 6”
- 1 chest strap 3/16” x 3’ 6”
- 1 head nose strap

He ordered rubber parts from Joseph Stokes Rubber Co. and steel parts from Barbour Bros. Iron and Steel, both of Trenton. Additionally, there were a number of details in an electric chair set-up that needed to be attended to. He ordered six square yards of 1/4” thick “Corrugated Rubber Matting for use around switchboard” from the New Jersey Cloth Company of Trenton (and with offices in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Pittsburgh and Washington D.C.). That would have been to provide insulation for the operator. Horace E. Fine Company, General Engravers, at 19 East State Street, Trenton, was hired to engrave the labels on the plates to be for the switchboard.

He seems to have used local sources where possible, but the apparatus was created out of parts from a variety of vendors in the northeast. In the case of the insulated cables, he asked for quotes from the National India Rubber Company of Church Street in New York City, B. Latham & Company of Broadway and Murray Street, New York City as well as from the old Trenton industrialists, John A. Roebling’s Sons Co. For many of the electrical components, he turned to Keystone Electrical Instrument Company, over in Philadelphia. American Transformer Company, 153 Miller St., Newark, supplied the transformers; a

dozen condensers came from Bausch & Lomb Optical Co., Rochester, NY; the Macallen Company of Boston supplied “insulated joints.”

Two vendors in particular, however, had him nervous about making his deadline. He had ordering a bunch of parts from Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing Company: a 3,450 volt, primary, 2,000 volt secondary, 40 cycle, single phase, Type S transformer for \$185; type D oil switch, double pole, double throw; 2 type D oil switches; 4 plug switches, mountings and faceplates; type S lightning arresters for 3,500 volts AC, etc. When it came to how he was going to pay for all this, Adams was very particular: “Regarding the payment for this material if you will send me your invoice for same by return mail I will forward you my certified check in payment for same at once, with the distinct understanding, however, that said check is not to be used until you are ready to make delivery of the material, said delivery to be positively made within the time agreed upon between ourselves.”

A Mr. Lyon of Westinghouse’s Detail & Supply Division wrote back that he had “taken the matter of credit up a little further and we regret to advise that we will be unable to accept your order without cash in full for same or certified check. We are bringing this matter to your attention so that no delay will occur should you feel in need of the apparatus upon which we quoted you while in the office.”

Two days later, he sent them a check, “with the distinct understanding that it is not to be deposited until you send shipping memo for the above material.” These were critical parts that would hold up construction and Adams’ frustration shows through when he added, “Now will you please ship this material immediately so that there is no further delay.”

Adams had sent them a check for \$97.74—he had built in his own 5% discount for payment up front. Evidently, Westinghouse never agreed to that. One can imagine Adams

annoyance when he received his check back with the letter stating, “We regret that we are unable to accept your check insofar as you have deducted 5% for spot cash, also with the restriction in not allowing us to deposit same at the time of entering order . . . we can only enter this order upon receipt of certified check covering full amount of \$104.68 without any restrictions.”

Indeed, Adams comes across in his letters as somewhat dictatorial—he tells rather than asks. Whether he just assumed Westinghouse would extend to him what he considered a standard business practice or was trying to slip one by them is uncertain. But he was obviously frustrated with how it was handled, writing back, “I trust that you did not delay getting out this material while all the writing was taking place, as you know how important it is for me to have this material, therefore please follow the matter up immediately and get it down to me without any further delay . . . As to placing the restrictions on using of the check, this was simply done at the time for the purpose of having you make a special effort to get the shipping bill for me at the quickest possible time. As far as the checks are concerned, if it is any help at all to the Westinghouse Co. to use the money before shipping the stuff I have no objection whatsoever to your making use of the money . . . It also seems rather peculiar way of doing business to return a certified check. Why didn’t you keep it and have us send you an additional check. I suppose, though, that you fellow have to do everything just so according to red tape otherwise you cannot do any business. Now please, Mr. Lyon, as a personal favor to me, see that I get this material at once.”

