

DOUBLE MURDER STILL UNSOLVED

A new state law requires Virginia State Police to maintain a publicly accessible online database of unsolved homicides, unidentified bodies and missing-person cases. Three of the database's 60 cases are from Isle of Wight County. This is the first in a three-part series.

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

It's been 35 years since an Isle of Wight County sheriff's deputy on nighttime patrol found 20-year-old David Knobling's pickup truck parked at the Ragged Island wildlife refuge—doors closed but unlocked, driver's side window down and its radio left playing with no one inside.

Two days later, on Sept. 23, 1987, a beachcomber discovered the bodies of Knobling

and 14-year-old Robin Edwards lying on Ragged Island's shoreline roughly a mile from the James River Bridge. Both had been shot in the back of the head at close range.

The double murder remains unsolved, one of several decades-old crimes now listed in an online Virginia State Police database of cold cases that debuted in June.

Janette Edwards Santiago, Robin's older sister, remembers her younger sibling

• See **COLD CASE**, p. 4



Robin Margaret Edwards



David Lee Knobling

Homicide

Incident date:
09/23/1987

Location:
Isle of Wight County

other facts

Cold Case

• Continued from p. 1

as “free-spirited” and “hard-headed.”

“She was never afraid of anything ... always believed nothing was going to happen to her,” Santiago said.

The then-19-year-old had been living on her own when she received a phone call from her parents Saturday night, Sept. 19, 1987, asking whether she’d seen Robin that evening. She answered, “no.”

“I didn’t think a whole lot of it at the time because she had run away a couple months previously and was gone for two weeks,” Santiago said.

The sisters “weren’t really speaking” at the time, Santiago recalls, and hadn’t been since the day she’d told on Robin for having ridden her bicycle from their parents’ house in Newport News almost all the way to the Coleman Memorial Bridge in York County.

Santiago had attended elementary school with Knobling, who’d lived in Hampton, but hadn’t seen him since. Robin, she recalls, had arranged a date on Sept. 19 with Knobling’s cousin, Jason.

As Santiago recalls from her mother’s account of events, Jason, David and David’s brother, Michael, had shown up at the Edwards home in David’s truck the evening of Sept. 19 to take Robin to a movie that ended up being sold out. The four went to an arcade instead, dropping Robin back at her parents’ house around 10 p.m.

Michael, who now lives in Newport News, confirmed Santiago’s version of events. He and David are technically half-brothers. David’s stepfather, Karl, had divorced David’s birth mother and remarried to Kathy Knobling by 1987. David’s birth father “wasn’t ever really in David’s life,” said Michael, who provided no additional comments for this story.

Once home, Robin put her younger sister, Pam, to bed, but at some point went back out later that night with David.

Why the two ended up traveling all the way across the James River Bridge to Ragged Island remains a mystery.

“David’s girlfriend was pregnant,” Santiago said, recalling her mother’s speculation that Robin “was a problem-solver” and may have been trying to help David figure out what to do.

Santiago then hinted at the possibility of some sort of love triangle, noting David “was a good-looking boy” and Robin “was a good-looking girl.”

Ragged Island, according to letters to the editor published in The Smithfield Times at the time, had a reputation as a secluded “lovers lane” where young couples would park their cars to be alone together.

Sept. 21-23, 1987

According to an Oct. 28, 1987, letter by then-Isle of Wight Sheriff B.F. Dixon, the deputy who’d found David’s truck early Monday, Sept. 21, had exited his patrol car at 3:33 a.m. and walked through the island looking for the vehicle – but found no one. He returned to his car at 4:10 a.m. to check the truck’s license plate and continued to wait at the scene in case anyone showed up.

At 5:24 a.m. the Sheriff’s Office made its first attempt to contact David’s family by phone, but received no answer. At 6:41 a.m. another call was made, also receiving no answer. At 7:40 a.m. “Mrs. Knobling answered” and told a dispatcher she “had no idea” where David was.

The deputy then walked through the island again, but still found no one. By 12:20 p.m. Newport News

detectives and Karl, had arrived on the scene. Karl, according to Dixon’s letter, told detectives he “was sure something was wrong.”

Robin’s mother, Bonnie, was also called by police to identify items that had been left in David’s truck. Santiago recalled. She identified Robin’s tennis shoes and some of her clothes.

David and Robin were officially reported missing later that day.

During the next day and a half, Robin’s parents went to WAVY television station for an interview and pleaded for Robin to come home.

Santiago remembers Pam and their parents gathering around the TV the evening of Sept. 23, 1987, to watch the 5 p.m. news, hoping for an update on Robin.

During the broadcast, WAVY reported two bodies shot execution-style had just been found on the beach that morning at Ragged Island, identifying the victims as 20-year-old David Knobling of Hampton and 14-year-old Robin Edwards of Newport News.

“That’s how we found out my sister was gone,” Santiago said.

Misplaced evidence?

According to the Times’ Sept. 30, 1987, story on the shooting, Dixon told reporters on Sept. 28 that his office hadn’t yet received a ballistics report on the weapon used but believed it to be “larger than a .22” caliber. But beyond that, there had been no physical evidence to prove where the murders occurred.

