

The Murder of Sukey Gray

William Winkfield was a Free Man of Color and Sukey Gray was a Free Woman of Color. Both lived in Prince William County and both were Slave owners. Each, in the two years prior to 1826, had charged each other and their Slaves with criminal conduct. Hard feelings finally culminated on the 2nd day of July 1826 when Will Winkfield beat Sukey to death with his fists.

An inquest was held on the body of Sukey Gray, and the evidence presented to a Grand Jury who returned a "True bill" and ordered that Will Winkfield be indicted for premeditated murder or murder in the first degree. He was also ordered held in the Brentsville Jail until the outcome of the trial.

The case was scheduled for trial, and the usual eighteen fit and discreet legally qualified freeholders were there as prospective jurors. All the eighteen were questioned as were the legal freeholders there as bystanders, and only six were elected to hear the case. These six jurors were then ordered to be sequestered in Brentsville. A deputy sheriff was ordered to stay with the six and keep them together "without separation except on occasions of indispensable necessity." The deputy was also directed to "not hold any communication with them or permit others to do so." He was also to bring the six back to court tomorrow morning at ten o'clock.

The next day September 26, 1826, in the Superior Court the prisoner was again led to the bar in the custody of the sheriff. The deputy sheriff along with the six jurors also reported to the court. Another eighteen prospective jurors were brought into court and again the case had to be continued until the next day because the defendant and his lawyer would only select four out of the second group of eighteen freeholders. A deputy was mandated to take the selected jurors, now numbering ten, and to sequester them again with all the same rules as yesterday. He was also ordered to present them at the court the following day.

On the next morning, Winkfield was again brought into court along with the sheriff and twelve more prospective jurors. Out of this jury pool, two jurors were selected and with the others from previous days made up the jury: John Kincheloe, Charles Chick, Benjamin Dyer, Richard Philips, Moses Mathews, Benjamin Pridmore, George Copin, Moses Arnold, Rowland Florance, John Lee, William Abel and William Bridwell. With the jury finally set, all twelve were again sequestered with the same rules as stated above on the first day.

On the fourth day of the trial, the case was finally started, and the evidence presented to the jury. William was found guilty of murder in the second degree; his punishment would be the infliction of ninety stripes on his bare back. The first thirty stripes were to be inflicted a day after the trial at the public whipping post between the hours of ten a.m. and two p.m. The second thirty stripes were to be well laid on his bare back on the fourteenth of the next month. The thirty last stripes were to be inflicted sixteen days after the second thirty, and further, when the corporal punishment was completed, he was to be sold as a Slave and "banished without the limits of the United States."

The distribution of the punishment by stripes was made at the request of the prisoner and his counsel. Because of the present infirm state of his health, his life might be endangered from the infliction of the whole number of stripes at one time.

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