



EPISODE 04: Who Killed Stephen Smith? Part Two

Mandy Matney 00:00

I don't know who killed Stephen Smith. But I do know that something went wrong in the investigation of his death and because of that Stephen's family has been waiting 2194 days to get justice in his case. My name is Mandy Matney. I'm the news director at Fitz news.com. I have been investigating the Murdaugh family for more than two years now. And this is the Murdaugh martyrs podcast. So this podcast is different from other True Crime podcasts because it's all still developing. I'm waiting for the Freedom of Information request to come back. I'm waiting for different pieces of the story to finally come out. I understand that there's a lot to follow here and it gets very complicated, but we will do our best to guide you through all of the twists and turns. Two episodes ago, we introduced y'all to the Stephen Smith case. I know so many of you are eager to learn more details of this investigation. So this week, we're going to go back and do part two of who killed Stephen Smith. So let's start with a recap. Smith was found dead just before 4am on July 8 2015. He was found in the middle of Sandy Run Road in Hampton County, South Carolina on June 22 2021. Huge news broke in his case, I was first report that the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division also known as SLED, the same agency investigating the Murdaugh murders open an investigation into Stephen Smith's death. SLED told me that this was based on information gathered during the course of the double homicide investigation of Paul and Maggie Murdaugh. We don't know what information led them to that position. But it's important to look back on the 2015 case and see what went wrong. Like the probe of the 2019 bow crash that killed Mallory beach, the 2015 investigation and dismissed death was chaotic from the beginning derailed by jurisdictional perplexity and suspicions of investigative interference. In the last episode, we discussed the evidence or lack thereof found at the scene on Sandy Run Road on July 8 2015. So before I get into the details of this case, I want to describe this place for you because Hampton county is different. If you've driven on I 95 in southern South Carolina you wouldn't notice the exit for Hampton exit 38 is unremarkable. You'll see a Love's Travel stop, Dollar General Store and a Family Dollar but not much else. A trip to Hampton county is like a trip back in time. It's about an hour and a half northwest of Hilton Head Island but it feels a world away. The town name and the local high school Wade Hampton High are named after a confederate officer he was one of the largest slave owners in the southeast as he traveled down Yemasee highway railroad tracks follow the route to downtown Hampton. Tall southern pines frame the highway. Hampton is along the corridor of shame counties in South Carolina with failing schools and inadequate funding. Hampton is one of the poorest counties in South Carolina with a median household income of around \$32,000. Only about 19,000 people live in Hampton County and that number decreases every year. There are very few jobs and very few businesses. Downtown Hampton is a place where time stood still and hasn't moved much since the 1950s. A large pedestal clock stands in the middle of Lee Avenue, which is the heart of downtown Hampton. Palmetto trees line the sidewalk of the sleepy downtown you will see



EPISODE 04: Who Killed Stephen Smith? Part Two

some old fashioned storefronts such as the Palmetto theater and almost Feed and Seed standing watch over Lee Avenue the historic courthouse built in 1878. It's hard to miss one block from Lee Avenue. There was one noticeably thriving business in Hampton, South Carolina. That is the Murdaugh law firm, Peters Murdaugh, Parker Ellsworth and Dietrich also known as PMPED. For decades Hampton County has been known as a judicial hellhole, a place where you do not want to get sued. A 2004 report by the National American Tort reform Foundation, named Hampton County as a number three judicial hellhole in the United States. While the report is dated many of the problems and names in the report still exist in Hampton County today. Because of Hampton County's longtime reputation of siding with plaintiffs and rewarding an unusually high amount for damages. A large amount of plaintiffs went to Hampton county to file their lawsuits. For years, South Carolina law allowed plaintiffs to file civil lawsuits against businesses virtually in any county in the States, specifically wherever the corporate defendant does business or owns property. According to the report, one law firm brings the majority of the major lawsuits in Hamden County and that is the Murdaugh law firm PMED. The report said intimidation through the use of subpoenas as one of the reasons why Hampton was a judicial hellhole. The litigation climate hurt the economy in Hampton county by scaring away businesses. In the early 2000s. Walmart considered opening a store and hand and county. The report said a lawyer reportedly warned company executives that locating a store there could place the retailer's entire South Carolina operation at risk. Still, today. Hampton remains one of the few counties in South Carolina without a Walmart; there is virtually no industry in the county. And I'm not making a value judgment here. Life in Hampton was hard for a lot of people. And it was not easy for the Smith family. Stephen Smith was born two pounds 12 ounces at 7:05am. On January 29 1986. He was a twin and given a 50% chance of survival rate. But he always overcame the odds. His mother says,

