

The First Public Execution in Seneca County

The public execution of George Chapman at Waterloo on May 28, 1828, has often been chronicled as the first hanging ever made in Seneca County. According to an old history, however, that execution was preceded by the hanging of a man named Andrews at Ovid between the years 1810 and 1812. Andrews murdered an assistant with whom he worked in a distillery and after trial and conviction in Court of Chancery was convicted and hanged near the village of Ovid, probably during the year 1811, although the records in the county clerk's office in Seneca County do not extend back far enough to record the trial and conviction.

Older citizens remember that years afterwards the stumps of the gallows remained standing and often were pointed out, in a vacant lot, as some one recalled the sickening details of the trial of Chapman. Seventeen years later, the names of the judges became known. There were three judges sitting in judgment of the accused man: Circuit Judge Daniel Mosley; First Judge Luther Stevens, counsel for the people. James Clark, the District Attorney, assisted by Thompson, Whiting and Park.

That the prisoner was ably defended is noticeable when the records show that he had four attorneys: Hulbert, Mott, Stryker and Knox. Seventeen witnesses were examined and the case finally submitted to the following named jurors: John Norris, Aurey Marsh, Abiel Cook, John White, Tyler Smith, Israel Haines, Benjamin Cuddebeck, Robert Livingston, Garvin Stevenson, Peter Whitmore, George Bachman and Jacob Sell.

The hanging of Chapman for the murder of a colored man took place early in the morning of the spring of 1828. The day before the execution people began to arrive from miles around the countryside. They came in ox-carts, four horse teams, by boat and packet, and many sleep out-of-doors as there were no accommodations for the visitors. Grattis C. De Yoe, now deceased, told the writer that 10,000 persons witnessed the hanging of Chapman.

He, a little fellow then, climbed up a tree, saw the procession headed by the Fayette Rifles, a local company. Sheriff James Rorison, with the prisoner and his spiritual advisor, the Rev. Aaron D. Lane, came across the village common through the street now known as Locust Street to the island where the gallows had been erected.

Chapman walked up the steps to the platform, though infirm, and remained standing with Rev. Mr. Lane gave him spiritual comfort. Finally the sheriff handed him a red bandana handkerchief which he held in his hands for a few seconds, cropped it and his body shot down through the trap and into eternity.

The throng that witnessed the crude taking of human life that day in May came all through the night before. They thronged to banks of the river, the bridges and the roofs of adjacent dwellings and the roofs of nine stores on Main Street in the village of Waterloo were black with people. Mr. De Yoe describing it said, "Trees around the spot were so filled with sight-seers that they looked as if they were covered with blackbirds."

Several years later a man by the name of Johnson was hanged in the Seneca County jail, but the first two were the only public hangings in Seneca County.

[The above is simply a typed version of an article from a source simply identified as "C-H May 1956" in the Seneca County Historian's Office. Should anyone be able to identify this source, please contact the County Historian's Office.]