

Alabama executes Derrick Dearman by lethal injection

Kevin Reed
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On Thursday, the state of Alabama executed Derrick Dearman by lethal injection at the William C. Holman Correctional Facility in Atmore, which is some 120 miles southwest of Montgomery, on the border with Florida. The time of death was recorded at 6:14 p.m. Central Time.

A report in *USA Today* said:

The execution began just before 6:00pm CT and Dearman appeared to lose consciousness in a matter of minutes. It took “two sticks” to gain access to the two IV lines that carried the deadly cocktail that ended Dearman’s life.

Dearman was executed after he pleaded guilty in 2018 to charges of capital murder and kidnapping for killing five members of his then-girlfriend’s family in Mobile County on August 20, 2016. Court records state that he used an ax, a .45 caliber handgun and a shotgun in the massacre at a home in Citronelle, near Mobile.

Witnesses to the execution said that after the curtain covering the window looking into the death chamber was opened, Dearman could be seen lying cruciform on a gurney, with his head slightly elevated. Two IV lines led from the death chamber through a small square hole to the control room. One IV line went into Dearman’s inner left elbow. The location of the other line could not be seen.

Dearman, 36, was covered by a tightly tucked white sheet and he was wearing khaki prison garb. The straps holding him to the gurney crisscrossed his chest.

A report in the *Montgomery Advertiser* said that once the execution began, Dearman “raised his head and appeared to speak to the three corrections officers in the

chamber.” After he appeared to lose consciousness, Dearman’s “abdomen fluttered several times.”

The article continued: “A guard approached Dearman, bent down and did a consciousness check by yelling Dearman’s name into his left ear, raking his thumb across Dearman’s left eyelid and pinching and twisting the shin of his inner left elbow.”

Although Dearman’s left arm moved slightly after the consciousness check, Alabama Corrections Commissioner John Hamm said he was not awake and the arm movement was not a sign of consciousness.

Under the influence of drugs and in a rage, Dearman murdered his girlfriend’s brother, Joseph Adam Turner, 25; Turner’s wife, Shannon Melissa Randall, 35; Randall’s brother, Robert Lee Brown, 26; Randall’s niece, Chelsea Randall Reed, 22; Reed’s husband, Justin Kaleb Reed, 23; and the couple’s unborn baby.

The day before the killing, Joseph Turner brought Dearman’s girlfriend to their home after Dearman became abusive toward her, according to a judge’s sentencing order. Dearman had shown up at the home multiple times that night asking to see his girlfriend and was told he could not stay there.

Sometime after 3:00 a.m., Dearman returned when the victims were asleep, according to the sentencing order. Dearman attacked the victims one by one with an ax taken from the yard and then with a gun found in the home, prosecutors said. He forced his girlfriend, who survived, to get in the car with him and drive to Mississippi.

Six months prior to the setting of an execution date, Dearman wrote a series of letters to state officials, including Attorney General Steve Marshall, stating that he had dropped all appeals, fired his appellate attorneys and requested his death sentence be carried out so the victims and their families could get the justice that he

agreed they deserved.

Marshall, a Republican, said Dearman’s request to halt appeals and proceed with the execution was “appropriate in the interest of justice and finality for the families.” He went on:

As a jury of his peers unanimously agreed, the gruesome facts of this case merited the ultimate punishment. Dearman viciously struck his victims with an ax, leaving them conscious and suffering for some time before he executed each at close range. Dearman showed no pity and no mercy.

On October 14, Dearman said in statement:

I am willingly giving all that I can possibly give to try and repay a small portion of my debt to society for the terrible things that I have done. From this point forward, I hope that the focus will not be on me, but rather on the healing of all the people that I have hurt.

A post on the website of the Equal Justice Initiative—the legal nonprofit that Dearman fired this spring—said that on the day of the murders, Dearman “had been hearing voices, believed that people were ‘after’ him, had used a large amount of methamphetamine, and had not slept for six days.”

The Equal Justice Initiative statement added:

Derrick Dearman stopped his appeals only after a lifetime of severe mental illness and suicidal behavior that Alabama courts have repeatedly ignored. The State of Alabama now plans to execute him despite serious questions about the constitutionality of his conviction and death sentence.

Equal Justice Initiative Director Bryan Stevenson said:

Subjecting people with serious mental illness to the death penalty raises huge concerns in a nation that seeks to protect human rights. Important questions about a defendant’s competency to stand trial, the validity of a guilty plea, and whether the level of moral culpability necessary for the death penalty can be assigned to people impaired by delusions, hallucinations, or other symptoms of serious mental disorders—all issues in Derrick Dearman’s case—have been left unanswered.

Stevenson continued:

The Constitution requires courts to resolve these questions before sentencing someone to death. However, in Mr. Dearman’s case, no Alabama court even conducted a hearing to evaluate his competency to plead guilty, waive his right to counsel, or stop his appeals, despite the fact that he has suffered from serious mental illness and suicidal ideation throughout his life.

There are currently 161 inmates on Death Row in Alabama, including five women.

Dearman was the fifth person executed in Alabama this year. Kenneth Smith, who was the first inmate killed using nitrogen gas in the US, was executed in January, triggering outrage all over the world after he writhed on the gurney. The other Alabama executions in 2024 include Jamie Ray Mills, who was put to death by lethal injection in May despite evidence that prosecutors falsified the case against him, 64-year-old Keith Edmund Gavin by lethal injection in July, and Alan Eugene Miller in September by nitrogen pumped through a gas mask.



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