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THE STOCKING MASK - PART 1

Serial rapist stalks vulnerable city while Staunton police, women's college stay silent

A Virginia city's racial inflection point: White women were the rapist's victims. Black men were the police department's target.

[Jeff Schwaner](#) Staunton News Leader

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STAUNTON — At the top of the ladder, in the hot July night, he paused, looking in on a landing between the first and second floors of the house. He popped the screen and the window slid up for him, unlocked, as he knew it would.

It wasn't the first house he'd broken into. There had been practice. He'd been caught in Roanoke the year before, but his mother had written the court a plea for leniency for her son, and the judge had listened. The two-year sentence had been suspended after 90 days, and he was free.

Just days after moving to this little city in March, the 20-year-old had begun his invasions again.

He hoisted himself up on the sill, then hopped lightly down. He lost his footing for a moment as he landed, and braced himself against the banister; then he hid in a room, and waited.



The "Stocking Mask Rapist" entered houses by cutting or removing window screens and climbing through open windows. He terrorized the city of Staunton, Virginia, for most of 1979. (Recreation image) JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

Crouching in the silence, he knew he had gotten away with it all so far. Next to nothing had appeared in the newspaper to show the police had connected any of his multiple break-ins.

It was July 1, 1979. Since the spring, he'd broken his way into at least five houses; in three of the houses he had stolen female undergarments, as well as an item or two of little value. As police reports noted, he'd overlooked the most valuable jewelry as he'd ransacked dresser drawers. It may be that he could not differentiate between trinkets and true jewels. It may be he was after something else.

Twice, he had surprised women in their homes and raped them.

Waiting now, he was in fact on the same street where he'd raped a Mary Baldwin College student in her dorm room in March. A few months later he had struck again, entering

through a window and raping a teenager who was home alone in her house near Gypsy Hill Park.

Neither act of terrifying sexual violence, committed at knifepoint, had been reported in the local news. The police and the newspaper had remained as silent about these life-altering crimes as the man biding his time in the dark.

A door opened on the first floor. From where he crouched he could have heard people conversing at the threshold after a night out, talking and laughing. Female voices. A conversation ending with farewells. Or just the sound of a woman coming home quietly to a dwelling she thought was empty. Then, the sound of the front door closing.

Someone was coming up the stairs.

The intruder took a stocking from his pocket and slid it over his head to just beneath his nose.

He heard the sound of shoes flipped off, and the sigh of shifting sheets and mattress springs as someone lay down in her bed.

He pulled out a pocketknife and thumbed open the blade as he moved toward the bedroom.



While James Bruce Robinson was attacking a woman on North New Street, a few blocks from the all-women's college and a stone's throw from three of the city's historic churches, windows all over town were open.

It was a hot summer night in Staunton in the 1970s, and most houses were not air-conditioned.

Leaving your window open was just what you did in Staunton in 1979.

His victim had noticed a ladder propped against her house when she got home, but did not think it was cause for alarm.

"Nobody had any reason to be suspicious," she said in a 2022 interview.

Do not Publish

INCIDENT RE. (INCLUDE ATTEMPTS)	
SSN NA	3 TYPE OF OFFENSE RAPE
ke, Va.	PHONE 989-8029
ewSt. Staunton, Va.	PHONE 885 XXXX
TIME 5PM	DAY OF WEEK Wed.
SEX	AGE
ADDRESS 12 PLACE O Woodr	

The break-ins and rapes by a stocking masked assailant wielding a knife began in March 1979. But police kept that fact secret for months. And in those months, more women were assaulted.
JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

"He waited until I'd gone to bed and put the light out. Then he jumped on top of me with his knife and his stocking mask. It's one of those things where you say, this can't possibly be happening, I'm dreaming."

It was a nightmare the city had opened itself up to because its citizens were not warned.

Brenda Canning lived downtown most of her life. She was not involved in the case, but could easily have been a victim: "I always left the window up, at the landing of the stairway," she said.

Since it wasn't public knowledge that a rapist was entering homes through unlocked windows, Staunton's young women — many living alone — continued to unknowingly place themselves at risk, Canning and her friends among them.

Most of city's women didn't yet know that a rapist was on the loose, but the cops did.

The Staunton Police Department knew the rapist's method well before July. They were aware he was rare among sexual offenders — a stranger to both women he assaulted in March and June, even though most rapists are known by their victims.

On the top of the police report for each of these rapes, the words “Do Not Publish” were handwritten by the same person who initialed the “Supervisor Approval” line at the bottom of the page: Staunton Chief of Police J.M. Boyers.

Police also were aware of a string of break-ins in which women's undergarments were stolen, but they weren't reporting those crimes to the press. Or if they were, they weren't appearing in an otherwise thorough police blotter which detailed less invasive infractions along with bigger crimes.

The Boston Strangler case almost 15 years earlier had shown the peril the public faced when police assumed a criminal with a history of breaking-and-entering crimes wouldn't escalate to sexual assault or murder. But Staunton wasn't Boston. It was far safer, everyone thought, and the police weren't warning the general public that someone dangerous was prowling the city in 1979.

Police had no leads. He was an evil shadow without a name. To those he attacked and horribly traumatized, he didn't even have a face; he wore a stocking over his head.

Neither was its newspaper, known then as The Staunton Leader, the city's family-owned daily paper since 1890.

Police had no leads. He was an evil shadow without a name. To those he attacked and horribly traumatized, he didn't even have a face; he wore a stocking over his head.



“I had to feel the pain.”

Judging from 82-year-old Noreen Renier's voice on a 2019 call from Florida to Staunton, the hurt doesn't go away even four decades later. It was not her pain, but she became familiar with it over that awful year.

It started at the local community college, with a ring placed in her hand by a rape survivor's sister.

What happened next launched a chaotic career for Renier as a high-profile psychic, who would go on to work with other police departments across the country and become the first and only psychic who would lecture at the FBI training academy in Quantico.

Speaking at Blue Ridge Community College in the late fall of 1979, she was approached by a young woman who asked her to perform a public service. She said her sister had been raped. The police had no leads.

Renier practiced what she called psychometry. The practice works on the idea that events leave traces or memories on inanimate objects. Renier said she could sometimes sense these trace memories and find herself in the middle of the experience as if she was living through it in the moment.



Noreen Renier remembers the sister of a rape victim placing a ring in her hand after a speaking event at Blue Ridge Community College. The sister's memory is that she and a few other people approached Renier and talked. However it happened, that meeting led to the psychic visiting two crime scenes. (Re-creation image) JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

The woman handed Renier a ring and listened as the psychic held the ring and began talking. What she said was convincing enough for the sister to take to the Staunton police and insist that they bring her in to help.

A few weeks later, the psychic would visit the scene of that crime at the police's request and put herself literally in the place of the victim, on her bed, to describe details that made a reluctant believer out of the commonwealth's attorney.

Renier stated that the rapist had climbed a ladder and opened the window on the stair landing.

While in a trance-like state, she drew a curious circle pattern on her notebook, saying the criminal drove something that went around and around.

The police said nothing, but they took her to the house of the second victim as well.

On leaving, she was asked if she had any more insights about the man they were seeking.

"You'll catch him by Christmas," she said.



Before he left the house for the humid summer night, the man with the stocking mask on his head took \$13 from his victim's purse. She was unaware that her attacker had been in her apartment a few months before and had stolen a Westclock alarm, a hand-painted candy box and a garnet ring.

Serial predators take souvenirs. In 1979, some Staunton women came home from a day at work to find a dresser drawer open, undergarments strewn about.

Then women noticed panties and other undergarments missing after a break-in, while other more valuable items were left untouched in their jewelry boxes.

The stocking mask rapist would later claim he often threw away the clothing. But now and then a particular item would call to him and he'd take it, such as the garnet ring he stole from North New Street.

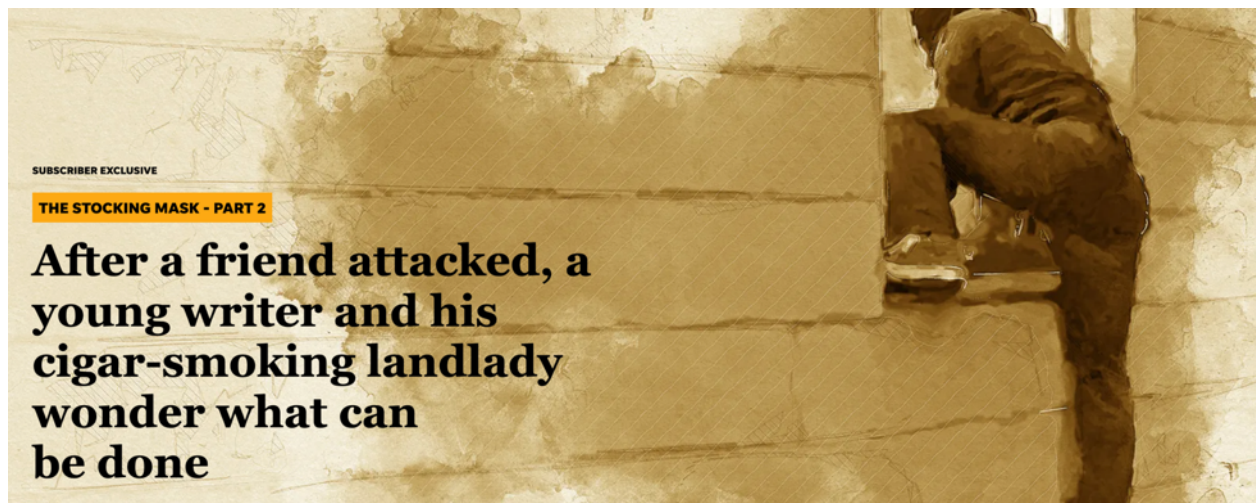
A city would erupt with fear and false accusations. "Five concerned women" would force the newspaper's hand to publish details about the crimes.

Another ring would bring Noreen Renier into the orbit of the case, and when he was captured, some of the details about him she provided police likely convinced law enforcement they finally had the rapist in custody on a trespassing charge.

But first, two more women would be tragically victimized, and a city would erupt with fear and false accusations. “Five concerned women” would force the newspaper’s hand to publish details about the crimes.

And in the white-dominated Southern city, amid pervasive institutional racism, it would be revealed that an innocent Black man had been incarcerated since March for the first rape even as the real rapist worked his way at will across downtown at night.

That would not be the only false arrest before the year was over.



He knew a rapist was roaming the city because his friends were the victims.

[Jeff Swaner](#) Staunton News Leader

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Tires on several cars were slashed in one neighborhood, a newspaper carrier was bitten by a dog on Grayson Avenue and the owners of five storage sheds in Waynesboro found them burgled.

The Staunton Leader published its weekday editions in the afternoon, and these items made the March 15, 1979, edition.

You can learn a lot about a community from its newspaper. The movie "The Great Train Robbery," starring Sean Connery, was opening at the Visulite. An editorial cartoon captioned "The Truth Behind the Veil" criticized Iran's crackdown on women's rights. Ralph Sampson's basketball team up the road in Harrisonburg was beating every high school squad in the state. A five-course meal at Kentucky Fried Chicken was \$1.88.

Later in March there'd be a report in the paper of a local cross burning.



The stocking mask rapist entered a dormitory at then all-girls Mary Baldwin College in March 1979, turning doorknobs until he found a door unlocked and surprised an unsuspecting college student. The college asked police not to report the crime to the press or public, according to a police spokesman's statement months later. (Re-created image) JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

You also can learn a lot about a community from what its local newspaper doesn't report. There would be no story about the violent rape of a Mary Baldwin College student in her dormitory; not in the March 15 edition or any other edition of The Leader for months.

When it came to American women's rights, there was still much kept hidden behind the veil of 1970s culture, where silence seemed to be the mainstream response to violence against

women. That included the college asking the cops to delay reporting the rape, according to a police spokesman's statement months later.

In that silence, four more women were raped and several more assaulted.



Ray Robertson sat comfortably in his den while his mind wandered back to uncomfortable times.

"He wore a uniform," the former commonwealth's attorney for Staunton said in a 2019 interview about the 1970s rapist. He had a scar on his leg, and walked with a slight limp. He was a young Black man who wore a stocking mask and threatened his victims with a knife. In one rape, he'd made use of a ladder in the yard to climb to a second-floor window and slip in.

"And he apologized to his victims." Robertson knew about the apologies, about the knife and the mask, from the victims of the criminal who became known as the stocking mask rapist.

He heard those details from one other person that year: a psychic who became involved in the case on the insistence of the third victim's sister. A tall and striking woman from over the mountain in Ruckersville, she told them things that only the police and the rapist's victims knew. And more.

About the scar on his leg, his slight limp. About how she was sure he lived across the street from a theater downtown. All those impressions turned out to be correct.

Including her directions to look for a handprint on the banister by the landing where the intruder steadied himself after dropping from the windowsill. It would be the only strong piece of physical evidence police would have when going to trial.

Forty years later, Robertson shakes his head about it. A psychic, sitting on a rape survivor's bed, repeating in minutes what investigators had struggled to learn over the course of months, and then providing additional details that were not possible for someone to know.

"I've always been really skeptical about that stuff," he said, leaning forward a little, then settling back in his armchair.

"But I gotta tell you, these are the facts of the case."





Charles Culbertson and Audrey "Sugar" Higgs in the late 1970s. COURTESY OF CHARLES CULBERTSON

Charles Culbertson had been writing occasional pieces for The Staunton Leader for a few years. His break had come when his landlady wrote to the newspaper notifying them that "there's a young man in my house who writes all day long."

The paper's editor told her to send him the couple of hundred yards from her house on Church Street to The Leader offices on Central Avenue, and a freelancing career was born.

He wasn't the only tenant that the widow on Church Street took in as a boarder, renting rooms in the old house that otherwise would have seemed empty. To the young and single "Charlie," as she called him, Mrs. Audrey Higgs was family.

And, like family, he sometimes called her by her preferred name, "Sugar."

He and Mrs. Higgs would discuss the serial rapist case many times in 1979. Culbertson would come downstairs and make his morning coffee and sit in a chair by the kitchen window. A few feet away, she'd be stationed in her normal place at the Formica table, wearing a loose-fitting floral print dress that made it easier for her to move around despite chronic arthritis.

They'd sit and converse for hours. "Smoke and talk, talk and smoke," Culbertson remembered in a 2021 interview. "She wanted that rapist caught, and I think she would even have liked to capture him herself. She was fearless."

Culbertson would have his chance to eventually write about the stocking mask rapist, but for now his writing about it was confined to his journal entries.

He knew the first victim, a Mary Baldwin student.

When the door of her dorm room opened, she thought it was her roommate, who'd just left for a night out. But it was a man with a stocking mask pulled down over his head. He'd forced her into the bathroom and pushed her against the sink, pressing a knife to her throat.

He asked if she liked making love as he blocked her way out. "Not with a knife, not a knife," she shouted.

"Shut up!" he told her.

Nobody heard her protests, or his repeated apologies as he locked her into the bathroom. But one student down the hall told police she saw her doorknob quietly turning around the same time the attack took place. Her door, unlike Culbertson's friend, was locked.

Pondering the recent death of a friend of his, he wrote in his journal in April 1979 how that person's suffering was over. But his friend from Mary Baldwin? She "will suffer — how many years?" he wrote. "Already she is an emotional wreck. She may never return to college.

"And what really infuriates me is that this same rapist — who commits his crime with a stocking pulled over his head — has committed this crime a couple of other times."

Culbertson hoped that "the low-life son of a bitch" was caught soon. It was not the last time he'd write in his journal as female friends he knew began to panic. It was not the last time someone in his own circle would be victimized.

