On May 25th, 1849, after thirteen years without an execution at the Reverett Street Jail, Washington Goode, a black man, was hanged. The trial was widely publicized and deeply contentious, gaining press attention as far away as Pennsylvania. The hanging struck a chord with abolitionists fighting both racism and capital punishment. Judge Lemuel Shaw, who was seen by some as a hanging judge, presided.

Goode was convicted for the murder of Thomas Harding, a fellow sailor and love rival for the affections of Mary Ann Williams, a married woman and Goode’s lover. Goode had gone out to drink with a knife on his person and coincidentally met both Williams and Harding. They exchanged words and parted ways. A few hours later, Harding was found stabbed to death. There were no witnesses on the night of the murder, and Goode maintained until the end that he was innocent.

Boston’s abolitionists quickly began a campaign for clemency. William Lloyd Garrison argued in his abolitionist newspaper, The Liberator, that the case consisted mostly of circumstantial evidence. In recent years, similar cases had been pardoned; in 1845 a burglar, Albert Terrill, had been pardoned after the gruesome murder of a prostitute on Beacon Hill. In recent years the precedent for claiming temporary insanity had been established in Judge Shaw’s court room (Commonwealth vs. Rogers, 1844), however Goode’s lawyer did not argue this point.

The community was largely against Goode’s execution, and in his defense more than 24,000 signatures were obtained and 130 petitions for clemency from Massachusetts communities were sent to the Governor, George N. Briggs. One in particular, “Protest of 400 inhabitants of Concord against the execution of Washington Goode” was signed by both Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In the end, Goode attempted to take his own life before he could be hanged. The prison doctor saved his life, however, ensuring that Goode would be subjected to a more horrible death the next morning. Goode was hanged while strapped to a chair, unable to regain consciousness. Many of the surrounding buildings, which had a view of the jail yard, either boarded up their windows in protest or refused to rent the rooms to spectators.

Even after Goode’s death the community publicly protested his trial and execution. A crowd of approximately 1,000 people escorted Goode’s body to the South Burying Ground.