

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

The Hanging of John (Pete) Montjoy

Excerpted from

History of
A Famous Scaffold
Used in the Last Legal Hanging in Kentucky

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THE HANGING OF JOHN (PETE) MONTJOY

If this old scaffold could talk, if trap doors could speak—what a story they could tell of the men who have met their doom by hanging by the neck until their squirming, twitching and dangling bodies became motionless.

If they could tell you of the last thoughts running through a condemned man's mind, would it be that he was thinking of his last few seconds here on earth, of the crimes he had committed, or of what he would find on the other side?

Dirty and cold, damp with the dew of a cold and miserable early morning, the old gallows silently awaited the time to send John (Pete) Montjoy out there across and beyond the Great Divide from which no traveler has ever returned.

The hangman's scaffold trap door that swung open to bring a strangling death to John (Pete) Montjoy, also brought an end to a court fight that lasted nearly three years. It was Kenton County's first prominent rape case of the century.

It was on the cold night of March 22, 1935, that a screaming, hysterical woman ran into the Kentucky Grill, in Covington's downtown business section, and told of being criminally attacked by a Negro while another looked on.

But a short time before, she had taken her husband, a railway mail clerk, to the Suspension Bridge on his way to work, she said. Then she had driven to a parking lot in the back of a night club building and parked her auto. Two Negroes approached, one of them pointed a gun and commanded her to "stick 'em up." Montjoy then robbed her and attempted to get the keys to her car. He threatened her and the attack followed, the woman related.

In the company of Detectives Leroy Hall and Albert Seiter, she went to Covington Police Headquarters and identified a picture of Montjoy as her attacker. Later, as they searched the city with the woman in a police cruiser, the detectives arrested Montjoy and Willie Black, a 16-year-old Huntington, W. Va., Negro, at Eighth and Washington streets. Charges of rape and armed robbery were placed against Montjoy. Black was charged with armed robbery.

Both Negroes signed written confessions later which absolved Black of actual participation in the attack and robbery. Black's case was transferred to the authorities who ordered him held to the Grand Jury.

A special session of the Kenton County Grand Jury indicted both Negroes.

Montjoy sat unmoved in Judge Johnst Northcutt's Kenton Circuit Courtroom when a jury returned the death verdict on the night of April 17, 1935. A packed courtroom heard the decision. Rushed to his cell by a corps of officers, Montjoy fell on his cell cot and sobbed.

A motion for a new trial was overruled by Judge Northcutt. An appeal to the Court of Appeals proved futile. The appellate court sustained the lower court in an opinion handed down March 17, 1936. Originally Montjoy was sentenced to hang June 28, 1935.

His appeal brought postponement of that date. The U. S. Supreme Court refused to review the case June 1, 1936.

Efforts to obtain a writ of habeas corpus from the U. S. District Court also were in vain. Judge H. Church Ford refused the writ. Montjoy's counsel then filed a petition in equity in Kenton Circuit Court asking for a new trial on the grounds that more new evidence had been found. This hearing was refused. The case again carried to the Court of Appeals in an appeal from the lower court's decision on the petition. The higher court affirmed the Kenton court's decision for a second time.

Governor A. B. Chandler then set the date when the original death verdict must be carried out.

As Montjoy walked to the scaffold, he left behind him one of the most thorough and lengthy court fights listed in Kenton judicial records, one that continued almost past a third anniversary of the crime for which he died on the famous gallows.

The 24-year-old Covington Negro was hanged in the courtyard of the Covington City Hall, December 17, 1937. He had been convicted of a criminal attack upon a white woman. The scaffold trap was sprung at 8:06 A.M. and Dr. James P. Riffe, Kenton County Coroner, and Dr. Clifford Heisel pronounced him dead fifteen minutes later from "strangulation not a broken neck."