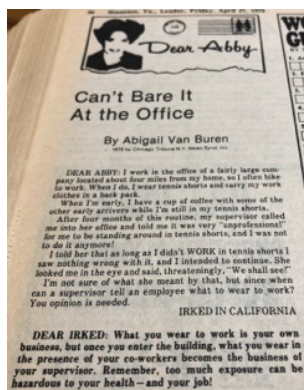
miss paper - now 1/11/79
Already she is an emotional wreck. She may never return to College. And what really infuriates me is that this same rapist - a man who commits his crime with a stocking pulled over his head - has committed this crime a couple of other times. I've heard the police are sure of his identity but for some reason are unable to arrest him. Who knows? All I know is that whoever he is, he's a low - life son of a bitch.

From Charles Culbertson's personal journal in 1979. COURTESY OF CHARLES CULBERTSON



The news was quiet as spring turned to summer, but the man who'd come to be known as the stocking mask rapist was active.

He broke into three downtown houses on Kalorama Street, North New Street and South Madison Street in a period of two weeks in late April and mid-May, stealing coins and jewelry, a stereo receiver and speaker.



Typical of the times, a Dear Abby column from April 1979 puts the responsibility on women for how men might react to their appearance. JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

He started out forcing locked doors open with a screwdriver, but learned as the weather warmed that if he cut open the window screens he often found the windows unlocked and even ajar.

On the eve of the multiple house break-ins, Dear Abby was warning women readers of The Staunton Leader about showing up to work in shorts. Men's responses were the fault of the women, according to the column: "Too much exposure," Abby lectured, "can be hazardous to your health — and your job!"

Echoing the popular columnist, early conversations about the stocking mask rapist would also center on how women chose to appear in public, as if "commonsense tips" and lower hemlines would protect them from being attacked in their homes.

Women's undergarments were stolen in another flurry of break-ins on May 24, May 29 and June 6. Several homes were entered in the span of a few hours.

In the midst of it, a woman fought off a man with a stocking mask entering her house on Sunday night, May 27, on West Frederick Street.

The next break-in would result in a second rape victim.



On a mild and cloudy Sunday night, June 3, in a neighborhood across the street from the city's popular Gypsy Hill Park, a teenage girl was studying in her room.

Suddenly, she heard a sound in the house louder than the television she'd left on in the living room. A man opened her bedroom door wearing a stocking mask over his face and holding a knife.

He asked her if she smoked pot, if she had any money. Where was her mother at? She sensed he was nervous. He told her to take her underpants off and lay on the bed.

Another month would pass before any news of the rapist on the loose would reach the front page.

At 9:45 p.m., police received a call from the teen. The responding officer noted she was wearing a short pink night gown and was "hysterical" when he arrived. She was nevertheless able to describe her attacker, characterize his voice as deep but fast-talking and remember many of the things the rapist said to her. What school do you go to? How old are you? What is your name?

A week later, a Hardee's employee named Pam told her new co-worker that a girl from her class had been raped.

It hadn't been reported in the news but everyone in school was talking about it. The girls in her class were scared.

The co-worker, who went by the name Jimmy Robinson, listened carefully and became protective of her.

What school did she go to? he asked her.

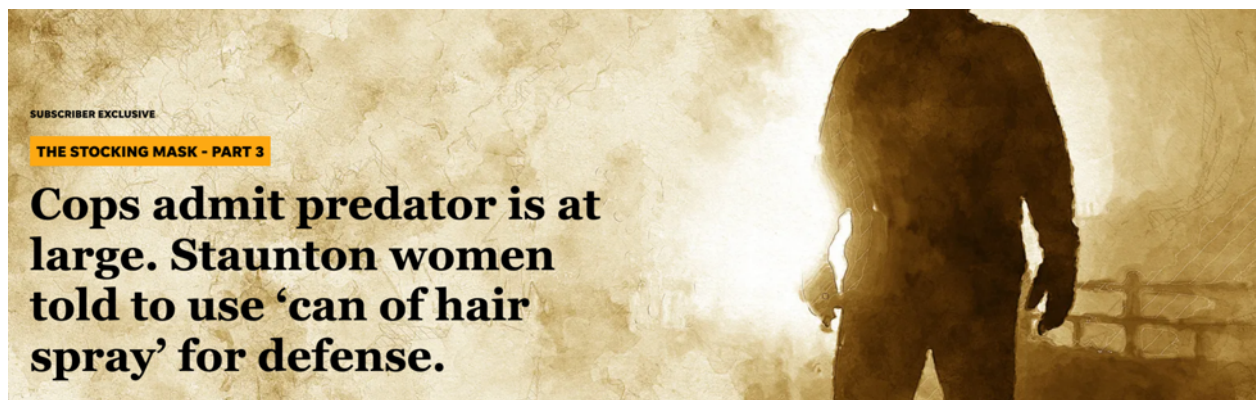
Lee High.

Jimmy offered to walk her home when her shift was over so that she'd feel safe.

Nine days later, a reader of The Staunton Leader's police blotter would have found the first published hint of the danger facing the city: "Staunton police are looking for a man suspected of a rape, attempted rape, and three 'sexually motivated' break-ins in the city since May 24."

Another month would pass before any news of the rapist on the loose would reach the front page.

In those weeks of silence, a woman would come home about 11 p.m. on the first night of July, walk upstairs and be assaulted in her own bed by a man whose features were distorted by a stocking mask.



Five women force the newspaper to act. Police have connected the dots, but not told the public of an ongoing threat. Rapist breaks into more houses.

[Jeff Schwaner](#) Staunton News Leader

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People were watching the skies for signs that summer.

Skylab was expected to crash to earth on July 11, 1979, hurtling debris for potentially hundreds of miles as it entered the atmosphere. NASA scientists set it on a “tumble” that would help it scud over North America and crash into the Indian Ocean.

The satellite overshot its landing area by 700 miles, breaking apart over Australia in a spectacle of “hundreds of shining lights” and sonic booms as much of it burned up on re-entry.

But nowhere near all of it. The opportunistic and the curious converged on an area hundreds of square miles wide outside Perth to scour the ground for the 20 tons of scattered debris. Farmers in Kalgoorlie grumbled about the Americans dropping their dangerous trash across their lands.

Meanwhile, in Staunton, summer’s slower burn continued.

Barbara Mandrell showed up to join the Statler Brothers onstage for their popular Happy Birthday U.S.A. event on the baseball field at Gypsy Hill Park. The movie version of “Hair” opened at The Dixie Theatre on Friday the 13th.

Just before Skylab took its final bow, and before the cast of “Hair” could start singing “When the moon is in the seventh house,” reality crashed down on the city. The crimes of the man dubbed the stocking mask rapist finally reached the public on the local section — Page 7 — of The Staunton Leader in the July 10 edition.

Some of the city’s most powerful institutions — its all-girls college, its police department, and its daily newspaper — appeared to have tried their own version of the Skylab “tumble,” pushing the information about multiple break-ins and rapes forward and over the heads of citizens and hoping that it would land harmlessly at some point in the future, perhaps in a small five-paragraph arrest brief on the inside pages of the paper.

Maybe they thought they were protecting the privacy of the victims, and that it outweighed notifying other women there was a sexual predator in their midst.

Some of the city’s most powerful institutions appeared to have tried their own version of the Skylab “tumble,” pushing the information about multiple break-ins and rapes forward hoping that it would land harmlessly at some point in the future.

Maybe they’d hoped that a suspect would be caught before they had to admit there was a serial rapist on the loose, and that questions about whether their silence had emboldened the rapist and endangered more women would burn out like so much debris in the shining lights of the news of an arrest.

As with NASA, the calculations were off. The tumble went errant. Even buried on Page 7, the July 10 headline — “Rape suspect still sought by police” — and the connection of the rapes with other area break-ins and attempted sexual assaults had the impact of a satellite dropping directly on City Hall.



Two days before the story came out, the rapist broke into an apartment at 221 E. Beverley St., stealing two BIC Venturi stereo speakers.

Stereo speakers in the 1970s were even larger than many people born in the age of cell phones and earbuds might think. If the residents held the door open for the thief, walking out with two speakers the size of a dorm-room fridge would still be an awkward task.



This 1970s-era ad for BIC Venturi speakers shows off their size, not easy to tote around in a burglary. ANN ARBOR PUBLIC LIBRARY ARCHIVES

The intruder didn't have far to walk in the dark that Sunday night; he lived down the hill on the corner of Market Street, less than 150 feet away.

Although the Leader reported on several weekend break-ins resulting in losses, they did not report on the heist of stereo speakers. It appeared that crimes considered connected to the rapist were not being reported to the media, or not being printed by the newspaper.

Until July 10.

The Staunton Leader's report on "a man sought for two rapes and two attempted sexual assaults in Staunton," a story without a byline, was jarring: every paragraph added another crime connected to the perpetrator of those two rapes.

It underscored without saying it that police had already connected the dots between a series of disturbing break-ins and violent assaults going back five months, without once warning the public of a serial offender.

The short article described the suspect as a Black male "from 20-30 years old, 5-foot-11, 150-155 pounds, and with a short Afro hairstyle. He has reportedly threatened his young victims with a knife.

"Obtaining a good description of the suspect has been difficult since he has attacked in the dark and in most cases has worn a stocking over his face to disguise his features."

Police had made a composite sketch of the suspect but warned it was "of poor quality" and did not release the image for use in the paper.

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Then came the details of other crimes linked to the same unknown suspect.

On June 3, the Leader's readership learned, the rapist "reportedly broke into the home of a Lancaster Avenue woman and raped her."

One of the attempted sexual assaults connected to a man wearing a stocking mask occurred on March 9 when two teenaged girls at the private Stuart Hall school were confronted in their dorm room and forced to strip but then escaped their room and ran for help.

The other unsuccessful assault happened on May 27, in the midst of the weekend break-in spree the rapist later admitted to, when "a man with a stocking over his head reportedly forced his way through the front door of the home of a Frederick Street woman who was in her living room at the time."

On those summer nights, they still kept their windows open to let in the cool air, unaware they were advertising easy entry to an intruder. If they were naive about the rapist's tendencies, it was because they were uninformed about them.

The article stated, "Several sexually motivated break-ins have also been reported in the past few months. On May 29, a Market Street resident returned to her home to find that it had been broken into, but only some underwear had been stolen."

Sentence by sentence, the story was an unwitting indictment of the police's knowledge of a series of sexually motivated break-ins, unsuccessful assaults and violent rapes spread over five months and counting.

The connections were made, and the shape of the whole was obvious: a single predator brazenly breaking and entering homes, first violating women by going through their underwear, then escalating to surprising and raping women while holding a knife to their throats.



Twenty-six-year-old Anne Roberts, newly married and newly situated as a Staunton resident, watched the city go by from her job at The Beverley Book Company downtown. The building facing Beverley Street was a bookstore; office supplies were sold at the back, with a door leading out to North Augusta Street.

From those windows Roberts would gaze out at her adopted city and watch the people. "It was just such a great place to live," she'd say in a 2021 interview. "When you're younger, you're just so optimistic. You go around oblivious to bad things."

She hadn't heard anything about a rapist in town that summer. When she did find out from a neighbor that a woman had been raped one street over from her, she was incredulous that the word hadn't gotten out. "Everybody knew everybody," she said.

An object lesson in just how small Staunton was: resident Brenda Canning married her high school boyfriend Art. They moved out of the city for a few years. When they had children they bought a house back in Staunton, right next door to her childhood house. From her front door she could see the porch only 15 feet away where she and Art had stood while her parents had snapped photographs of them before they headed off to their senior prom.

One of her best friends was now living in Canning's childhood home. They both worked as nurses at the emergency room at Kings Daughters hospital, where at least one of the rape victims had been treated. They didn't know the same rapist had assaulted two other women by the time July came. They didn't know the police had connected the rapist to several unsuccessful rape attempts, also unreported in the local paper.

On those summer nights, they still kept their windows open to let in the cool air, unaware they were advertising easy entry to an intruder. If they were naive about the rapist's tendencies, it was because they were uninformed about them.

Despite Staunton's reputation as a safe place, it was never as safe for women as some might have imagined. They had always been on their own.

But it would be naive to think this would be their first time worrying about a male predator. When a former employee at the hospital began stalking Canning's friend, the police did not offer much in the way of protection.

"The police said we had to set traps ourselves," Canning said. "We had to put up NO TRESPASSING signs. We'd string up fishing line in the driveway" between their houses, "about, you know, knee-high. And then between the fence and the bench. And one morning we got up and the bench leg was pulled out, and we knew that somebody had been there."

The two women used an intercom system shared between the houses so they could immediately talk to one another.

When the news reached the public that a serial rapist was breaking into houses, Debbie, a single woman living alone, had more than a prowler to worry about.

"As a woman, it was an unsettling feeling," Canning said. "It really was, and the backyards are really dark."

Despite Staunton's reputation as a safe place, it was never as safe for women as some might have imagined. They had always been on their own.



In a letter to the editor published on July 19, "Five Concerned Single Women" called for more transparency from the police and the local paper so that women could "take an active part in protecting ourselves." (News Leader re-creation)JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

The daily paper had finally started to report on the story. A letter to the editor nine days later suggested that women had forced the newspaper's hand.

“This letter is a cry from five concerned single women who reside in the Staunton area to our public officials and the news media,” the letter published on Thursday, July 19 began. It went on to list the streets on which rapes or sexually oriented break-ins had occurred, mentioning New Street, Lancaster Avenue, Frederick Street and Vine Street.

“There is a great possibility that there have been more incidents that haven’t been reported to the police, much less to the public,” the letter writers stated.

“The most frightening aspect of this crisis is that our law enforcement officials have not reported these attacks to news reporters and deny their existence when questioned.”

Chasing after a suspect is not sufficient, they wrote. “Public awareness is a courtesy which could prevent unprotected and unsuspecting women from making themselves easy targets.”

The letter writers scooped their newspaper and police with what might have been the most keen observation to date: “According to our sources, the rapes have been consistently occurring on weekends, for the past six to eight weeks in the downtown area. Only two incidents were reported to and published by the Leader prior to the article of July 10, which was instigated by the undersigned.”

The writers ended by saying that being “notified of such offenders” will help them “take an active part in protecting ourselves.”

The letter, signed “FIVE CONCERNED SINGLE WOMEN,” added the daily newspaper to the list of institutions who’d sabotaged the safety and security of women in the city.

Looking back, the July victim doesn't remember the letter to the editor. She was still processing the attack and its aftermath. Stories in The Leader would later detail "angry women" demanding justice or victims testifying to the grand jury about a night they'd rather forget. The public discourse of the day didn't really allow for discussion of the trauma of the crimes, nor of the commitment each woman had to apply to their own well-being in those weeks and months afterward.

A front-page story in the Jul. 15 paper offered People Against Rape’s co-chairman Ms. Billie Rosenberger’s advice for women on "Making yourself less vulnerable to rape." Top of the list: close and lock doors and windows.

“[B]reak your daily routine so a potential rapist won’t learn what to expect, don’t put your first name on your mailbox or in the telephone directory, and keep a weapon handy such as a can of hair spray or ammonia in a squeeze bottle,” the story noted.

Rosenberger advised that attacking the rapist could backfire. “If you hit them and can’t get away to safety, you’ve only made them madder.” She suggested that acting crazy, developing a nervous tic or vomiting might discourage a rapist, and that “the rapist is also a human and trying to talk him out of it has also worked.”

Perhaps most telling was not a piece of advice but an aside. Rosenberger told reporter Patrick Kelly that she had “noted an increasing number of telephone calls in recent months from women concerned about the danger of rape.”

Two weeks later, the rapist was back inside 221 E. Beverley St., this time breaking into a different apartment in the building. It was the only criminal activity that he would later admit to from the month of August. Even then, he was staying close to home, breaking into a building which he’d already had success entering.

He might have noticed more cars parked on the side of the streets when he went out late at night. Police had begun to stake out areas around the college.

And one reporter had begun to stake out the police.



Police threaten a reporter. Two Black men identified by victims languish in jail while the rapes continue.

[Jeff Schwaner](#) Staunton News Leader

Published 3:40 am UTC Mar. 16, 2022 Updated 3:50 am UTC Mar. 28, 2022

“Once this broke, there was a sort of mania in Staunton.”