There was, however, widespread speculation at the time that David and Robin had been shot on a boardwalk built across the Ragged Island marsh, their bodies then drifting to where they were found after being dumped into the James River.

“They had nothing to go on,” Santiago recalled. “Back then, DNA wasn’t a big thing.”

By this time, the number of agencies working the case had expanded to include the Virginia State Police and Hampton Police Department. The State Police would eventually take over the case.

Carrollton resident Andrew M. Casey, a retired Army military police supervisor, had written an Oct. 21, 1987, letter to the editor in the Times claiming “no one remembered to impound the truck and process it for evidence,” after David and Robin

Newport News Police Department’s forensics unit, and inquired whether Casey had “political reasons” for writing to the Times a month after the fact.

The double murder had occurred just over a month shy of a contested November 1987 election where voters would choose the next Isle of Wight County sheriff. Dixon had announced his pending retirement earlier that year, leaving his son and chief deputy, Drew Dixon, vying for the job against then-Smithfield Police Lt. Charlie Phelps and self-proclaimed “long shot” candidate Deputy E.L. “Duke” Dickerson.

Santiago’s recollection of the investigation, however, corroborates Casey’s allegation that the truck was returned to David’s parents prior to being dusted for fingerprints. Phelps, who ultimately won the 1987 sheriff’s election, also recalled that one of the police agencies investigating the case had gone back to collect additional evidence from the truck after it had been returned to the Knobling family.

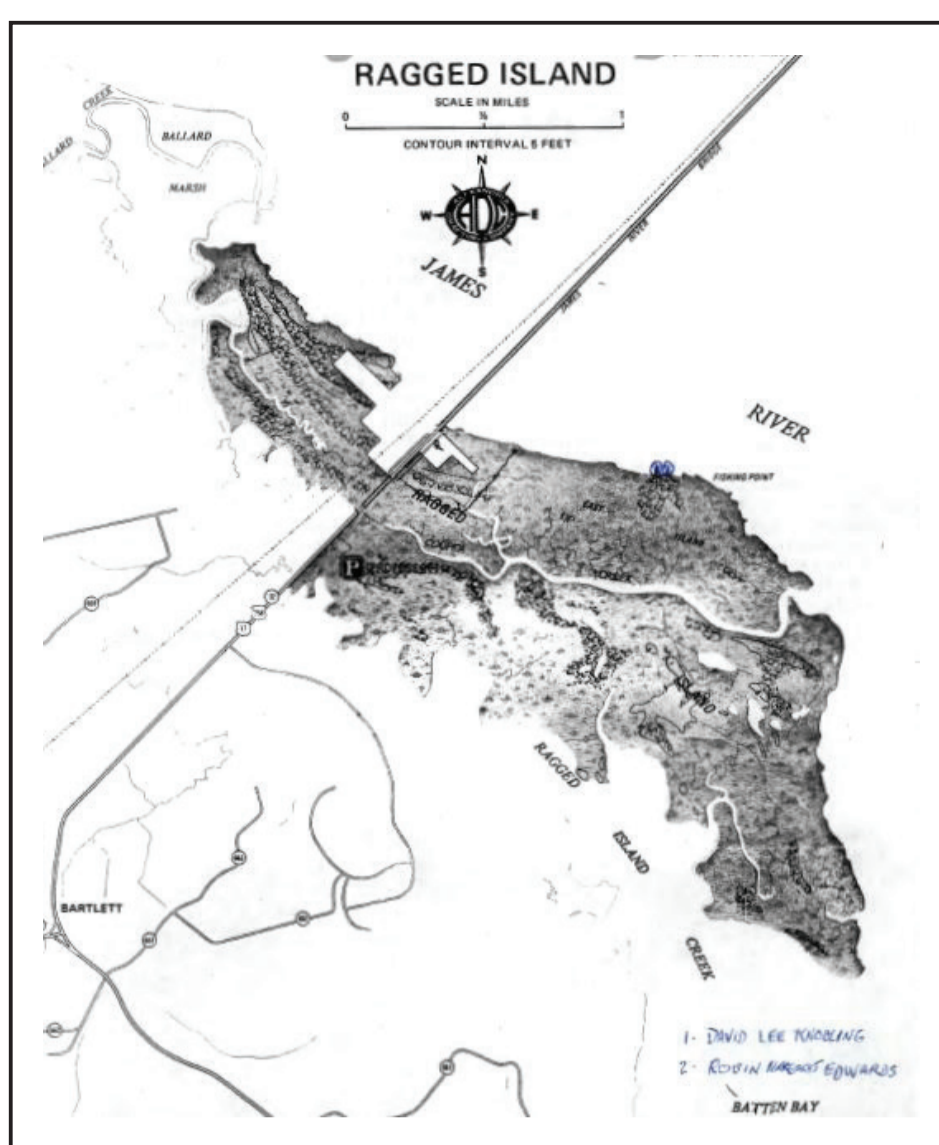
Santiago recalls David’s stepmother, Kathy, contacting police after they’d finished dusting the truck for prints in her driveway to inform them she was holding the fingerprint film they’d dropped outside her home in the rain.