Sandy Smith 06:03

Yeah, well His room was a library. Every dollar he got from chores he spent in the library buying their old book, didn't matter what it was Greek mythology, whatever he read it. He was so smart. And he always had a dream of being a doctor, but he said he didn't want to talk about costs or money. So he had to start from the bottom and be a nurse until he could become a doctor and then he was gonna go overseas to help children in need.

Mandy Matney 06:35

Stephen was in class at Orangeburg tech, a local community college about 55 miles north of Hampton on July 7 2015. Just hours later, he was found dead in the middle of Sandy Run Road around 4am on July 8 2015. For the sluice out there the closest address to pinpoint the location where Stephen was found, according to the report would be 6199 Sandy Run Road. It's a country road about five miles north of downtown Hampton, the only commercial buildings for miles or the Crockett Ville country store in the Hampton Presbyterian Church, there is an occasional house every mile or so on Sandy Run Road and the landscape is



EPISODE 04: Who Killed Stephen Smith? Part Two

shaped mostly by cornfields. In crime scene photos, there appears to be a house adjacent to where Stephen was found. But again, there are no records and police reports of any officers canvassing the neighborhood and asking neighbors if they heard anything strange that morning, yet they took several photos of the house nearby. This is one of many investigative peculiarities in the Stephen Smith case. Okay, so in the last episode, we discussed several important factors about the crime scene and evidence in this case, including Stephen's face was covered in blood. His forehead was heavily bruised and bashed in by blunt force. His shoulder was partially dislocated, but he had no other major injuries. Stephen's loosely tied shoes were still on his feet, and his phone was in his pocket with his key when he was found by authorities. His car was found about three miles away on Bamburgh highway with the gas cap off, police could not get his car to start, Highway Patrol searched the scene multiple times and time and time again. They found no evidence of a motor vehicle accident. They found no tire marks, they found no debris from a vehicle. They found nothing. So as we explained in the last episode, there was a lot of dispute about the cause of Stephen's death from the beginning. The first few investigators on scene went back and forth between a gunshot homicide and a hit and run accident. South Carolina highway patrol officers were told it wasn't a vehicular accident and they didn't have to be at the autopsy. But then at the autopsy pathologist, Dr. Erin Presnell ruled it Stephen was killed in a hit and run crash to Highway Patrol investigators who spoke with Presnell Describe hostile experiences with her and couldn't get a direct answer for why she ruled Stephen's death a vehicle accident. In a month after Stephen's death, the coroner said that he didn't believe that Stephen's death was a hit and run. And despite the fact that officials rejected the ruling that Stephen was killed by a truck nearby in a hit and run accident, a highway patrol investigated the case. They started by interviewing Stephen's family members in a man that described himself as Stephen's boyfriend. Go back to episode two if you want to hear those interviews. In a letter forensic scientist Michael Moscow of the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division said that he tested trace evidence in the case he tested three items of clothing that Stephen was wearing the night he died and scan them for automotive paint. He found no paint on Stephen's black Nike shirt he found no paint on Stephen's cargo pants. He found no paint on Stephen's blue tennis shoes. But then when he tested debris from the shoes and the shirt he found 10 one millimeter single layer blue paint chips for an eye. Do you know how small one millimeter is? It's about the width of a pencil tip tiny. He indicated that the paint could be from an industrial tool dumpster or signpost and he added that toy to use this particular paint on its vehicles from 1982 to 1988. But there's something important to note about those clothes: the chain of custody apparently was broken with Stephen's clothes when they were left unattended at the funeral home on the day of his death, so it's hard to say where those paint chips came from. On August 4 2015 Duncan, an investigator with the South Carolina Highway Patrol picked up Stephen's iPhone from SLED he wrote in his notes, there is no chain of custody with the phone. This is weird because in another SLED report, it says that Duncan signed a Chain of Custody form on August 4 and transferred the phone to Jay Connolly of the Highway Patrol on I 95. On August 5, the phone is another key piece of evidence in this case that the



