

Guillotine History

The history of the guillotine started long before the French Revolution, but when and where exactly, nobody knows. Guillotine like machines seem to have functioned in Germany, Great Britain and Italy before 1300, but there is no clear evidence to prove this. The earlier machines replaced the axe, but the guillotine replaced the sword.

- 1307 1/4/1307 The first evidence of the existence of a guillotine like machine used at the execution of Murcod Ballagh near to Merton in Ireland.



The execution of Murcod Ballagh near to Merton in Ireland 1307. (Picture British Museum)

- 1400 The Halifax Gibbet, a precursor to the guillotine was used in Halifax, England, at executions on market-days. May have functioned as early as 1280. The last execution with the Halifax gibbet took place in 1648.
- 1564 The Maiden was constructed and used in Scotland. It was based on the Halifax Gibbet.
- 1789 10/10/1789 On the second day of the Assembly debate about the Penal Code, Dr Guillotin submitted a proposition in six articles which included a recommendation that death, without the accompaniment of torture and by means of decapitation, should become the sole and standard form of capital punishment in France.
- 1791 3/6/1791 The Assembly approved a text providing that "Every person condemned to the death penalty shall have his head severed".
- 1792 10/4/1792 Roederer (Procureur général syndic) and Tobias Schmidt (a german harpsichord maker) reached a happy accord: 960 francs was to cover the cost of manufacturing the machine, the sum moreover providing for a leather bag in which to dispose of the severed head.

11/4/1792 It was on this Friday afternoon, the first real guillotine was set up, in the Cour du Commerce, rue Saint-André-des-Arts. It was tried out on sheep and calves. The blade was not the oblique one yet. It may have been curved like that of an axe, or even straight. Tobias Schmidt the maker of this prototype, had his workshop there, just opposite the printing office in number 8, where Marat had *Ami du Peuple* printed.

15/4/1792 The first test on human corpses at a combined hospital, prison and old peoples home, at Bicêtre. 3 cadavers were beheaded successfully.

19/4/1792 Guidon went out to Bicêtre to fix the newly conceived blade in position.

21/4/1792 The improved machine was again tried out at Bicêtre. Three corpses were carefully selected from the military hospital in order to obtain, if possible, well-built men who had died in an accident or of some short illness which had not caused them to grow thin.

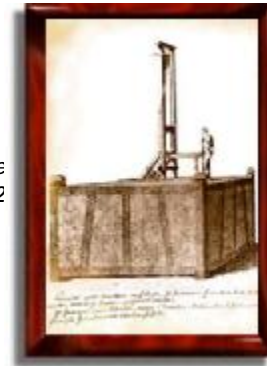
25/4/1792 Nicolas-Jacques Pelletier was executed on the place de Grève. Sanson operated the machine in dead earnest for the first time. It was not well received by the crowd who called for the return of the gallows.

5/6/1792 The architect Giraud submitted his report requested by Roederer. The report said: "Although well conceived in itself, it has not been perfected to the fullest possible extent.

The grooves, the tongues and the gudgeons are of wood; the first should be made of brass, the others of iron; the hooks to which are attached the cords holding up the mouton are only fixed with round-headed nails; they should be fixed with strong nuts and bolts."

21/8/1792 The guillotine was installed at the place du Carroussel, where it stayed until May 7th 1793 with some interruptions, such as the execution of the king, which took place at Place de la Révolution

Illustration shows the document which accompanied each of the machines supplied to the provinces in 1792



23/09/1792 French Revolution Calendar is declared as official calendar of France.

1793 21/1/1793 Louis Capet (Louis XVI, king of France) was executed at Place de la Révolution (now place de la Concorde)

16/10/1793 Marie Antoinette (Queen of France) executed at the Place de la Révolution (now place de la Concorde) Near the gate of the Tuileries garden.

1794 9/6/1794 The Guillotine is installed on the place de la Bastille, but only for a very short time. On June 11th. it was moved to the barrière du Trône (now Place de la Nation).

1806 01/01/1806 The French Revolution Calendar is banned

1843 Nicolas Roch, grandson of Antoine, replaces François Desmorets as executioner at Lons-le-Saulnier.

1847 Louis Deibler succeeds Clément Sanson, who is dismissed. He is the first man to graduate from assistant executioner to executioner for all France.

1853 Nicolas Roch is promoted to executioner at Amiens. He is the successor to Henri Ganier.

1854 4/4/1854 M. Joseph Tussaud returns to London with a guillotine he had bought from Clément Sanson. The guillotine was to become a part of the Tussauds Waxworks.

1870 Leon Berger, an assistant executioner and carpenter, improves and develops a new guillotine between 1870 and 1872. Among the improvements are the spring system, which stops the mouton at the bottom of the groves, and the lock/blocking device on the lunette. The new release mechanism for the blade, was also developed by Berger. All guillotines built after 1870 are made according to Berger's design.

1872 Nicolas Roch now occupies the post of executioner at Paris itself. His five assistants include MM. Berger, Ganier and Desfourneaux.

1878 Roch installes a wooden shield at the top of the machine, to mask the knife from the sight of the approaching victim. A novelty suppressed by M. Deibler, when he replaces Roch.

1879 Louis Deibler succeeds Nicolas Roch.

1898 Anatole Deibler succeeds his father Louis Deibler.

1905 June 28th Languille is executed at 5.30 a.m. Dr Beaurieux conducts an experiment on the severed head.

1932 May 7th: Prisoner Eugène Boyer receives clemency just as the assistants of Anatole Deibler are conducting him to the guillotine on Bvd. Arago outside the Santé prison.

1939 February 2nd Anatole Deibler collapses with a fatal heart attack while waiting for his train at Métro Porte de St Cloud. He was setting off to execute Pilorges in the provinces. The last public execution in France. On June 17th Weidmann is guillotined outside the Prison St. Pierre in Versailles.

24/6/1939 In accordance with a new law executions are no longer held in public, but have to take place (in Paris) in the yard of the Santé prison.

1951 André Obrecht is chosen from more than four hundred applicants when the post as Bourreau falls vacant.

1976 Marcel Chevalier succeeds André Obrecht, and remains on duty until the abolition of the death penalty in 1981.

1977 The last official use of the guillotine in France. On the 10th of September Hamida Djandoubi is executed. (May it never be used again.)