His name was Roland Lazenby, and after the initial shock wore off that a rapist was at large in the city and his own employer had to be pushed into publishing anything about the crimes, he did what a reporter does. He took to the street and talked to people. He talked to women. He talked to Black men, who he intuited might be feeling targeted by police and the white community.

And he began to take walks at night, easily identifying the unmarked police cars and hanging around areas where he saw signs of heightened police presence.

“This was my first real year in journalism,” Lazenby recalled in a 2021 interview. “I think it surprised everyone” that the police and the newspaper had not reported on rapes by a knife-wielding stranger as soon as they occurred. He’s not sure who might have made that decision.

Lazenby wasn’t surprised that someone at the paper could have worked with police to hold back information about the break-ins, assaults and rapes. “The Leader in those days, you know, was often like life in the South — it was a curious mix,” he said.

Curious because, among other things, the newspaper’s crime photographer also shot crime scene photos for the police department.

That same police force was not pleased to see a Leader reporter out at night trailing them.

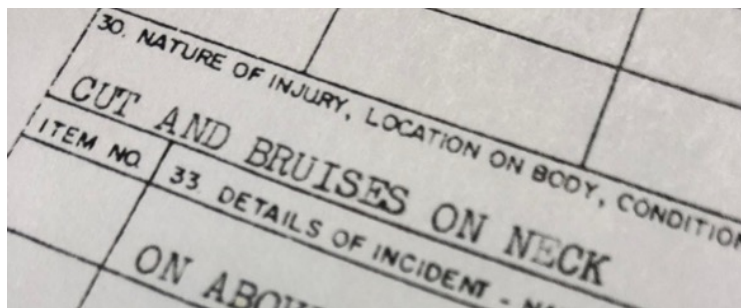
“They threatened to charge me with interfering in an investigation, because I was following them around at night, trying to see what they were doing and how they were going about things.”

Lazenby left the Leader early in 1980. He went on to write biographies of Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant.

“Obviously they felt comfortable withholding this information from the public. It blew up in their faces.”

All the publicity, and perhaps the greater police presence it inspired, made for a quiet August when it came to break-ins and assaults.

It wouldn’t last more than a few hours past the first day of the next month.



Detail from the police incident report of the September assault and rape of a Staunton woman.
JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

The Leader printed four stories on its front page on Wednesday, Sept. 5, 1979, with a story from Savannah, Georgia, and two with datelines from Richmond. There was even a story from London that earned a space on the afternoon edition’s cover.

The most important story of the day, though, was from Staunton, and it was buried on Page 2: “Another rape reported in city.”

The rape occurred early Sunday morning, but “police department officials asked The Staunton Leader to withhold a report until information was released by the department this morning.”

The police asked for the delay, according to the story, to protect “stake-outs at one or more points of the city” and “undisclosed leads” that remained unreported in the story. The dates of the last three rapes showed a distinct pattern: June 3, July 1, Sept. 2 all fell on weekends. How likely was it that he would strike again on a weekday after a rape, when he had not done so before?

When asked if the stake-outs and undisclosed leads had brought the police any closer to identifying and apprehending a suspect, the police spokesman answered, “I don’t know.”

And if they did believe he might be active, others would ask, why not warn the public?

When asked if the stake-outs and undisclosed leads had brought the police any closer to identifying and apprehending a suspect, the police spokesman answered, “I don’t know.”

Police first said the rapist forced his way through a locked first-floor window, but curiously added a caveat in their statement to the newspaper: “The police spokesman suggested the window latch may not have been closed completely.” The detail did not appear in the police incident report.

Was it an attempt to place responsibility back on the woman?



Just across Central Avenue from The Leader’s office, journalists and townies, cops and detectives regularly gathered at the Different Drummer to nurse a cup of coffee and listen to the whisper-stream while they filled the room with cigarette smoke. Charles Culbertson, still stringing for The Leader, sat across the table from a female friend.

The diner’s owner, rumor had it, was a former DuPont employee from nearby Waynesboro who’d made a small fortune as part of the team that invented Formica, the durable material making up countless kitchen counters and table-tops.

The tables at The Different Drummer were wooden and linen-covered, the lighting low and friendly. In a room separate from the bar where the four stools almost always were filled, Culbertson and his friend talked quietly.

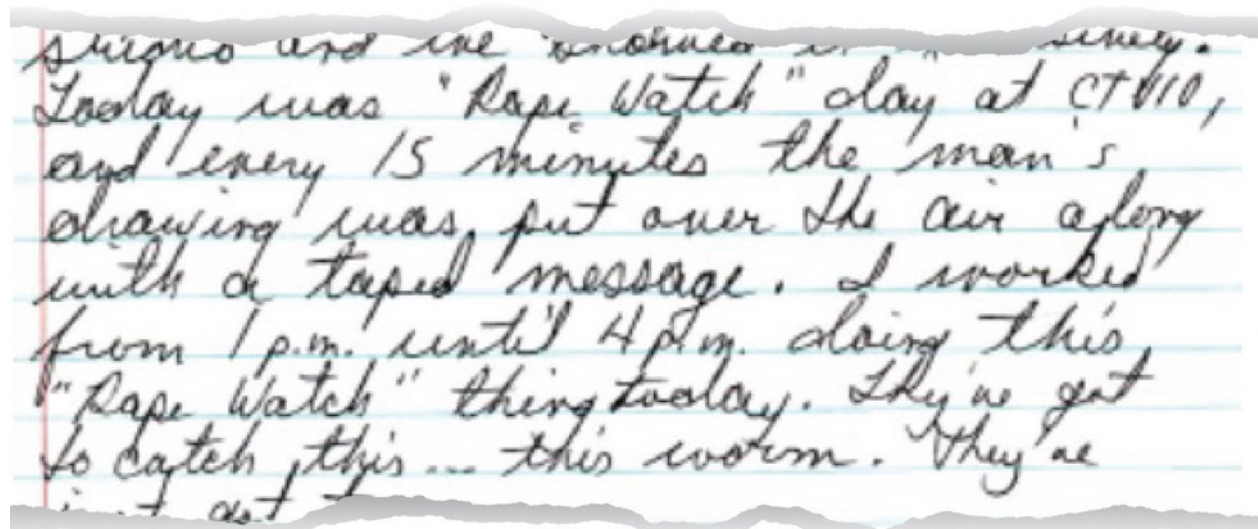
She'd been babysitting the night of Sept. 1 when the stocking mask rapist forced his way in. "Since (March) the rapist has struck again and again, and his latest attack was on another girl I know," he wrote in his journal on Sept. 7.

They sat at a table at Different Drummer that day, and the enormity of the violence against his friend sunk in.

"[She] was babysitting when this detestable son of a bitch broke into her house, cut her with a knife, and threatened to kill the children if she didn't stay quiet," he wrote.

He was perturbed that the paper he worked for had failed to notify the public about the imminent danger facing single women.

One of Culbertson's other gigs was a regular show on local cable called "Staunton Closeup." His September contribution was a three-hour "Rape Watch" segment from 1 to 4 p.m. that Friday, showing the police's vague composite sketch every 15 minutes. Still, there was little to report because the police were protecting their leads.



Charles Culbertson wrote in his journal about the three hours he spent getting the word out on a cable TV program about the stocking mask rapist. "They've got to catch this ... this worm," he wrote. JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

As a young man in a small city with an intransigent police force and a newspaper just waking up to the danger to half its readership, Culbertson felt something more had to be done. His editors at The Leader had not given him the green light to write a story yet.

He needn't have worried. A few weeks later, his cigar-smoking landlady would bring the story right to his doorstep.



Staunton Leader reporter Roland Lazenby's story running above the fold in Sunday's Sept. 16 paper amplified the concern of both white females and Black males as summer turned to fall with police no closer to stopping the stocking mask rapist.

"Everybody's scared to walk outside their houses — or stay in them, for that matter," one woman told him.

Lazenby introduced the other aggrieved party in town, innocent Black men and teens who were under constant suspicion from a racist white Southern community that treated them like a menace to the public.

"[Roger] Jenkins is what you might call the secondary victim of the rapist," Lazenby wrote. "He is a young black man, one of many who have been under uncomfortable scrutiny lately."

"My sister told me of some blacks they've been pulling over because they suspect them of being the rapist," Jenkins told Lazenby.

Another Black man, Rodney Freeman, criticized the Leader's role in putting a composite drawing of the suspect on the front page of the paper. "There's a whole lot of other crime too, but you don't see them putting nobody else's picture on the front page. ... Because this man is black."

For those comments, Freeman would find himself under scrutiny by police as a potential suspect in the case, including having his palm print, along with those of five other Black men, examined against the North New Street banister print.

None proved to be a match.

On Sept. 12, the People Against Rape established a reward of \$130. A day later it was \$250. By the third day, it was \$585. On Sunday, the day Lazenby's story came out, the reward stood at \$785.

Lazenby was the first reporter to add the Mary Baldwin rape from March to the list of the crimes of the stocking mask rapist, and the first to write that there'd been an arrest in an earlier case.

People Against Rape counselor Marney Gibbs said that nationally only one out of 10 rapes are reported. "While she doesn't want to suggest that 30 people have been raped in Staunton, she does feel there is a strong possibility that more than three women have been assaulted," Lazenby wrote.

Perhaps the most succinct indication of the public's rising anxiety, Lazenby wrote, was the posted reward for information leading to the conviction of the rapist. On Sept. 12, the

People Against Rape established a reward of \$130. A day later it was \$250. By the third day, it was \$585.

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Vine Street in Staunton, Virginia, the site of a September, 1979, assault by the stocking mask rapist, is dark at night, even in 2022. JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

The police had finally admitted there was a serial rapist in the city.

What they hadn't admitted yet is that they were certain the person they were looking for was responsible for an additional rape in March.

Why weren't they mentioning it? Because they'd arrested a Black man, Gordon Smith, for that crime five months ago. He'd been living at a homeless shelter at the time he was identified by the first rape victim. He was not charged; the police knew by the time of the second rape in June that the man was not responsible for the first rape.

But he was trapped in the bureaucracy of the state's mental health wards and remained imprisoned in an institution, under observation.

He was still in the custody of the state when a second suspect was arrested Sept. 17.

Theodore Gray, 23, a Staunton resident who worked for the U.S. Forest Service, was charged with the September rape after the victim saw him walking on a city street.

Gray lived on the west side, a mile away from the area around the women's college where the rapist was operating. Police declined to say on what street Gray was spotted by the victim.

When asked if Gray was also suspected in the earlier rapes, Commonwealth's Attorney Ray Robertson's answer was curiously distant. "That would only be speculation, and I won't speculate on an ongoing case."

What Robertson also wouldn't speculate on is that he thought Gray was an unlikely candidate for the rape charges, and that the most recent arrest only compounded a troubling situation he felt was spinning out of control.

Two groups of people were afraid to go out at night — white women, who feared being hunted by the stocking mask rapist, and Black men, who feared being hunted by the police.

Two groups of people were afraid to go out at night — white women, who feared being hunted by the stocking mask rapist, and Black men, who feared being hunted by the police.

And for centuries in America, when white women were afraid of Black men — it was always clear who would pay with their livelihoods, their liberty, their lives.

Two Black men had already been arrested in Staunton in what was already seeming to be a bungled and racist police investigation.

Two weeks later, with Gray in jail and the first forgotten suspect lost in the mental health system at Southwestern State, the real stocking mask rapist proved he was not yet behind bars.



The investigative team is running out of leads. After a fifth rape occurs, they call a psychic who's never worked with law enforcement.

[Jeff Schwaner](#) Staunton News Leader

Published 3:42 am UTC Mar. 21, 2022 Updated 3:52 am UTC Mar. 28, 2022

Kalorama Street hugs the side of one of the many hills in Staunton. The stocking mask rapist of 1979 would get there by walking a minute up a side street, past the Stonewall Jackson Hotel and its giant neon sign which could be read literally a mile away by drivers coming off the highway into town.

After the large hotel building, the side street abruptly ends and the path plunges down 30 feet below; turning along the side of the hill, the stocking mask rapist would be on Kalorama.

The street, even in 2022, is almost pitch black at night.



In October 1979, with two Black men incarcerated for rapes after being identified by their white victims, the stocking mask rapist would have walked up Market Street past the Stonewall Jackson Hotel to Kalorama Street, where he attacked a fifth victim. RE-CREATION IMAGE BY JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

The streetlights may be the same that the stocking mask rapist walked beneath as he found his way to the ornate stone house that October night, stepped up into the tangle of bushes and the winding stone stairway, and disappeared from sight.

She'd fallen asleep while reading, the light in her room still on, when a sound outside awoke her. She looked out the window and saw nothing.

She dozed off again for a few minutes, and then he was in the room, on her, straddling her.

The details of what happened next on Oct. 2, 1979, are not clear from the police incident report, which is disjointed and riddled with spelling errors and strange statements like “Subject walked with a lope that indicated he was young.”

His voice is described as both rough and smooth. The report doesn’t state whether the rapist was lying in wait or broke into the building while the victim was home. It’s not clear whether she was assaulted once or twice.

Things weren’t getting better despite the news of the arrest. They were getting worse.

What’s known from the police report that ties it to previous attacks is that the rapist held a knife to the victim; that he apologized to her several times, once after grazing her back with his knife as she turned over to try to talk to him; that he told her that his girlfriend had been “kilt” in a car wreck a year earlier. Like the rapist who struck on Vine Street, he asked the woman if he could visit her at her home in a few days, an odd request which the police had already taken seriously once, to no avail.

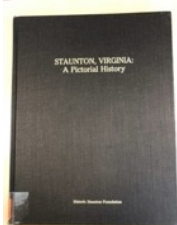
What was known is that it was at least the fifth rape that year by the same unknown subject, a Black male with a stocking mask and a knife, and his second attack in the last four weeks.

Things weren’t getting better, despite the news of the arrest. They were getting worse.



North of City Hall lay a few blocks that in the late 1960s and early 1970s looked like Skylab actually had crashed there. They were the remains of a swath of several blocks, including the city's Black business district, that had been destroyed, building by building, by federally funded urban renewal.

Ostensibly, the teardowns were to make room for a mall or shopping center. The replacement was never planned and never built. In its place came a handful of modern bank buildings and the long macadam skirts of their mostly empty parking lots.



As early as the 1980s, some histories of Staunton were recognizing how the city's downtown Black business district was targeted for "urban renewal." Dozens of buildings were flattened and businesses and families were displaced to make room for a shopping mall which was never built.
JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

The mall was eventually built elsewhere, but one thing was achieved, planned or not: the elimination of Black businesses from this small downtown by white-dominated government power structures.

One young Black girl who grew up in the area revisited the site of her childhood decades while participating in a march in Staunton in the late spring of 2020 after George Floyd was killed. She told a News Leader reporter how the march, which took the crowd south down Central Avenue, gave her the chance to walk with her daughter into the part of town she remembered from her own childhood. A place now invisible to all.

Others who grew up here remember it well, too.

“I can close my eyes now, and walk down Central Avenue, and remember what it was like,” Brenda Canning, who grew up just a few blocks north of Central Avenue, said from her porch in June 2021. “There was the bus station, an ice plant. A skating rink. There was a Packard dealership. There was a coat factory, a hosiery factory. It was just amazing.” Many of the businesses were white-owned, as well. Canning remembered the area as lively and full of people, businesses and their customers and residents of the district sharing the space in “beautiful old brick buildings.

“And then we just razed them.”

Those buildings — 32 in all — contained 26 businesses and 17 households.

After it was all gone, “most of the cleared land remained a weed-infested vacant lot for about 10 years,” according to “Staunton Virginia: A Pictorial History.”

Disdain for and destruction of Black spaces in Staunton was the backdrop still, as the 1970s came to a close. It was the context for the cityscape where the stocking mask rapist tragedy would play out.

And as newly empowered voices of women, mostly white, demanded protection and justice — the police turned their attention to the segment of the population they were used to ignoring most of the time and then dealing harshly with when a problem arose: Black men.