EPISODE 04: Who Killed Stephen Smith? Part Two

South Carolina Highway Patrol apparently failed to get answers from for years the phone was tossed between agencies and they couldn't get it unlocked. We'll go back to more about the phone later. According to chain of custody reports there was a rape kit done on Stephen it was transferred from the Hampton County Coroner to Highway Patrol investigator Todd proctor at MUSC than Todd proctor transferred the rape kit to a name that I can't read and edit a location that says TR6A on August 11 2015. But the rape kit is never mentioned again, which is weird. They never mentioned what the results are and none of the investigators seem to care about it at all. The gunshot residue kit was also taken to the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division for analysis but like the rape kit, it's never mentioned again outside of the chain of custody report. In another investigative inconsistency. Hampton County Sheriff's Office investigator Perry Singleton wrote that Stephen was wearing a white polo shirt when he was found. However, in all other reports and photos from the crime scene, Stephen was wearing a black Nike t-shirt. Why would singleton write that not all investigations are black and white, but this just seems odd. So now that we've told you about evidence in the case or lack thereof, we want to get into the interviews on August 7 2015. South Carolina Highway Patrol investigator Corporal Michael E. Duncan calls Stephen's friend who we will call Brittany in this podcast. We changed Brittany's voice due to the sensitive nature of this topic.

Corp. Duncan 12:32

Let me kind of go over a couple of things, just now information that I got. And you can either confirm or not she'll steal me yesterday or show me yesterday or it might have been the day before. But she says matter of fact is on Wednesday, if I'm not mistaken, that she was at church and that both y'all have spoken about Stephen's death about Buster Murdaugh, is that correct? Kind of tell me what you told her about that.

Brittany 13:00

Another friend of mine had picked me asking me if Lester and Stephen worked together. And I told him no. I said not that I knew of him and I asked him why? He said because he had heard that. And then I asked him who he heard it from and he didn't know he just heard.

Corp. Duncan 13:17

Okay, so he didn't have any relevance or anything to base that upon just so far. More or less a rumor is that correct?

Brittany 13:24

Yes sir.

Corp. Duncan 13:24

Had you ever heard of Stephen and Buster being involved at all before this?

Brittany 13:30



EPISODE 04: Who Killed Stephen Smith? Part Two

No sir.

Corp. Duncan 13:32

So this was the first time you'd ever heard about something like this?

Brittany 13:35

Yes sir.

Corp. Duncan 13:35

Okay, did you know Stephen at all?

Brittany 13:37

Yes sir, he was my best friend.

Corp. Duncan 13:38

Okay. And did you know Stephen was gay?

Brittany 13:40

I did.

Mandy Matney 13:41

Duncan asked who Britney heard this rumor from and Britney said she heard it from a guy who we will call Jack in this podcast. Later that day, Duncan makes a note of the rumor that Brittany told them about in the investigation file. This is the first time he ever wrote down the Murdaugh name even though he had heard it in two previous interviews. A couple days later on August 10 2015. Duncan notes that Jack's father has called him and wanted to know what was going on. This is a reminder that we're dealing with teenagers here who are very young. All of these kids are around 19 or 20. August 11 2015. Jack calls Dunkin.

Corp. Duncan 14:22

Corporate Duncan again.

Jack 14:23

Yes, sir.

