



U.S. Department of Justice
Civil Rights Division

MJK:PMF:DHW:sam
DJ 144-19M-1759

Criminal Section - PHB
950 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20530

(b)(7)(C)

Cochran, Georgia 31014

Dear (b)(7)(C)

We are writing to inform you that the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) recently conducted a review of the circumstances surrounding the death of (b)(7)(C) your (b)(7)(C) Willic Joe Sanford, on or about February 2, 1957. We regret to inform you that we are unable to proceed further with a federal criminal investigation of this matter because the local (b)(7)(C) investigation undertaken following your (b)(7)(C) death and the additional federal investigation conducted in 2010-2012 have failed to identify any eyewitness or viable suspect in your (b)(7)(C) death. Please accept our sincere condolences on the loss of your (b)(7)(C)

Over the last 50 years, the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice has been instrumental in bringing justice to some of the nation's most disturbing civil rights era crimes. Today, the Division continues to use its resources and expertise to identify, locate, and, where possible, prosecute those responsible for committing racially-motivated crimes committed more than 40 years ago.

In 2006, the FBI began its Cold Case Initiative, a comprehensive effort to identify and investigate racially-motivated murders committed decades ago. Toward that end, each of the 56 FBI field offices searched their cold case files to identify incidents which might be ripe for investigation. In February of 2007, the FBI announced the next phase of the initiative, which includes a partnership with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), and the National Urban League to assist the FBI in identifying additional cases for investigation and to solicit their help. In October 2008, the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act (Emmett Till Act) became law giving the Department of Justice additional tools to investigate violations of criminal civil rights statutes . . . result[ing] in death that occurred not later than December 31, 1969.

(b)(7)(C) The federal review concerning your (b)(7)(C) death was begun pursuant to the Cold Case Initiative and the Emmett Till Act. This review was conducted by FBI Special Agents and an experienced cold case civil rights prosecutor. We have now concluded that review and wish to inform you in writing of our findings.

cc: Records Chrono Weiss T. 05/24/2012

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As part of its review of the circumstances of your [redacted] death, the FBI retrieved records (b)(7)(C) from the Pulaski County Coroner's Office, reviewed articles from the *Afro-American* newspaper and *Hawkinsville Dispatch and News*, researched Pulaski County court records, reviewed the available records regarding the grand jury proceedings, and contacted and interviewed numerous local law enforcement officials and attorneys.

According to a number of articles in the Baltimore, Maryland *Afro-American* newspaper, on March 1, 1957, the water-logged, naked body of Willie Joe Sanford, the victim, was raised from Limestone Creek, a few miles from Hawkinsville, Georgia. The victim was a 24-year-old sawmill worker. His hands had been tied over his head and his body had been wired to undergrowth in the creek. The victim's skull had been fractured by a blunt instrument and he had been stabbed numerous times in the chest, stomach, and back. An autopsy determined that the victim, who had been missing since February 2, 1957, had likely been in the creek for about 30 days.

(b)(7)(C) [redacted] According to an *Afro-American* article, Eva Mae Randall, the victim's sister and your [redacted] identified the body. Ms. Randall reportedly identified her brother from his shoes and from a surgical scar on his abdomen. The victim had been shot one year before by a white man and the scar resulted from the surgery to remove the bullet. The shooter had been released after spending one night in jail. No further information could be developed regarding the identity of the shooter. We were sorry to learn of your (b)(7)(C) passing. We understand that during her life she never mentioned any events believed to be connected to her brother's demise.

The local investigation into the victim's apparent lynching was led by Oconee Circuit Solicitor J. Wade Johnson and included four Pulaski County Sheriff's Office (PCSO) officers, four Georgia Bureau of Investigation agents, and two doctors.

Solicitor Johnson presented the matter to a Pulaski County grand jury. According to Johnson, the grand jury heard from about 15 witnesses, i.e. "anyone remotely connected to the case," but recessed without indicting anyone. A close friend of the victim, Arthur King, who reportedly had been with the victim shortly before his death, was jailed as a "material suspect," starting in mid-February, 1957. King was held in a jail in Macon, Georgia, 50 miles away from Hawkinsville, reportedly for "his own safety." Once the grand jury failed to indict anyone, King was released from jail. Pulaski County Sheriff Andrew Hill was quoted as saying that since the investigators had found "no evidence in the case," it was unfair to hold King any longer.

Solicitor Johnson, who reportedly initially characterized the murder as a lynching, retracted that opinion in the press, stating that had the murder been motivated by the victim's race, "it would not have been concealed" and the victim would have been "riddled with bullets." Nevertheless, Johnson conceded, if reluctantly, that his investigation had led him to conclude that the victim had been murdered by two white men. Newspaper accounts report that the solicitor's conclusion was based upon the fact that two different weapons were used - a blunt instrument that fractured the victim's skull and a sharp implement that was plunged into his chest, stomach, and back numerous times. The solicitor is further of the opinion that it would be difficult for one person to truss up a man, hold him under water, and tie him to the bottom of a creek. However, the perpetrators were never identified.

In the fall of 2008, the FBI initiated a review of the circumstances surrounding your (b)(7)(C) death. The FBI located and interviewed Ms. Randall on several occasions. She advised that Arthur King was a close friend to her brother, and got him a job at the local cotton mill. King was married to Lizzie Mae King. After the victim was missing, Ms. Randall and King tried to locate him. King later notified Ms. Randall that the Bleckley County Sheriff's Office had contacted him and told him of finding a body believed to be that of Willie Joe Sanford. Ms. Randall was transported by the sheriff to Pulaski County, where the body was found, and she identified the victim's body as that of her brother. According to Ms. Randall, King was placed in custody in Fulton County for his own safety, but later returned to Cochran, Georgia to live and work. According to Ms. Randall, King is deceased. She told investigators that she did not believe that anyone involved in her brother's death, whether as a witness or perpetrator, would still be alive.

The FBI was able to confirm that Arthur King was deceased. A review of death certificate records revealed that King died of an apparent heart attack on April 24, 1973. King's wife was also deceased; she died on October 31, 1999. FBI special agents interviewed Danny Mathis, Coroner of Bleckley County, who advised that there were no coroner's reports dating back to 1957. A copy of Sanford's death certificate was obtained and it indicates that the cause of death was "strain and hemorrhage from multiple stab-type wounds to abdomen, chest and head."

The FBI reviewed the Pulaski County grand jury docket for March 1957, but it did not provide any details concerning the identities of the 15 witnesses who reportedly testified in the victim's case. Through contact with the Pulaski County Clerk of Court, the FBI determined that Solicitor J. Wade Johnson is deceased. The FBI contacted officials at PCSO and the GBI, but neither agency had any records relevant to the victim's death. Additionally, according to a PCSO official, the adjacent Bleckley County Sheriff's Office would not have had any records either.

The FBI contacted Timothy Vaughn, Pulaski County District Attorney, who opined that the likelihood of prosecuting the victim's murder was extremely remote.

After careful review of this incident, we have concluded that the federal government cannot pursue a prosecution in this case. Despite both a contemporaneous investigation and the recent Federal review, no eyewitnesses were located or viable suspects identified. Additionally, even if suspects had been identified, the federal government may not have been able to prosecute them because the five-year statute of limitations has expired. Accordingly, we have no choice but to close our investigation.

We regret that we cannot be of further assistance to you. Again, please accept our sincere condolences for the loss of your (b)(7)(C)

Sincerely,

Paige M. Fitzgerald
Deputy Chief in Charge
of the Cold Case Initiative