“Back in 1979-1980, I guess the black-white thing was even a little scarier than now,” said former commonwealth’s attorney Ray Robertson, casting his mind back in the past to talk about the case.

The panic that gripped the town was real. “It was just an unsettling feeling, just not really knowing. And I guess we’d always been so comfortable,” Canning said.

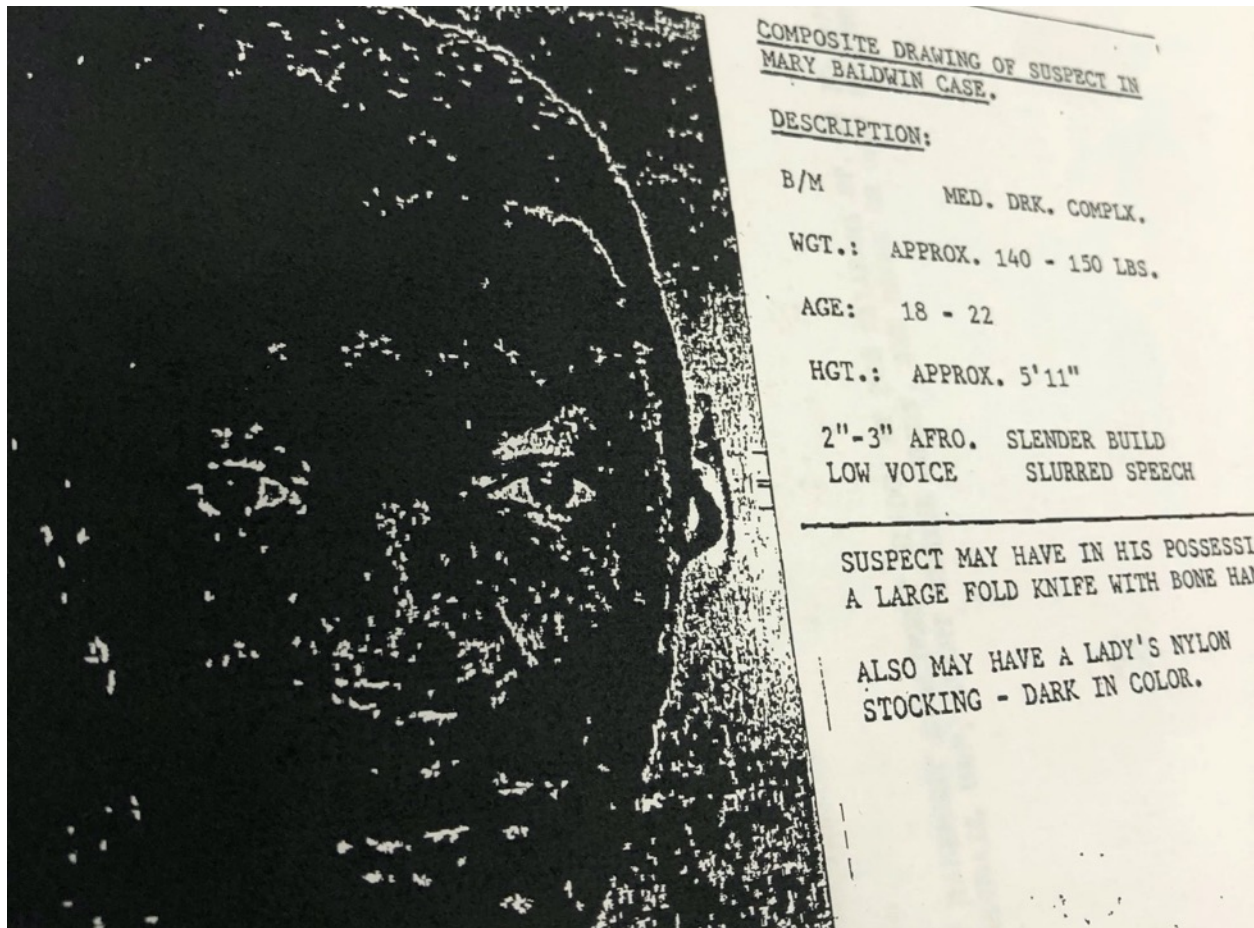
White people had been comfortable, at least.

"1979 was no different than any other year for the last 400 years on this continent," said Staunton native and Black resident Jerry Venable. "Black men have always had a target on their backs."

Venable may not have been a target of police. His height was closer to seven feet than six, and much of the year he was touring as a member of the Harlem Globetrotters. But his friends felt the heat, and by the fall you couldn't walk down the street of your hometown alone without a cop nipping at your heels asking what you were doing out.

"That year," Venable said, "the circumstances just exposed things for what they were."

In late September, the commonwealth's attorney understood two other things that had been exposed for what they were, even before the stocking mask rapist attacked a woman on Kalorama Street. He had already been part of the city arresting and incarcerating two Black men wrongly.



One of several composite sketches developed in 1979 for the Staunton Police. From the final report of the Virginia State Police's Special Agent. JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

"Smith didn't commit the Mary Baldwin rape. Gray didn't commit the Vine Street rape."

He would have an uphill battle to exonerate Teddy Gray. He'd been identified by the victim of the September rape from a photo lineup, "and she also identified him by voice." Worse, Gray had flunked a polygraph.

The other uphill battle was for the police to fight. They'd dug themselves a deep hole. As news reporter Roland Lazenby said, "The department was more interested in arresting the guys than in warning the public."

Now, after police had arrested two Black men identified on the street by white women, the real predator had broken into another house and raped again.

They needed to find the real stocking mask rapist.

They made the decision to call in psychic Noreen Renier to visit Staunton.

With scant physical evidence and two incorrect eyewitness identifications by white women against Black men, what help did they expect from a psychic?

"I'll tell you what," Robertson said. "They were looking for anything they could get."



*An early publicity photo Noreen Renier had taken as she embarked upon her career as a psychic.
COURTESY OF NOREEN RENIER*

Noreen Renier's typical clientele for her psychic services were usually inebriated, always curious and sometimes desperate.

Her new client, the Staunton Police Department, was definitely desperate. Other than that, "typical" didn't describe what the nightclub psychic and part-time adjunct teacher was about to get herself into in the fall of 1979.

On a normal job, she would set up a small table in a hotel bar, prop a posterboard nearby with her photo and the words "NOREEN Psychic in Psychometry" advertising her services, which included "revealing personal insights," and her terms — "Five dollar gratuity customary."

She'd buy a glass of wine at the bar, survey the room, maybe make some small talk, then sit down at her table. She favored fashionably flowing dresses complementing her equally flowing dark hair, well aware that even in her early forties she commanded a type of attention that had nothing to do with mind-reading, though that might have been easy enough to do, too. She'd sit at her table and mind her drink as she waited for her first customer.

Eventually he'd wander her way, because most often it was a man, swerving to stop at the bar or pausing by a table so he'd not seem so anxious to get there.

The customer would hand her a personal object: a watch, a necklace, a ring.

And Noreen Renier would hold it, sit for a moment with it, then start talking.

She'd describe images, feelings, even smells, as they came to her. She could tell if the person had been upset about something; if he had scars or tattoos on his body; if an old injury was nagging him or an old love was haunting him.

The interaction would often land her a tip in addition to the half-a-sawbuck standard, and sometimes another drink.

On occasion she would fall into a semi-trance while practicing psychometry. She often felt things as if she was the person involved; more like first-person recollections than investigative findings.

On occasion she would fall into a semi-trance while practicing psychometry. She often felt things as if she was the person involved; more like first-person recollections than investigative findings.

This included the bad experiences. "The worst was burning," she remembered in a 2019 interview. Holding an object hundreds of miles from a crime scene, she'd described in detail how many times a child had been stabbed after she was found hiding in a closet, and then talked about how the killer paused in the bathroom, mesmerized by the sight of blood running down his hands as he washed them in the sink.

Metal things, rings and knives, seemed to store vivid images and sensations. Even clothing, like a shirt or dress worn by a murder victim, held memories.

The intensity could be overwhelming. In the years to come when she'd visit crime scenes with police, she would be so exhausted after those trance-like hours and wired at the same time that she'd have to retreat to her hotel room, drink a glass of wine and fall asleep for hours in the middle of the day.

Some detectives she worked with knew her so well that she'd come back to her hotel room and find a chilled bottle waiting for her by the door. After hours in a dreamless sleep, she'd

wake in a pitch-dark room, hungry and disoriented but finally rid of the residue of the experience.

And that would be that. She wasn't "on" 24/7 like many people believed about psychics.

Kalorama St. resident raped

By PATRICK KELLY
Leader Staff Writer

The Monday night rape of another Staunton woman has sent ripples of shock and fear through many other single women living in the downtown area.

Although police have arrested two persons on rape charges in recent months, it appears they either have not arrested the right person or there is more than one rapist whose victims have been single women living alone in the downtown area.

Staunton police today said the latest rape occurred at 12:58 this morning when a 23-year-old single woman was sexually assaulted in her Kalorama Street apartment where she lived alone.

The rapist forced his way through a window into her apartment and threatened her with a "pen or pocket knife," police said in giving only the sketchiest details of the crime.

Police said the rapist was a young black man of slender build who wore a stocking mask over his face.

They declined to link today's rape with four others in the downtown area this year, but the method of attack used in the Kalorama Street rape fit descriptions of previous forcible rapes reported at Mary Baldwin College on March 14; a Lancaster Avenue home on June 3; a New Street apartment on July 1, and a Vine Street residence on Sept. 2.

Arrested for the Vine Street rape on Sept. 16 was Theodore B. Gray, 23, of 1401 W. Beverley St. Gray was still being held this morning in Augusta County jail in lieu of \$15,000 cash or \$30,000 real estate bond. No preliminary hearing date has been set.

Gordon P. Smith, 35, of Staunton was arrested in March for the MBC rape. Smith is held in a mental hospital.

(See RAPE, page 2)

In October 1979, a fifth woman is attacked by a knife-wielding man in a stocking mask just weeks after a second Black man is arrested for an earlier rape in the crime spree.

ARCHIVE / THE NEWS LEADER

She couldn't walk down the street and effortlessly read people's minds and see their auras blooming from their heads like psychedelic flowers. Most of the time she didn't feel like a famous psychic who could find things no one else could. She could barely follow a road map to find her way to her next job.

She could go for days without thinking a psychic thought, and often preferred that, especially after a job. "When I'm not being psychic I don't know anything," she said. "I get lost in Kmart."

Hardly the traditional psychic according to mainstream terms, and hardly the traditional tool for law enforcement. Then again, traditional detective work had not been paying off for the Staunton Police Department.

Traditional detective work had left the force with five rape victims, and two Black men sitting in jail while the rapes continued. It had led to accusations of withholding information from the public and lying to a newspaper reporter.

Traditional detective work had led the police to admit that waiting four days to issue a press release about the Oct. 2 rape had gotten them no further in pursuing investigative leads.

By mid-October the reward for identifying the stocking mask rapist had risen to more than \$1,000.

Police Chief J.M. Boyers and Capt. D.L. Boccock, head of the investigative division, were under scrutiny from the mayor's office.

Neither were known for their sensitivity.

Boyers had told the paper flatly in mid-October when reporting no new leads or suspects: "People are going to have to learn to protect themselves a little."



The commonwealth's attorney thinks they arrested the wrong man. 'Forty angry women' storm a city council meeting. And a special agent quietly starts to put the pieces together.

[Jeff Schwaner](#) Staunton News Leader

Published 3:46 am UTC Mar. 23, 2022 Updated 3:55 am UTC Mar. 28, 2022

It should have been impressive, the stack of evidence.

One eyewitness identification by a September victim, who said she recognized her attacker on the street. Reinforced when she also picked him out of a photo lineup, and then by identifying his voice.

Add to that one badly failed polygraph test.

“He agreed to take one, and he flunked it flat,” said prosecutor Ray Robertson in 2019, recalling those fraught days in Staunton in the late 1970s. The test would not be admissible in court as evidence, but “it helped convince the police that they had the right guy.”

Add a record of questionable behavior turned into a trail of misdemeanors.

It equaled one man behind bars at the local jail in what appeared to be a slam-dunk case.

Ray Robertson should have felt confident about catching the city’s “stocking mask rapist” — a Black suspect named Teddy Gray.

The prosecutor knew in his gut it was all wrong.

Eyewitnesses made mistakes more often than people thought. The history of DNA evidence has shown the most common cause of false conviction and imprisonment has been incorrect eyewitness identification. “Especially the victim identifying the defendant and getting it wrong,” said Robertson. And Robertson thought most people don’t understand polygraphs. “They show deception, but they don’t show that you’re lying or what you’re lying about.”

Polygraph measures heartbeat, blood pressure and galvanic skin response. “And when they got to the relevant question, did you rape [the Vine Street victim], and he said, ‘No,’ everything went crazy like he was lying.”

Gray thought it was his look-alike brother who did the rapes, according to Robertson.

“And it wasn’t him, either — but that’s what he thought.”

To Gray, it could have made sense that the victim thought it was him. “And so he thought he was hiding something and holding something back and therefore deceiving. That’s why his heart rate and his blood pressure and his galvanic skin response all went haywire.”

Adding to Robertson’s uncertainty was the Oct. 2, 1979, sexual attack, matching in all ways the methods and behavior of the rapist.

And it couldn’t have been Teddy Gray, the prosecutor knew. “He was already in jail.”

Robertson thought Gray’s attorney, an older gentleman from Richmond, was not competent and wouldn’t do the defendant any favors. “I saw him in action during the preliminary hearing and so forth. And I was afraid. Teddy wasn’t really getting the best representation he could.

“I had real misgivings about Teddy Gray going to trial in Staunton, Virginia, in 1980 for raping a white woman.”

So he kept delaying the trial. He knew the potential spectacle that a trial could be. Virginia was just a few decades removed from white criminals lynching their Black neighbors for trumped-up crimes against white women.

“Racial issues are a bit different than you have now,” he said, looking back. “You’re talking 40 years ago.”



Staunton’s city council meeting Oct. 11, 1979, was stormed by “40 angry women,” according to the following afternoon’s paper. The women demanded the city council bring in additional resources to catch the stocking mask rapist before another woman was assaulted.

City Manager Gene McCombs surprised everyone by saying that “outside police specialists” had already been brought in to help.

News-Virginian reporter Brower York Jr. accused the police of lying to him on more than one occasion and withholding information from the news media.

“Half the population is fearing for their lives,” Martha Murphy said during the public comment session.

“Another speaker criticized the police for publicizing the arrest and jailing of one rape suspect whom the police knew was not responsible for all the assaults,” the Leader reported. “By not releasing the latter information, police endangered the lives of women who had relaxed their precautions, the speaker said.”

The next morning, the fourth rape victim testified for a grand jury against Theodore Gray, providing chilling detail of the trauma of the September attack by someone unknown to her.

After putting the children she was babysitting to bed upstairs, she’d fallen asleep on the sofa watching television. She woke around 12:30 a.m. feeling the cold metal of a knife against her throat and saw a man with pantyhose pulled over his face. She struggled to get away.

“He told me he would kill me, and I stopped struggling,” she told the court. “He pulled up my dress and raped me.”