This exchange took place in May of 1912—far too close for comfort for an apparent June 1<sup>st</sup> deadline! When, by June 4<sup>th</sup>, he still did not have the items from Westinghouse, he wrote them, “Now, it is of the utmost importance that

I receive this material at once and I would request that you follow this matter up at once and see that this material is forwarded without further delay. It has delayed the job considerably now and is causing considerable annoyance by the delay.”

How firm that June 1<sup>st</sup> deadline really was is suspect. Adams seems to have built in extra time before the first execution—and it was a good thing. Parts were out of stock, and Westinghouse sent what they could piecemeal. When they arrived, some were broken and Adams wrote back as late as June 26<sup>th</sup> that replacements had to be shipped.

The classic image of an electrocution involves the dramatic “throwing of the switch.” In fact, there was no such switch with Adams’ installations. A rheostat was dialed up, increasing the current. Getting that critical piece of equipment, however, proved an additional headache for Adams. On May 21, 1912, Ward Leonard Electric Co. of Bronxville, NY, informed him, “Please note that we cannot make up the variable electrocution rheostat in the time allowed—that is, we cannot make delivery of the complete machine by June 1<sup>st</sup>, but we can supply the resistance units complete with mounting rods and segments.”

In other words, while they couldn’t send a complete unit, they could send all the parts and diagrams so Adams’ electricians could assemble it themselves. Adams received the parts, but not the diagram that would show how to assemble it all! “In further reference to this matter,” Adams wrote back when he got the parts that he “wish[ed] to state that your Mr. Waller and Mr. Kemp both promised that you would send me the shop drawing of the variable rheostat and also a chart of the units according to their steps so that I can give to my shop man to assist him in the assembling of these units.” He remained also in need of another small but critical detail—a brass faceplate with arrows showing which way to turn the knob “to raise and lower voltage.”

It wasn't until June 7<sup>th</sup> that they sent him a "complete drilling template and wiring diagram for your electrocution rheostat," with the suggestion that they lay the bits and pieces out first to make sure everything will fit properly before actually drilling.

Part of the problem was that while Ward had done the rheostat for the Trenton job, they couldn't find the template and had to recreate it. Aside from noting that several tubes had been broken in shipping or were missing from the order, Adams informed them, "I also wish to let you know that your sketch is not just right but I'll excuse you for getting it wrong, as it is a hard lay-out." He could afford, perhaps to be charitable since his men discovered the mistakes beforehand by comparing it to the template they had for Trenton.

Still, the delay caused by the broken and missing parts was vexing: "Please do not delay the sending of the units as I have everything ready to ship now and just need these few tubes to complete both the Test Resistance and the Variable Rheostat. I want to ship the outfit by next Tuesday's steamer so will you be so good as to send these tubes by express at once so that I won't be held up." Ward sent the needed parts at no charge.

He wrote Ward on June 21<sup>st</sup>, but had evidently begun shipping some of the equipment earlier. Records show materials being sent via the Trenton Transportation Company to Philadelphia on June 10<sup>th</sup> and then on to Columbia, South Carolina on the Seaboard Air Line Railway. Given this was 1912, "Air Line" was a descriptive rather than literal term. By July 1<sup>st</sup>, they informed Adams that "Shipment arrived at Columbia, S.C. morning of June 17<sup>th</sup>, consignees did not take delivery of same until the 24<sup>th</sup>. The reason that the Penitentiary people did not accept delivery before that date, was on account of them not being prepared to install same at the time of arrival."

Clearly, June 1<sup>st</sup> had been a self-imposed

deadline, given that the client wasn't ready to begin actual installation until near the end of July. Adams always had men on-site to supervise not only the installation, but also the training of staff in the use of the thing. And, he would always be on hand to witness the first execution in his chair.

While Adams appears to have designed much of the equipment himself (probably based on what he had learned from Edison or observed at Sing Sing), he did find at least one improvement thanks to an independent inventor. N. K. White, of Virginia, had sent him a diagram of a new and improved electrode he had some up with, to which Adams replied in a February 10, 1910 letter, "[y]our scheme is first-class and is no doubt a big improvement over the electrodes which we furnished with our chair equipment. Ever since we had the accident with the leg electrode at your first execution [in Virginia] when the strap broke off I have been experimenting with some different things . . ."

