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**Guillotine**

**Lead: One of the most fearsome and famous methods of capital punishment was actually developed as a more humane and democratic way of execution. It is named for an obscure member of the French National Assembly, a young physician, Joseph-Ignace Guillotine.**

**Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.**

**Content: Decapitation as a means of execution has been a part of the human experience since the dawn of time. The quick easy removal of the victim's head brought a swift**

**conclusion to their earthly journey; a sharp blade, a heavy well-placed blow brought matters to a timely end. Mechanical devices for execution may have used in various European countries before 1300, but there is no evidence for this prior to the execution of Murcod Ballagh near Merton Ireland in 1307. By 1564 in Scotland such a mechanism was in common use. It was called “The Maiden,” and consisted of two grooved upright posts held together at the top by a cross-member and at the bottom by diagonal supports. The person to be offed was trussed-up, laid faced down with their neck lined up with the grooves. At the moment of execution, a very heavy oblique, steel-clad, iron blade held in lead-**

**lined wooden casing would be released and the victim's head would be quickly and painlessly severed from his torso.**

**For the most part decapitation, mechanical or otherwise, was reserved for the nobility and the upper classes. Lower class offenders, as a measure of social control, were treated to public hanging and even more gruesome forms of execution, such as drawing and quartering. During this exquisite torture an offender would be kept fully alive in terrible agony while his body was chopped up, stomach cut open and his entrails were placed, still steaming on his chest while the rest of the body was stretched and hacked to pieces.**

**One of the goals of the French Revolution which began in 1789 was to establish equality between citizens and eliminate many of the privileges of the nobility and clergy. This extended even to the practice of execution. On January 12, 1790, an obscure member of the French National Assembly, a young physician, Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotine, in the second day of debate on the new Penal Code, made a series of motions that regulated capital punishment in order to advance the leveling cause of democracy. Torture was banned and decapitation was deemed to be the sole means of execution in France and it was to be accomplished by a**

**“simple mechanism.”**

**At first called the Louisette or Louison, and later known in the French underworld as The Widow, after its first use in April 1792 to execute a robber in Paris' Place de Grève, people called the guillotine. It continued to be France's means of execution until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1980 France abandoned the death penalty, but before doing so it terminated the last person to die in the guillotine; in 1977. Research assistance by Christina Smith, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

## Resources

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**Soboul, Albert. *A Short History of the French Revolution, 1789-1799*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.**

**<http://www.metaphor.dk/guillotine/Pages/Guillot.html>**

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