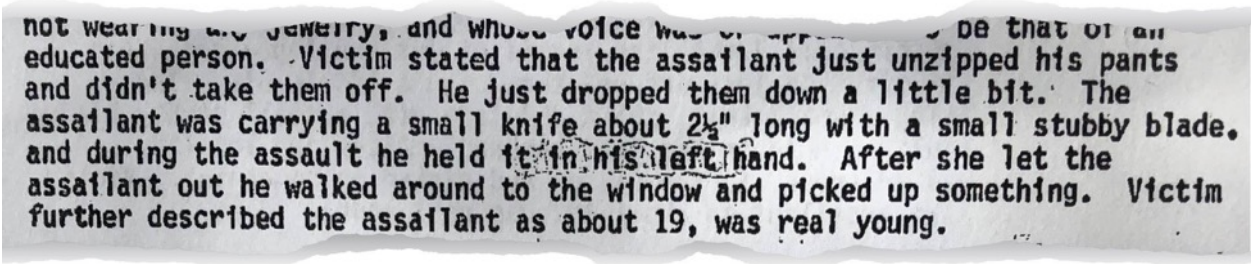
The attacker, who she identified as Black, didn’t take her clothes off or tell her to undress. She told the rapist she had venereal disease and was pregnant. “I didn’t want to see anyone go through this thing if they don’t have to,” she said. She tried to feel his features through the stocking mask, and told the court, according to the Leader story, that “Gray’s eyes, lips, nose, voice, shoulders, chest, body hair, height and weight matched that of her attacker.”

She had seen Gray walking in front of Thornrose Cemetery on the west side of town a few weeks after the attack.

Two days later, Staunton Mayor S. Wilson Sterrett said he had confidence in the police despite the criticism of their methods.

“Unhappily,” he added, admitting that the most recent arrest did not stop the rapes, “I cannot report that an arrest is imminent.”

Still, Gray remained in jail. The wheel of justice continued to grind slowly against him, pulling him deeper under the weight of a system that seemed to think it was fine to incarcerate numerous Black men for the crimes of a sole offender. If justice is blind, what it chose not see when indicting Gray was not color but everything else happening outside its halls, including a violent rape of another woman by a man with a knife and a stocking mask.



not wearing any jewelry, and whose voice was of a person who would be that of an educated person. Victim stated that the assailant just unzipped his pants and didn't take them off. He just dropped them down a little bit. The assailant was carrying a small knife about 2½" long with a small stubby blade, and during the assault he held it in his left hand. After she let the assailant out he walked around to the window and picked up something. Victim further described the assailant as about 19, was real young.

Details from the report of the Virginia State Police special agent's November 1979 report.
JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

Capt. Bocock spent most of October defending himself and his force against accusations of lying. “We have not told the press lies. I have not told the press lies. The people don’t know the facts of what has been done and what is being done. They don’t realize how hard it is to catch a loner,” Bocock told the press. But he didn’t seem to want any help; earlier, Bocock had warned that it might be dangerous if women decided to arm themselves with guns and patrol the streets like vigilantes.

He confirmed that reports of the earlier rape at Mary Baldwin and the attempted assaults at Stuart Hall were delayed for weeks at the request of the schools.

And he admitted to asking The Staunton Leader to sit on news of the Vine Street rape for days while the police followed up on leads the captain would not detail.

By the following Tuesday, Oct. 16, the grand jury had officially indicted Theodore Gray for the Vine Street rape, despite the fact that another rape by a man in a stocking mask had occurred while Gray was sleeping in a jail cell.

Gray would spend over 70 days in jail awaiting trial. It would take professionals from outside the local police force to provide the political cover needed by the state to drop the

charges on him. That came from an employee of the state police force who happened to live just outside Staunton.



He'd later call it one of the most important cases he had in his career. But when he first arrived in Staunton, Special Agent Darrel Stilwell of the Virginia State Police could have called it a mess.

He saw multiple rape cases assigned to different detectives, another to a patrol officer. He saw break-ins with a sexual component assigned to other officers.

The special agent told chief investigator Capt. Boccock, "I want you to bring in all the case files of all five of these rapes, and we're gonna get in a room and we're going to go over that, and we're going to see what we got."

They gathered each morning and went over every detail of the cases. It was "something that should have been done a lot sooner," Stilwell said in a 2021 interview. There was "very little, if any, coordination" in the investigation of a list of cases that seemed to grow every few weeks.

Picture a dozen sheets of paper taped and glued together and folded up like a map. In a sense, it was a map — it was the first attempt by the police, led by Stilwell, to chart the crimes and territory of Staunton's stocking mask rapist. The streets he walked; the times he struck; the clothes he wore, the things he said, the objects stolen or disturbed during his break-ins and thefts.

It was the map that would guide them, Stilwell hoped, to end the city's nightmare.

After three long days of meetings, Stilwell told the chief of police, "You got two innocent people in jail, and a rapist still out there."

He formed a surveillance team. This included the two detectives, Lacy King and Ronnie Whisman, who'd been most involved up to this point. "Those guys were good detectives, I want you to know that," he said. They hadn't made much progress, but Stilwell thought this was due to mistakes above their pay grade. King and Whisman weren't even assigned all the cases that were clearly connected.

They knew the most about what had happened, so they formed the core of his team. He knew he needed more, so he added two patrol officers, L.M. Kerr and D.R. Myers.

"That made five of us," he said.

The team began focusing on the stocking mask rapist's geographical footprint. Almost all the buildings he broke into were within a five-minute walk of each other.

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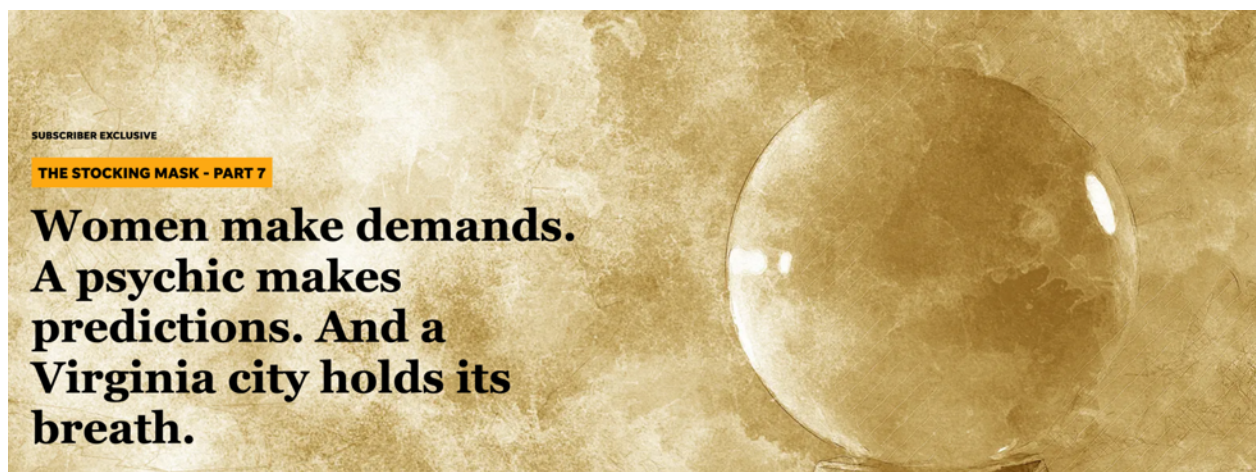
"I was sure that guy would be on foot," Stilwell said.

Night after night they parked in the areas they considered the rapist's territory. They sat in cars mostly. At times they'd get out and walk a few blocks and come back.

They got to know the neighborhood, which people went out to get exercise at what time of the night. They listened for the difference between the rhythmic sound of a jogger's stride and the stop-and-start steps of a person pausing while their leashed dog sniffed the sidewalk, or the sound of more tentative footsteps which indicated someone trying not to make noise. They had to get used to the sometimes-furtive comings and goings of young couples. They got a feel for the late-night rhythm of the very streets the criminal had walked for months with impunity.

Outside of the task force, others could not afford to be so patient.

Women were abandoning "commonsense" advice and taking matters into their own hands. If City Hall wouldn't outline a plan to protect its citizens, they'd create the plan themselves.



The psychic told police details she should not have known about the crimes. She also told them things even she couldn't understand. Would it help or hurt the investigation?

[Jeff Schwaner](#) Staunton News Leader

Published 3:25 am UTC Mar. 28, 2022 Updated 3:58 am UTC Mar. 28, 2022

It wasn't bridge night, but the card table was out at Sugar Higgs's Church Street house, and half a dozen folding chairs were occupied by neighborhood women.

It was the same room Charles Culbertson had spent hours in talking with Sugar over cups of iced tea or coffee, or something stronger, over the years.

The same small blackened fireplace, built for burning coal and framed by porcelain tiling, that dated the house to the turn of the 20th century. The tall windows with the varnished oak framing that let in any winter draft. The sofa, the small television, and in the corner, the rocking recliner that was where he was used to seeing the house's owner and landlord hold court.



The house at 108 Church Street, where in 1979 Audrey "Sugar" Higgs hosted a meeting of women to create an action plan that would help protect women and capture the stocking mask rapist. Photo from March 2022. JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

There was coffee. There was wine. Cigarette smoke hung in the air. And Sugar's trademark cigar smoke.

The same room, but something different about it. A shared determination permeated the room that the young Culbertson could only call "grim."

Higgs was wearing her standard floral pattern dress, speaking to the group of women gathered there.

Sugar was even more animated than usual that night, Oct. 17, 1979.

"The purpose of this is to counteract non-involvement," Sugar told the group. "We need to take a hand in our own protection and quit sticking our heads in the sand."



On a mid-October evening in 1979, area women met at Audrey "Sugar" Higgs's home on Church Street to come up with a plan to protect women and catch the stocking mask rapist. News Leader re-creation. JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

The women present began to plan. And Culbertson finally had a story to write, his first serious news story for The Leader after a few years of freelance features. He hoped it might help catch a predator.

That Wednesday night, in the room on Church Street in which Culbertson sat and took notes, glasses and coffee cups accumulated on a card table and Sugar's old Formica table. Some women had moved from alcoholic drinks to coffee as the meeting carried on; some chose the opposite route.

For her entire adult life, Sugar had volunteered to work with patients at Western State. She believed many of those “mental patients” didn’t belong locked up and had successfully petitioned for the release of some who were considered sick simply for not being whatever passed for normal in Virginia.

In a few cases some of those freed patients had become temporary residents of her house.

In one case, a former patient had attacked Higgs during a psychotic episode. Higgs had used the Formica table as a shield. Now, beneath the empty glasses and coffee cups, Culbertson could still see the gouges in the Formica tabletop left by the knife-wielding boarder. Of course, Sugar had refused to press charges.

She did not feel as forgiving toward the stocking mask rapist.



Packaging illustration for Paralyzer tear gas showed a white female in business attire defending herself against a dark-skinned man. WILLIAM RAMSEY/THE NEWS LEADER

The four-point plan they provided to city officials called for the installment of a female representative from the community to work with both city council and the police force. She’d be updated by police and would keep women informed on their activities and efforts.

It also proposed the creation of citizen patrol groups made of volunteers to walk the streets during the times the rapist had been active.

The plan included the creation of a rumor control center to “dispel any unsubstantiated stories” about the crime, and a Citizen’s Hall of Fame to honor residents who assist a victim or notify the police when hearing something unusual.

Bonnie Traylor of the Staunton School of Cosmetology announced that her students were equipped with Paralyzer tear gas canisters to protect themselves.

A week later, the city council agreed to cooperate with the anti-rape battle plan.

The council announced that public agencies, psychologists, polygraph experts and private citizens comprised a growing and intensive effort to follow up leads and leave no stone unturned. While showing some discomfort with the idea of street vigilantes in Staunton, the mayor said the city would help women begin to implement their plan on all fronts.

The city was on edge. The last weekend of the month was approaching. The rapist had been active around this time four of the last five months.

“No effort must be spared,” said Ms. Lynne Constantine, president of the Shenandoah Valley chapter of the National Organization of Women. “Until the rapist is caught, no woman will feel safe in Staunton.”

The city was on edge. The last weekend of the month was approaching. The rapist had been active around this time four of the last five months.

But the weekend passed peacefully.

A dozen November days ticked by like dry leaves blown across the street, with no reports of break-ins or rapes.

The quiet was broken in a Nov. 13 police blotter report titled “Information withheld” which stated that police would not confirm reports that a woman in College Park Circle was attacked in her home by a Black male who entered the house by sliding open an unlocked window.

The suspect “ripped the nightgown of a woman who was there alone” and then reportedly fled after the woman screamed, according to police.

The description lacked only a garish dime-novel cover illustration to place it firmly in the offensive mythos of the Black intruder ravishing a white man’s property. It wasn’t the stocking mask rapist’s method, and the man was not reported to be wearing a stocking mask.

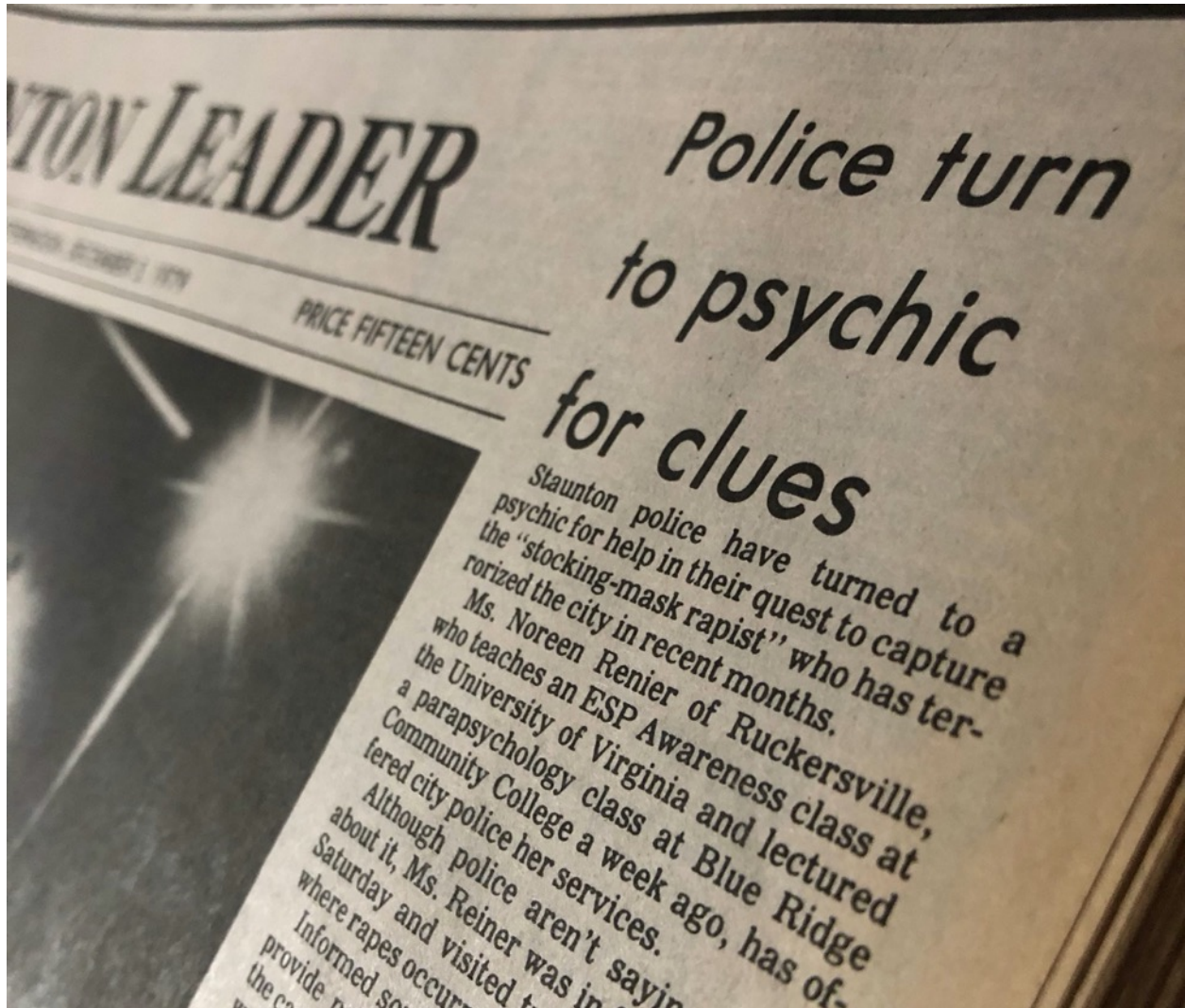
Police “couldn’t say” if this was connected to the stocking mask rapes.

