

**‘To be Black is to be already mad’: Doctors called Clarence Pickett paranoid. A year later,
he was dead.**

While on furlough from his stay at Milledgeville State Hospital, it was not unusual for Rev. Clarence H. Pickett to walk around talking to himself.¹ He shouldered a history of drinking too much² and hearing voices,³ and sometimes reported that vigilantes were after him.⁴ So, when Pickett grew convinced in early December 1957 that someone was going to kill him,⁵ the other citizens of Columbus, Ga. probably did not give the preacher much of a second thought.

That was just Pickett. He was “insane.”⁶

But three weeks later, he was dead,⁷ and the man who killed him walked free.

Pickett was born on Nov. 25, 1909⁸ and quickly made a name for himself. He was a savant with a Bible in his hand, and was preaching before crowds of church-goers in Atlanta’s Mount Vernon Baptist Church at only 20 years old.⁹ His passionate sermons caught the attention of other preachers and local media, with the Atlanta Daily World calling him a “rising young divine. His presence was, the paper reported, a highlight of the 1936 State Missionary Baptist Convention.”¹⁰

¹ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, testimony of Lillie Banks, Coroner’s Hearing, January 8, 1958, 104.

² *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, Record of Offenses, Recorder’s Court City of Columbus, Georgia, January 3, 1958, 23.

³ Testimony of Lillie Banks, Coroner’s Hearing, 104.

⁴ Clarence Horatious Pickett Milledgeville State Hospital Intake Form, Milledgeville State Hospital, 1958.

⁵ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, statement of Bessie Smith to Columbus Police Department, December 26, 1957, 32.

⁶ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, testimony of Bessie Smith, Coroner’s Hearing, January 8, 1958, 105.

⁷ Statement of Bessie Smith to Columbus Police Department, 32.

⁸ Department of Commerce and Labor-Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910-Population, accessed through Ancestry.com.

⁹ Mount Vernon Baptist Church, “A Historical Overview: 1915-Present,” 2024.

¹⁰ Taschereau Arnold, “Convention Hi-Lights,” Atlanta Daily World, November 12, 1936.

But by the time Pickett was 40 years old and living in Columbus, something had changed.

Neighbors still called him “Preacher,” but Pickett was no longer the teenage prodigy whose sermons filled the church’s pews. Instead, he struggled through his job as an advertisement salesman for the *Columbus World* newspaper¹¹ and often turned to alcohol, racking up a record of arrests for public drunkenness.¹² People believed he was “insane” and often spotted him roaming the streets talking to voices no one else could hear.¹³ So, Pickett found himself checked into the Milledgeville State Hospital¹⁴ — about 125 miles away from his home in Columbus — on Dec. 11, 1956, two days after he was arrested on a drunk charge for the 13th time since May 1952.¹⁵ Milledgeville State Hospital was the only mental hospital in Georgia and the largest in the world, housing over 12,000 patients.¹⁶ A doctor assessed Pickett upon entry, and common practice would have included comparing his symptoms to the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: Mental Disorders*.¹⁷ Flipping through the manual, a doctor would have been greeted with a laundry list of options. But after glancing at Pickett — a six-foot Black man weighing in around 160 pounds¹⁸ — the doctor assessing the preacher likely did not

¹¹ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, statement of Percy L. Taylor to Columbus Police Department, December 26, 1957, 33.

¹² Record of Offenses, 23.

¹³ Testimony of Lillie Banks, Coroner’s Hearing, 104.

¹⁴ Clarence Horatious Pickett Milledgeville State Hospital Intake Form.

¹⁵ Record of Offenses, 23.

¹⁶ Kylie Smith. Interview by Madi Olivier of the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University. Personal interview. Atlanta, Georgia, November 20, 2024. Smith is the director of the Center for Healthcare History and Policy. She is also the Andrew W. Mellon faculty fellow for nursing and the humanities and associate faculty in the history department at Emory University. She expects to publish her book, “Jim Crow in the Asylum: Psychiatry and Civil Rights in the American South,” next year. (Hereafter cited as Interview with Kylie Smith).

