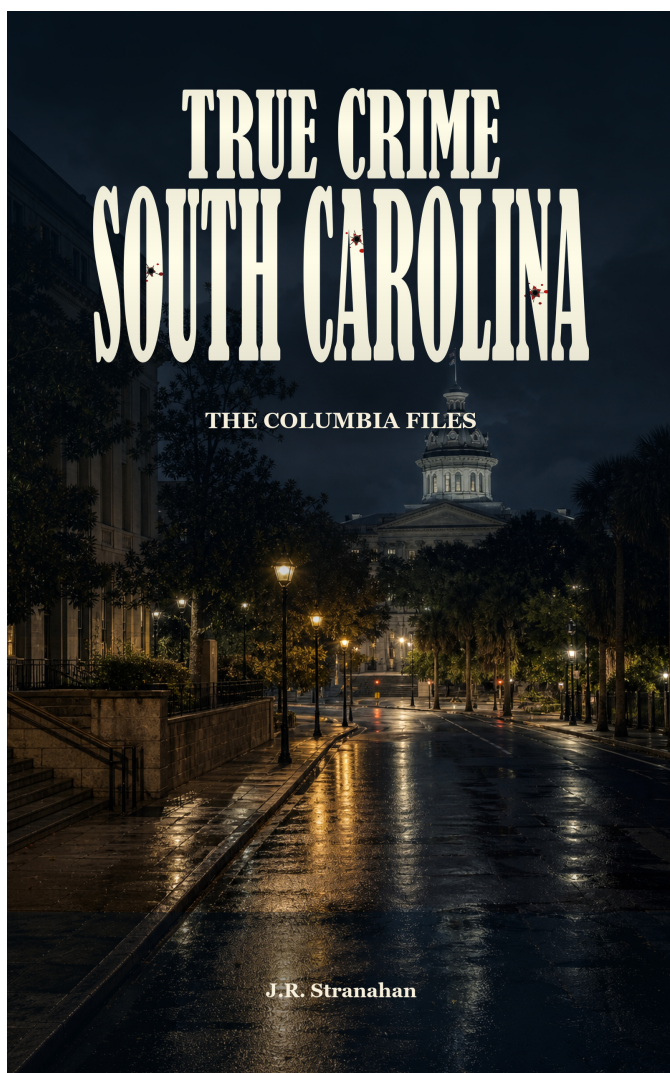




True Crime South Carolina: The Columbia Files

J.R. Stranahan

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The Editor and the Lieutenant Governor

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Chapter One

The Editor and the Lieutenant Governor

On the afternoon of January 15, 1903, two of South Carolina's most recognizable political enemies approached each other near the State House.

One was Narciso Gener Gonzales, cofounder and editor of *The State*. The other was James H. Tillman, the lieutenant governor and a member of the most powerful political family in South Carolina. Their disagreement had already been carried through campaigns, editorials, speeches, and personal insults. By the time they met on a Columbia sidewalk, neither man needed an introduction.

Tillman drew a pistol and shot Gonzales.

The basic act was not hidden. It happened in daylight, near the physical center of state power, with witnesses nearby. Gonzales survived for four days. Tillman was arrested and prosecuted for murder. In a case with an identified shooter, a known weapon, and an audience, the central dispute became not who fired but why the law should or should not excuse him.

To understand the trial, it is necessary to understand what had happened before the shot.

Gonzales was born in 1858 and entered journalism when newspapers were not observers standing outside politics. Editors promoted candidates, attacked factions, and shaped public reputations with a directness that modern readers might associate with campaign organizations. *The State*, founded in Columbia in 1891 by Gonzales and his brothers, became a force in Democratic politics during a period when the party dominated white political life in South Carolina.

Benjamin Ryan Tillman, James's uncle, had built a movement by presenting himself as the champion of farmers against the conservative establishment. He became governor and then a United States senator. His movement reshaped state government while defending white supremacy and disfranchisement. James H. Tillman benefited from the name and the organization surrounding it, but he also had ambitions of his own.

Gonzales opposed him with unusual intensity.