Asked about the allegedly misplaced fingerprint film, State Police spokeswoman Sgt. Michelle Anaya said the agency’s Bureau of Criminal Investigations “will not confirm any specifics about any evidence seized in an active investigation.”

According to Anaya, there are no agents still employed by the State Police who investigated the 1987 double murder, but “the latest forensic technology is being utilized to generate new leads.”

Maj. Joseph Willard, now chief deputy in Isle of Wight under Sheriff James Clarke Jr., confirmed to the Times he’d been the deputy to have initially discovered David’s truck at Ragged Island, but deferred further comments on the still-active case to the State Police.

“We turned over any information that we have acquired decades ago to the Virginia State Police and have not participated in any further investigative efforts,” said Deputy Alecia Paul, the Sheriff’s Office’s assistant public information officer.



area near the York River off the Colonial Parkway, a highway that connects James City and York counties. Thomas, a recently discharged Navy lieutenant, and Dowski, a student at the College of William & Mary, had last been seen alive the evening of Oct. 9 in a computer lab on William & Mary’s campus. Both women’s “throats were slit from ear to ear,” according to Oct. 14, 1986, reporting by The Daily Press.

Roughly six months after David and Robin were found murdered, 20-year-old Richard “Keith” Call’s father found his son’s car abandoned at the York River overlook off Colonial Parkway the morning of April 10, 1988. According to the FBI, Call had been on a first date with 18-year-old Cassandra Hailey at a Christopher Newport University party in Newport News that had begun the night before and lasted through midnight. As with Robin, clothes belonging to Call and Hailey were found inside Keith’s car, but neither victim has ever been located.

The Suffolk News-Herald and Daily Press reported in 1988 that a former Gloucester County private detective facing deportation had claimed days after the disappearance of the two CNU students to be the FBI’s chief suspect in that case, and in the slayings of David and Robin, though the FBI and immigration officials denied his allegation.

The Daily Press had reported 32-year-old Ronald Little, originally of New Zealand, had job ties with Robin’s mother, and had sent a six-page letter filled

with accusations to several newspapers and talk show hosts. FBI agents, according to the Suffolk story, did question Little and searched his car. Little was ultimately deported in August of that year.

Roughly a year and a half later, on Oct. 19, 1989, hunters found the bodies of 18-year-old Annamaria

Phelps and 21-year-old Daniel Lauer on a logging road less than a mile from an Interstate 64 rest stop in New Kent County. According to reporting by The Farmville Herald, Annamaria and Lauer had left Amelia County on Sept. 4 heading for Virginia Beach, where she was set to marry Lauer’s brother, Clinton, Sept. 25. They were last seen at the westbound rest stop around 1 p.m. on Sept. 5, though they should have been heading east. Later that day, the car was found parked at the rest stop’s truck acceleration on-ramp with no one inside.

Like with David’s truck, the vehicle’s key had been

left in the ignition. Daniel’s clothes and Phelps’ purse had also been left inside.

A new sheriff in town

Charlie Phelps, who served as sheriff for 24 years until December 2011, inherited the Ragged Island double murder case upon taking office in January 1988, though by this time the State Police had taken over as the lead law enforcement agency.

“We cooperated with each other, we didn’t have any conflict on that, but ... the State Police basically had recovered any type of evidence, which was very little,” Phelps told the Times in an interview at his home last week.

Three to four months after taking office, Phelps would uncover a new lead while working another case.

In April or May 1988, an Isle of Wight woman reported several firearms as having been taken from her home. Phelps came to suspect the woman’s son of the theft.

When the son was detained in Jacksonville, Florida, on Isle of Wight charges, Phelps and a State Police investigator flew there to question him.

“I don’t remember how it happened, but the Ragged Island situation came up,” Phelps said.

The son, Phelps recalls, had confessed to taking a gun from his mother’s home and selling it at a pawn shop in Mississippi but then began talking about a roommate who’d lived with him and his mother in Isle of Wight County named Samuel “Sammy” Rieder. According to Blaine Pardoe’s and Victoria Hester’s 2017 book, “A Special Kind of Evil: The Colonial Parkway Serial Killings,” 28-year-old Rieder had just gotten out of prison for forging a \$60 check, and had called in one of the original tips the Sheriff’s Office had received when investigating David’s and Robin’s initial disappearance.

The son, Phelps recalls, told him that Rieder had taken an interest in the Ragged Island case and had made some comments about it. When Phelps returned to Virginia, he tracked down Rieder and questioned him.

“I kept getting different stories out of him about Ragged Island,” Phelps said.

As Phelps recalls, Rieder had initially claimed to have stopped at Ragged Island out of curiosity on Sept. 23, 1987, when David’s and Robin’s bodies were found, then later claimed to have seen Knobling’s truck parked at Ragged Island days earlier.

“At that point, I took him into an interview room at State Police headquarters in Norfolk and started questioning him about the inconsistencies in his statements,” Phelps said.

Rieder’s final version of events, Phelps re-

calls, was that he had taken money out of Knobling’s wallet, which had been left in the truck, but fled the scene when he heard a loud noise.

“I was getting information” that David “supposedly had a firearm in the truck,” Phelps said. Rieder “claimed, of course, ... that he didn’t see any gun” and would not admit to having anything to do with David’s or Robin’s deaths.