¹⁷ The American Psychiatric Association published the first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1952. Today, psychiatrists across the United States and Australia use the fifth edition of the DSM as a set of standardized diagnostic criteria for mental disorders.

¹⁸ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, Clarence Horatious Pickett autopsy report, December 23, 1957, 3.

feel the need to consult the manual to declare Pickett's diagnosis: schizophrenic reaction, paranoid type.¹⁹

Schizophrenia was a common but terrifying diagnosis at the time, and patients who received it faced extreme stigma.²⁰ Pickett was one of 874 patients admitted to the Milledgeville State Hospital with a schizophrenic reaction diagnosis during the institution's fiscal year ending in 1957, which lasted from July 1, 1956 and June 30, 1957.²¹ A total of 3,519 patients were admitted to the institution during this time, meaning doctors diagnosed about 24.84% as having schizophrenic reaction²² — a staggeringly high rate, considering the National Institute of Mental Health considers the modern prevalence of schizophrenia to sit between 0.25% and 0.64% in the United States.²³

For Pickett and other Black patients, however, the diagnosis was more than just scary — it was a metaphorical straight jacket. Throughout the 1950's, schizophrenia was considered a “white women's disease” because the depression and hysteria associated with the disorder at the time were believed to largely afflict housewives and mothers.²⁴ However, Pickett's admission to Milledgeville State Hospital in the latter half of the 1950's placed him in the middle of a transition of how psychiatrists viewed schizophrenia. By 1960, doctors' perception of schizophrenia completely flipped to that of a “Black person's disease,”²⁵ a phenomenon that became known as “protest psychosis.”²⁶ If a Black patient spoke of being mistreated due to their race, Southern doctors believed they must have been delusional and schizophrenic — paranoid,

¹⁹ Clarence Horatious Pickett Milledgeville State Hospital Intake Form.

²⁰ Interview with Kylie Smith.

²¹ *One Hundred and Fourteenth Annual Report of the Milledgeville State Hospital*, Georgia Archives, 1957, “Diagnostic Grouping of All Patients Admitted During the Fiscal Year,” 21.

²² Ibid.

²³ National Institute of Mental Health, “Schizophrenia,” 2024.

²⁴ Interview with Kylie Smith.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jonathan Metz, *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease*, 2009.

even. “Schizophrenia as a diagnosis is very much like a form of social control,” said Kylie Smith, an expert in psychiatry during the Jim Crow era.²⁷ “It was just an easy way to categorize people that you did not want to engage with. So, when people are saying, ‘I don’t want to be here. I have rights. You should let me out. Stop holding me against my will, you white person,’ it’s very easy to say, ‘Well, you’re paranoid and delusional, and therefore you have schizophrenia.’”

The doctors at Milledgeville were especially susceptible to leaning on these racist practices surrounding schizophrenia diagnoses. Many of the doctors²⁸ were elite Cubans who were strongly against Marxist ideals and fled their home country after the Cuban Revolution, leaving them especially unsympathetic toward Black patients.²⁹ Additionally, most of the Cuban doctors were general physicians by training and were not licensed to practice general medicine in the United States, much less psychiatry.³⁰ Therefore, doctors at Milledgeville State Hospital were already diagnosing Black patients with schizophrenia at a higher rate than white patients when Pickett was admitted in the fiscal year ending in 1957. About 23.80% of the 2,580 white patients admitted to the institution during that time were diagnosed as having schizophrenic reactions, while about 27.99% of the 929 Black patients admitted received the diagnosis.³¹ This came in tandem with the early stages of racial reckoning in the South in 1957 — about 625 miles away in Little Rock, Ark., federal troops stood outside Central High School at the demand of former U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower to maintain order as Black teenagers entered the school as students for the first time.³²

²⁷ Interview with Kylie Smith.

