

The Killer Next Door?



An Examination of the Atlanta Child Murders and the Forensic Evidence Against Wayne Bertram Williams

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Preface

It was the summer of 1978 and the Greater Atlanta area was under siege by violent crime. Murder was commonplace; and tourists and business travelers alike steered clear of "the city too busy to hate" (James Baldwin). The racial divide between Black and White was deeply rooted, and no amount of civil rights legislation was going to change that, when the political landscape took a sudden turn, and the skin color of Atlanta's leaders started reflecting that of its citizens. The hope was that now that black leaders were in charge, perhaps the violence towards black people and by black people would fade, and life could return to normal. That hope was dashed by the summer of 1979, when the bodies of murdered black children started showing up in the woods, rivers, and roadside ditches of the small towns that make up the Atlanta suburbs; discarded like trash by someone with an affinity for adolescent boys. The violence had not stemmed. Worse, in the minds of those affected, was that this was obviously a black-on-black crime.

Think for a moment about the makings of a suburban neighborhood. People all know each other. Although they may not know every name; the faces are all familiar, and the families are, for the most part, all similar. Suburban Atlanta in the late 1970's and early 1980's was no different from the rest of suburban America, except that its neighborhoods were predominantly to exclusively black. From the local store owners to the police officers walking the beat, a white face was a rare sight; and, like all things out of place, something to distrust. A child riding his bike would not stop to offer directions to a white stranger. A boy walking home after a

long day at play would not accept a ride home from someone so different from himself. The killer, Atlanta had decided, had to be someone who looked like them. It had to be someone who walked among them; and someone who could blend with the fabric of black society.

To most people, the name Wayne Bertram Williams does not mean a thing. However, in the history of law enforcement and criminal forensics, Williams' name is as unique and as recognizable as a fingerprint. Wayne Williams was convicted of only two of the more than two dozen murders that occurred in the Atlanta area during the 22-months covering July 1979 – May 1981; however, he was implicated in ten more of them.

It is both a controversial and memorable case; and Williams is a study in forensics unto himself. His was the first major case to be tracked using psychological profiling; and to this day the only person ever to be convicted on the basis of hair and fiber evidence that left no room for reasonable doubt that he was present at the scenes of the crimes. These facets of the case are what make it so memorable. The fact that Williams was never tried for the ten additional murders of which he stood accused are what make the case so controversial. The only evidence against Williams for these additional crimes was the hair and fiber evidence that connected him to the crime scenes and the bodies of the victims. Could it have been enough to convict him, as it was in the other cases, if he were to be tried?

To follow is a report in two parts: the first is an overview of the investigation of the Atlanta Child Murders case; and the path of evidence linking Williams to the

murders. The second part is an in-depth look at the unusual evidence against Williams; and the possibility – in this particular case – that justice is still waiting to be served, even as Williams serves his time in jail.

Part I: The Investigation

More than a dozen child murders had occurred between the summer of 1979 and winter of 1981; and all had appeared to be committed by the same person, as the modus operandi was the same: A black male child between the ages of 10 – 15 would be abducted from his neighborhood; asphyxiated; stripped of most clothing; and dumped somewhere along the local landscape. This, unfortunately, was all the police had to go on...by the time the bodies were found, they were usually in moderate to advanced stages of decomposition. Fingerprints could not be lifted; a weapon could not be found; and most other hard evidence was destroyed, if it had even existed in the first place (Baldwin).

There was, however, one piece of evidence that kept cropping up on many of the bodies: yellowish-green nylon fibers, sometimes mixed with violet acetate fibers; other times in conjunction with what police would later discover to be dog hair – but always the yellowish green nylon fibers...

From the case of the Boston Strangler to that of Jon Benet Ramsey, police investigators have always held back details of certain pieces of evidence found at crime scenes. One reason is to dissuade false confessions – if the confessor does not know the details; they could not possibly be the killer. A second reason for holding

back key evidence was illustrated in the Wayne Williams case.