Phelps gave Rieder a polygraph test, which proved inconclusive as to whether he was telling the truth.

Phelps’ theory is that David returned to the parking lot upon hearing someone rifling through his truck, surprising Rieder mid-theft, and that Rieder indeed shot David and Robin.

Robin, Phelps recalls, had been shot only once in the back of the head. But David, in addition to the execution-style gunshot wound, had also been shot in the back at an angle that suggested he had been leaning forward, “which would have been conducive with him running.”

“I firmly believe that my suspect was the one who killed those two people,” Phelps said.

But with uncertainty as to whether a wallet had been recovered from the truck or whether David had indeed kept a gun in the vehicle, Phelps held off charging Rieder with the theft.

According to an Aug. 1, 1990 Smithfield Times story, another theory police were pursuing at the time was that the murderer was “an authority figure,” due to there being little evidence of a struggle aside from David being shot twice. In the same story, Kathy Knobling told the Times it was her belief that the murderer had been posing as a police officer or was “a cop gone bad.”

There was also nothing to connect Rieder to any of the other Colonial Parkway murders, Phelps noted, other than that once Rieder died, “there were no more Colonial Parkway murders after his death.”

According to Phelps, Rieder died sometime after the bodies of Annamaria and Daniel were found in 1989 — allegedly by choking himself while masturbating. The “Special Kind of Evil” book, however, asserts that Phelps had been told this information by someone else. The Smithfield Times has been unable to find an obituary or other record to confirm if and when Rieder died.

Santiago receives updates from the State Police every six months to a year, but to date she’s learned of no new leads. All she can do, as she’s done for the past 35 years, is wait and hope someday, somehow, she’ll have closure.

Access the VSP’s cold case database at <https://coldcase.vsp.virginia.gov/>.

'Parking' care urged in shooting wake

Isle of Wight Sheriff B.F. Dixon advised young people this week to be more cautious than ever about parking in isolated places until week's double murder at Ragged Island is solved.

Dixon said he and other law enforcement officers have uncovered little evidence in the shooting of 20-year-old David Knobling and 14-year-old Robin Edwards.

With no indication of why the two young people were shot, Dixon said officers have to be concerned

that the shooting could have been random, and for that reason advised young people to stay away from the refuge after dark.

"I would advise young people to stay out of there, especially until we find out what's happened," Dixon said.

Knobling and Miss Edwards apparently went to the refuge located near to the James River bridge, someone Saturday night.

Sept. 19, Knobling's Ford Ranger pickup was found in the parking lot there the next day, keys in the

vehicle and the radio running. Several articles of clothing were found in the truck.

On Wednesday, Sept. 23, a search party found Miss Edwards' body on the beach about a mile from the bridge. Police were called to the scene and found Knobling's body a short distance from here.

Both young people had been shot in the back of the head at close range. Dixon said Monday he has not received ballistics reports on the weapon used, but

believes it was "larger than a .22" caliber.

Beyond that, there has been a few clues in the case. Dixon said there has been a lot of speculation that the couple were shot on a boardwalk built across the Ragged Island Marsh near the James

River. Bridge by the Commission, and their bodies dumped in the river. On theory goes, the bodies drilled a half mile or better to the site where they were found.

"We just haven't found much," he said.



The work of a serial killer?

According to the FBI's Norfolk division website and past press releases, the Ragged Island cold case may be linked to three other unsolved double homicides with similarities from the 1980s known as the Colonial Parkway Murders.

The first double murder occurred in 1986. On Oct. 12 of that year, U.S. Park Service rangers found the bodies of 27-year-old Cathleen Thomas and 21-year-old Rebecca Dowski inside Thomas' car in a wooded

Death certificate: Prime suspect in Ragged Island murders hanged himself

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Samuel “Sammy” Rieder, who’d been retired Isle of Wight County Sheriff Charlie Phelps’ prime suspect in a September 1987 double murder, was himself discovered dead roughly three

years later.

The Smithfield Times has obtained a copy of Rieder’s death certificate, which states the 31-year-old was found in his Chesapeake mobile home the morning of Aug. 8, 1990, hanging from a

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Death

• Continued from p. 1

doorknob with an electrical cord around his neck.

Thirty-five years ago, on Sept. 21, 1987, a sheriff's deputy on nighttime patrol had found 20-year-old David Knobling's pickup truck parked at the Ragged Island wildlife refuge – doors closed but unlocked, driver's side window down and its radio left playing with no one inside.

Two days later, a beachcomber discovered the bodies of Knobling and 14-year-old Robin Edwards on Ragged Island's shoreline roughly a mile from the James River Bridge. Both had been shot in the back of the head at close range.

The Times interviewed Phelps last month for the 35th anniversary of the unsolved Ragged Island case. He said he'd come to suspect Rieder of the crime for his inconsistent statements to police. Rieder, Phelps recalled, initially claimed to have stopped at Ragged Island out of curiosity on Sept. 23, 1987, when Knobling's and Edwards' bodies were found, then claimed to have seen Knobling's truck parked at Ragged Island days earlier, and eventually admitted to taking money from Knobling's wallet – but denied shooting either victim. A polygraph test

Phelps gave Rieder at the time proved inconclusive as to whether he was telling the truth.

