The Court Archive:
The First—and Only—Public Hanging in Sangamon County

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Fifty years before the Illinois State Capitol was built, thousands gathered on the same grounds to witness the first public execution in Sangamon County history. They expected to see frontier justice carried out, but what they witnessed instead seemed torn from the pages of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

On August 27, 1826, neighbors discovered Peggy Van Noy lying dead in a pool of blood inside her cabin near Athens, Illinois. When questioned, her husband Nathaniel blamed local Native Americans for the murder, but few believed his story. Authorities arrested him and transported him to Springfield. A coroner's jury concluded that Van Noy killed his wife by striking her with a chair. Judge John Y. Sawyer called a special session of court, and a grand jury returned an indictment for murder.

Justice moved swiftly on the Illinois frontier. Van Noy's trial began the day after his arrest. James Turney, Illinois's attorney general, prosecuted the case, arguing that Van Noy murdered his wife in a drunken rage. Springfield attorneys James Adams and Jonathan H. Pugh defended him. By August 29, just three days after Peggy's death, the jury, led by Bowling Green—one of Abraham Lincoln's earliest legal mentors, found Nathaniel guilty and sentenced him to hang.

While awaiting execution, Van Noy entered into an unusual agreement with Springfield physician Dr. Addison Philleo. Newspapers of the era were filled with sensational stories about galvanism—the use of electricity to stimulate dead tissue. Physicians discovered that electrical currents could make corpses twitch, jerk, and even appear momentarily alive. Such experiments helped inspire Mary Shelley when she wrote *Frankenstein* in 1818.

Van Noy and Dr. Philleo agreed that after the execution, the physician would attempt to revive him using a galvanic battery. If successful, Van Noy promised him a generous payment. If the experiment failed, Dr. Philleo could dissect his body for medical study.

On November 26, 1826, a large crowd gathered to witness the execution. Sitting atop his coffin in a horse-drawn wagon, Van Noy rode in procession from the jailhouse to an open field where the current statehouse now stands. Witnesses recalled that he sang a hymn before the wagon beneath him pulled away from the makeshift gallows. His body hung for nearly an hour before the sheriff cut him down and pronounced him dead.

Dr. Philleo transported the body to his office and applied electrical currents to the corpse. Witnesses claimed the dead man's limbs jerked violently and his face contorted, but as one early historian later wrote, "his soul was too far in the land of spirits to be called back." Dr. Philleo then proceeded with a publicly viewed autopsy while horrified spectators returned home with a story they told for the rest of their lives.

The Van Noy hanging proved to be the only public execution in Sangamon County history. Over the next century, six additional hangings took place in the county, but all occurred behind the walls of the jail yard, away from public view.

In 1928, Illinois changed both the method and location of executions. Hanging was replaced by electrocution, and executions were transferred from county jails to the state penitentiaries at Joliet Correctional Center and Menard Correctional Center. In 1990, Illinois replaced electrocution with lethal injection at Stateville Correctional Center. Later, executions were moved to Tamms Correctional Center.

In the 1980s, Supreme Court Justice Seymour Simon dissented in all capital punishment cases in which the court affirmed the death penalty because he believed that it could not be fairly implemented among Illinois' 102 counties. In 1998, Governor George Ryan commuted the sentences for everyone on death row. In 2011, Illinois officially abolished the death penalty. Today, capital punishment remains legal in 27 states.