In February 1981 *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the local newspaper which had been steadily reporting on the rash of murders of local black children, published a story about the mysterious yellowish-green nylon fibers that had been cropping up on the bodies of the slain boys, in the hope that the publicity would help the police find a lead on the source of the unusual fibers (Baldwin). In all, 25 fibers had been found on over a dozen corpses, indicating the possibility that the crimes had all been committed by the same person or persons. From that point on, the bodies of the murdered youths were no longer found dumped in ditches, ragged clothing clinging to their remains. From that point on, the bodies were found stripped of all clothing and dumped in local rivers and streams, washed clean of almost all trace evidence. *Almost all trace evidence.*

By this point, FBI investigators from the Atlanta Chapter had been called in to work on the case of these serial murders, as it was receiving national attention. At the time, an agent from the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit, John Douglas, was working to prove the validity of a new form of criminal investigation: Psychological Profiling. Douglas believed that the nature, setting, and time of day in which the crimes were committed; the choice of victims and what characteristics they had in common; the manner in which the bodies were disposed of, and the types of sites at which they were disposed all came together to indicate the type of person who was committing the crimes (TruTV.com). From there, it was only a matter of concentrating on the narrow pool of potential suspects that fit the profile, and could reasonably be linked to the crimes. "I use a formula," said Agent Douglas for TruTV.com, "How plus Why equals Who. If we can answer the hows and whys in a

crime, we generally can come up with the solution." Common sense led investigators to believe that the killer was black. What new leads would this new "profiling" method bring?

The killer in this investigation was determined to be an "organized" killer – one who planned ahead; and although his victims may have been chosen by sheer opportunity, the methods used to obtain them were not. The killer had a plan of action used to lure victims, a vehicle in which to transport them (and their remains, if necessary), and a weapon or weapons of choice used to commit the crimes (in this case, strangulation and/or blunt force trauma). It was also discovered – since the killer had been made aware of the trace evidence against him – that he preferred the famous Chattahoochee River as his primary dumping site. This preference was to be the killer's undoing.

The killings continued with the usual frequency of one or two – sometimes three – a month until May 1981, when the FBI used the profile they had created to set a trap for the killer. On May 21, 1981, Atlanta police, along with the FBI, set up a stakeout of the Chattahoochee River. They hid under bridges and in strategic places along the banks. Around 2 AM, a loud splash from the James Jackson Parkway bridge was heard, followed by the sound of a car slowly pulling away, as if its driver did not wish to be heard (Saferstein).

The vehicle, it turned out, was a white Chevrolet station-wagon driven by a man named Wayne Williams, a self-professed music producer who had many a successful client to his name. The Atlanta police followed Williams for about half-a-mile before he was stopped by the FBI and questioned about his activities on the bridge (TruTV.com).

Although it was well into the early hours of the AM, Williams claimed he was looking for the address of a “prospective client”, as he had an appointment with her at 7 AM that morning (TruTV.com). The FBI thought this story sounded unbelievable, and rightfully so when the phone number of the supposed client was not in service and the address Williams gave did not exist (Baldwin). When asked, Williams gave FBI agents permission to search his car; but nothing unusual was found – or so they thought. Unbeknownst to them, the agents had stumbled upon some very important evidence.

The next day, the Chattahoochee was dredged in the region of the Jackson Memorial Bridge, but no body was found. Williams was questioned further, as to his presence on the bridge, and he claimed that he had been “dumping garbage” (Saferstein). Williams was also questioned as to his whereabouts the previous day, and it was discovered that his claims of his whereabouts were completely false. Williams was not, as he claimed, “playing basketball at the Ben Hill Recreation Center” and picking up recording equipment at the San Souci Lounge (TruTV.com). This, of course, begged the question: Where was Williams; and what had he been doing in the hours prior? Investigators did not have long to wait before finding another piece of this puzzle.

