

# Racist Roots

*Origins of North Carolina's Death Penalty*

## 'A Worthless, Good-for-Nothing Mammal': Painting Black Defendants as Animals

*By CDPL Staff*

**T**he use of animal imagery to describe Black criminal defendants plays into a long and brutal history of dehumanizing Black people. 20<sup>th</sup> century newspapers compared Black men to animals when covering their executions.



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Raleigh News and Observer, Saturday, 5th.

"I am sorry to my heart that I sinned," said Howard Craig in his cell at the State penitentiary yesterday morning. A few moments later the young gorilla-like negro was on his way down the corridor to the octagonal chamber where he paid with his life for the crime that he had committed.

It was horrible, the deed; swift was the punishment and sure. Out in the cotton fields of Stanly he had crept like a wild beast upon his innocent, unsuspecting victim, a fourteen-year-old white girl. A wild desperate struggle, the supremacy of brute force, the hot chase of infuriated whites, the capture, the intervention of the law in the hands of a quick-witted zealous sheriff, the trial, the sentence, and the days of waiting, condemned without hope of pardon or reprieve, the fateful chair, the whirring motor, and the whole story is told.

*News and Observer, 1904*

*“the young gorilla-like negro”*

*“like a wild beast”*

*“brute”*



he stumbled to his death, a great stupid, unlettered animal, too dense to know why, a victim of the instinct to fight back even though his enemy was too strong for him.

*Lincoln County News, 1920*



Fifty-two people looked on while John Goss squared his accounts with the law that he has violated throughout the most of his 41 years of life. It was the usual throng that snickered and joked as it waited and then fell dead silent when the spectacle of death was brought in before them. Half the number were beardless youths from State College who kept discreet silence when the warden wanted to know if any present were less than 21 years old.

Goss looked the part of the picture that "mean nigger" conjures up. Short, squat, thick-bodied, and with the face of a gorilla. Even the eyes were muddy with a diffusion of the color of his skin. He held them steadfastly open as death came steadily toward him, and when he was dead, he stared with stolid indifference toward the ceiling.

*News and Observer, 1923 (right next to a recipe for Christmas cookies)*

*"Gross looked the part of the picture that 'mean n[—]'*  
*conjures up. Short squat, thick-bodied and with the face of a*  
*gorilla"*



# Man Protests His Innocence

**John Andrew Roman, 30-  
Year-Old Negro, Fights  
As He Is Strapped In**

Outwardly, Roman was calm when he was led into the gas chamber yesterday morning. But his eyes betrayed the fear of a man staring death in the face. In them was that intangible something seen only in the eyes of a trapped animal; eyes that darted furtively from first one "captor" or guard, then another.

A medium-heavy mustache covered a full top lip that seemed firm, not tremulous. Roman's mouth was clamped tight and hard ridges rippled along either cheek as he obviously bit down hard on nothing.

The fight-back instinct of the

trapped animal surged to a climax when officials had finished strapping the young Negro in the grim wooden chair.

*News and Observer, 1952*

*“the eyes of a trapped animal; eyes that darted furtively from first one ‘captor’ or guard, then another”*

*“The fight-back instinct of the trapped animal surged to a climax”*



Prosecutors likewise compared Black defendants to animals at trial.

“He is a human hyena and should be treated as such,” said one of the prosecuting attorneys. This was the main basis of appeal. Judge Grady

*“He is a human hyena and should be treated as such.”*  
– Gates County prosecutor, 1926



Even in the era of the modern death penalty, prosecutors still use animal imagery and other dehumanizing slurs when arguing to juries why Black men should be executed.

“They were like a pack of humans acting as wolves when they descended on her (Mrs. Ritch),” Mr. Bowers told the jury. “They were the same pack that had descended on Seab Ritch.”

*Cabarrus County prosecutor, 1982*

*“a pack of humans acting as wolves when they descended on her”*



The defendant next contends references by the prosecutor to the defendant as an “animal” and to his environment as a “jungle” were so prejudicial as to warrant a new trial. We do not agree. During his closing argument the defense counsel himself referred to the defendant’s neighborhood as a “jungle” and to the defendant and his peers as “bulls” and “leaders of the pack.” We do not condone comparisons of criminal

*New Hanover County prosecutor, 1983*

*Called the defendant an “animal” and his neighborhood a “jungle”*



And what we thought he said was he was walking down the street, he stopped in the yard -- in front of the yard beside Jesse Wilson's house to tie his shoe string. And as he was bent down, he heard the first shot, he looked up at Jesse Wilson's house, he heard two more shots, and then he saw Rayford Burke run out of the house like a big black bull. Now, that was their own witness that told you that.

*Iredell County prosecutor, 1993*

*“like a big black bull”*



like the weasel that he is, he sprints away.

Or in this case, because he's a worthless,  
good for nothing mammal.

*Forsyth County prosecutor, 1995*

*“like the weasel that he is... a worthless, good for nothing mammal”*



## *Closing arguments begin*

JACKSONVILLE (AP) — The two men accused of killing state Rep. Leo Daughtry's aunt hunted her down and dragged her off like an animal, according to a prosecutor in his closing arguments.

"He who hunts with the pack is responsible for the kill," Assistant District Attorney Greg Butler said in Onslow County Superior Court Monday. "Just like the predators of the African plain, Antwoun Sims, Chris Bell and Chad Williams stalked their prey, caught and dragged it away and ultimately killed their prey."

Sims, 18, and Bell, 20, are charged with first-degree murder, first-degree kidnapping and burning of personal property in connection with the death of Elleze Kennedy, 89. Charges of assault with a deadly weapon-inflicting serious injury were dismissed Friday.

*Sampson County prosecutor, 2001*

*"just like the predators of the African plain."*



Playing games with the interviewers? Playing games with Detective Murphy and Agent Tilley? Trying to find out what they knew? Folks, this is a street-wise, Department-of-Corrections-honed thug. He's gonna sit and

*Cumberland County prosecutor, 2002*

*"a street-wise, Department-of-Corrections-honed thug"*

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## Next – States' Rights: How One Law Allowed a Scourge of Racist Death Sentences

The federal government plays a critical role in upholding our nation's promise of equality. The Fourteenth Amendment, which granted due process and equal protection, was passed during Reconstruction to protect newly freed people from racist state laws.

Nearly 100 years later, the federal government again stepped in to protect Black Americans from the continued racism of state courts and legislatures. While Strom Thurmond and George Wallace railed against federal interference with "states' rights," Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Supreme Court enshrined the victories of the Civil Rights Era, desegregating schools, increasing protections for those accused of crimes, and, in 1972, temporarily abolishing of the death penalty.

Like mid-century segregationists, the AEDPA exalts the autonomy of states at the expense of marginalized people. When state courts allow injustice to flourish, the AEDPA prevents federal courts from acting as the backstop they should be.

Today, however, federal courts offer little protection against racist death sentences handed down in state courts. This is due largely to one law: the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act. Like mid-century segregationists, the AEDPA exalts the autonomy of states at ...

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*Racist Roots* is a project of the [Center for Death Penalty Litigation](#), in collaboration with scholars, advocates, historians, artists, poets and people directly affected by the death penalty. It aims to place North Carolina's modern death penalty within the context of 400 years of history and to expose its deep entanglement with the aims of white supremacy. This project is the result of more than a year of research, writing, and relationship building. [Read about our sources](#). This project would not be possible without [the generous support of many individuals and foundations](#).

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