By the time Adams was making the chair for South Carolina, White has patented his design and Adams agreed to use them, paying \$75 for the rights and suggesting he might want to buy the patent outright for future use. White liked that idea and offered that if he did, he wouldn't charge Adams for his using his electrodes on the South Carolina chair. But Adams demurred in a June 25, 1912 letter, "Now Captain I will not allow this generosity; this has nothing to do with the future business and I shall send you a check for \$75.00 as agreed we soon as I get my first payment from Columbia [South Carolina]."

### **Hard Times?**

Success continued to attract customers, though it didn't always pan out. In April of 1913, a year following South Carolina, The B-R Electric & Telephone Mfg. Co. of Kansas City, Missouri wrote to Adams. They had been contracted to install an electrocution system for

“one of the Western Panitentiaries [*sic*]” and wanted to get the equipment from him. The catch was that *they* wanted to be the ones to perform the actual installation. Adams’ reply demonstrates how confident he was in his own performance by that point.

“Replying I would say that I sell my equipment only direct and install it myself on account of giving an absolute guarantee with each outfit that I build . . . I also wish to mention that my Electrocuting Apparatus is fully protected and is today the only equipment in use that can be operated from an exterior source of power supply such as is furnished by electrical light or power companies . . . I devoted a great deal of time and study to the designing of this apparatus realizing that for the work which it is intended the machine must be absolutely sure in it’s work, safe in it’s handling, and positively fool-proof. That I have succeeded in these points is demonstrated by the successful operation of the several Plants in use in the various States.”

In the end, he would turn down the contract. But this demonstrates that here were competitors out for the business in an admittedly shrinking market that was never all that large to begin with. Back in 1910, when he was corresponding with White about his patent, Adams enquired if White had heard anything about the state of the electric chair in North Carolina, since Virginia was closer than New Jersey. A local competitor had beaten him out on the contract and he was annoyed that they had not returned the photographs he had sent with his proposal. But more than loss of business, it seemed to justify his self-pride: “From newspaper reports I found that they are still trying to get the outfit to work and that one of the criminals has already had five respites and the chair is still inoperative.”

It is difficult to say how successful Adams really was with all this. Based on the balance of enquiries and shipping information in the Rutgers collection, it would appear that he lost

as many contracts as he won. Perhaps the most interesting solicitation came from outside the United States.

In January of 1913, The Colonial Stores, identified on their letterhead as “Purveyors and Provision Suppliers, Canton, China” wrote to the warden of Virginia’s State Penitentiary in Richmond:

We have written to the firm of Montgomery Ward & Co. Chicago for information regarding an apparatus for executing criminals by electricity, same as those used in some of the states of America. They have referred us to write you for information regarding this machine. We have a customer an high official in Canton who wishes to adopt the same method for this part of the country . . . I will be ever so thankful for your kind assistance. Wishing you greater prosperity in 1913 than you have ever had before, I remain yours sincerely, J. A. Cheong, Manager.

The only thing odder than writing to Montgomery Ward for an electric chair was that the question came from a company that also specialized in “canned goods, dried fruits, wines, spirits, tobaccos and cigars.”

Adams replied: “The price for this machine will be cash \$3000.00, delivered on board ship at New York.” Added to that would be the costs for man to go to oversee installations at \$5/day while in transit and then \$10/day during the actual work. He estimated it would all take a month from the receipt of the order to ship and then another two weeks to install. There were, of course, technical questions about the electrical systems overseas:

It will be necessary to receive current delivered from an exterior source. In the United States here this current is furnished by the Light and Power Companies and is Alternating Current of not less than 2200 volts; it is immaterial to us how much higher the voltage may be and whether it is one, two, or three phase, or what the cycle ratio may be, as all we need to know from you when ordering the machine is what the primary line voltage is, what the cycle is, and what the phase is, and then we will

build the machine to suit your current conditions . . . Should you decide to purchase one of these machines for your Government you will be restricted from placing a higher price on this machine than what is a legitimate profit in consistency with your business. And I reserve the right to pass upon this price before the offer is made. Ordinarily a profit of 20 to 25% should be sufficient for you to handle the proposition.”