On May 24th – three days after Wayne Williams was “dumping garbage” off of the James Jackson Memorial Bridge – the body of 28-year-old Nathaniel Cater was found floating in the Chattahoochee River, only about 1 mile from where the Jackson Memorial Bridge crossed. The corpse had been stripped of all clothing; but a single yellowish-green nylon fiber clung to the hair of the victim. Microscopic comparisons showed that it was the same type of fiber as reportedly found at other

murder sites in the area. Although the age of the victim was an outlier; the method of killing (asphyxiation); the dump site (the Chattahoochee River); and the trace evidence all fit the profile of the crime wave's killer.

Combined with Wayne Williams' lack of an alibi – and his lies to the police and FBI investigators – a search warrant for Williams' home was secured. It was executed on June 3, 1981, and it was then that police found what they thought was the source of the yellowish-green nylon fibers found on Cater's body, as well as violet colored acetate fibers and dog hairs found on the bodies of other victims: a carpet inside the Williams home was made of yellowish green nylon; his family dog's hair matched the dog hairs found at the scene; and Williams' bedspread was a match for the violet acetate fibers.

Further investigation showed that fibers from the rugs of a car Williams drove matched fibers found on another murder victim. Investigators, it would seem, had found Nathaniel Cater's killer, and in the process discovered the killer of a second local man, Jimmy Ray Payne, whose murder during the previous month was a mirror-image of the murder of Nathaniel Cater: death by asphyxiation; body dumped – naked – into the Chattahoochee River; similar fibers as found on Cater found sticking to the corpse.

During the following weeks, investigators continued to question Wayne Williams, who failed three separate polygraph tests in which questions regarding his connection to the murders were asked (FBI.com). Two months after that fateful night on the James Jackson Memorial Bridge, Wayne Williams was arrested and indicted on two charges of murder for the deaths of Nathaniel Cater and Jimmy

Ray Payne. Investigators had no doubt in their minds who had been killing the black youth of suburban Atlanta. The problem would be convincing a jury.

Fibers are not like fingerprints in the respect that they cannot be individualized. However, like DNA, if the characteristics of the fiber are rare enough their origin *could* pass the test of reasonable doubt. Unfortunately, investigators had a long road ahead of them to prove the rarity of the yellowish-green fibers that would make or break their case against Wayne Williams.

Part II: The Fiber Evidence

Originally, investigators in the Wayne Williams' case hoped that the unusual carpet fibers found on the bodies of the victims would lead to avenues of investigation – if they could find out from where the fibers came, perhaps it would result in a lead in the case. They had no idea that the fibers would become the whole case! The following facts are noteworthy because of the large number of forensic investigating techniques that were employed in the attempts to identify the carpet fibers; suggesting that they were the “smoking gun” the prosecution needed to convict Williams – which sets the fiber evidence from the Williams case apart from other cases of its time, and cases since.

As previously mentioned, hairs and fibers cannot be individualized like fingerprints or tool-marks. They can simply be classified according to possible sources – i.e. “negro male” or “canine” for hair and “nylon” or “cotton” for fibers. In most cases, a forensic scientist can prove that rug fibers are similar to a rug in a

suspect's home; but s/he cannot prove definitively that the fibers came from the rug in the suspect's home without overwhelming supporting evidence (i.e. skin cells from the suspect clinging to the carpet fiber). A single fiber is generally not enough to lead to an evidence trail. Therefore, they are generally not used to validate a case against a suspect; but used to support other evidence that links a suspect to a crime.

The Williams case, however, is not like most cases. The fiber evidence in the Wayne Williams case veered from the norm in that it was the main evidentiary finding against Mr. Williams; and other forms of evidence were used to support the credibility of the fiber evidence – a complete turn-around from the traditional use of fiber evidence. Furthermore, the fiber evidence in this case differed from others by the fact that the microscopy of the fibers was so “unique” that the manufacturer of the carpet from which it came was “difficult to determine”, even by industry professionals (Saferstein).

Attempts to identify the fibers found on the murder victims took authorities on a detailed chase. The photomicrographs (pictures taken of the fibers while under a microscope) were distributed to Chemists working in the fiber industry but none could initially identify the manufacturer. They could only agree that the cross-sectional cut marks on the fiber were unlike any they had ever seen.

