



Joseph-Ignace Guillotin was a French medical doctor who opposed the death penalty. So how did it happen that the execution device most-associated with the French Revolution - the guillotine - end-up bearing his name?

During the early days of the Revolution, and before, the preferred method to execute members of the French nobility was beheading. That procedure was carried-out by an axe or a sword. Not only was that process painful, it often took the executioner more than one attempt to accomplish the deed. (Mary, Queen of Scots, comes to mind. The executioner needed three strokes of his axe to end her life.)

In 1789, while serving as a member of the French *Assemblée Constituante*, Dr. Guillotin's main concerns were about medical reforms. Opposed to the death penalty, however, he was also worried about the painful deaths people were enduring (whether by beheading or hanging). On the 10th of October, while debating how people were being put to death, Guillotine proposed a different way:

...the criminal shall be decapitated; this will be done solely by means of a simple mechanism.

What was the "mechanism?"

A "machine that beheads painlessly."

Guillotine's proposal for improving the *status quo* also appeared in a periodical known as *Actes des Apôtres* ("Acts of the Apostles"), a Royalist journal.

Dr. Guillotine wasn't just concerned about the methods employed during public executions. He believed that huge crowds, which gathered for the gruesome spectacles, were inappropriate (especially for families and children).

A couple months after suggesting that a simple, less-painful mechanism should be used to decapitate a condemned criminal, Dr. Guillotine reportedly made an off-the-cuff comment in a follow-up speech on capital punishment:

Now, with my machine, I cut off your head in the twinkling of an eye, and you never feel it!

It was the 1st of December, 1789 - when he made that remark - and from then forward the device invented by Antoine Louis has been called "the guillotine."

The doctor's family was so upset about the association of their name with the main symbol of the "Reign of Terror" that they petitioned the French government to change the name of the killing machine. When that didn't happen, the family changed their own name.

There was a doctor, whose name was Guillotine, who died by means of the device. But he was J.M.V. Guillotin (not J.I. Guillotine). The more-famous doctor lived until he was 75 and died of natural causes in 1814. His remains - with head intact - were buried in the Parisian cemetery at Père-Lachaise.

This image depicts a painting of Dr. Joseph-Ignace by an unknown French-School artist. It is maintained by the [Carnavalet Museum](#) in Paris.

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