The FBI, according to the agency's website and past press releases, believes the Ragged Island case to be linked to three additional double homicides with similar circumstances known as the Colonial Parkway Murders, which occurred in Virginia from 1986 through 1989. Though there was no evidence at the time linking Rieder to any of the non-Isle of Wight County murders, "there were no more Colonial parkway murders after his death," Phelps said, asserting Rieder to have died by choking himself while masturbating.

The Times had been unable to locate an obituary or other record of Rieder's death. Bill Thomas, brother of Colonial Parkway murder victim Cathy Thomas, provided the Times with a copy of Rieder's death certificate on Sept. 30 after reading the Times' interview with Phelps.

According to the certificate, a Norfolk medical examiner ruled Rieder's 1990 death a suicide, listing a cause of "asphyxia by hanging" and a diagnosis of "depression" as "contributing" to the death.

Who was Samuel Rieder?

According to his death certificate and Ancestry.com, Rieder was born Dec. 3, 1958, in Portsmouth to Gilbert Homer Rieder and Imogene McIntosh, who had married two years earlier. Gilbert died Dec. 31, 1986 at age 51.

The Times has found little documentation of Rieder's childhood. According to the Times' archives, a Jan. 6, 1986, Isle of Wight County grand jury indicted Samuel, then 28, on one count of forgery and uttering. A Suffolk grand jury then indicted him three weeks later, on Jan. 27, on two counts of grand larceny and three counts of forgery and uttering.

According to Blaine Pardoe's and Victoria Hester's 2017 book, "A Special Kind of Evil: The Colonial Parkway Serial Killings," Rieder had just been released from a jail sentence for forging a \$60 check and was working as a dishwasher when he called in one of the early tips the Isle of Wight County Sheriff's Office received in the Ragged Island case.

According to Rieder's death certificate, by age 31 he was working as a truck driver.

DNA recovered

The Virginia State Police, now the lead investigating agency in the Ragged Island case, told the Times in September that the agency's Bureau of Criminal Investigations "will not confirm any specifics about any evidence seized in an active investigation." According to Bill Thomas, however, there was "a small amount of badly degraded DNA evidence" taken from Edwards' body.

"It is 35 years old and has been exposed to sea water, but private DNA lab Othram has had outstanding results with similar crime scene samples of evidence," Thomas said. "If the Virginia State Police are willing to have Othram do the tests, the Colonial Parkway Murders families are willing to crowdfund the money (usually around \$5,000) to conduct the tests."

The Texas-based company's personnel, according to Othram's website, are "experts at recovery, enrichment, and analysis of human DNA from trace quantities of degraded or contaminated forensic evidence" to "close previously unsolvable cases."

BURNED BODY LEFT IN FIELD

A new state law requires Virginia State Police to maintain a publicly accessible online database of unsolved homicides, unidentified bodies and missing-person cases. Three of the database's 60 cases are from Isle of Wight County. This is the second in a multi-part series.

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Dee Dee Darden remembers the grisly sight that greeted her the morning of Wednesday, June 5, 1991, like it was yesterday.

Her late husband, Tommy, had gone out early that morning to one of the couple's wheat fields on Bowling Green Road, only to return a few minutes later in a panic.

"He came flying back down the road, saying, 'Get in the truck; get in the truck! You gotta see it; you gotta see it!'" Dee Dee recalled in a recent interview at

her longtime business, Darden's Country Store.

In the field, lying face down, was the badly burned body of a Black man police later identified as 33-year-old Thomas Daryle Williams of New York City.

The murder remains unsolved, as one of three decades-old Isle of Wight County crimes listed in an online Virginia State Police database of cold cases that made its debut in June.

The Smithfield Times could find only one article in its archives, dated June 12, 1991, and none in any other Virginia

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Darden Store



Homicide

Incident date:
06/04/1991

Location:
Isle of Wight County

other facts

Cold Case

• Continued from p. 1

newspaper concerning the murder. The lack of media coverage from the day stands in stark contrast with the extensive reporting across multiple publications on the 1987 double homicide at Ragged Island the Times profiled in its Sept. 28 and Oct. 25 editions as part of its multi-part cold case series.

Tommy Darden speculated in the Times' 1991 story that the murder had likely occurred sometime overnight, noting that one of his farmhands had been working in the field until late in the evening on Tuesday, June 4.

According to Dee Dee, Tommy found Williams' body at the end of a long, gated, dirt path through the wheat field, which the Dardens usually kept locked but had left open the evening of June 4 to allow their farmhands to continue into the night collecting wheat.

"We always wondered how did anybody know where that path was," Dee Dee said.

The person who killed Williams, she recalled, had wrapped his body in a curtain before setting him on fire. The metal curtain rings were still laying in the field that morning. Williams, she recalled, had been wearing tennis shoes with metal hooks for shoelaces, which were also still identifiable following the fire.

Had the Dardens not been planning to leave early that morning to attend their daughter's kindergarten graduation and take some cattle to a market in Smithfield, they might not have seen anything. But Tommy wanted to check the field before heading out to see how much wheat his farmhands had collected, Dee Dee recalls.