As there is no paperwork indicating an order in the collection, it may be that this job never came about—nor did ones in Arkansas, Kentucky or Maryland. But there are other clues as to financial troubles. Adams declared bankruptcy in 1900; he was dealing personally with suppliers on the South Carolina order and a May 21, 1913 letter asking the status of the Arkansas death penalty law was from an A. Lee Grover, identified on the letterhead as a successor to Adams Electric Company.

Even before that, Adams seemed to be playing a game—he would order parts and vendors would invoice Adams Electrical Company, but he would write back, saying it was really ordered by A. Lee Grover and that if they would resubmit the bill to that name, it would be paid immediately. While it isn't completely clear it was what he was about, this has the appearance of being a stalling tactic to delay having to pay the bill.

### **Cars and Blue Laws**

Obviously, electric chairs wasn't Adams' sole business. He seems to have been involved with another new marvel of the modern age—the automobile. According to a column, “Among the Automobilists” in the January 1, 1909 *Trenton Evening Times*, H. A. Anderson, an automaker from Detroit, had sold out all his stock at a New York car show and had to order his factory to make more for an upcoming show in Chicago. That it was the first time he had had such a success was noteworthy for him, but for history it is worth noting that he

was selling electric cars—a hundred years before it again became popular! And, among the agents he assured he would still fill orders for was Adams in Trenton.

In February, he listed for sale a 1906 Ford touring car “in first class condition” for \$375. Evidently, Adams picked up extra money renting out garage space. The “Automobiles and Automobilists” column—something of a social column for automobile owners—in the April 17, 1909 *Trenton Evening Times* mentioned “The Adams garage is storing Dr. Charles P. Britton's new Premier touring car” and seemed to consider it newsworthy that “The Adams Electrical Company's garage recently installed twenty-four lockers.” Further, E.H. Savage received his new Regal, Model A, 30-horsepower touring car from Adams Electrical Company and David S. Swift, local taxicab manager, was having four cars “cared for by the Adams Electrical Company.”

Adams was also a family man. He and his wife, Catherine H. Aller Adams, had a son, two daughters and eight grandchildren. He was active in local affairs around Trenton. At the same time he was responding to solicitations for electric chairs from China, his company also did the “electrical effects” at the Mohawk Canoe Club's “George Washington dance” and was a founding member and historian for the Trenton Tadpoles Club.

While he obviously had no moral compunction to capital punishment, he was of a different mind when it came to watching a motion picture show on the Sabbath. So-called “blue laws” in Trenton outlawed movie theaters being open on Sundays. Given that for most of the working class folks who were their most likely patrons, that was their only day off, this was a threat to their livelihoods. So, on August 28, 1921—a Sunday—they all agreed to remain open in defiance of the law. It was a lucrative protest—some 18,000 tickets were said to have been sold!

The Interchurch Federation League, however, saw this open defiance as nothing less than a war on religion. Leading the resistance State Quartermaster General C. Edward Murray. Among those who reminded Trentonians of the Fourth Commandment—Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy—was the Rev. John H. Fox at St. Mary’s Cathedral, the same Rev. Fox whose Silver Jubilee Adams’ company helped to celebrate in 1905 with electric light shows.

Trenton’s Public Safety Commissioner, George LaBarre, begged to disagree, not seeing it as something the city ought to get involved in. He instructed the chief of police to leave unmolested any theater owner open on a Sunday by virtue of a technicality—the law specifically forbade “dancing” and “fiddling”—neither of which tended to go on in a movie house.

General Murray was furious—if the city’s officials would not enforce the law, *bis* “police” would. He had Sheriff Walter Firth on his side and they handed out deputy’s badges to some sixty-five members of the Inter-Church Federation League—including Carl F. Adams. They would bust the movie theaters that were open, arresting the owners and sending the disappointed sinning patrons home.