²⁸ In his series of articles covering Milledgeville State Hospital for the Atlanta Journal Constitution, Jack Nelson also reported that a quarter of doctors at the institution had their own histories of drug and alcohol abuse.

²⁹ Interview with Kylie Smith.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *One Hundred and Fourteenth Annual Report of the Milledgeville State Hospital*, Georgia Archives, 1957, 21.

³² Dwight Eisenhower, *Executive Order 10730: Providing Assistance for the Removal of an Obstruction of Justice Within the State of Arkansas*, September 23, 1957, 1.

As the Civil Rights Movement gained traction, the difference in diagnosis rates only grew more damning: Of the patients admitted during the fiscal year ending in 1960, 29.40% of white patients and 36.41% of Black patients were diagnosed as having schizophrenic reactions.³³ Also in 1960, four Black college students made headlines when they refused to leave Woolworth's Lunch Counter in Greensboro, N.C. until they were served. Their sit-in sparked more peaceful protests, and the diner was desegregated five months later.³⁴ In the fiscal year ending in 1965 — the year members of the Nation of Islam assassinated Malcom X during a rally and local police brutally attacked civil rights activists marching from Selma to Montgomery in protest of Black voter suppression³⁵ — 30.22% of admitted white patients and 62.43% of admitted Black patients were diagnosed as having schizophrenic reactions.³⁶

Therefore, it is not shocking that doctors in Milledgeville labeled Pickett as having a schizophrenic reaction: As far as they were concerned, the preacher likely would have been the perfect case study on the disorder. As a Black man hailing from Columbus — a city that was over 70% white in 1950³⁷ — Pickett was not one to shy away from defending himself: In 1957, he went on to yell at white police while being thrown in jail, calling them sons of bitches and head beaters.³⁸ If Pickett acted similarly upon his arrival at Milledgeville State Hospital in 1956, he would have been declaring exactly what doctors viewed as a sign of delusion: mistreatment at the hands of white people.

³³ *One Hundred and Seventeenth Annual Report of the Milledgeville State Hospital*, Georgia Archives, 1957, Letter from Assistant Medical Director Dr. Zeb Burrell to Superintendent Dr. T.G. Peacock, 16.

³⁴ “Freedom Struggle: Sitting For Justice: Woolworth’s Lunch Counter” webpage, Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

³⁵ “Civil Rights Movement Timeline,” History.com website, December 4, 2017.

³⁶ *One Hundred and Twenty-second Annual Report of the Milledgeville State Hospital*, Georgia Archives, 1965, “Admissions by Age at Admission, Admission Classification, Race, Sex, and Mental Disorder” and “Discharges by Age at Discharge, Admission Classification, Race and Sex,” 113 and 128.

³⁷ Georgia Census, State of Georgia, 58.

³⁸ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, Maurice L. Foshee case report, January 1, 1958, 40.

Racism went on to become a consistent theme throughout Pickett's time at Milledgeville State Hospital, where doctors generally believed that, unlike Black patients, white patients, especially men, could be rehabilitated and re-enter society as productive citizens.³⁹ Burdened by too many people and too little funding, the institution was forced to choose where to allocate its money. But in 1950's Georgia, the solution was clear: White patients were placed on the nice side of the campus in groups of dormitories around an orchard and permitted to gather outside and wander the grounds. White men learned skills such as woodworking and mechanics, while white women spent their days embroidering or doing laundry.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Black patients like Pickett had to spend hours in the heat growing crops and raising cattle, which they later had to kill in the slaughterhouse so the hospital could sell their products for profit.⁴¹ When they were not working in the field, the Black patients were usually locked inside run-down buildings near a swamp, as hospital administrators did not want "the crazy black people wandering around," Kylie Smith said.⁴² So many Black patients were placed in cramped rooms where there was not enough space to stand between the beds, and half-covered toilet stalls stood mere feet from the sleeping area.⁴³

Although white patients also faced poor psychiatric care, Black patients like Pickett faced the most brutal procedures.⁴⁴ During the fiscal year ending in 1957, Milledgeville State Hospital staff performed 26,211 electric shock treatments and 145 insulin treatments⁴⁵ — which entailed purposely placing patients in diabetic comas to calm them down⁴⁶ — as well as surgeries ranging

³⁹ Interview with Kylie Smith.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Photo of Washington Annex Building, Atlanta Journal Constitution, 1956.