After continued investigations – most of it unfruitful – the source of the fibers, found during a warranted search, turned out to be a yellowish-green carpet in Wayne Williams home. It was obvious to investigators that the fibers were a match; but what if they matched other carpets in the area? Could further investigation show this to be unlikely? From here, the search for the manufacturer of the carpet

took on an even bigger sense of urgency as the need to prove the exclusivity of the fibers drove the investigation against Williams.

In their search for information on the carpet fibers, the police were led to the Wellman Corporation, a local textile manufacturer; but unfortunately, Wellman had only manufactured the fibers for the creation of the carpet – not the finished product, and could therefore not testify to the exclusivity of the unique cross-section cut of the fibers that had puzzled field professionals. Although investigators were not pushed back to square one, they had not advanced beyond square 2; and it appeared that they may have hit a dead-end. Investigators continued the search for a manufacturing source.

Authorities compiled a list of information on the carpet fibers, furnished by Wellman Corporation, which included the technical information about the fiber; on when it had been manufactured; on what companies had purchased it; and information on when and how much of the fiber had been obtained and to what purpose. It was then that they learned that the unique fibers had a limited production run of only seven years, so they narrowed their search to encompass only purchases made during that time frame.

Numerous industry contacts were made before discovering that the West Point Pepperell Corporation (Dalton, GA; only an hour outside of Atlanta) had manufactured a carpet in the exact color and with the same fibers found in Wayne Williams' "English Olive" (a.k.a. yellowish-green) colored carpet. This carpet, which had the unique cross-sectional cut markings that police were seeking to match, was eventually discovered to be of an even further limited issue – in fact, it was only manufactured for one year, resulting in presumed rarity of the fiber, an unusual trait

in and of itself. This combination of unique cross-cut and limited issue drastically narrowed the statistical probability that this particular carpet was widespread throughout homes in the Greater Atlanta area.

A statistical study (something never before executed for textile evidence in a criminal trial) later showed that the chances of anyone who was living in the Atlanta area AND having the same carpet as found in the Williams' home to be less than 1 in 7500 (FBI.com). These factors worked in favor of the prosecution, as the defense could not claim that the carpet from which the fibers came was a common one, and could be found in households across the state or even across the country.

These findings were important to the prosecution in the Wayne Williams case and significant to the case against Williams because they greatly reduced the reasonable doubt that the fibers found on the murder victims came from anywhere but the carpet in the Williams' home. Nevertheless, there could still be reasonable doubt that these carpet fibers were not rare enough to be from only one local source. Prosecutors needed investigators to show that these fibers were indeed from Wayne Williams' place of residence. Luckily, somebody in the Williams' household was not a stickler for clean.

Investigators found what they were searching for in Wayne Williams' bedroom: Fibers from the bedspread of Williams' bed and hairs from his family dog matched other fibers and hairs that had been found on the murder victims; thus further reducing the probability that the carpet fibers came from somewhere else and supporting the theory that they came from Williams' home. Furthermore, additional fibers from the crime scenes (mingled with the carpet fibers) were found to come from Wayne Williams' station wagon, as well as other vehicles to which he

had access (FBI.com). All in all, 25 hair and carpet fibers were found at various murder scenes, an amount considered by forensics experts to be “overwhelming” (Saferstein). If Williams was not the killer, somebody in his household was. How can this be definitively stated?

In a general sense, knowing the source of a fiber can help investigators narrow the search for a suspect. If a carpet fiber from a known source is found on a victim or at the scene of a crime – and the source is not continuous with the crime scene – there is a possibility of finding the suspect at the source of the disjunctive fibers.