Police could have said more about a Nov. 22 incident, but that one did not show up in the newspaper. A man was seen late at night climbing a ladder toward the second floor of a house on North Market Street. The use of a ladder to gain access to a window caught their attention. But the man was not apprehended. The stocking mask rapist had a way of disappearing quickly, even with patrols and citizens parked on the streets of his territory.

Late autumn gets cold in the Shenandoah Valley. The air can be five to 10 degrees colder than just east of the Blue Ridge mountain range in Charlottesville.

From what locals called the “other side of the mountain” would come one of the private citizens the mayor spoke of, to aid in the hunt for the stocking mask rapist. Her skill set was not one the mayor had mentioned. She wasn’t an expert in polygraphs or psychology, fingerprints or forensics.

But she would come the closest to identifying the suspect — right down to pointing out the building he lived in.



While it took Staunton's local paper months to report on the attacks of the stocking mask rapist, it only took a few days for the paper to find out a psychic had been in town to consult with police.
JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

The drive from her old farmhouse in Ruckersville to Staunton Dec. 2 took her through the foothills of the Blue Ridge, over Afton mountain and into the Shenandoah Valley. It's a

stunning ride full of tight turns beneath towering rock walls dynamited during the roadway's construction, lush scenery and vertigo-inducing views.

Four miles down the mountain, then another 10 to reach the city of Staunton. It was a Sunday, so she didn't have to maneuver around a maze of trucks on Route 64. While the temperature never quite got above freezing, the highway was clear of snow.

She drove past Waynesboro, where the night before Santa Claus himself had reportedly appeared at the small city's annual Christmas parade. An estimated crowd of 15,000 lined the streets for the event, which would have been close to 75% of the city's population. The other 25% was most likely in the parade.

It was the holiday season, after all. And while children were anticipating the sound of reindeer hooves on the roof, in Staunton the windows were locked.

The police were taking no chances. It was the beginning of December, the first weekend of the new month. Four of the rapist's attacks had been on the first weekend of the month.



Noreen Renier's typical gig as a psychic involved putting up a sign at a table in a hotel bar or restaurant, and waiting for curious clients. In December 1979 she consulted with police on a case for the first time. News Leader re-creation. JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

At the urging of the sister of the third victim, they'd called Noreen Renier to meet them at the address of the July attack.

Detectives Lacy King and Ronnie Whisman were waiting for her outside the building. After brief introductions, King and Whisman led her in the house.

Halfway up the stairs to the second floor, she paused. She was being bombarded with images of the rapist climbing in through the window. But how could he have made it that high up the side of the house?

A ladder.

She announced to the detectives that the rapist had come in through the window at the stairway landing. The two men looked at each other but said nothing. Before she moved on she looked at the banister closest to the window. "You'll find some fingerprints here," she told them. "He lost his balance jumping in."

The police had already found a single palm print at that spot. Again, they said nothing.

The psychic found the silence comfortable. She did not like to be led on by suggestion, and she preferred to encounter a scene with no context so that she knew any impressions she got, however unusual, would be uncontaminated by outside input.

The distanced but respectful behavior of these two detectives became her standard for how she wished law enforcement to operate with psychics at crime scenes.

At the top of the stairs a young woman opened the door and led them into her living quarters. In the main bedroom she sat on the bed, holding a ring the woman was wearing when she was attacked.

Her mind was flooded with the presence of the stocking mask rapist. "He wears some kind of uniform," she told them. The heavy fabric of the pants and shirt felt the same to her hands. She got a quick sense of where he lived, as if viewing it from his eyes walking home after the rape. "I live in a brick building...across the street from a theater...I can see the lights of the marquee, I can feel the brick, it's very old."



During her visit to the site of one of the attacks, psychic Noreen Renier drew circles on her pad while in a semi-trance. Detectives weren't sure what to make of it; neither was Noreen. News Leader re-creation. JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

She turned her focus to the body of the intruder. She felt he had some injury to one of his legs, perhaps scarring on the knee. He might walk with a slight limp. He was young.

She was feeling overwhelmed and full of fear, shame and embarrassment. She opened her eyes and saw the frightened look of the young woman staring at her. She realized she'd been absorbing the victim's anxiety.

The detectives got a few more details from the psychic as she sat there. One was that he drove a truck.

Renier was sitting with a pad and pencil, seeming to aimlessly draw a circle on the pad, until she said, "He drives something that goes round and round." She didn't know what she meant by that but felt it was important.

She put the ring down on the bed. The stream of information seemed to flow away from her, a river changing direction. When she opened her eyes, the detectives were standing by the bed silently.

When she looked like she had her energy back, they asked her if she had time to visit one other house. It was the home of another rape victim.

The psychic agreed.

The impressions came to her like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that someone else would have to assemble without knowing in advance what the big picture was.

As they passed the spare bedroom, Renier was immediately filled with a sense of dread. She pointed out where the rapist had been hiding in wait for the woman.

She received more impressions as she and the woman stood in the doorway of the spare bedroom, some from the rapist's mind and some from the victim's, many not as strong as the initial flood of images, textures, sounds. One of those sounds was the voice of the stocking mask rapist, apologizing to his victim. "He's apologizing to me..." she said, her eyes closed.

The impressions came to her like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that someone else would have to assemble without knowing in advance what the big picture was.

The detectives thought the detail about a uniform, combined with the truck, might mean he was a driver for a local company. A delivery driver? What kind of uniform? What kind of truck? And what did "round and round" mean?



A psychic makes a bold promise. A boy plays spy. And a citizen CB enthusiast is in the right place at the right time.

[Jeff Schwaner](#) Staunton News Leader

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The woman didn't like her husband being out late. When he did come home, he smelled of booze or reefer. She had a feeling what he'd been up to. And here they were, with a 9-month-old baby to take care of.

By late summer she'd started to take notice of the reports of Staunton rapes by an intruder.

Nursing her baby one late night, alone again, she thought it odd that her husband had been gone each of the nights a white woman was raped in the city.

It stuck with her. She mentioned it to a female friend who already knew of her husband's night-time wanderings. The friend reminded her that he'd been out a lot of nights besides those, too. But it was enough for her to mention it to another friend.

Somewhere along the line, an unnamed informant brought it to the police.

The task force had been doing more than interviewing psychics. They'd checked out more than a dozen persons of interest in the six weeks since Darrel Stilwell had arrived.

They ramped up their patrols and plainclothes presence, watching pedestrian traffic in the stocking mask rapist's strike zone. They accepted the offer of a citizen group of CB enthusiasts called "React," who volunteered to park in strategic locations and monitor foot traffic as part of the night-time stakeouts.

One of those locations just happened to be outside the apartment building diagonally across East Beverley Street from The Dixie movie house. It was a direct nod to the psychic's

strong impression of having seen a theater marquee when she was in the mind of the rapist walking home after the July attack.

They'd responded to all tips, some less believable and some plain outrageous.

Investigators were very interested when a tipster pointed to the woman who suspected her husband of being the rapist. The notion of a husband and father being a serial offender himself was not outrageous. A year earlier, John Wayne Gacy had been arrested and confessed to one of the country's most notorious killing sprees. Later, both the Golden State Killer and the BTK killer turned out to be married men with families, seemingly above suspicion for their decades-long rampages.

And this suspect had a reputation for being out of the house late at night.

In this instance, two members of the task force paid a visit to the husband who was gone in the nighttime. Others quietly interviewed his work associates and friends.

He let them into his home and agreed to speak with them in front of his wife, who was rocking their baby to sleep. In a tactic typical of questioning potential suspects, the investigators asked him what he knew about the rapes, and how.

This seemingly benign way of opening the conversation worked in two ways: it put the person of interest in a position of an advisor, gave them a certain authority and leeway to talk about their theories of how the rapist was operating.

And if the police heard any detail that wasn't part of the local newspaper's reporting, they'd gently lead the person on. How did he know that? Who had he heard it from? When? Despite what appeared to be a somewhat craftless approach, they could often quickly determine if a person was worth worrying about or just the object of another misguided tipster.

The task force had been doing more than interviewing psychics. They'd checked out more than a dozen persons of interest in the six weeks since Darrel Stilwell had arrived.

The man took in these questions with some humor, fully aware of what was happening. He'd already been stopped by one member of the task force after he'd been seen walking on the street late at night just as a local jewelry store's alarm went off. He was not charged with anything that night. His palm print was checked against the print left at the North New Street rape scene and was not a match. Investigators appeared satisfied that he was not the stocking mask rapist. As they prepared to leave, the wife told them, "Well he knows who the rapist is! Ask him!"

The man replied that he didn't have any idea who the rapist was.

"He won't tell me, either!" the woman said, laughing. "What made you think he'd tell you?"

Other leads were strong enough to quietly bring an individual in for questioning. The task force kept this information tightly controlled. They needed to be chasing down all leads, but they didn't need to appear to be arresting every Black male seen in the rapist's territory.

One was a man that patrolman Logan Kerr had observed sitting in a car and watching white women as they passed by. Kerr approached him and they talked on the street. Eventually they continued the conversation at the police department and the man agreed to a polygraph test, which he passed.

The victim noticed a softening of his voice after he got what he wanted, and in the last two rapes the stocking mask rapist had asked to see them again, saying in one case he thought he was "falling in love" with her.

In his final report Stilwell described most of these persons of interest as "polite" and "cooperative." But Black men were tired of being eyed suspiciously by white people everywhere they went. At least three submitted to polygraph tests. In one of those cases, the test was considered "inconclusive," but Special Agent C.O. Rhodenizer, who administered the test, advised Stilwell that he did not think the subject was involved in any of the rapes or break-ins.

They went back to the victims for additional statements. They even considered using hypnosis on one of the victims. Two of the women told investigators that the rapist had a slight limp; psychic Noreen Renier had said the rapist had suffered some kind of leg injury and they would find a scar on his leg or knee.

Renier had correctly noted that the rapist had apologized to his victims. In one case, the victim noticed a softening of his voice after he got what he wanted, and in the last two rapes the stocking mask rapist had asked to see them again, saying in one case he thought he was "falling in love" with her.

Stilwell was a man of faith and family. Over his career he'd learned to leave his work at the office and come home with a clear head so he could focus on being a husband and father. He had no pity for criminals and yet he tried to keep in mind, "There but for the grace of God go I" when he felt himself becoming judgmental. His cases involved some of the most disturbing deeds people can do to one another. He wanted justice for the women who'd been attacked.

Yet one of the most disturbing things about this case was the psychic.

She made him uncomfortable, and on the one occasion where he met her she seemed to become aware of his discomfort almost before he did. And while some of what she said was eerily accurate, it was also frustrating. It wasn't evidence, it couldn't be used in court, and where she was right it bothered him far more than the incorrect predictions another psychic had sent unsolicited to a police officer.

Stilwell had no doubt that more of her impressions might turn out to be accurate. He also knew they weren't helping him catch this predator.

He grimly thought that it would take more old-fashioned police work, and probably the luck of being in the right place at the right time, to catch this criminal.



The city experienced a brief warming the weekend before Christmas. It appeared to be enough to wake a predator from hibernation.

On Thursday, Dec. 20, an apartment on Kalorama Street was entered through an unlocked bathroom window in the rear of the building about 10 p.m. The intruder tore the curtain as he climbed down into the tub, leaving indistinct muddy footprints in the bathroom and on the carpet. He walked past the fish swimming in the aquarium that gave the apartment its sole source of light, and knelt by the Christmas tree.

The intruder tore the curtain as he climbed down into the tub, leaving indistinct muddy footprints in the bathroom and on the carpet.

He unwrapped a few of the presents beneath the tree; he tore the wrapping from a present to find an expensive-looking buck knife. Its blade dwarfed the pocket knife he was carrying.



Days before Christmas, 1979, the stocking mask rapist broke into a home, opening presents beneath a Christmas tree by the light of the fish tank. He was interrupted by a man coming home and escaped out the bathroom window. News Leader re-creation.

WILLIAM RAMSEY/THE NEWS LEADER

Someone opened the front door.

A man entered, arms laden with packages from a shopping trip. He put them down and turned to head back out, then stopped as he heard an "unusual" noise. He froze, eyes scanning the room. The only movement came from the fish in the aquarium. After a moment, he chalked the sound up to one of his wife's cats, and left.

Ten minutes later he returned with his wife, who noticed the unwrapped presents. The buck knife lay on the floor, still sealed behind its plastic packaging, reflecting lights from the Christmas tree. The couple tracked muddy prints to the tub and the open window, and called police.

They could not determine if anything had been stolen in their absence. It appeared the intruder had also gone through the wife's jewelry box.



Just days before Christmas, on the longest night of the year, a figure stood in the dark backyard of a house on North Coalter Street. He was supremely confident in his abilities. He'd been playing this game for a while now.

It was only 7 p.m. on Dec. 22, but winter's darkness came before dinner these days, and he'd found new places to lurk unseen as people passed by.

He was dressed for the cold, but also for stealth. He was probably no taller than four feet, even in his winter boots. His game of choice was "spy," which he frequently played with his friends.

He stiffened as he heard footsteps coming up the driveway. The boy hadn't expected anyone else to be in the yard, and slid further into the shadows to see who it was. It wasn't one of his friends. It was a man, standing close to the house and looking in a window at his mother.

Spy instincts kicked in, and he tailed the man as he began moving. Around the house they went, the man with a green jacket and the spy shadowing him from the dark edges of the yard.

The Black stranger was dressed in a green jacket and a winter hat that looked to the boy like a cowboy hat, though it was likely a simple knit cap.

Spy instincts kicked in, and he tailed the man as he began moving. Around the house they went, the man with a green jacket and the spy shadowing him from the dark edges of the yard.

The man slowly made a circuit of the entire house, pausing to look through each of the windows. The boy followed him quietly, and when they'd come back around to the driveway he watched the man walk up the front steps to the porch, crouch and look in the windows.

Suddenly seeing a man inside, the stranger backed away from the house and walked briskly down the driveway. He turned to the left and headed south on North Coalter Street.

The young spy went inside and told his mother what he'd seen. She called the police.

Patrolman Logan Kerr and Patrolwoman Dolores Coogan, one of the only female officers on the force, were driving toward the house when they saw a young Black man in a green jacket and knit cap walking down the street.

They caught up with the man as he was about to step into what was called Library Alley. The city was stitched together with such alleys, dirt or grassy or half-paved single-lanes. They were poorly lit off-street paths for homeowners to access the backs of their houses.

It was also a perfect haunt for a person to gain access to backyards and peer through windows. If the officers had driven past even half a minute later, the man would have been lost in the darkness of the alley.



The apartment building at the corner of Market and Beverley streets in Staunton, Va. where the stocking mask rapist lived in 1979. News Leader re-creation image.

JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

The man denied having been near the North Coalter Street address, carefully detailing his movements to and from his apartment that night. However, 39-year-old Betty Ralston, a mother of two and a React volunteer, had been sitting in a car outside the same apartment building — diagonally across the street from a movie theater — all evening and had not seen any Black men wearing a green jacket come in or out at those times. It made the man's story about his evening's activities seem fictional.

Kerr put the man in the back seat of his car and they drove back up North Coalter Street, where the boy who'd been playing outside late identified him as the man he'd seen peeking in his family's windows.



At the house of one of the victims of the stocking mask rapist, psychic Noreen Renier had drawn circles on a notebook while in a semi-trance. She told detectives that the rapist drove something that went "round and round," though she had no idea what that meant. When the man who eventually confessed to the crime spree was arrested, it was discovered he drove a cement mixer. News Leader re-creation. JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

The officers arrested the man in the green jacket on a simple misdemeanor charge of window peeping. Kerr thought he recognized the young man; back at the station, he figured out where from.

The police asked him about a reported break-in at a duplex six days earlier at 31 S. Coalter St., just a block down from Library Alley.