⁴⁴ Interview with Kylie Smith.

⁴⁵ *One Hundred and Fourteenth Annual Report of the Milledgeville State Hospital*, Georgia Archives, 1957, "Surgery and Treatments," 33.

⁴⁶ Interview with Kylie Smith.

from two eye enucleations to one penile amputation and 40 circumcisions.⁴⁷ The hospital was hopelessly understaffed, leaving nurses to sometimes perform surgeries on patients.⁴⁸ So, Pickett likely regularly found himself lying on a table as nurses clad in white dresses held him down, placing a cloth over his face as shocks were sent through electrodes stuck to his scalp.⁴⁹ Nursing students training at Milledgeville recalled that patients' screams pierced through the air all night⁵⁰ as staff continuously used shock therapy to instill fear in patients as a form of control, especially among the Black population.⁵¹ Additionally, doctors gave White patients with schizophrenic reactions Thorazine, an expensive but ground-breaking drug that was released in 1954 and restores regular thinking in patients with schizophrenia.⁵² But Black patients like Pickett were not given the luxury of receiving this medication: White patients could more often afford to pay for the drug, and doctors did not want to waste the medication on Black patients, who they typically did not believe could be rehabilitated into productive citizens.⁵³

However, after exactly seven months in Milledgeville State Hospital, Pickett saw a rare light at the end of the tunnel: He was released on furlough,⁵⁴ meaning someone — likely his sister — advocated for his release.⁵⁵ Pickett was one of 90 Black men diagnosed as having a schizophrenic reaction released on furlough that year, making up only about 12% of such

⁴⁷ *One Hundred and Fourteenth Annual Report of the Milledgeville State Hospital*, "Surgery and Treatments," 29-30.

⁴⁸ Jack Nelson, "Report on Milledgeville State Hospital," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 25, 1959.

⁴⁹ Photo of Dr. John Bradley and Dr. Veronica Murphy administering electroconvulsive therapy in Milledgeville State Hospital, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 1940.

⁵⁰ Gail Godwin. Interview by Madi Olivier of the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University. Personal interview. Atlanta, Georgia, November 20, 2024. Godwin is a retired assistant professor of nursing at Georgia College & State University. She co-wrote an oral history study on psychiatric clinical experiences, based on interviews with Georgia Baptist Hospital School of Nursing graduates about their psychiatric nursing rotation at Milledgeville State Hospital in the 1960's. (Hereafter cited as Interview with Gail Godwin).

⁵¹ Interview with Kylie Smith.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Clarence Horatious Pickett Milledgeville State Hospital Intake Form.

⁵⁵ Interview with Kylie Smith.

patients.⁵⁶ Unlike Pickett, many of these patients did not go home and were instead contracted out to work for local white farmers under the peonage system.⁵⁷ White patients with the same diagnosis had a better chance at actually going home on furlough: 29% of the men and 47% of the women were released.⁵⁸ On top of the fact that the white patients were more likely to have family who could afford to travel and advocate for their release,⁵⁹ society viewed Black psychiatric patients as more dangerous than their white counterparts. This put social and political pressure on hospitals like the institution in Milledgeville to not release Black patients.⁶⁰