With cooperation from the West Point Pepperell Corporation, investigators discovered the following information about the carpet fibers found on the bodies of twelve murder victims, including Nathaniel Cater and Jimmy Ray Payne:

1. That West Point Pepperell had manufactured a line of carpeting called *Luxaire*, which was manufactured with the *same fibers as found in Wayne Williams' rug*
2. West Point Pepperell was the only known carpet company (existing or defunct) to use this fiber in its product, in the *exact chemical make-up of the color in both the fibers found at the murder scene and the fibers in Wayne Williams' carpet*
 - a. The possibility of two separate manufacturers using the exact same chemical processes and ingredients to create the exact same color is *extremely rare at best*, as both are protected by patent and copyright laws, respectively; and
 - b. Other, visually similar green carpets were compared to the fibers found at the crime scenes; and *none were found to be microscopically similar*
3. The unique carpet fiber pattern found in both the fibers taken from Nathaniel Cater's body and Wayne Williams' rug was used *exclusively* in the manufacturing of *Luxaire* English Olive colored rugs for a period of one year – after which a *dissimilar* fiber was used to produce the *Luxaire* carpet line

4. The approximate amount of this unique carpet in the English Olive color sold in the Southeast United States was quite low – less than 16, 500 square yards. Simply put:
 - a. An estimate of existing carpeted floor-space in the U.S. during this time was 6.7 billion square yards, giving *Luxaire* English Olive only .00000245% ($2.45 \times 10^{-6}\%$) of the U.S. carpeting market
 - b. Further probability estimations showed that approximately 82 rooms in the entire state of Georgia (out of over *half-a-million* occupied homes) were carpeted in *Luxaire* English Olive

Each of these facts was important in connecting Wayne Williams to Nathaniel Cater's body because all were necessary to reduce the probability of the carpet fibers coming from an identical rug in the Atlanta area. If any one of these facts had been absent, the distribution of the carpet would have been much greater, thereby increasing the statistical probability that the fibers did not come from Wayne Williams' carpet; but from a similar carpet owned by someone else.

These facts, presented as they are, sound like a slam-dunk conviction for the prosecution. However, statistical probability involves a great deal of higher math; and can be difficult if not impossible to explain to someone untrained in the subject – i.e., a typical jury. Further muddying the waters is the fact that when most people hear the word "statistics" they think of Social Statistics, not Scientific (Forensic) Statistics; which are two widely differing concepts. Social Statistics predict what *should* happen, given a situation with set variables. Forensic Statistics take into account the often ignored variables that can change the forecast of what "should" occur – very much like "Chaos Theory".

For example, if a U.S. coin is tossed into the air 100 times, Social Statistics state that it will land on "heads" 50% of the time, and tails the other 50% of the time, as these are the only two available options. Forensic Statistics takes into account the

fact that the “heads” side of the coin is embossed, whereas “tails” side of the coin is both embossed *and* engraved. This slightly changes the aerodynamics of the coin, and will favor a “tails” result approximately 53% of the time over repeated coin tosses.

Forensic Statistics, though useful, cannot always be employed to the level of legal accuracy required in a courtroom. For this reason, the *less precise* Social Statistics are what investigators used to calculate the statistical probability of other Atlanta residents owning the same *Luxaire* English Olive carpeting, from which fibers were discovered on several of the murder victims, including Nathaniel Cater.

The facts taken into account when creating the study led scientists to the probability of randomly selecting a house within a reasonable radius of the crime scene (metropolitan Atlanta). That probability was 1 in 7,792, not taking into account that much of the *Luxaire* English Olive carpeting sold between 1970 – 1972 could have been destroyed by 1981 (when Nathaniel Cater was murdered), as the normal lifespan of the carpet was estimated to be 4 – 5 years [these variables fit into the mold of Forensic Statistics] (Saferstein).

Not taken into consideration was the probability of the *Luxaire* English Olive carpet fibers occurring in conjunction with other fibers (also linked to Williams) found on the bodies. If a Forensic Statistical study were done, then statistically speaking the odds would be infinitesimally small – as close to zero as science can predict – and yet all fibers found on the murder victims bodies were found together in Williams' station wagon, as well as other vehicles to which he had access.