During the 1902 campaign for governor, *The State* attacked Tillman's character and qualifications. The criticism was not phrased as a restrained disagreement over policy. Gonzales depicted Tillman as unfit for the office and used language intended to wound his public standing. Tillman lost the race but remained lieutenant governor until his term expired.

The feud therefore combined politics, pride, family power, and the honor culture of its period. That context explains the hostility. It does not explain away the shooting.

Contemporary accounts agreed that Gonzales was walking near the State House with colleagues when Tillman approached. The accounts diverged over movements, words, and whether Gonzales posed a threat. Tillman claimed self-defense. The prosecution treated the killing as the culmination of resentment over Gonzales's editorials.

Gonzales was taken for medical treatment. His condition became a public event. Newspaper readers followed bulletins as physicians tried to save him. He died on January 19, leaving a newspaper, a family, colleagues, and a city that had watched a political quarrel become a homicide.

Tillman's office did not protect him from arrest. It did, however, make the prosecution inseparable from questions of influence.

Columbia was saturated with the case. Potential jurors had read the editorials, followed the shooting, and formed opinions about both men.

The defense sought a change of venue. The proceeding moved from Richland County to neighboring Lexington County.

A venue change can protect a defendant's right to an impartial jury. It can also alter the social landscape of a trial. The distance from the State House to the Lexington courthouse was not great, but county lines mattered. Political loyalties, newspaper readership, personal networks, and attitudes toward the Tillman family did not distribute themselves evenly.

The trial began in September 1903 and lasted into October. It drew extensive press attention. Witnesses described the encounter. Lawyers argued over whether Gonzales had made a threatening movement and whether Tillman reasonably believed himself in danger. The defense presented the shooting as a response to an immediate threat. The prosecution asked jurors to see a prepared man acting on a long grievance.

The meaning of Gonzales's editorials also entered the courtroom. In one sense, the writings supplied motive. In another, the defense could present them as evidence that Tillman had reason to fear or resent Gonzales. The victim's own words became part of the case against the man who killed him.

That transformation happens often in homicide trials. The state must explain the relationship because motive can help a jury understand conduct. The defense may use the same relationship to justify fear. A dispute that once belonged to both men is reconstructed after one can no longer testify.

No responsible modern account can claim access to Tillman's private thoughts at the moment he fired. The public record supports narrower conclusions. He knew Gonzales. He knew what Gonzales had published. He was armed. He fired the shot that caused Gonzales's death. He asserted self-defense. A jury heard the state's evidence and acquitted him on October 15, 1903.

The acquittal settled Tillman's criminal liability.

It did not rehabilitate his career. His public identity remained tied to the shooting. The verdict also failed to quiet suspicion that status had shaped the result. Critics believed the setting and political climate had favored him. Supporters treated the acquittal as confirmation that the defense account had prevailed fairly.

The temptation, more than a century later, is to choose one of two clean versions. In the first, a powerful politician murdered a courageous editor and escaped because of his name. In the second, a persecuted public official acted to protect himself and was vindicated by a jury.

The record is less accommodating.

The Tillman name mattered in South Carolina. So did the violence of the shooting. Gonzales had used his newspaper to oppose and insult Tillman. Those words did not authorize his killing. They did, however, shape the evidence jurors were asked to consider. Witnesses disagreed about an encounter that unfolded quickly. The defense benefited from reasonable doubt. An acquittal does not require later generations to admire the defendant. It prevents the state from trying him again for the same offense.

Gonzales's death also belongs to the history of American journalism. Newspaper work in the period could be intensely partisan and personally dangerous. Editors were not protected from the people they criticized by professional norms or physical distance. The press operated through named men in small political worlds where reputations traveled face to face.

Gonzales had helped build *The State* into an institution. After his death, the paper continued. His killing became part of its identity and part of Columbia's civic memory. The event linked a public office, a newspaper, and a criminal courtroom in a way that made each institution look less detached from personal power.

The location is central to that memory. The shooting did not occur in an isolated room or on a country road. It happened near the State House, the building meant to represent government conducted through rules. The accused was the lieutenant governor. The victim had spent years arguing in print about who was fit to govern.

