

NC homicide victim was found in the woods in 1979. Now, DNA reveals his identity.

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DNA analysis revealed the identity of a homicide victim whose skeletal remains were found in woods near Mountain Island Lake in 1979, Gaston County Police on Wednesday said.

James Harold Smith of Charlotte was 33 when he disappeared, according to a Gaston County Police Department news release.



The family of James Harold Smith filed a missing person report with Charlotte-Mecklenburg police in October 2014, more than 35 years after he was last seen outside an uptown courthouse, according to Gaston County Police. *CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG POLICE DEPARTMENT*

On Oct. 6, 1979, police responded to a call of a body found in woods off Horseshoe Bend Beach Road, off N.C. 16 near the lake.

The body of the 30- to 60-year-old man had been there “for some time,” police said, and no identification was found on the victim.

Police have not said why they believe somebody killed Smith.

DNA technology didn’t exist in 1979, and no one reported Smith missing until his brother from Wingate filed a missing persons report with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department in 2014.

According to the 2014 CMPD report, Elwood Smith said he hadn’t seen his brother since June 1979. Elwood Smith told police he filed the missing persons report “because he is concerned for his brother ... who has not been in touch with him or any other family members.”

CMPD on Wednesday provided a copy of the 2014 report to the Observer.

On a missing persons flier that CMPD issued in 2014, police said the last time his family saw Smith was after a Mecklenburg County court hearing in June 1979.

“In the 1980s, it is believed that James Smith stayed at a residence on Honeywood Avenue,” police wrote in the 2014 flier, unaware he’d been dead so long. “James Smith is 68 years old at the time of this report.”

Smith worked for BB & Construction on East Worthington Avenue, according to the 2014 CMPD report.

Elwood Smith “has been asking other family, siblings and other family members which have not seen or heard from the victim,” police wrote in the 2014 report.

The Observer could not reach multiple neighbors of Smith and former owners of his last known home address in the 600 block of Gallagher

Street. The property is now [owned by Mecklenburg County](#), according to land records.

Gaston County Police reviewed the case in 2020, and a University of South Florida forensics lab created a DNA profile and artist sketch of the victim.



Gaston County Police worked with the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System to process DNA from skeletal remains of a man found dead in 1979. With help from the Florida Institute of Forensic Anthropology and Applied Science at the University of South Florida in Tampa, a DNA profile and an artist rendition were created. The man was identified as James Harold Smith of Charlotte. *COURTESY OF GASTON COUNTY POLICE*

Detectives spoke with Smith's family and learned he was of Lumbee Indian descent, police said.

Police urged anyone with information about Smith's disappearance and killing to call Gaston County Police Detective B. Dalton at 704-866-3320 or CrimeStoppers at 704-861-8000.

A reward of up to \$1,000 for information leading to the identification and arrest of a suspect.