

fore the coroner's jury identified him as the shooter. He was ordered bound over to the Grand Jury.

It was soon discovered that Prendergast had been writing threatening letters concerning the Corporation Counsel's position, not only to Harrison, but to Adolph Kraus, the Corporation Counsel himself. "I want your job. Do not be a fool. Resign. Third and final notice," one note read.

The press reported that prior to traveling out to the mayor's home, on October 28th, Prendergast had visited Kraus in his City Hall office, warning him to resign then and there or face the consequences. Kraus only escaped violence when he tricked Prendergast into believing he was about to vacate the office for him. Kraus lost his intruder in the crowded lobby of City Hall. That evening, when Prendergast visited the mayor, Harrison wasn't as lucky.

By the time Prendergast came to trial, less than five weeks later, the question of his sanity, riveted Chicagoans, and was central to the prosecution's case. At his three-week trial, "expert" witnesses testified that although he was a "crank," he was, in fact, sane when he pulled the trigger and murdered Harrison. They paid little attention to the report that he had suffered a severe head trauma as a child that left him impaired, or the fact that his grandfather had died in Ireland in a lunatic asylum.

On December 29, 1893 the jury quickly returned a verdict of guilty and sentenced Prendergast to hang. They set March 23, 1894 as the date for his execution. But on March 22, just one day before the capital sentence was to be carried out, Prendergast's brother, had a motion filed on his behalf, citing section 285 of the Criminal Code by which a condemned criminal's post sentence insanity bared his execution. Judge Chetlain granted a stay of execution, ordering that a new sanity trial be held.

At this juncture, Prendergast received a new defense 'dream team' led by young Chicago attorney named Clarence Darrow – perhaps the death penalty's most outspoken critic in Chicago. It was his first murder defense. Darrow set out to shatter the opinions of the state's medical experts. One doctor, over 80 years of age, he characterized as "a relic of a forgotten age," and another doctor who had stopped practicing medicine had all the skills he insisted of a "butcher." A third expert, he pointed out, had been dismissed by the state when he found correctly that the accused was insane.

Darrow was relentless in identifying Prendergast's severe mental disabilities and his further mental disintegration while incarcerated.

Prendergast's irrational behavior was at the heart of Darrow's defense. "Was the state so interested in taking a life that lawyers should travel beyond the truth and beyond the record and beg the jury to violate their oaths for the sake of giving justice a victim," he pled.

Bizarre correspondence written by Prendergast to officials across the country, as well as in Chicago, demonstrated his unstable mental capacity. Prendergast requested that single tax advocate Henry George and Baltimore's Cardinal Gibbons each testify at his trial.

Darrow cited Prendergast's odd obsessions with things like support of the single tax theory, the gold standard and the new grade crossings for Chicago's elevated train system, as examples of his insanity. Prendergast claimed these espoused theories were the cause of his shooting Mayor Harrison. He continued to display distinct but irrational thinking.

Throughout his incarceration, Prendergast continued to write letters, over and over, in which he made such statements as, "I was obliged to shoot the mayor because he betrayed my confidence and interfered with me in the discharge of my duties, both in the abolishing of grade crossings and in the advocating of the single tax."

Facing the new Prendergast jury, Darrow pleaded: "You have been asked to ignore all the learning and the science of the past. You have been asked to forget all the humanity of civilization which the years of progress and enlightenment have given the world. You have been asked to do all this for the sake of giving the law a victim."

On July 3, 1894, however, that jury brought in a verdict of sanity on Prendergast, sentencing him to hang, ten days later, on Friday, July 13. Darrow's petitions to Illinois Governor John Altgeld, and Lieutenant Governor Joseph Gill, fell on deaf ears. Prendergast was hanged as ordered. It was the only case Darrow was ever to lose.

Curiously enough though, Chicago's first political homicide, and Prendergast's fate, appears in reality to have truthfully rested on the curious and tragic set of historical conditions of the times outside the control of all involved in the case.

Just six years earlier, Chicago was embroiled in a terrifying labor dispute that erupted into the famous Haymarket Riot of 1886. With labor organizers and anarchists marching through the streets of Chicago, it did not take much for the situation to disintegrate into calamity and misfortune. You may remember that four convicted anarchists were hanged for their part in the riots and the resulting loss of police life.