

Murder Conviction Vacated as a Result of North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission Investigation



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WINSTON - SALEM — On June 16, [Forsyth County](#) Superior Court Judge Richard Gottlieb vacated the conviction of Merritt Williams in the 1985 murder of Blanche Bryson. Mr. Williams subsequently entered an Alford Plea to breaking and / or entering. An Alford Plea "is when a defendant maintains his innocence but admits that the state has sufficient evidence to convict him and agrees to be treated as guilty." See *North Carolina v. Alford*, 400 U.S. 25 (1970). Mr. Williams was sentenced to three years on the breaking and / or entering conviction. That sentence retroactively began on August 4, 1987.



On June 4-7, 2019, the [North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission](#) (NCIIC) conducted a hearing in the case of *State vs. Merritt Williams Drayton* (Forsyth – 86 CRS 031738) arising from the murder of Blanche Bryson on December 10, 1985. Mr. Williams was found guilty of first-degree murder after a jury trial on August 4, 1987. After carefully considering the evidence, the Commission unanimously concluded that there was sufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit judicial review. This case was referred forward for a hearing before a three-judge panel which was scheduled to begin on June 27, 2022.

As a result of the investigation conducted by the NCIIC, Assistant District Attorney Ben White and Mr. Williams' attorney Julie Boyer consented to a motion for appropriate relief in lieu of the case being heard by a three-judge panel, which vacated Mr. Williams' conviction for the murder and allowed him to take an Alford Plea to breaking and / or entering.

[View all materials considered by the Commission, along with a transcript of the Commission's hearing.](#)

Mr. Williams remains in custody on a separate unrelated conviction of 2nd degree murder for which he has also claimed innocence. The Commission investigated that case and presented it at its Commission hearing on June 4-7, 2019. After carefully considering the evidence in that case, the Commission concluded by a vote of 6-2 that there was not sufficient evidence of factual innocence to merit judicial review and the case was not referred to a three-judge panel.

More

Currently, one case is pending a hearing before a three-judge panel. The case of State v. John Pritchard (Yancey County) is set to be heard the week of July 11, 2022.

About Innocence Inquiry Commission

Since it began operating in 2006, the Commission has reviewed and closed over 3,000 claims, confirming guilt through DNA testing in 10 cases. Fifteen individuals have been exonerated after a post-commission three-judge panel or had their convictions vacated through motions for appropriate relief that were based on the Commission's investigation of their innocence claim and received Pardons of Innocence from the Governor. Four individuals, including Mr. Williams, have accepted Alford Pleas for time served from prosecutors after the Commission referred a case to a three-judge panel but prior to the three-judge panel hearing.

For questions, please contact NCIIC Executive Director Lindsey Guice Smith, at 919-890-1580 or nciic@nccourts.org.

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About North Carolina Judicial Branch

The [North Carolina Judicial Branch](#) is an equal and distinctively separate branch and core function of government. More than 7,000 Judicial Branch employees statewide administer justice in courthouses in North Carolina's 100 counties. The [Judicial Branch budget for FY 2020–21](#) was \$598.2M, 89.2% of which is used to pay salaries and the remaining 10.8% is used for operations. The Judicial Branch receives only 2.44% of the overall State budget.

About North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts

The North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts (NCAOC) is the administrative agency for the [North Carolina Judicial Branch](#), providing administrative services to help the North Carolina court system operate more efficiently and effectively, taking into account each courthouse's diverse needs, caseloads, and available resources.

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