But Pickett was one of the lucky ones. His sister, Lillie Banks, was at home ready to act as his guardian.⁶¹ Other members of the community also stood in his corner, including his long-time friend Bessie Smith, who visited Pickett every month during his time in the hospital,⁶² and his boss Percy L. Taylor.⁶³ Upon his release on June 11, 1957,⁶⁴ doctors told Banks her brother would be fine as long as she could keep him away from alcohol.⁶⁵ Although Banks admitted this was a somewhat tough job since her brother would still “take him some beer,”⁶⁶ Pickett appeared to get along better: While he still heard voices, Pickett never harmed anyone; he simply spoke to himself.⁶⁷ Police only arrested Pickett once for being drunk in October 1957⁶⁸ —

⁵⁶ *One Hundred and Fourteenth Annual Report of the Milledgeville State Hospital*, Georgia Archives, 1957, “Furloughs,” 36.

⁵⁷ Interview with Kylie Smith.

⁵⁸ *One Hundred and Fourteenth Annual Report of the Milledgeville State Hospital*, “Furloughs,” 36.

⁵⁹ Interview with Kylie Smith.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Clarence Horatious Pickett Milledgeville State Hospital Intake Form.

⁶² Statement of Bessie Smith to Columbus Police Department, 32.

⁶³ Statement of Percy L. Taylor to Columbus Police Department, 33.

⁶⁴ Clarence Horatious Pickett Milledgeville State Hospital Intake Form.

⁶⁵ Testimony of Lillie Banks, Coroner’s Hearing, 104.

⁶⁶ Testimony of Bessie Smith, Coroner’s Hearing, 105.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Record of Offenses, 23.

a large improvement from his previous record⁶⁹ — and he returned to his job at the *World* newspaper.⁷⁰

However, if neighbors knew of his commitment to the Milledgeville State Hospital, they likely did not welcome Pickett back with open arms. The threat of going back to the institution would hang over his head for the next year: Pickett could have been shipped back to Milledgeville State Hospital if anyone complained about his behavior.⁷¹ Although doctors considered Pickett “restored” enough to go home,⁷² leaving the institution on furlough was like wearing a Scarlet letter that identified Pickett as crazy.⁷³ It did not matter that Pickett lived with his sister and held down his job without much trouble for over half a year. Many of the citizens of Columbus grew up hearing their parents threaten to send them to Milledgeville if they did not behave,⁷⁴ so to them, Pickett was still a threat who needed to be neutralized. And six months after his release, Pickett would come face to face with one of these people: Columbus Police Officer Joseph E. Cameron.

The morning of Dec. 21, 1957 marked the beginning of the end of Pickett’s life. He woke up and drank at least one black-label beer before he walked to work at the *World*, which was located in the same building as the Dixie Theater.⁷⁵ Taylor owned both the theater and the *World*, so later that afternoon, Pickett met with Taylor to discuss and receive his payment for the recent issue of the newspaper.⁷⁶ Pickett called Bessie Smith to ask her to pick him up after he was paid,

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Statement of Percy L. Taylor to Columbus Police Department, 33.

⁷¹ Interview with Kylie Smith.

⁷² *One Hundred and Fourteenth Annual Report of the Milledgeville State Hospital*, “Furloughs,” 36.

⁷³ Interview with Kylie Smith.

⁷⁴ Interview with Gail Godwin.

⁷⁵ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, FBI interview report with Lillie Banks, January 1, 1958, 48.

⁷⁶ Statement of Percy L. Taylor to Columbus Police Department, 33.

but the situation grew tense when Pickett decided he did not want to get paid in front of his sister and friend.⁷⁷ He began yelling, which made Taylor nervous as the group spilled out onto the street in front of the theater.⁷⁸ As a community leader, Taylor knew firsthand the dangers the Black community faced in Columbus and was desperate to diffuse the situation with Pickett before they drew attention to themselves. But Pickett did not seem to share Taylor's concern and resisted getting in the car as Taylor began pushing him inside.⁷⁹ Columbus Police Officer J. D. Quattlebaum and City Court Investigator Jimmy Scoven, both white men, noticed the situation while driving by and pulled over to break up the scuffle, claiming that Pickett was drunk.⁸⁰ Taylor, Bessie Smith, and Banks later acknowledged that Pickett had a drink, but insisted he was not drunk during the altercation.^{81,82,83} Quattlebaum and Scoven also later claimed that Taylor violently hit Pickett to get him into the car,^{84,85} but Taylor, Banks, and Bessie Smith all denied the allegations.^{86,87,88} Ultimately, Quattlebaum permitted Banks to take Pickett home.⁸⁹