### **Trial of the Century**

In 1932, New Jersey and the nation—indeed the world—was gripped by the tragic kidnapping and murder of trans-Atlantic hero Charles A. Lindbergh’s son, Charles, Jr. The boyish Lindbergh had captured imaginations with his historic first solo airplane flight across

the Atlantic Ocean in 1927 and the public was more acutely aghast when his and wife Ann Morrow Lindbergh’s 18-month old son went missing and was then found dead near their East Amwell, New Jersey home. When, two years later, German immigrant Bruno Richard Hauptmann was arrested and charged with the crime, he was considered “The Most Hated Man In The World.” From January 2 to February 13, 1935, Hauptmann was put on



Bruno Richard Hauptmann, convicted of the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, died in Adams’ chair in Trenton.

trial—“The Trial of the Century” according to the media. Throughout, he vehemently protested he was innocent and the case remains one that is questioned and rehashed by historians. But, in the end, he was convicted and sentenced to die in the electric chair. In Charles Adams’ electric chair.

At the time, a newspaper sought out the man who built the instrument that would end the life of that “Most Hated Man In The World.” The copy in the Rutgers collection is unidentified, but told how, “[t]he impending execution of Bruno Richard Hauptmann means little to the man who built the electric chair for the New Jersey State Prison.” He was described as “a middle-aged electrician, living

at 1122 Riverside Avenue, [and as] a man of ponderous reserve good nerves and calm temper of mind . . . [The chair] worked perfectly the first time on the night of December 11, 1907, as is as good as new now after 116 executions. That, he feels, is something.”

### The End of Capital Punishment in NJ

New Jersey held capital punishment laws on the books until a moratorium imposed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1972.

In *Furman v. Georgia*, by a 5-4 decision, the court considered it cruel and unusual punishment and, therefore, unconstitutional. Justices William Brennan, Jr. (born in Newark, NJ) and Thurgood Marshall both considered capital punishment unconstitutional in *all* cases, while others had a problem with *how* it was being handed out on the state level, pointing to arbitrariness and racial bias. Guidelines were imposed and the states told to revise their sentencing processes. When capital convictions occurred in Georgia, Florida, Texas, North Carolina and Louisiana, they were appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court with a view to abolish the death penalty once and for all on the grounds of being fundamentally cruel and unusual. Consolidated with *Gregg v. Georgia* in 1976, the Court instead upheld the penalty so long as certain broad guidelines were adopted by the state legislatures into their capital sentencing processes. These were designed to remove some of the discretion that led to abuse, permit appellate review and allow the judge or jury to take character and record of the defendants into account. As far as Justice

Potter Stewart was concerned, the death penalty was “cruel and unusual in the same way that being struck by lightning is cruel and usual.”

New Jersey’s last execution took place in 1963, when Ralph Hudson died in Adams’ electric chair for stabbing his estranged wife to death. The post-*Gregg v. Georgia* period is called the “Modern Era” of capital punishment and, in 2007, New Jersey became the first state to abolish the death penalty completely.



Carl F. Adams

### Conclusion

Death came for Carl F. Adams at age 78 on October 13, 1946 after an illness that confined him to Mercer Hospital. Regardless of whatever else he had done in his life, he was still identified first and foremost in his obituary as the state’s “Death Chair Builder.” It seems he probably wouldn’t have minded the distinction. As of then, his creation had taken the lives of 134 men.

His chair from Trenton now sits in the New Jersey State Police Museum. While there is no longer a death penalty in the Garden State at the moment, other states and the nation as a whole still struggle with the

moral and legal questioned it embodies, giving a macabre twist to Trenton’s industrial heritage.



*Thanks to Ronald Becker at Rutgers Special Collections for alerting me to the Adams papers!*

**UPDATE:** In March 2021, Virginia became the first Southern state to abolish the death penalty. The electric chair Adams made for them in 1908 was last used in 2013.