

Execution Halted by Verdict

A lethal injection scheduled for Thursday night was put on pause after the lawyer debated the court's verdict.

Associated Press

HUNTSVILLE, Texas - A court today halted the planned execution of a man who was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic, in a case that critics say demonstrates problems with the state's treatment of the mentally ill.

In a 5-4 ruling, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, the state's highest criminal court, blocked tonight's scheduled lethal injection of Larry Robison after his attorneys questioned the inmate's mental competence. He was convicted of killing five people in a rampage 17 years ago.

Death penalty opponents and Robison's relatives have held for years that he should be spared execution because he was insane and demanded that Gov. George W. Bush, running for president as a "compassionate conservative," show his humanitarianism by postponing this evening's punishment.

Heather Browne, a spokeswoman for the Texas attorney general's office, said it was not immediately clear if the state could or would appeal the court's decision.

Robison doesn't deny the rampage 17 years ago in which five people were killed and says he's looking forward to his execution.

"I'm real excited about it and glad to be leaving here," he said in a recent interview.

Before the rampage, Robison had been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. But he was not considered violent and was released from a number of public hospitals.

Last week, the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles voted unanimously against recommending to Bush that the death sentence be commuted to life. Besides the last-minute appeal to the courts, the only other recourse that had been left would have been for Bush to issue a one-time 30-day reprieve, something he never has done in his nearly five years as governor.

Linda Edwards, a Bush spokeswoman, had said the governor would announce a decision today.

The former construction worker from Abilene was arrested Aug. 11, 1982, in Wichita, Kan., driving the car of 33-year-old Bruce Gardner of Lake Worth.

The previous day, Gardner was one of five people found mutilated, shot or stabbed in neighboring cottages near Lake Worth. Also killed were Gardner's girlfriend, Georgia Ann Reed, 34; her mother, Earline Barker, 55; and Reed's 11-year-old son, Scott.

In a cottage next door, authorities found the remains of Rickey Lee Bryant, 31, Robison's lover and roommate, who had been shot twice in the head, decapitated, and stabbed 49 times. His genitals were found in the kitchen sink.

Robison pleaded innocent by reason of insanity, but a jury convicted him of capital murder for Gardner's slaying and sentenced him to death. The conviction was overturned because of an error by the trial judge, but Robison was retried, convicted and condemned again.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1986 that mentally ill people could be executed as long as they understood the punishment that awaited them and why they were being put to death.

Local License Plate Office to Close its Doors

The individually contracted office, located in University Mall, might close its doors at the end of next month.

By GINNY SCIABBARRASI
Assistant City Editor

Chapel Hill residents might soon have to drive to Durham for their car registration and license plates.

The N.C. Department of Motor Vehicles announced Thursday that its privately contracted license plate office

at University Mall would be closing its doors Sept. 30.

"We were notified last week," said Jon Parks, spokesman for the N.C. Department of Transportation. "This (office) will close unless someone takes over."

But Robert Norbutt, who contracts the office from the state, said he would not leave until the office had a new contract with someone else. "I'm not going to leave until they get someone qualified," Norbutt said. "If necessary, it will be open with no shutdown whatsoever."

Norbutt said he was leaving for personal reasons, but would not comment

"If Chapel Hill continues to grow, there's an increase of people that can be served."

JON PARKS
Spokesman for the N.C. DOT

on the exact circumstances.

"There's changes in your life and a time to do something else," he said.

The office is responsible for issuing titles and license plates for residents,

Norbutt said.

The office is the closest option for residents of Chapel Hill and Carrboro. If the University Mall location closes, the closest DMV license plate outlet will be in Durham.

All the license plate offices in the state are privately owned except two, Parks said. "The General Assembly decided years ago that all offices would be privately contracted."

Parks said the office in the mall was convenient for residents of both towns.

"If Chapel Hill continues to grow, there's an increase of people that can be served," he said.

Norbutt took over the office contract in 1997 after seeing an advertisement in the newspaper.

Prior to working at the license office, Norbutt worked for IBM for 25 years. When he retired, he said he saw a need for the office and renewed the contract with the state.

Norbutt said it was necessary to keep the office open until the contract was renewed with someone else.

"It's a commitment I have to the state and community," he said

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Freed Slaves' Underground Railroad Stop Faces Destruction

Burgeoning development has erased almost all traces of Sandy Ground, a colony founded by freed slaves.

Associated Press

NEW YORK—Sandy Ground has survived pollution and the Depression in the more than 170 years since it was founded by freed slaves. Now it faces a new danger: the developer's bulldozer.

"It's devastating. When we come out of church and look across the street, it's hard to believe what's happening," said Yvonne Taylor, who grew up in the Staten Island community.

With the rampant development, there's little left of the oldest existing free black colony in the United States, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Quaint two-story houses that once faced the church with their gracious front lawns and yards worn bare by streams of children are gone. They've been replaced by a row of tightly packed, aluminum-sided clones.

Sandy Ground was a stop on the Underground Railroad, protecting runaway slaves seeking freedom in Canada.

Only Sandy Ground has descendants of early settlers still living there. The question is, for how long?

Despite a rich history, few know where or what Sandy Ground is.

"You can find it listed on old Staten Island maps, but in terms of city history you have to dig hard to find any details," said Dick Dickenson, borough historian for Staten Island.

Julie Moody Lewis, executive director of the Sandy Ground Historical Society, said the reason for the enclave's low profile is because "city planners like to act like it never existed."

The colony was founded in the 1820s by two New Jersey brothers, Moses K. and Silas K. Harris. The sandy soil was considered useless, but the Harris brothers introduced strawberries and asparagus, two crops that thrive in it.

After Maryland and Virginia barred freed slaves from harvesting oysters in 1830, hundreds moved to Sandy Ground to farm oysters in New York Bay. More than a million oysters were harvested in some years.

In its heyday in the early 1900s, some 150 families of descendants lived in Sandy Ground. Today there are 10.

Developers turned their attention to the area in the late 1970s when the booming home construction industry discovered the wide open spaces in the city's least populated and most countrified borough. After snapping up parcels of city-owned land in Sandy Ground, developers turned to the spacious property owned by blacks. The Sandy

Ground Historical Society was formed in 1979, partly in response to the threat by developers.

In addition to 10 surviving private homes and the A.M.E. Rossville Zion Church and cemetery, all that's left of old Sandy Ground are three pieces of property owned by the historical society.

They are the 1886 Bishop iron forge, which operated until a suspicious fire damaged it in 1982; William "Pop" Pedro's little Cape Cod-styled house, now the historical society's museum; and an abandoned house willed to the society.

Pedro, Moody Lewis' great-grandfather and the unofficial mayor of Sandy Ground, died in 1988 at 106.

"It's really just a skeleton," said one survivor. She remembers traveling by horse and buggy to visit Sandy Ground from her home across the island.

"It was a beautiful sight ... but when it was really worth preserving, people

weren't interested in doing anything about it. Local history meant nothing and black history meant even less," she said.

But the history is there for all who visit the museum. The museum, which offers tours and workshops, has welcomed groups from as far away as Ohio and Canada. Moody Lewis also runs a traveling education program in Staten Island public schools.

Walking through the neighborhood now, Sylvia Moody D'Alessandro, Moody Lewis' mother and a founding Sandy Ground board member, feels a deep sadness.

"I think it's Staten Island's loss and New York City's loss not to have kept that community intact."

Today, the once proud black colony is nearly all white.

Most of the new people moving in aren't even aware that this was once a black community," Moody Lewis said.



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