Four days separated the shot from Gonzales's death. Nine months separated it from Tillman's acquittal. The public argument lasted much longer.

The case opens the Columbia files because it exposes a pattern the later chapters keep returning to. A visible act can still produce disputed meaning. A complete trial can still leave public doubt. A legal verdict can be final without being emotionally persuasive.

The jury in Lexington County answered the question placed before it. History has continued asking different ones.

The paper, the pistol, and public character

The surviving newspaper coverage shows how quickly a criminal proceeding can become a contest over public character.

Gonzales's supporters described a fearless editor attacked for doing his work. Tillman's defenders emphasized provocation and danger. Both positions selected from a history the public already knew. The editorials supplied a documentary trail, but a trail of words can be made to point in more than one direction.

For the prosecution, the attacks explained motive. Tillman had been humiliated during a statewide campaign and had reason to resent the person who helped shape that humiliation. A pistol carried into an expected public day could suggest readiness. For the defense, the same published hostility helped establish a relationship in which threats might be taken seriously.

The law required the jury to focus on the encounter. Public debate kept returning to everything that preceded it.

Honor had particular force in the politics of the period. Men holding office or seeking it treated attacks on courage and personal integrity as more than ordinary criticism. Public reputation affected authority. Violence could be rationalized as the answer to insult even when the criminal law did not formally excuse it.

Recognizing that culture is not endorsing it. Historical context explains why certain arguments could persuade listeners. It does not make Gonzales responsible for being shot.

The case also exposed the unstable position of a partisan press. *The State* sought to influence government while insisting on the freedom to criticize those who held it. Political figures could accuse the paper of exercising power without accountability. The shooting demonstrated why the answer to press power cannot be private violence.

After Gonzales died, the paper faced the challenge of covering the prosecution of the man who killed its editor. No newsroom in that position could claim emotional distance. Other newspapers carried the trial across South Carolina, sometimes through sharply different political loyalties. The archive therefore preserves evidence of the case and evidence of the state's divisions.

Contemporary reporting must be read with both uses in mind. A detailed account may preserve a witness's words while the headline frames those words for a partisan audience. Editorial pages may identify fears and expectations without establishing facts. The closer the source was to the event, the more likely it was to possess immediate detail and immediate bias.

The trial's timing intensified that struggle. Months passed between the death and the verdict. Each procedural step became another occasion to interpret the shooting. Jury selection, witness testimony, and closing arguments were not confined to the courtroom. They were retold to readers who had already chosen sides.

Tillman's acquittal belongs to the record with no qualification. The verdict did not say that Gonzales deserved to die. It said the prosecution had not persuaded that jury to return a murder conviction under the law and evidence presented.

The distinction is useful in modern true crime because acquittals are often treated as puzzles to defeat. Writers retry the case in narrative, selecting evidence the jury supposedly misunderstood and ending with a declaration the state could not obtain. Historical criticism is legitimate. A second fictional verdict is not.

The better question is what the trial reveals about the institutions around it.

An officeholder brought a weapon into public space. An editor's campaign writing became evidence after his death. A county line changed the jury pool. Newspapers acted as witnesses to the proceeding and participants in its meaning. The acquittal protected Tillman from another prosecution while leaving his public reputation permanently marked.

Gonzales's reputation changed too. Death can turn a partisan combatant into a civic martyr. He was both a forceful political editor and the victim of a shooting no editorial could justify. Respecting him does not require sanding away the aggression of his journalism. A full identity can contain courage, influence, prejudice, ambition, and vulnerability.

The State House grounds now receive visitors who may know nothing about the killing. Government continues in the same visual frame. That continuity can make the past seem safely absorbed.

It is not difficult to find modern political language that treats opponents as enemies or humiliation as injury. The Gonzales case remains distinctive because the threat became a shot fired by a sitting lieutenant governor. Its lesson is not that public disagreement inevitably becomes violence. It is that institutions depend on people accepting limits precisely when their pride tells them not to.

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