Pickett did not stay home for long. About three hours later, the white woman who owned the nearby Malone's Grocery Store called police, complaining that Pickett was walking around drunk outside her store, cursing and making "smart remarks."⁹⁰ She told Columbus Police

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Statement of Bessie Smith to Columbus Police Department, 32.

⁸⁰ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, testimony of J.D. Quattlebaum, Coroner's Hearing, January 8, 1958, 90.

⁸¹ Testimony of Lillie Banks, Coroner's Hearing, 103.

⁸² Testimony of Bessie Smith, Coroner's Hearing, 107.

⁸³ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, testimony of Percy L. Taylor, Coroner's Hearing, January 8, 1958, 97.

⁸⁴ Testimony of J.D. Quattlebaum, Coroner's Hearing, January 8, 1958, 90.

⁸⁵ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, testimony of Jimmy Scoven, Coroner's Hearing, January 8, 1958, 92.

⁸⁶ Testimony of Percy L. Taylor, Coroner's Hearing, 94.

⁸⁷ Testimony of Lillie Banks, Coroner's Hearing, 103.

⁸⁸ Testimony of Bessie Smith, Coroner's Hearing, 106.

⁸⁹ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, J.D. Quattlebaum Letter to E.S. Moncrieff, December 24, 1957, 19.

⁹⁰ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, statement of Bartow J. Robinson to Columbus Police Department, December 23, 1957, 16.

Officers S. D. Wright and Bartow J. Robinson that Pickett had left, walking down Glade Avenue toward 10th Avenue.⁹¹ Wright and Robinson drove in that direction and came across Pickett, who Robinson later recalled was cursing and mumbling to himself as he staggered in front of the police car. Pickett seemed fresh out of a fight, Robinson later recalled, claiming that the preacher's shirt tail was pulled out and his necktie hung to one side.⁹² Robinson and Wright arrested Pickett and took him to Columbus City Jail around 4:20 p.m., booking him on a charge of public drunkenness with a \$12 bond.⁹³

Banks never believed that her brother deserved a drunk charge that afternoon. He was not intoxicated, she said: After he returned home from the theater, Pickett ate lunch and combed his hair, never picking up another beer.⁹⁴ He left to walk to another preacher's house around 3 p.m.⁹⁵ before finding himself in front of Malone's Grocery. He never entered the store and might have been experiencing psychiatric symptoms, but likely kept to himself: "He says 'the voices are talking to him' — but he just walk along and talk to himself," Banks said.⁹⁶

Most local police were not trained to deal with mental health issues, especially among people of color. Instead, most conversations among police about mental illness centered on concerns of people escaping from mental hospitals.⁹⁷ "That gave the police a free reign on how they controlled people, how they arrested people, who they thought were escaped from Central State, largely because the police are dumb and they wouldn't know that he was actually on an official furlough," Kylie Smith said.⁹⁸ "They'd just be like, 'Oh, he's one of those crazy kooks from Milledgeville.'"

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Statement of Bartow J. Robinson to Columbus Police Department, 16.

⁹³ Maurice L. Foshee case report, 40.

⁹⁴ Testimony of Lillie Banks, Coroner's Hearing, 104.

⁹⁵ FBI interview report with Lillie Banks, 48.

⁹⁶ Testimony of Lillie Banks, Coroner's Hearing, 104.