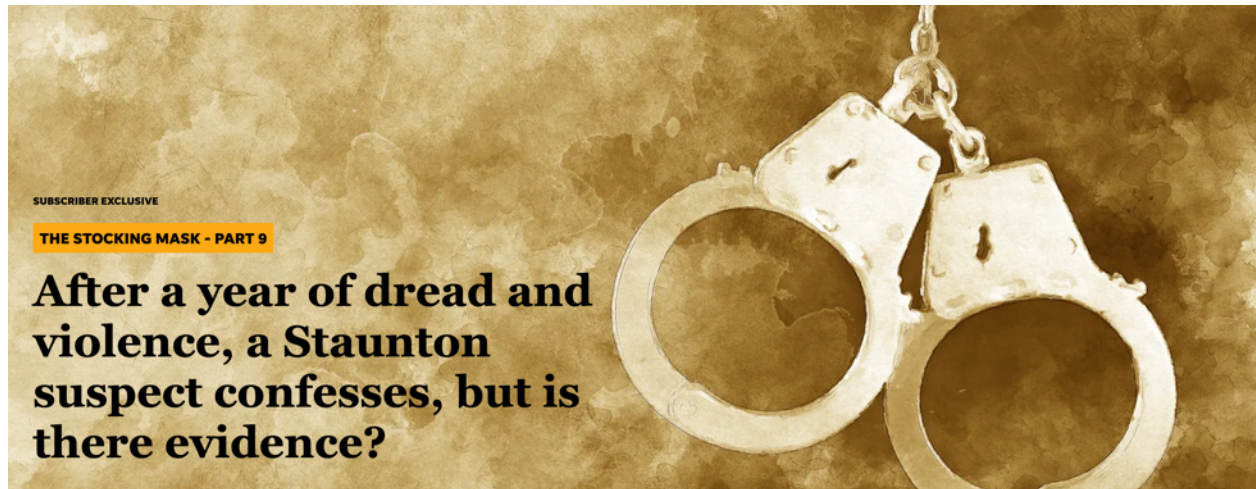
In both cases, the man in the green jacket said he was not trying to break in but to see if a person he recognized was there who'd sold him marijuana once. Kerr had seen him walking on North Coalter as he drove to the address of the break-in that evening.

A second charge was added. Unable to post the \$500 bail, the man was in jail for at least a night.

Patrolman Kerr had almost certainly seen the man before, even before the December break-ins, riding high in the cab of an M&M Construction cement mixer truck, whose mixing element was constantly in circular motion, going round and round.

His name was James Bruce Robinson.

The special agent had gotten his lucky break, thanks to a child spy and a citizen stake-out based on a psychic's suggestion. He suspected that luck wouldn't keep the stocking mask rapist in jail for long.



The only evidence literally fit in the palm of your hand. Was the plea agreement the best choice prosecutors had?

[Jeff Schwaner](#) Staunton News Leader

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The brief warm spell in late December had come and gone, along with holiday celebrations and New Year's parties. People didn't stop going out on weekends, but Charles Culbertson had long noticed a pattern emerge about how they arrived and departed.

Buttoning up his coat against the cold as he left the Different Drummer he could see it clearly: women arrived in small groups to eat and drink and socialize. Once indoors, they might disperse to talk with different people.

But nobody left by themselves. In those weeks after the new year, he would have been surprised to see a lone female exiting a local bar and striding toward her apartment or dorm.



As 1979 turned to 1980 without an announcement of an arrest, the buzz in local bars and restaurants was if the stocking mask rapist would ever be caught. One popular spot was The Different Drummer (ad from early 1980). ARCHIVE / THE NEWS LEADER

Things were different now.

The public had no idea that police were focusing on a single suspect and following his every move. It probably wouldn't have mattered.

Once someone comes through the open window, the whole house never feels safe in the same way again.



The 1970s were drawing to a close; the best-of-the-decade lists were coming out. As people tidied up after the holiday, a TV commercial advised you to “bag up your troubles” in trash bags and smile, smile, smile.

In Staunton, though, things were coming loose again.

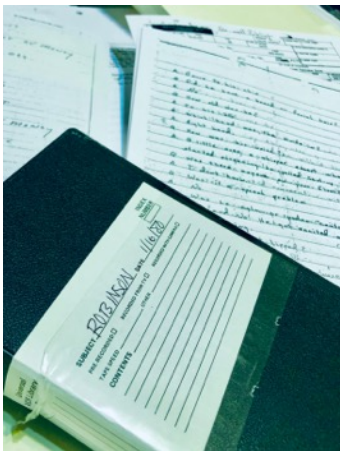
Christmas came for James Bruce Robinson, even if it was a day late, and he was back on the streets.

The stocking mask rapist was in a jail cell for four days, but on Dec. 26, 1979, after being convicted of trespassing, he was released while awaiting trial for the peeping tom charge.

On the night he'd been arrested, Robinson had denied having anything to do with the rapes and had agreed to take a polygraph test.

After he was released, Special Agent Darrel Stilwell of the Virginia State Police wasted no time in sending out Patrolman L.M. Kerr and Sgt. Ronnie Whisman to arrange the details. They went to Robinson's apartment that evening at 7 p.m. to get his consent to pick him up the next morning and drive him down to Salem for the polygraph.

Robinson balked. He said he had a phone call to make and asked them if they could come back later to talk.



The final report of Special Agent Darrel Stilwell on the stocking mask rapist case ran over two hundred pages long and listed numerous pieces of evidence, recordings, lab results and polygraph tests, none of which could be found by either state or local police. News Leader recreation. JEFF SCHWANER/THE NEWS LEADER

Two hours later they returned and were greeted by Robinson and his girlfriend. Now Robinson was reluctant to take a polygraph. The two agreed to go for a ride with the police and discuss it. They stopped in a lot on North New Street to talk.

“During this conversation,” Kerr noted in his report, “he would agree to take the examination, while his girlfriend would not. Then she would tell him to take the test, and he stated that he wouldn’t do so.”

Robinson’s girlfriend suddenly said, “Why should he go? There haven’t been any more rapes.”

“That’s right,” Robinson said quickly. “There haven’t been any more rapes. They have stopped.”

Robinson said he wanted more time to think about it, and the police drove the couple back to the Woodward apartment building.

The next day, police approached Robinson again about a polygraph, after he spoke to his attorney. He was adamant now that he was not going to take one.



As the task force conducted interviews focused on Robinson, a portrait began to emerge.

Sgt. Lacy King spoke with two members of the state parole and probation office. King wrote in his report that a cousin of Robinson's told one of them "that James Robinson liked to smoke marijuana and go in to houses at night."

His most recent convictions were of breaking into two houses in Salem, "and in both cases the residences were occupied by women," King wrote. "This subject has lived in several cities in this state and it appears that each time, he has had some trouble with the law and in the respect that it has to do with going into other people's houses."

Joe Andrew Edwards, a security guard, was one of the initial subjects that police investigated.

He was also Robinson's brother-in-law, and the Staunton connection. After Robinson was released from prison on March 5, he spent "about a week" with his mother in Millboro; then Edwards, who lived in the Woodward apartment building, "brought him to Staunton where he began looking for a job."

Edwards told police that he'd noticed his brother-in-law bringing things into the apartment that he said people had given him. It seemed odd to him; he didn't consider Jimmy to be a thief but it didn't make sense that he'd have the money for some of the stereo equipment that he was obtaining, or that he'd be so interested in buying some of the other smaller items, like an alarm clock.

New search warrants issued in mid-January helped recover items overlooked in a first search of Robinson's apartment, tying him to break-ins in May and July.

On Jan. 15, police charged Robinson with four break-ins and burglaries based on evidence found during those searches.

Confronted with the additional charges, Robinson "maintained his innocence for a good while," Stilwell wrote. When police explained they had gathered evidence from his apartment of items stolen from the four homes, he eventually admitted to three of the break-ins and larcenies. He said he'd bought stolen stereo speakers found in his apartment from a man named Spooney.



In an interview in January 1980 James Bruce Robinson admitted to climbing a ladder to break into a house in Staunton through a second-floor window. When he reached the level of the porch roof, though, he saw two children looking out at him, and escaped before police arrived. News Leader re-creation. AURORA SCHWANER/SPECIAL TO THE NEWS LEADER

Then he came out and admitted to an additional break-in on Aug. 1 where he stole nude pictures he found in an apartment on East Beverley Street. He also said he was the person who'd been seen using a ladder to climb toward a second-floor window of a North Market Street home Nov. 22.

"I put the ladder up to the roof and climbed part of the way up the ladder," Robinson said in a signed statement about that night. "I saw two girls looking at me and climbed down and ran. I don't know what I climbed up on the ladder for. I was high and didn't really know what I was going to do."

Stilwell suddenly had two things going in his favor. First, the ladder connection. He had Robinson's prints at a rape crime scene where a ladder was used to gain entrance; and he had Robinson admitting to using a ladder at another address.

Second, he had a suspect who was willing to widen the conversation of his illegal activity. He pressed Robinson on the North New Street break-in.

Robinson seemed to have a very good memory of the home except for the bedroom, even though he'd stolen a garnet ring from that room. He was soft-spoken in general, wrote Stilwell, except when the rapes and the theft of women's undergarments were brought up.

When the other rapes were brought up, Robinson had a ready excuse for any evidence of his presence. It seemed he was always looking to buy marijuana, and he'd do that by going out at night to a house where a seller, always a man, was supposed to live, and looking through the windows to make sure he was home. The night in December he was arrested, he'd made a similar claim, though he had no money in his pockets to make the buy.

He said he was familiar with the house on West Frederick Street, site of the attempted rape in late May, because he was "pretty sure that was the house he used to go buy reefer from a light-skinned black guy but denied he had ever attempted an assault on anyone in the building."

He added that in one case he had helped a woman move from a house on Kalorama Street, so that would explain if his prints were found at that location.

"It was obvious when talking to Robinson that he was intentionally trying to explain away any possibility that he perpetrated any of the sexual assaults or attempted assaults," Stilwell wrote. He could describe in detail some of the homes but "shunned the areas of all the assaults and crossed himself up in his statements to the point there was not much doubt he had perpetrated all of the assaults."

One thing he couldn't quite explain was the palm print on the banister below the window appearing two months after his break-in, found when police were investigating the July rape. Robinson argued the print was from his April burglary. For some reason he couldn't explain, he said he'd decided to try the window from the inside, even though it was eight feet above the stairs and would not be a safe escape route. He claimed he got a chair from the kitchen, placed it on the stairway, and stood on it to reach the window.

The opening Stilwell needed to close the case was right in front of him in his mind's eye: that open window. Why would Robinson care about the window if he had no plans to come back?

The opening Stilwell needed to close the case was right in front of him in his mind's eye: that open window. Why would Robinson care about the window if he had no plans to come back?

Things were starting to come into focus. But like when you look through binoculars at a distant object and instead see two objects, they weren't fully aligned yet. Stilwell was sure he had his sights set on the right person; he just needed to make the proper adjustments to get clarity.

Robinson's arrival in Staunton lined up with the initial attempted sexual assault of two underage students by a stocking-masked man at Stuart Hall on March 10, the rape of a Mary Baldwin student on March 14, and the string of sexually-oriented break-ins and rapes that had plagued the city until his arrest just before Christmas.

Now James Bruce Robinson was back in jail.

Stilwell and the task force were sure they had found the nightmare that had been stalking the city. With more knowledge of Robinson, his criminal past and his behavior, Stilwell thought it was time to turn up the heat.

"Robinson is quiet. He listens well," he wrote in his report. He also clearly liked to talk. Stilwell hoped that would be his undoing.



Robinson faced a Jan. 16, 1980, hearing for the April break-in of 230 Kalorama St. Before he went to court, he and his attorney, William Bobbitt Jr., met with Commonwealth's Attorney Ray Robertson. With Stilwell and other members of the task force present, Robertson advised the public defender of the new charges Robinson had admitted to the day before.

He also advised that there was evidence to charge him with the July rape. Robertson asserted that "there were enough facts available to cause the belief that James Bruce Robinson was the stocking mask rapist, and that if he was and would clear up all the cases, he would recommend a 20-year sentence on all charges with none suspended."

After the hearing, Bobbitt authorized the police to talk with his client and said that he would not need to be present. An unusual allowance, many defense lawyers would agree.

After the hearing, Bobbitt authorized the police to talk with his client and said that he would not need to be present. An unusual allowance, many defense lawyers would agree.

Police brought him back to the station and provided him lunch. Despite his denials, Robinson seemed to want to be cooperative, and Stilwell tried to bring him out more.

"We'd go over the types of offenses that we thought he'd probably committed." Anything to keep him talking.

Robinson began owning up to the rapes, but as in the previous conversation he could not bring himself to talk in detail about them, though he could describe the victims, the furniture in the rooms, the pictures hanging on the walls.

Stilwell wrote that Robinson eventually characterized the crimes as if “some unknown part of him may have caused him to commit the rapes and then it was blotted out of his memory.” Robinson said that he did not know any of the victims and was sorry for what he’d done.

Stilwell remembers at one point in the conversations Robinson said something striking. “He said he felt like he needed help.” Stilwell understood the stakes. As soft-spoken and intelligent as he was, Robinson was admitting to rapes in which he held women down at knife-point, sometimes cutting them. He made attempts to cover the faces of some of the women, a dehumanizing behavior. When would the implied violence and de-personalization of the victim turn to life-taking violence? He felt Robinson was reaching a similar conclusion.

The special agent also knew a confession doesn’t make a case airtight.

They needed more details. In a case with scant physical evidence, before the days of DNA, they needed to be sure he was the person who committed the rapes.

The next day, the detectives took Robinson for a sightseeing tour of the city the stocking mask rapist had terrorized for 10 months.

Staunton’s a city of hills; you can’t drive for a minute without finding yourself on one, and it always seems you’re traveling up a hill more often than down. In winter the trees that adorn the yards seem to withdraw, and the old houses seem more prominent. Driving up hilly North New Street on a cold gray day, it might seem the houses are crowding together in a group, as if to overhear the conversation of people in their cars.

“I remember this as if it were yesterday,” Stilwell said. “I’d say, ‘We’re in the area where one of these assaults occurred. Now when you see the house that it occurred in, you tell me to stop.

“And he did. He would sit there and tell us exactly how he went into the house, and everything about it.” How’d he enter the building? Where’d he find that ladder, anyway? And after you left, where did you leave it?

They sat in the car and he talked over the heater’s hoarse roar. Those details would be brought up at Robertson’s trial.



City's 'stocking rapist' confesses

By PATRICK KELLY
Leader Staff Writer

A city man arrested for an attempted break-in has confessed to being the "stocking-mask" rapist.

James Bruce Robinson, 22, of 204 E. Beverley St. was charged Wednesday night with the five rapes which have occurred in the downtown area since last March.

Robinson, a truck driver for M&M Ready Mix Inc. of Fishersville, is divorced and lived alone at Woodward Apartments. A Philadelphia native, he came to Virginia in 1976 and moved to

Staunton in early March — just before the first of a series of rapes began in the city's downtown area.

In a confession made to Staunton Commonwealth's Attorney Raymond Robertson, Robinson "freely admitted" to the rapes of five Staunton women. A total of 16 charges — including rapes, break-ins, larcenies, attempted larceny and armed robbery — have been lodged against Robinson.

A break in the case came Jan. 9 when Robinson was arrested for an attempted break-in at the apartment of Ms. Ann C. Dahl of 239 Kalorama St. On Tuesday Robinson was charged with break-ins

from March 28 to July 8 at four homes.

"We know from his confession details that only the rapist would know," the city's chief prosecutor said.

In the confession, the prosecutor said, Robinson admitted to the break-ins and forcible rapes of women at a Mary Baldwin College dorm on March 14; a Lancaster Avenue home on June 3; a N. New Street residence on July 1; a Vine Street home on Sept. 2, and a Kalorama Street apartment on Oct. 2.

Robinson also admitted to the armed robbery of the N. New Street woman. The attacker in that incident was reportedly armed with a knife.