After driving Dee Dee to the scene around 7 a.m., Tommy called his neighbor, State Trooper Elwin Kessler, resulting in the case becoming the purview of the Virginia State Police rather than the Isle of Wight County Sheriff's Office. Kessler died in 2009.

According to the Times' June 12, 1991, story, police speculated at the time that Williams' body had been dragged from a vehicle and doused in some type of fuel before being set afire.

According to the State Police cold case database, Williams' body also showed signs of having been beaten and mutilated.

The State Police declined to provide the Times with documentation from the case file, citing that the case, though cold, "remains an active investigation."

Who was Thomas Daryle Williams?

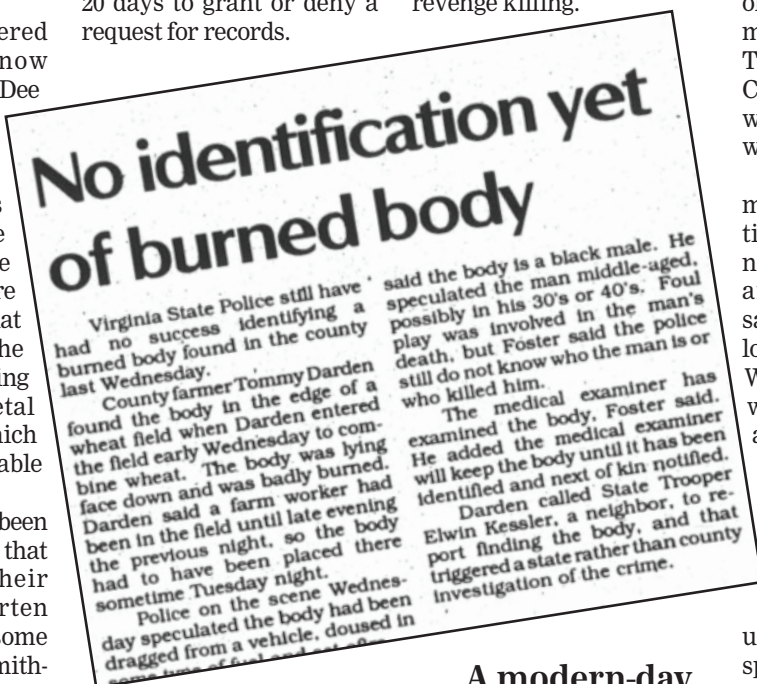
One week after the Dardens' grisly discovery, the state medical examiner still hadn't identified the victim, let alone any evidence of who killed him, according to the Times' 1991 story.

According to State Po-

lice Public Relations Director Corinne Geller, the case agent at the time had contacted 16 different law enforcement agencies, including some in Canada, to compare the victim with their missing-person reports, but none proved to be a match.

Later that month, police received a tip from an unnamed person that resulted in the medical examiner identifying the body as Williams based on dental records obtained from New York's Department of Corrections — indicating Williams had served time in prison.

The Times submitted a request under New York's Freedom of Information Law for records pertaining to Williams' conviction and prison sentence on Nov. 4. Under New York's FOIL, state agencies have up to 20 days to grant or deny a request for records.



The Times received two responses to its FOIL request, one on Nov. 16 stating there was more than one Thomas Williams in the state's criminal justice records system who would have been 33 as of June 5, 1991, and another on Nov. 22 denying the request on grounds that criminal history records are "specifically exempted from disclosure" under New York's Public Officers Law.

According to Geller, Williams was a native of New York's borough of Queens, and still has family there. During the course of its investigation, the State Police have maintained contact with Williams' sister.

At the time of his death, Williams had three young children. State Police have pursued "several leads" as to what led Williams to travel just over 430 miles south to Isle of Wight, Geller said. But 31 years later, it remains a mystery.

The Times asked on Nov. 4 that State Police pass along a reporter's contact information and request for an interview to Williams' sister, and confirmed on Nov. 9 that case agents had done so. But to date the Times has received no response from the sister or any other surviving family member.

The Times filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the Virginia Department of Health's Office

of Vital Records for a copy of Williams' death certificate on Oct. 14. It was denied Oct. 17 on grounds that the Office of Vital Records is "exempted" from FOIA, despite the department acknowledging in its denial that Virginia death certificates become public record after 25 years.

The Times tried again to obtain the document on Nov. 15, this time going through the Department of Health's online portal for purchasing a certified copy, which was still pending as of Nov. 23. The death certificate, in addition to naming Williams' next-of-kin, would typically list his last known occupation.

Dee Dee recalls being told by police that Williams had been recently released from prison, and that he had allegedly raped a drug dealer's girlfriend — the theory at the time being that it was a revenge killing.

A modern-day lynching?

It's been 90 years since Virginia saw a documented lynching, but the level of brutality in Williams' murder, and his being a Black man accused of rape, raises the possibility of a racially motivated hate crime as well.

According to the website for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP, lynchings were a type of extrajudicial killings perpetrated by mobs of white people against Black people during the 19th and 20th centuries — often for perceived sexual transgressions against white women.