⁹⁷ Interview with Kylie Smith.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Drunkenness was an easy charge to pin on Pickett and get him off the street, and the officers did not listen when the preacher complained about being arrested: “I had arrested this Negro several times in the past and I didn’t pay any attention to his talking,” Robinson said.⁹⁹

With racist ideals and minimal understanding of mental illness, police officers were aggressive when Pickett arrived at the city jail. Wright and Columbus Police Officer Joseph E. Cameron placed Pickett in the tank, a cell for drunk inmates.¹⁰⁰ Robert Nelson, a white inmate with a view of the tank from across the hall, later recalled that Pickett did not appear drunk as officers placed him in the cell.¹⁰¹ Pickett walked on his own while holding a hand to his head¹⁰² and spoke clearly, calling the police “son-of-a-bitch” and “head beaters.”¹⁰³ Floyd Clifton, a Black prisoner, warned Pickett that if he did not quiet down, the officers would “beat him up.”¹⁰⁴

But Pickett did not listen. He continued to yell, and about 30 minutes after the preacher entered the tank, Cameron proved Clifton right. Other inmates watched¹⁰⁵ as the officer returned and roughly grabbed Pickett, hitting him in the face and stomach until he fell to the floor. Cameron then hit the preacher around his head and neck with a slap jack before kicking Pickett in his stomach.¹⁰⁶ Several inmates saw the beating and later stated that Pickett did not fight back.^{107,108,109,110} Cameron later recalled a different narrative, claiming that he beat Pickett out of

⁹⁹ Statement of Bartow J. Robinson to Columbus Police Department, 16.

¹⁰⁰ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, FBI interview report with Clyde Adair, December 31, 1957, 38.

¹⁰¹ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, FBI interview report with Robert William Nelson, January 6, 1958, 67.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ FBI interview report with Lillie Banks, 48.

¹⁰⁴ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, FBI interview report with Floyd Clifton, January 3, 1958, 62.

¹⁰⁵ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, FBI interview report with Ralph Dudley, January 3, 1958, 59.

¹⁰⁶ Maurice L. Foshee case report, 40.

¹⁰⁷ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, FBI interview report with Charlie Johnson, January 2, 1958, 52.

¹⁰⁸ FBI interview report with Ralph Dudley, 60.

¹⁰⁹ FBI interview report Floyd Albert Clifton, 62-63.

¹¹⁰ FBI interview report with Robert William Nelson, 67.

self-defense. The preacher, Cameron said, grabbed his shirt and his leg, so he had to hit Pickett in the chest to knock him off and kick him off his leg.¹¹¹ None of the prisoners corroborated Cameron's story.

As a former Marine with a heavy build, Cameron was not a weak man. He stood a few inches shorter than Pickett's six-foot frame¹¹² but was about 90 pounds heavier than the preacher.¹¹³ Cameron fought in and survived the Battle of Peleliu, one of the bloodiest battles of World War II.¹¹⁴ Standing face-to-face, a debatably-drunk inmate would likely not be a true threat to Cameron, whose white skin¹¹⁵ and police badge offered him an extra layer of protection. But like many white people at the time, Cameron likely viewed Pickett as dangerous due to his Black skin. If the preacher was displaying symptoms of mental illness, they would have only exacerbated Cameron's negative perception of him, Kylie Smith said, so she was not surprised that Cameron leaned on claims of self-defense.¹¹⁶ Even if Cameron did not feel threatened by Pickett and simply made up the story of the preacher grabbing him as an excuse, he likely knew other people would believe him — a white police officer — over Pickett, a mentally ill Black man. "To be Black is to be already mad," Kylie Smith said, reflecting on the common beliefs at the time.¹¹⁷ "It's just the way those people are. They don't have complicated psychology. They're stupid. They can't speak properly. But if there is that erratic kind of behavior, then it becomes a justification for police violence in the name of protecting other people." With this justification,

¹¹¹ Maurice L. Foshee case report, 41.

¹¹² Clarence Horatious Pickett autopsy report, 3.

¹¹³ FBI interview report with Floyd Clifton, 62.