Two attempted rapes reported during the period are still under investigation, Robertson said.

The arrest of Robinson, who is being held without bond in Augusta County jail, ends a 10-month period during which women living alone in the downtown area were terrorized.

During that time, city residents appealed to the City Council for help, formed an anti-rape program with city help and established a reward fund for information leading to arrest and conviction of the rapist.

During the investigation, frustrated police even turned to a Ruckersville

ROBINSON



psychic as well as other police agencies for help.

THE STAUNTON LEADER

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STAUNTON, VA., 24401, THURSDAY AFTERNOON, JANUARY 17, 1980

TWENTY CENTS

The arrest and confession of the stocking mask rapist is announced in The Staunton Leader of January 17, 1980. ARCHIVE / THE NEWS LEADER

For once, the news was reported on time.

When she saw The Leader story that James Bruce Robinson had been arrested and confessed, the July victim thought to herself, "Thank goodness." A similar sentiment was likely being thought and spoken by many of the city's women. Maybe this time, the nightmare really was over.

James Bruce Robinson had his day in court. It was a brief one.

Surviving records in circuit court show a plea agreement had been reached. Robinson appeared in court Feb. 6 and acknowledged guilt in five rapes and more than a dozen other felonies, including 11 breaking-and-entering felony charges, four charges of felony grand larceny and one charge of felony robbery.

He pleaded guilty to the rape for which Theodore Gray was indicted by a grand jury, and for the rape in which Gordon Smith was initially identified and jailed.

He was not charged in the attempted rape of two Stuart Hall students, nor in the May rape attempt by a stocking-masked man at a Frederick Street home. He was not charged in the attempted rape in November.

He pleaded guilty to the rape for which Theodore Gray was indicted by a grand jury, and for the rape in which Gordon Smith was initially identified and jailed. Smith remained incarcerated in a mental institution at the time, though no longer in a ward for criminal

patients. Gray had been released in November after the commonwealth's attorney decided not to prosecute.

No transcript of the trial exists in circuit court records. A court document dealing with the indictments and plea bargain, and the judge's sentencing decision, are all that remain of the proceeding.

The trial was recorded on three cassettes but not transcribed. When The News Leader examined the cassettes in the office of the clerk of circuit court in 2019, it was discovered that the tapes were broken away from their leader tape and spool.

Then-circuit court clerk Tom Roberts refused to repair the cassettes, or to let them be taken out of the building for repair by a third party paid for by The News Leader.

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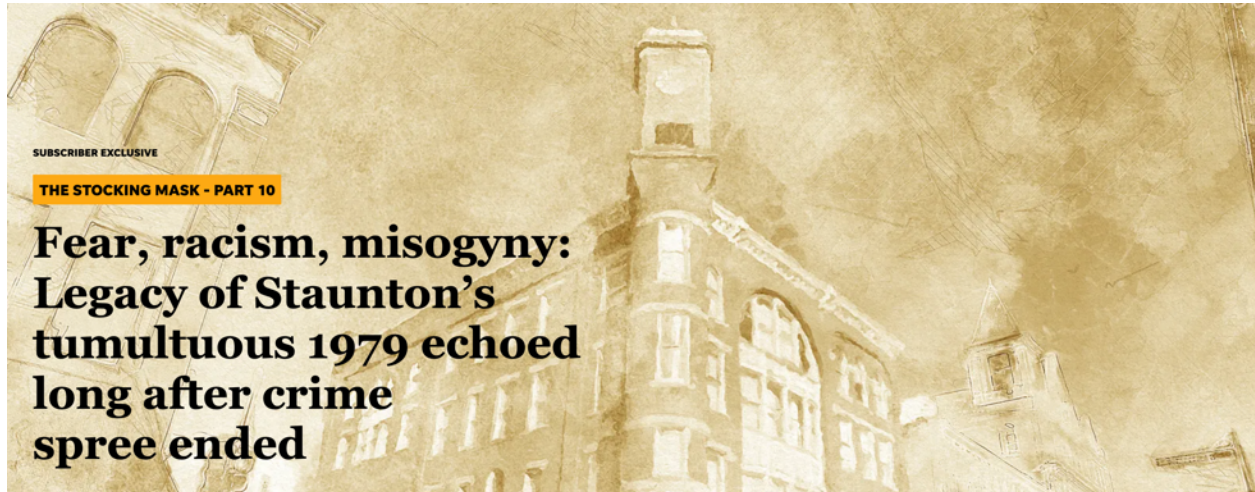
Special Agent Stilwell was listed as the only witness. He recalled that in a trial involving a confession he would have read the victim's statements and the defendant's confession to the judge. None of those materials are among the printed documents available at the courthouse.

He would then have explained how the information that the defendant provided in conversations with detectives included details that only the rapist could know about all five attacks. No transcript of this statement exists at the courthouse.

The sentencing guidelines for rape in Virginia in 1979 indicated imprisonment of five years to life. Robinson held a knife to his victim's throats as he raped them. He threatened to kill them. The additional violence and trauma on the victims is not part of the surviving trial record, which states only the 21 charges to which James Bruce Robinson was pleading guilty.

The judge sentenced Robinson to 20 years on each count. "And it is further ordered that the penitentiary sentences this day imposed shall run concurrently." Translation: 20 years, not 400.

Or in layman's terms, four years per violent rape.



Missing police reports, broken trial tapes, accusations of coercion. The troubled legacy of the city's most terrifying crime spree.

[Jeff Schwaner](#) Staunton News Leader

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Summer, 2021. A few days a week, you can find a Black man in his mid-sixties named Ted working at White's Travel Center in Raphine, a sprawling complex for truckers and travelers off Interstate 81, that strip of highway stretching from New York's Canadian border through half a dozen states to Knoxville, Tennessee.

He's semi-retired after decades of work in hospitals in Richmond and Harrisonburg.

If James Bruce Robinson hadn't been caught peeping in a window by a kid playing spy, it's likely Ted Gray would have spent a few of those decades in prison for a rape he didn't commit, after being falsely identified by the victim.

While much of his life has been spent in areas close to Staunton, he never came back to settle in the city that cost him his job and some friendships in 1979, when he was arrested with great fanfare in mid-September. Many women in the community, believing the worst was over and that a months-long crime spree had finally come to an end, relaxed their guard.

Two weeks after Gray's arrest, the stocking mask rapist broke into a home and raped another Staunton woman.

While much of his life has been spent in areas close to Staunton, he never came back to settle in the city that cost him his job and some friendships in 1979, when he was arrested with great fanfare in mid-September.

Gray was already in jail, and remained incarcerated even after that attack. His rape charge was certified before a grand jury in mid-October as the Staunton police were requesting help from the Virginia State Police to find the real rapist.

Gray himself was dumbfounded when he was arrested. "I went to school with her," Gray said of his accuser. "Why would she pick me?"



In 1982, the Staunton Leader covered the issue of rape again. This time it was an in-depth series by female reporters on the difficulties of securing convictions of accused rapists. Those stories included an analysis of the complexity of catching and prosecuting rapists, and the problems with laws that were meant to protect victims.

Gone were the headlines suggesting that if women just had "common sense tips" to protect themselves, they might not be attracting rapists to their doorstep.

Georgina Hickey, the chair of the Department of Social Sciences and a professor of history at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, has heard that before. Hickey's family had moved to Virginia Beach in 1978. She doesn't remember hearing about the serial rapist in Staunton, but recalls how late '70s and early '80s culture seemed to amplify the idea of urban areas as dangerous for women.

As a girl and young teenager "I was absolutely conditioned to be afraid of what was lurking out there," she wrote. The professor has been tracing the history of how public space has been defined across the 20th century in American cities for her book "Breaking the Code: Challenging Gender Segregation in the Twentieth Century Urban United States," to be published in 2023.

"Once something gets labeled 'common sense,' of course, there is very little room to push back against it. It absolves the larger community of responsibility while holding individual women responsible for whatever violence they might encounter," she wrote in an email to The News Leader.

Hickey said that the multiple arrests of Black men helped convey a message that the streets were safe only for white men.

"This case seems to have quickly triggered longstanding racial tensions, creating fear and suspicion on both sides. And, of course, false accusations of Black men are no surprise in this atmosphere. It foreshadows what will happen a decade later in the Central Park Jogger case."

It might stretch someone's memory to call up any instance in Staunton where, in the midst of serial crimes, two white men were held for individual incidents while the local police publicly sought help to find the real culprit.

It took Special Agent Stilwell to bring all the cases together into an organized investigation, and to tell the chief of police what should have been obvious — that they had two innocent Black men incarcerated, and one very active rapist still at large.

As the fall of 1979 stretched toward winter, Stilwell's task force, aided by the React citizen's group, regularly noted the appearance of any lone Black male in his 20s on the streets of Staunton and often asked the men to identify themselves and explain what they were doing out at night.

The law enforcement strategy is seen today as racial profiling and targeting. It still happens, though.

The law enforcement strategy is seen today as racial profiling and targeting. It still happens, though.

“There is a long history, of course, of controlling and persecuting Black men in the name of protecting white women,” wrote Hickey. “The narrative is controlling on both sides — perpetuating images of Black men as violent, needing to be surveilled and controlled, and women needing to be ‘protected,’ which often translated as advice to stay home.”



Noreen Renier wouldn't find out about the arrest of Robinson until early 1980, when she'd read about it in the newspaper like everyone else.

It's something that both bothered her and comforted her over the decades. She wasn't a police officer or detective. She didn't face the pressures those professionals faced.

“I don't solve crimes,” she said in many interviews over the years. “The police solve crimes.”

An invitation to speak at the Peninsula Tidewater Academy of Criminal Justice in Hampton, Virginia in the early 1980s put Renier in front of a roomful of cops, speaking between a parapsychologist and an FBI agent. There she met Robert Ressler, one of the FBI agents who founded the Behavioral Science Unit and coined the term “serial killer.”



*Noreen Renier speaking at a library in Fairfax County, Virginia, in December 2021.
COURTESY OF NOREEN RENIER*

Ressler was impressed by her demonstration of psychometry; she had successfully described all but one of the police officers who'd put a ring or watch in an envelope with only their initials to identify them.

After her talk, Ressler determined that her one failure was due to an officer using the watch of a colleague in his envelope. That man sheepishly apologized to Renier, and she was invited to speak to FBI agents at Quantico.

There, among the brain trust of the investigative world, she would be the first and only psychic to lecture the FBI on her methods. Again, she won over the tough crowd. Later, she recalled in her autobiography "A Mind for Murder," she was escorted to an agents-only lounge inside the building called the "Board Room."

Loosened up by a few drinks, the agents began approaching her one by one, dropping a watch or ring on the bar in front of her and asking, "Can you tell me something about myself?"

Maybe these guys weren't so different from her typical clientele after all, she thought.



If you were to walk around downtown Staunton and note all the buildings related to the spree of the stocking mask rapist, you'd start to get claustrophobic. You can't live downtown without being able to walk to one or more of them in a matter of minutes. Without being aware of it, I lived for five years in a house next door to where one of the attempted rapes took place.

One house that might stand out as the last place to visit on such a stroll would be an old building on Church Street where Audrey "Sugar" Higgs hosted and exhorted a group of Staunton's women to demand accountability from their city and police.

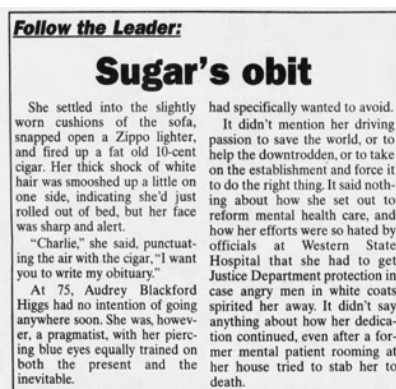
Nearby, one of the oldest churches in the city raises its spires to the sky, and tourists walk its grounds and stand among its pews every week to get a glimpse of the Tiffany stained-glass windows. Staunton is still pious enough that the top of every hour is a brief competition between multiple sets of church bells.

Meanwhile the house on Church Street silently stands as the beginning of a new covenant among women to claim their lives in a modern era.

A few years after the stocking mask rapist was imprisoned, Sugar told Charles Culbertson, who was still living under her roof, "Charlie, I want you to write my obituary."

She was dying, and couldn't bear the thought of boring the populace in the aftermath of her last breath with a run-of-the-mill obit. Not many people called him "Charlie" and got away with it, but Sugar did.

It took Culbertson nearly a decade to finish that obituary, but eventually, when he could command a spot on the Opinions page of The News Leader, he wrote an elegy to his long-lost landlord and friend.



Freelance writer and Leader columnist Charles Culbertson followed through on his promise to Audrey Higgs to write her obituary.

ARCHIVE / THE NEWS LEADER



One element of the case with a long American history — that of Black men confessing to crimes they didn't commit — is not lost on history professor and Dean of the Mary Baldwin College for Women Amy Tillerson-Brown.



Amy Tillerson-Brown, history professor and the Dean of Mary Baldwin College for Women. PROVIDED.

“I think of the thousands of men who have been coerced.”

Tillerson-Brown sat for an interview in Staunton at a coffeehouse directly across the street from the apartment building where James Bruce Robinson lived.

“Plea deals are usually made to shut the story up,” the history professor and dean said in October 2021.

She wondered if Robinson had appealed his conviction on the grounds his confession was coerced — he had — and wondered if the Staunton Police Department had done any DNA testing on the evidence to confirm the rapes were linked to a single rapist, and that the rapist was indeed James Bruce Robinson.

While an effort was made in recent years by the Virginia State Crime Commission to use DNA testing on evidence from over 800 convictions from 1973 to 1988, the case of James Bruce Robinson's conviction for the stocking mask rapist cases was not part of the Post-Conviction DNA Testing Program and Notification Project, according to Katya Herndon, the chief deputy director of the Department of Forensic Science.

It may be that there is no evidence left to test.

The News Leader reached out to the Staunton police to request they test the PERK kit evidence in the stocking mask rapist cases, if any still exists. There has been no response.



The Ted Gray who spoke in an October 2021 interview is not bitter toward his accuser. “It wasn’t so much her,” he said. He said a retired judge told him later that “he felt she was coached into saying it was me.”

The state’s General Assembly gave Gray \$5,000 months after he was released to make up for the loss of his livelihood while in jail. In those months he’d lost more than a livelihood; he’d lost friendships and the trust of others.

As a Black man he’d also lost any remaining trust in police.

The state’s General Assembly gave Gray \$5,000 months after he was released to make up for the loss of his livelihood while in jail. In those months he’d lost more than a livelihood.

“It’s more systematic now than it was back then,” Gray said of the racism in the police today. “But to me it’s still the same. In my own personal way, you know, you can’t even trust them.”

He’d already talked to the police on more than one occasion. Detectives Whisman and King had approached him to ask informally if he knew anything about the rapes. He was on a list of nearly 20 potential suspects the task force checked out after Special Agent Stilwell arrived. They treated him with respect, he said. “To me, they were all right.”

Gray felt there was pressure coming from other people to bring someone in and say they were the stocking mask rapist. “That’s what they built me up to be.”

He was a newly free man, and just starting to feel the social constrictions of this new freedom, when he read in the paper about Robinson’s 20-year plea deal, famously calling it “the deal of the century.” It’s the same deal they were offering him to confess for a single rape, Gray said.



The first man arrested in the stocking mask rapes, Gordon Smith, died in 2019. He lived for years on Kalorama Street, across the road from several of the houses broken into by the stocking mask rapist, and a few steps from where James Bruce Robinson was arrested in December of 1979.

James Bruce Robinson was released in 1995, at the age of 38, after serving 15 years in prison.

— *Jeff Schwaner is a journalist at The News Leader in Staunton and a regional storytelling and watchdog coach in USA TODAY Network-Southeast. Contact him at jschwaner@newsleader.com.*



Gordon Smith, photographed here after his release in early 1980, was falsely accused of the stocking mask rapist's first attack and spent around 10 months incarcerated before charges were dropped.

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