A lynching, according to the NAACP, would typically involve a criminal accusation against a Black person, followed by an arrest and the assembly of a mob that would then abduct the accused, torture and murder the suspect. Lynchings "typically evoke images of Black men and women hanging from trees," but "involved other extreme brutality, such as torture, mutilation, decapitation, and desecration," with some victims "burned alive," the NAACP's website states.

According to a James Madison University database, there were 115 confirmed lynchings in Virginia from 1866 through 1932 and an additional six uncon-

firmed victims.

None are listed as having occurred in Isle of Wight, though a mob did form in the county in 1927.

According to past reporting by the Times and the now-defunct Richmond Planet, an African American newspaper published from 1883 to 1938, 25-year-old Shirley Winnegan, sometimes called Willingham, of Smithfield, was arrested and charged Oct. 14, 1927, with the rape and murder of a 14-year-old white girl.

A local lunacy commission had declared Winnegan legally insane in August of that year, making him ineligible for the death penalty.

The night of Winnegan's arrest, a mob of 1,000 unmasked residents joined together and converged on Isle of Wight County's jail, not realizing that then-Sheriff Willie Holmes Chapman had ordered Winnegan secretly moved to Petersburg's jail. The mob reportedly cut Chapman's telephone line while demanding to know where Winnegan was.

A few days before Chapman was to stand for reelection as sheriff, a second lunacy commission convened and declared Winnegan sane. Chapman ultimately lost his bid for reelection to William Colgate Whitehead, who'd been backed by the angry mob.

At his trial, Winnegan protested his innocence and "on the witness stand explained away every moment of his time from the hour he quit work ... until he was arrested and spirited away to prevent a mob from taking his life," the Planet reported.

Winnegan was ultimately convicted of the rape and murder, and was executed by electric chair on Jan. 25, 1926.

In a Nov. 21 interview at his home, Charlie Phelps, who served as sheriff of Isle of Wight from 1988 to 2011, only vaguely recalled reports of a body being found near the Dardens' store during his tenure. Nor did Phelps recall ever working any racially motivated crimes.

"I had some Black-on-Black crimes and white-on-white crimes," Phelps said.

As for whether it could have been drug-related, "I can't say that we were really ever inundated with drug-related crime," Phelps said, but "we had our share of it."

The Dardens did ultimately still make it to their daughter's kindergarten graduation and the Smithfield market, but then returned to watch as police worked the crime scene on their farm.

"It seemed like they were here almost all day," Darden recalled.

But it wouldn't be the last time someone came running up to Dee Dee's door to tell her that the body of a murder victim had been spotted near her home.

ANOTHER YEAR, ANOTHER BODY

A new state law requires Virginia State Police to maintain a publicly accessible online database of unsolved homicides, unidentified bodies and missing-person cases. Three of the database's 60 cases are from Isle of Wight County. This is the last in a multi-part series.

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

It must have felt like déjà vu. Fourteen months earlier, on the morning of Wednesday, June 5, 1991, Dee Dee Darden's late husband, Tommy, had come speeding back home from the couple's wheat field on Bowling Green Road, shouting, "Get in the truck! ... You gotta see it!" — and had shown her the burned and mutilated body of Thomas Daryle Williams lying face down at the end of a dirt path.

Dee Dee was again in her home the afternoon of Aug. 19, 1992 — another Wednesday —

when two people came running up to her door, stuttering and stammering about having found another body.

According to Aug. 26, 1992, reporting by the Smithfield Times, the two passers-by had discovered the body of 27-year-old Desmond Anthony Fergus of Norfolk in a ditch along Carroll Bridge Road, about a quarter of a mile south of Bowling Green Road, where Williams' body had been found.

Fergus' murder remains unsolved and is the most recent of three decades-old Isle of Wight County crimes listed in an on-

• See **COLD CASE**, p. 6



Homicide

Incident date:

08/19/1992

Location:

Isle of Wight County

other facts

Cold case

• Continued from p. 1

line Virginia State Police database of cold cases that made its debut in June.

According to the cold case database, Fergus' body appeared by its state of decomposition to have been partially submerged for at least two days in the water-filled ditch. Three bullets were recovered from Fergus' body, and an autopsy concluded they were the cause of Fergus' death.

It was "an unusually wet August," Dee Dee recalled in a recent interview at her longtime business, Darden's Country Store.

According to the Times' 1992 story, heavy rainfall had hit the county for the past two weeks, flooding Carroll Bridge Road. Fergus' body hadn't been visible from the road, but according to Dee Dee, the two passers-by caught a glimpse of a gold chain Fergus had been wearing, glistening in the sun, and decided to look closer.

Press, Fergus' family had reported him missing to Norfolk police the day prior to his body being found. Phelps told reporters at the time that police were able to confirm the murder victim's identity by comparing the body's fingerprints with those in Fergus' criminal file. Fergus had been arrested on several misdemeanor charges, including brandishing a firearm, Phelps had said.

According to Fergus' death certificate, which the Times was able to obtain from Ancestry.com, Fergus was born on March 15, 1965, to Cleve Lewis and Janet Fergus in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, a Caribbean island nation. He was a U.S. citizen, never married, and was working as an auto mechanic at the time of his death.

Janet was living in Virginia Beach at the time of her son's

death, suggesting the burning and mutilation may have occurred after Williams was already dead.

