



## **Alfred Chestnut, Andrew Stewart, & Ransom Watkins: Background Info**

**Quick Summary:** Alfred Chestnut, Andrew Stewart, and Ransom Watkins were exonerated today after each spending 36 years in prison for the 1983 murder of 14-year-old DeWitt Duckett. A joint investigation led by the Baltimore City State’s Attorney’s Conviction Integrity Unit, and assisted by the Mid-Atlantic Innocence Project, the University of Baltimore Innocence Project Clinic, the Maryland Office of the Public Defender, Nieto Law Office, and Nathans Biddle, proved they did not commit the crime. The parties jointly filed a Writ of Actual Innocence in Baltimore City Circuit Court and are hopeful that the consent motion will be granted today.

### **Important Names & Dates:**

**Crime:** November 18, 1983

**Arrest:** November 24, 1983

**Conviction:** May 28, 1984

**Sentencing:** July 10, 1984

**Sentences:** Life

**Lead Detective:** Donald Kincaid

**Assistant State’s Attorney:** Jonathan Shoup

**The Crime:** At around 1:30 p.m. on November 18, 1994, 14-year-old DeWitt Duckett was shot in the neck and killed while he was walking to class at Harlem Park Junior High School (HPJHS).

**The Investigation:** When police arrived at the scene, they identified three teenage boys, friends of Duckett’s, as eyewitnesses to the crime. All of them said that one person had accosted Duckett, asking for his Georgetown jacket. As the jacket snagged on Duckett’s wrist, the individual shot Duckett in the neck, grabbed the jacket, and ran off. Initial media reports provided a description of one individual.

Initial media reports also quoted the school principal, who said the shooter must have been someone who was not a student and had come into the school from the outside — a problem the school had been trying to address. On the evening of November 18, a HPJHS teacher called police to tell them that shortly before the shooting, she’d seen five teenage boys at the school who were not students, and she asked them to leave.

Using yearbook photos, she identified Chestnut, Stewart, and Watkins as three of those boys. Each of them was 16 and had previously been students at HPJHS. On November 19, police interviewed Watkins and Chestnut, who was wearing a Georgetown jacket. At that point, the investigation began to focus solely on the three teenagers — despite the initial witness statements pointing to a single perpetrator.

On November 21 and 22, police showed a series of photos — including photos of Chestnut, Stewart, and Watkins — to the teenage witnesses. None of them selected the three as perpetrators; at least one of them selected another individual.

On November 23, police got the break they were looking for. A school security guard told police that he'd interviewed another purported eyewitness to the crime, a 14-year-old girl who identified Chestnut, Stewart, and Watkins as the perpetrators.

At that point, police lead Detective Donald Kincaid sent uniformed police officers to pick up the three teenage male eyewitnesses. Kincaid said he was upset and stern with the witnesses, standing over them as he again showed them the photo array containing pictures of Chestnut, Stewart, and Watkins. This time, the three identified Chestnut, Stewart, and Watkins as the killers.

The three 16-year-olds were arrested on Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 1983, and have always maintained their innocence.

### **The Trial:**

At trial, the State's case was based primarily on testimony from the four eyewitnesses. Their testimony was impeached, although not as fully as it could have been if the State had complied with its discovery obligations.

All three of the boys admitted to being at the school that day but said they left before the shooting, at the request of the school security officer. The security officer, a State witness, testified that he last saw the boys at the school before the crime, walking away from the school as he asked them to leave.

The defense also attacked the theory that Chestnut's Georgetown jacket had belonged to Duckett. Chestnut's mother produced a receipt for the Georgetown jacket and testified that she bought it for him. An employee from the store where the jacket was purchased also testified that he remembered a woman who looked like Mrs. Chestnut purchasing a jacket from the store.

Nonetheless, the jury convicted the boys after only three hours of deliberation. At sentencing, both Stewart and Watkins spoke, continuing to maintain their innocence. The State said that the boys' failure to accept responsibility should result in a harsher sentence.

**Post-Conviction Investigation:** During the post-conviction investigation, all four eyewitnesses who testified at trial recanted their testimony. The three who initially spoke with police told police the truth at the beginning, that one person had committed the crime. The girl who testified as a teenager admitted that she had not seen the crime. The credibility of those recantations was bolstered by their consistency, as well as by interviews with additional witnesses who were at the school that day.