

## Jasper jury finds white supremacist guilty of capital murder in dragging

JASPER(AP) — A white supremacist whose vengeful writings and racist tattoos were used to prove he despised blacks was convicted Tuesday of chaining a man to a pickup and dragging him to his death in a crime that shocked the nation.

Courtroom spectators applauded and relatives of the victim wiped away tears as John William King was found guilty of capital murder in the June 7 slaying of black Jasper resident James Byrd Jr.

King sat expressionless when the verdict was read. He leaned forward, apparently trying to shield himself with his attorneys from courtroom TV cameras.

If sent to death row, the 24-year-old would become the first white person in Texas to be sentenced to lethal injection for killing a black person since the state resumed imposing the death penalty in the mid-1970s.

Byrd's daughter, Renee Mullins, one of about a dozen family members who braved five days of graphic testimony, dabbed her nose and eyes with a tissue as she called the verdict "a breath of fresh air." Said his son, Ross Byrd: "All I know is that there's one down and two to go."

King, a laborer, was the first of three white men to be tried for the slaying. The body of the 49-year-old Byrd was torn in two — his head and right arm severed from his torso — when

he was pulled nearly three miles while tied by his ankles with a 24 1/2-foot logging chain.

The murder thrust Jasper into a national spotlight as members of the Ku Klux Klan

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— Rev. Jesse Jackson

and New Black Panthers descended on the timber town of 8,000 people about 100 miles northeast of Houston.

The verdict also reverberated among black leaders across the country, with Kweisi Mfume, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, saying he was gratified that it took only 2 1/2 hours for a jury in the South to render its decision.

"The guilty verdict in the James Byrd murder trial is a sad victory in this the first step of a very troubling judicial ordeal," Mfume said in a telephone news conference from Baltimore. "We have come too far for the individuals who have committed these types of

crimes to take us back in time."

The Rev. Jesse Jackson said he approved of the verdict, but called on jurors to give King a life prison sentence.

"We must break the cycle of this killing," he told the AP in a

telephone interview. "If these three men saw killing as a solution in their sick state, then we in our sober and sane state must know killing is not a solution."

During the punishment phase, the state called probation and police officers who discussed King's criminal history and his refusal to follow rules while on probation for burglary. King was sent to boot camps and restitution centers at least four times before a probation supervisor recommended he be sent to prison.

In closing arguments, prosecutor Pat Hardy outlined the evidence against King, likening Byrd's attackers to "three robed riders coming straight out of hell."

"After they dragged that poor

man and tore his body to pieces, they dropped it right in front of a church and a cemetery, to show their defiance to God, to show their defiance of Christianity and everything most people in this county stand for."

The evidence included a lighter engraved with a Klan symbol and King's prison name, "Possum," that was found along with cigarette butts at the scene; clothes stained with Byrd's blood; letters in which King wrote about organizing a racist gang; and King's tattoos of a black man hanging from a tree, cartoon characters in Klan garb, Nazi-type SS lightning bolts and Aryan power proclamations.

King's lawyers called only three witnesses who testified for less than an hour. King did not take the stand.

In his closing, Jones acknowledged a "terrible, terrible brutal horrendous death."

He skirted the issue of whether King participated in the killing but focused on his contention that the state had not proved Byrd was kidnapped.

Said Cribbs: "I don't deny he made some racial slurs. Not that I agree with that. But that is his right. ... You have a right to even be a satanist, but that is our right."

Byrd, an unemployed man known for his singing voice — and also his affection for alcohol — was on his way home

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