The state had denied the Times' October Freedom of Information Act request for Williams' certificate, though under state law death certificates become public record after 25 years, nor was it listed on Ancestry.com as Fergus' had been. The Times was able to obtain the document in December by going through the Virginia Department of Health process for purchasing extra certified copies of death certificates.

Jamison had signed Williams' certificate on July 26, 1991, nearly two months after the Dardens discovered Williams' body on June 5 of that year. Fergus' certificate, which is signed by Dr. Stephen S. Marsh, is dated Dec. 21, 1992 — nearly four months after Fergus' body was found.

Fergus' certificate lists "multiple gunshot wounds" from a handgun as the cause of death.

Jamison, a longtime Smithfield doctor who still lives in town, told the Times in a phone interview this week that he remembered driving out to the Darden farm to see Williams' body. Jamison noted he'd "seen a lot worse" in his decades as the state's medical examiner for Isle of Wight County crime scenes.

The Times was unable to locate current contact information for Marsh.

Dee Dee Darden never heard from police any theories as to who could have killed Fergus, or why, but she's always assumed over the decades that it was drug-related based on the beeper Fergus was found wearing.

According to reporting by The Washington Post, pagers had become a staple of the drug trade by the late 1980s, with dealers sometimes dialing 911 to alert their beeper-wearing couriers that police were closing in.

Phelps could vaguely remember only one of the two homicides near the Darden store when speaking to the Times last month, but reiterated his earlier theory that one or both may have been killed elsewhere.

"It almost sounds like they were disposed of out there," Phelps said.

Norfolk man's body found here

By Jennifer Vincent
Associate Editor

Police know a Norfolk man was murdered and his body dumped in an Isle of Wight ditch. What they don't know is who did it and why.

The body of Desmond Anthony Fergus, 27, was found on Carroll Bridge Road, a quarter of a mile south of Bowling Green Road, near Tommy Darden's Store on Wednesday.

People walking along the road discovered the body in the ditch, according to Isle of Wight Sheriff C.

W. Phelps. Phelps said Fergus was not killed where his body was found, but police do not know where he was killed.

The Norfolk Police Department, since Fergus was from that city, the Isle of Wight is still involved in the case because Fergus could have been killed in Isle of Wight, or anywhere for that matter, Phelps said.

Fergus' body had been in the ditch for about two days before it was discovered. The body was not visible from the road and heavy rains which hit the county for about two weeks allowed few people to walk along the flooded road, Phelps said.

Fergus' body was identified Friday, after Isle of Wight investigators traced the beeper Fergus was wearing to him and discovered he had been reported missing by his mother. Fingerprints matched his mother. Norfolk revealed Fergus was the man who was killed, Phelps said.

Fergus died of multiple gunshot wounds, according to an autopsy performed by the State Medical Examiner. He was shot in the head and chest, Phelps said.

Now that the members of the Isle of Wight Sheriff's Office know Fergus was killed, the next step will be to work with the Norfolk Police Department "to determine where it happened and who did it."

Phelps said. Fergus' car is missing, Phelps said, and police hope some clues in the slaying.

Phelps said it was a coincidence that Fergus' body was found close to where a burned body was found about a year ago. The body of another Norfolk man was also found about a month ago in Carrollton.

Phelps said he believes people have dumped bodies in Isle of Wight because they know it is a rural locality and the bodies may not be discovered as quickly as in a city. If a body is not discovered as quickly, identification may be more difficult and clues could be destroyed.

"They were scared to death," Dee Dee recalled.

After finding Williams' body in 1991, Tommy Darden had called his neighbor, State Trooper Elwin Kessler, to investigate. This time, however, the Dardens called then-Sheriff Charlie Phelps.

Phelps had stated in the 1992 story that he believed Fergus to have been killed somewhere other than where his body was found.

Who was Desmond Anthony Fergus?

According to reporting by the Times and The Daily Press at the time, Isle of Wight investigators were able to identify Fergus by tracing a beeper found on the body to a Virginia Beach company with records showing it belonged to Fergus. Someone working at the company, who is unnamed in the Daily Press story, had known Fergus and told officers where he lived.

The small radio receiver, also known as a pager, became popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a precursor to cellphones. The device would beep or vibrate to let a user know someone was trying to contact them by phone.

According to the Daily

death, according to the Daily Press story, but the Times was unable to locate contact info for either parent.

A dumping ground for drug-related crimes?

Though Williams and Fergus were both Black, both had criminal records, and were discovered dead within less than a mile of each other over a 14-month period, Phelps had attributed the similarities to coincidence when speaking to the Times for the Aug. 26, 1992, story — stating he believed killers from other jurisdictions were dumping their victims in Isle of Wight, counting on its rural character to delay the finding of any bodies and possibly erase any clues left behind.

The two murders are listed separately in the State Police cold case database.

"It was just weird that within a year's time there were two bodies here," Dee Dee said.

In both cases, it took state medical examiners well over a month to determine a cause of death.

Dr. B.F. Jamison, who'd served as the medical examiner in the Williams case, had listed "cranio-cerebral trauma" from being "beaten" as Williams' cause of