Even without the added Forensic parameters, these overwhelming statistics left no room for “reasonable doubt” that the carpet fibers found on Nathaniel Cater

– and ten other murder victims of the 22-month killing spree that Williams' was accused of perpetrating – came from Williams' carpet; thus tying Williams to the two murders of which he was formally accused; and at least ten others of which he was suspected.

In January of 1982, a jury of nine women and three men – eight white and four black – returned a verdict of “guilty” against Wayne Bertram Williams on two counts of murder, for the killings of Nathaniel Cater and Jimmy Ray Payne. On February 26, 1982, Williams was sentenced to two life sentences (FBI.com). With his conviction, the FBI investigation into the Atlanta Child Murders was closed; the concept of forensic profiling was accepted as a valuable form of criminal investigation; and the name of Wayne Bertram Williams quickly faded from the minds of most Americans, becoming a mere footnote in American criminal history.

Afterward

Wayne Bertram Williams has been serving time in a Northern Georgia State prison for almost 30 years; and it appears that he will spend the rest of his natural life there, as his final appeal was denied in November 2007 by the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, when they decided that his attempt to prove not one but *three* Brady violations had no merit, and that the lower courts had erred in ruling otherwise. [A Brady violation is when the Prosecution violates the rules of disclosure and withholds evidence that could prove the Defendant innocent] (U.S. Courts.gov). Justice has been given to the memory of Nathaniel Cater and Jimmy Ray Payne. However, justice for the ten other presumed victims of Wayne Williams' depravity is not to be served.

Although Williams' guilt in ten of the remaining crimes was implied during trial (in full accordance with Georgia state law) additional charges were never brought against him (TruTV.com, Saferstein). From a practical standpoint, Williams will never again be free to kill; why waste the taxpayers' money on additional court proceedings?

The remaining victims of the Atlanta Child Killer – black male children, adolescents, and a few men barely out of their teens – remain open cases until this day. The killer of these twenty-six may still walk free; or he may be serving a life sentence in a prison in Northern Georgia. They are the cold cases that time has not forgotten...

So that their memory may not meet the same fates as Williams' – to be forgotten to the tombs of history – their names, ages, and month of disappearances are as follows:

Edward Hope Smith, age 14 – July 1979	Aaron Jackson, age 9 – November 1980
*Alfred Evans, age 14 – July 1979	Patrick "Pat-Man" Rogers, age 16 – November 1980
Milton Harvey, age 14 – September 1979	*Lubie Geter, age 14 – January 1981
Yusef Bell, age 9 – November 1979	*Terry Pue, age 15 – January 1981
Jeffery Mathis, age 10 – March 1980	*Patrick Baltazar, age 11 – February 1981
*Eric Middlebrooks, age 14 – May 1980	Curtis Walker, age 13 – February 1981
Christopher Richardson, age 12 – June 1980	*Joseph "Jo-Jo" Bell, age 15 – March 1981
Aaron Wyche, age 10 – June 1980	Timothy Hill, age 13 – March 1981
Anthony Carter, age 9 – July 1980	Eddie "Bubba" Duncan, age 21 – March 1981
Earl Terrell, age 11 – July 1980	Michael McIntosh, age 23 – March 1981
Clifford Jones, age 13 – August 1980	*Larry Rogers, age 21 – April 1981
Darron Glass, age 10 – September 1980	*John Porter, age 28 – April 1981
*Charles Stephens, age 12 – October 1980	*William "Billy Star" Barrett, age 17 – May 1981

**Indicates evidence implied Williams as the killer*

To this day, Williams profess his innocence; insisting the evidence against him was scientifically faulty, and that the jury was not educated enough to understand this, which is why they were impressed by the scientific nature of it (Atlanta Journal-Constitution). Supporting his cause are those who argue that the Ku Klux Klan killed many of the twenty-six on this list; while others argue that a still at-large child molester is the perpetrator (Baldwin). Although anything is possible, not all is probable. Some ask if the truth will ever be known. I argue that it already is. It is of special note that the Atlanta Child Murders ceased after the arrest of Wayne Bertram Williams.

KJM
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