



HISTORY &  
CULTURE  
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## H.H. Holmes

Murderer (c. 1861–1896)

H.H. Holmes was the alias of one of America's first serial killers. During the 1893 Columbian Exposition, he lured victims into his elaborate "murder castle."

### Synopsis

Born in 1861 in Gilmanton, New Hampshire, H.H. Holmes was one of America's first serial murderers. He took over a Chicago pharmacy and built it into an elaborate maze of death traps to which he lured numerous victims during the 1893 Columbian Exposition. He was eventually captured and hanged in 1896. Erik Larson wrote about Holmes in the book *The Devil in the White City*, published in 2003.

### Early Life

Infamous con artist and serial killer H.H. Holmes was born Herman Webster Mudgett on May 16, 1861, in Gilmanton, New Hampshire. Sometimes referred as the "Beast of Chicago," H.H. Holmes killed many of the city's inhabitants in his specially constructed home, which was later nicknamed the "Murder Castle." He has also been linked to deaths in other parts of the United States and Canada.

Born to an affluent family, Holmes had a privileged childhood. It has been said that he appeared to be unusually intelligent at an early age. Still there were haunting signs of what was to come. He expressed an interest in medicine, which reportedly led him to practice surgery on animals. Some accounts indicate that he may have been responsible for the death of a friend.

Holmes's life of crime began with various frauds and scams. As a medical student at the University of Michigan, he stole corpses, which he used to make false insurance claims. Holmes may have used the bodies for experiments, as well.

## The 'Murder Castle' is Built

**NAME**  
H.H. Holmes

**OCCUPATION**  
**Murderer**

**BIRTH DATE**  
c. **May 16, 1861**

**DEATH DATE**  
**May 7, 1896**

**EDUCATION**  
**University of Michigan**

**PLACE OF BIRTH**  
**Gilmanton, New  
Hampshire**

**PLACE OF DEATH**  
**Philadelphia,  
Pennsylvania**

**AKA**  
H.M. Howard  
Herman Mudgett  
Dr. Henry H. Holmes  
Henry H. Holmes  
Henry Holmes  
H.H. Holmes

**FULL NAME**  
Herman Webster  
Mudgett

In 1886, H.H. Holmes moved to Chicago, Illinois. He soon found work in a pharmacy, using his now infamous alias, Dr. Henry H. Holmes. Eventually he took over the business and its original owner mysteriously disappeared. Holmes had a three-story building constructed, creating an elaborate house of horrors. The upper floors contained his living quarters and many small rooms where he tortured and killed his victims. Some of these rooms had gas jets so that Holmes could asphyxiate his victims. There were also trapdoors and chutes so that he could move the bodies down to the basement where he could burn his victims' remains in a kiln there or dispose of them in other ways.

During the 1893 Columbian Exposition, Holmes opened up his home as a hotel for visitors to the world's fair. Unfortunately, some of his guests did not survive his hospitality. Many of these victims—no one knows for certain the total number—were women who he seduced, swindled and then killed. Holmes had a habit of getting engaged to a woman and then for his fiancée to suddenly "disappear." Others were lured there by the offer of employment.

## Insurance Scams

All the while, Holmes continued to work insurance scams and it was one of these scams that led to his undoing. He joined forces with Benjamin Pitezel to collect \$10,000 from a life insurance company. The two traveled around for a time committing other frauds. Landing in jail in Texas, Holmes brought fellow inmate Marion Hedgepeth—who knew Holmes as H.M. Howard—in on the life insurance scheme with Pitezel. When Holmes failed to deliver Hedgepeth's share of the deal, Hedgepeth tipped off the authorities.

While they eventually identified Howard as Holmes, the authorities did not catch on to Holmes soon enough to stop his final murders. He killed Pitezel and then convinced Pitezel's widow that her husband was still alive. Becoming concerned that the five Pitezel children might expose him, he went away with three of the children, eventually killing them.

## Trial and Execution

At first, Holmes was charged with insurance fraud. He later stood trial for the murder of Benjamin Pitezel. During his time in custody, Holmes gave numerous stories to police, once admitting to killing 27 people. Estimates range from 20 to 100 victims, with some going as high as 200 victims. If Holmes even did half of the crimes associated with him, he clearly surpassed later American serial killers such as Ted Bundy and John Wayne Gacy in his depravity.

After his conviction, Holmes appealed his case, but lost. He met his end on May 7, 1896, when he was hanged for the Pitezel murder in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His life as one of America's first serial killers has been the subject of many books and documentaries, including *The Devil in the White City* (2003), written by Erik Larson.

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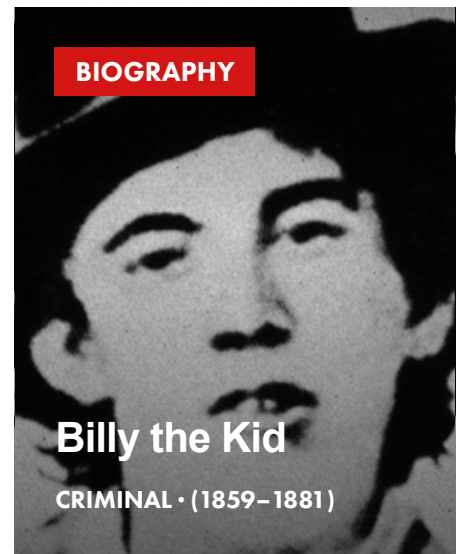
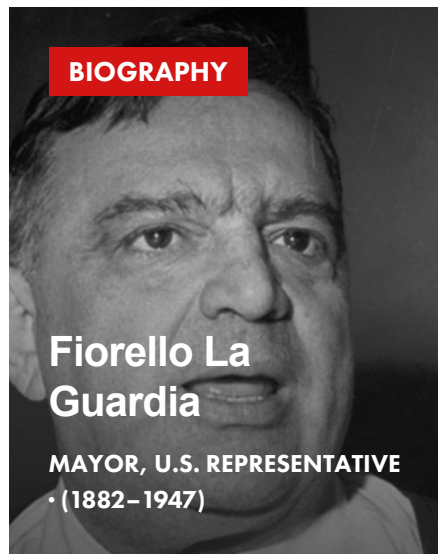
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