Electric chair to become a museum piece

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ANGOLA — Louisiana’s electric chair — where 77 condemned criminals have died — will be relegated to a state museum Thursday morning as penitentiary officials prepare for the state’s first execution by lethal injection.

 Corrections officials said the first use of intravenous injections to carry out the death penalty could occur on Sept. 19 — the 11th execution date set for twice-convicted murderer Antonio James, 36, of New Orleans.

 Louisiana State Penitentiary Warden John Whitley said a metal gurney will be installed in the death chamber at the penitentiary’s Camp F after the electric chair is removed.

 A private contractor built the gurney after Angola inmate metal shop workers balked at orders to build the device in July. The protest spread to other prisoner work details, but died out after Whitley said the table would be built outside the prison.

 An Orleans Parish jury convicted James of first-degree murder and recommended the death penalty for the slaying of Henry Silver, 71, during a New Year’s Day 1979 armed robbery in the French Quarter. He drew a 99-year sentence on the robbery conviction.

 He also was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for first-degree murder in the July 12, 1979, death of Alvin Adams in New Orleans.

 Defense attorneys argued in his appeals that he should not be put to death because he has an IQ of less than 60.

 Corrections Secretary Bruce N. Lynn decided to give the oak chair, built in 1941 after the state abolished hangings for capital punishment, to the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans, Whitley said.

 “They (museum officials) called up and asked about it,” Whitley said. “Mr. Lynn talked to them and decided it would be the best place for it to go.”

 “It’s the end of an era. It’s part of our history,” added Corrections spokeswoman Martha Junoville.

 The state Legislature decided in 1990 to switch to lethal injection executions, but left 32 Angola Death Row inmates sentenced before Jan. 1, 1991, to face the electric chair.

 Although a federal judge earlier this year rejected death penalty opponents’ claims that the electric chair’s use constituted cruel and unusual punishment, the Legislature later voted to do away with the dual system.

 The 1991 act set Sept. 15 as the switch-over date and Angola officials carried out the final electrocution after the legislation was adopted.

 Andrew Lee “Flash” Jones of Baton Rouge died in the chair on July 22 for the 1984 rape and murder of an 11-year-old Scotlandville girl. Two other condemned killers, Robert Sawyer and Tracy Lee, received execution stays in August.

 Lee’s execution has been rescheduled for Oct. 14, Junoville said.

 Fifty-seven men were executed in the electric chair between Aug. 6, 1941, and June 9, 1961, according to Angola inmate journalist Ron Wikberg.

 Executions were conducted by parish law enforcement authorities before May 21, 1957, Junoville said.

 Ten of the 57 were executed at Angola before a rising tide of anti-death penalty litigation led federal courts to suspend all executions in the United States in 1967.

 The U.S. Supreme Court struck down the myriad of standards by which states imposed the death penalty, but set new guidelines for capital punishment in 1976.

 Louisiana’s new capital punishment statute became effective on Oct. 1, 1976, and Robert Wayne Williams was put to death seven years later. Nineteen other Death Row inmates followed Williams to the chair.

 Wikberg said it is ironic that, after the 22-year hiatus, the first and last electrocutions were of defendants prosecuted by Assistant District Attorney John Sinquefield of East Baton Rouge Parish.

 In June 1987, the state executed four inmates — Benjamin Berry, Alvin Moore, Jimmy Glass and Jimmy Wingo — in a 10-day period.

 The following month, Willie Celestin, Willie Watson and John Brogdon, died in an 11-day period, and Sterling Rault Sr. was executed on Aug. 24, 1987.