

South Carolina executes Marion Bowman, Jr.: “I’m innocent of the crimes I’m here to die for”

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The state seal of South Carolina includes an image of Spes, the Roman goddess of hope, accompanied by the words “Dum Spiro Spero,” Latin for “While I Breathe, I Hope.” On Friday, January 31, the state carried out the execution of Marion Bowman, Jr., snuffing out his breath and life. He had spent more than half of his life on death row.

Bowman’s was the first US execution of 2025 and the third in South Carolina since 2011, when the state unofficially halted executions as pharmaceutical companies stopped supplying lethal injection drugs, fearing public concern over suffering of those executed. The state restocked its supply of deadly drugs after it passed a law in 2023 shielding the identity of suppliers.

The execution comes in the context of a Trump executive order calling for a sweeping expansion of the death penalty.

Bowman was convicted of the 2001 killing of Kandee Martin, 21, a childhood friend. Now 44, he was 20 years old when he was arrested for the murder. He has consistently maintained his innocence.

The condemned inmate was led into the execution chamber at the Broad River Correctional Institution for men in Columbia just after 6 p.m. local time. According to media witnesses, he was strapped to a gurney and blanketed with a sheet. After he was injected with a lethal dose of the sedative pentobarbital, his breathing became heavy and his head bobbed up and down before he became still around 6:07 p.m. He was pronounced dead by prison staff at 6:27 p.m.

Bowman’s final statement was read by his attorney Boyd Young. It read, in part:

I did not kill Kandee Martin. I’m innocent of the crimes I’m here to die for...

I know that Kandee’s family is in pain. They are justifiably angry. If my death brings them some relief and ability to focus on the good times and funny

stories, then I guess it will have served a purpose. I hope they find peace...

To my family, friends, and supporters, I have nothing to give, but I have gained so much. I have tried to give a good return on your investment with love and care...

Over the years I have learned that we are labeled as the worst of the worst. None of these guys that I have gotten to know and grown to love are the people that they were when they had their moment that cost them everything.

If the world could see us in our day to day, they would have a different view of the death penalty. We all pray for grace and forgiveness, but the outside world is stuck with images of monsters perpetrated by the state, while our real voices are silenced.

The primary witnesses against Bowman were two men charged in connection with the crime who received reduced sentences, plus a third man who had pending charges in a separate case that were subsequently dropped.

Bowman’s current legal team argued that the state had withheld evidence casting doubt on the reliability of the witnesses, including a memo outlining a claim that one of the witnesses had confessed to the shooting.

His defense also argued in a petition that the lawyer who represented him at trial had been “infected by his own racism.” At trial, Bowman’s lawyer referred to the victim as a “little white girl,” even though at the time she was 21 and Bowman was 20. The defense team wrote that the lawyer pressured Bowman to plead guilty because he was black and Martin was white.

Bowman’s legal team also raised that an anesthesiologist who reviewed the autopsy records of Richard Moore, the inmate executed in South Carolina previous to Bowman, said that fluid found in his lungs made it appear that Moore

“consciously experienced feelings of drowning and suffocation during the 23 minutes that it took to bring about his death.”

Bowman refused to plead guilty to a murder he said he did not commit. In a statement in December 2024 he said that his cousin, James Gadson, known to Bowman as “Gap,” killed Martin. He wrote:

There were a lot of things the jury didn’t know because the prosecutor and my lawyers didn’t tell them. First, the State’s star witness, Gap, confessed to the murder of Kandee in jail. The jury never heard anything about this. A person in the jail, Ricky Davis, without any connection to the case wrote a statement that Gap confessed that he killed Kandee. [The prosecutor’s] investigator even went and talked to him and he told him the same thing. But the jury never heard that because neither the prosecutor nor my lawyers called him or anyone else that heard Gap confess to the stand.

Bowman also wrote that four months after he was arrested on February 17, 2001 a gun was discovered at his house despite not being found during two previous searches. “My wife, my sisters, and my dad were all arrested and charged as accessories so the police and the prosecutor, Walter Bailey, could threaten them with jail if they did not make harmful statements against me and testify for the state in my trial.”

The South Carolina Supreme Court called Bowman’s appeal “meritless.” The US Supreme Court rejected his petition relating to his trial counsel’s “biases.” Bowman courageously refused to ask Republican Governor Henry McMaster to commute his sentence to life in prison, as doing so would be an acknowledgement of his guilt.

As his execution approached, Bowman spoke out about the inhumane conditions at the Broad River state prison. For the last four and a half months of his life, he was placed on “execution watch,” locked in a solitary cell narrower than his arm span and cut off from nearly all human interaction.

Speaking to the *Guardian*, Boyd Young, one of Bowman’s attorneys, summarized a recent conversation he had with Bowman about these conditions. The *Guardian* recounted:

He is locked behind two doors—an outer one with a window that guards can peer through and an inner one of bars. There’s a slot with a tray that slides in

and out with meals, which must be eaten alone. If he wants a toilet brush to clean, it goes on the same tray as his food...

There’s no desk. He had to give up many possessions, but what he was allowed to keep all sits on the floor—clothes, food, towels, an antenna television that plays a few local channels. The only place he can sit is his steel bunk. ... He never has privacy as a guard is consistently watching him, making him reluctant to wash his body by hand. At times, the lights have been on 24/7.

He is supposed to get one-hour recreation time five days a week, but it is inconsistent, and when he does go out, he exercises alone in a cage resembling a dog kennel enclosure.

There are currently 31 prisoners on South Carolina’s death row. The state is determined to keep its assembly line of death in operation, vowing to clear its “backlog” as prisoners exhaust their appeals. The state Supreme Court will allow an execution every five weeks.

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While on death row, Bowman began to write poetry. His “While I Breathe” poignantly takes aim at the South Carolina motto “Dum Spiro Spero”:

Grandma would say “as long as you got air in your body, you got hope.”

While I breathe, I hope.

Does this mean my breath should cease as I lose my hope?

Time seems to both speed up and stop.

While I breathe, I hope.

Doors continue to close, slamming with a resounding bang.

While I breathe, I hope.

With my hope gone, Do I cease to breathe?

Dum Spiro Spero.

Grandma didn’t know Latin, but she sure knew faith.

I’m still breathing, so this I know

While I breathe, I hope.

—Marion Bowman, Jr.



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