¹¹⁴ Abigail Charak, lecture to students in the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, October 2024.

¹¹⁵ Joseph Eugene Cameron World War II Draft Card, World War II Draft Cards Young Men, 1940-1947, accessed through Ancestry.com.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Kylie Smith.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Cameron did not feel guilty about harming Pickett. After beating him, Cameron told Pickett, “Now you bastard you'll be quiet,” Charlie Johnson, another prisoner, later recalled.¹¹⁸

Pickett was released from the jail the next afternoon, still in agony from his beating. Upon arriving at home, Pickett lay in bed and told Banks, “Sister, the polices has done killed me. ... I heard one of the polices say, ‘That Black son-of-a-bitch is dying, and if he is not dying, he is going to die.’ They beat me to death in jail.”¹¹⁹ Banks called an ambulance to take her brother to the hospital, but doctors sent him home with nothing but a couple of pills.¹²⁰

Pickett was fine, the doctor said. He was just “putting on.”¹²¹

Pickett returned home and continued to complain of pain. Banks called another ambulance the next day, but it was too late. Her brother was pronounced dead on arrival around 2:30 p.m. on Dec. 23, 1957.¹²² Pickett’s autopsy report declared “shock and toxemia due to peritonitis, resulting from traumatic rupture of duodenum” as the cause of death.¹²³

Pickett’s death prompted a police investigation and made its way through the Muscogee County court system over the next five months. The Muscogee County Grand Jury charged Cameron on Feb. 2, 1958 with killing Pickett,¹²⁴ but the criminal trial court jury in the Superior Court of Muscogee County found Cameron not guilty after only one hour and 35 minutes of deliberation on April 23, 1958.¹²⁵ The Columbus Police Department reinstated Cameron two days later.¹²⁶ The legal system’s failure to uphold justice can likely be pinned on society’s view

¹¹⁸ FBI interview report with Charlie Johnson, 52.

¹¹⁹ FBI interview report with Lillie Banks, 48.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Maurice L. Foshee case report, 41.

¹²³ Clarence Horatious Pickett autopsy report, 2.

¹²⁴ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, “Grand Jury Indicts Cameron for Murder,” *The Columbus Inquirer*, February 4, 1958, 129.

¹²⁵ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, Ed Sullivan, “Jury Clears J. Cameron, *The Columbus Ledger*,” April 24, 1958, 140.

¹²⁶ *FBI Case File 44-12692*, obtained by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University, Maurice L. Foshee case report, May 13, 1958, 144.

of Black people with mental illness at the time. Attorneys and judges were typically not sympathetic to the mentally ill, and the white jurors might have viewed Pickett as an unreliable source on his own beating. “There's ... no empathy at all and, again, this underlying belief that, ‘Well, in fact, yes, if you are mentally ill, that's not a mitigating factor. It actually makes you more dangerous, and so therefore whatever we do to you is justified in terms of broader social protection,’” Kylie Smith said.¹²⁷

With only an intake card from the controversy-ridden Milledgeville State Hospital, it is impossible to know if Pickett truly had schizophrenia. If the doctor who assessed the preacher upon his arrival in 1956 harbored the racist views that were common among Southern medical professionals at the time, they may not have cared if Pickett actually had the symptoms to qualify for a diagnosis. He was Black, so in their eyes, he must have been mad in some sense,¹²⁸ and schizophrenic reaction was a go-to label. Regardless, Pickett’s mental illness — or, at the very least, society’s view of him as mentally ill — forced him to endure terrible conditions at Milledgeville State Hospital and, upon his release, likely caused neighbors to view him as nothing more than insane. Upon meeting Cameron, the consequences of Pickett’s mental illness became more than damaging — they were deadly. Cameron brutally beat Pickett to an early death, but due to the preacher’s mental state and race, jurors may have seen the killing as an act of service to protect the community, not a racially motivated act of police brutality.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Interview with Kylie Smith.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.