

21043 Virginia all but certain to become first southern state to abolish death penalty

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Virginia is all but certain to become the first state of the old Confederate south to abolish the death penalty, after the house of delegates voted to end the ultimate punishment which it has practised since 1608.

The vote in the Democrat-controlled house by 57 votes to 41 makes abolition assured. Virginia's governor has made clear that he will sign the abolition bill.

The decision to scrap the death penalty is hugely significant on a number of levels. Virginia is now set to become the 23rd state in the union to turn its back on capital punishment, having been the first in the nation to carry out an execution in 1608.

"Today's vote in the house of delegates to abolish capital punishment is a landmark in the history of Virginia," said Michael Stone, executive director of Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty. "It is a repudiation of the long and violent policy and we look forward to Governor Northam signing this bill into law."

In the course of more than four centuries, Virginia has executed more people than any other state – a total of 1,390 men and women. That is more even than Texas, a state renowned for its fondness for judicial killings, which has put to death 1,325.

But the most seismic nature of Friday's vote is that it will render Virginia the first state of the former Confederate south to turn its back on capital punishment. That fact is not just historically important in that the death penalty emerged out of the south as a legalized alternative to lynching, it is also profoundly significant today when former Confederate states still account for 80% of all present-day executions.

The successful passage of abolition legislation through both the Virginia house and senate came after many years of campaigning. Advocates for repeal addressed the commonwealth's dark racial past in which executions were largely reserved for African American males.

Between 1800 and 1920, Virginia executed 625 black and 58 white people. In the more contemporary era, between 1900 and 1969 the state put to death 68 men for rape or attempted rape.

In every one of those cases the prisoners who were killed mainly in the electric chair were black. No white man was ever executed in Virginia for rape or attempted rape.

Two men remain on Virginia's death row. Should abolition be enacted, they would have their death sentences commuted to life in prison with no chance of parole.