Corp. Duncan 14:24

All right. Let me pull up this paperwork. Let me let me kind of go over a couple of things with you real quick. And how your name kind of brought about a long story short. You suppose we've sent a text so let me let me go and just kind of go in this. Do you know Stephen Smith?

Jack 14:39



EPISODE 04: Who Killed Stephen Smith? Part Two

Yeah, he was my classmate. All right.

Corp. Duncan 14:42

And and did you send that text to?

Jack 14:45

What was the text? Exactly. Yes sir.

Corp. Duncan 14:47

Let me pull that from a computer or get it unlocked real quick. All right. It says if Buster Murdaugh ever had any type of relationship with Stephen. Did you send that text? And then the question was asked back. How did you know about that? Where are you getting that information from?

Jack 15:12

There was a rumor.

Corp. Duncan 15:13

Rumor?

Jack 15:15

Yes sir. I heard it

Corp. Duncan 15:22

And so you heard it through just like people that you know, or just people in general comments. All right. Any information that you know, do you know, any information about whether that's true or not?

Jack 15:35

No, not at all.

Corp. Duncan 15:35

Not at all. Do you know anything? Do you know anything about Stephen's death?

Jack 15:41

No, sir. Not at all.

Corp. Duncan 15:42

Nobody has come to you and, and brought any information to you other than what was the question? You asked that correct.



EPISODE 04: Who Killed Stephen Smith? Part Two

Jack 15:50

That's correct.

Corp. Duncan 15:52

What have you heard otherwise? Have you heard any other rumors?

Jack 15:57

Nothing? Nothing. No.

Corp. Duncan 16:00

So the only rumor you heard is possibly Buster having some type of relationship with Stephen.

Jack 16:05

Yes, sir.

Corp. Duncan 16:06

Okay. All right. And how long ago was that? Did you call a one that was

Jack 16:14

a few weeks ago maybe was after

Corp. Duncan 16:16

or before his death?

Jack 16:18

After.

Corp. Duncan 16:18

Okay, so after Stephen had died?

Jack 16:22

Yes sir.

Corp. Duncan 16:23

All right. Anything else that you got that uh, that I need to know about anything at all.

Mandy Matney 16:29

While doing a background search on Jack, we noticed that he was facing two different lawsuits from the Murdaugh law firm. Attorney John E. Parker, a powerful, well known firm partner filed two car accident lawsuits against Jack just two weeks after Stephen's death. The



EPISODE 04: Who Killed Stephen Smith? Part Two

lawsuits were both dismissed in 2016. I am noting this only because this is something that I found during my reporting, and I've not yet found an explanation for the timing. It could be nothing but it's worth mentioning, in case any listeners can shed light on this. At the very least it shows just how small of a web we're dealing with in Hampton County and just how much of that web is covered by the Murdaugh Family Law Firm. A couple of weeks pass and not much happens with the investigation. On August 27 2015. Duncan interviews a man who we will call Ben over the phone the day before Sandy Smith told Duncan that this man had information on Stephen's death. Unfortunately, the interview really doesn't go anywhere. The man doesn't say that much. But he does mention a rumor that he heard

Corp. Duncan 17:32

and now let me ask you this. Have you heard anything strange about how Stephen died or any rumors or anything like that?

Ben 17:39

What I heard was, he was running from somebody.

Corp. Duncan 17:43

Said he was running.

Ben 17:45

Running in the woods on the guy like he was running for eight somebody in the woods.

Corp. Duncan 17:51

Now who do you hear that? Did you hear that from Stephen's Mama?

Ben 17:55

No, I heard this from my classmates. Okay. All right. And

Corp. Duncan 17:58

did did they even describe who it may have been?

Ben 18:01

They said it was an older guy running from. We tried to figure out who he was running from. Maybe he was with some guy he was messing with that nobody knew of and I get to kind of bring them out or something like that's what we thought.

Corp. Duncan 18:19

Okay.

Mandy Matney 18:19



EPISODE 04: Who Killed Stephen Smith? Part Two

The next day Lance Corporal Conley, interviews a man we will call him Joe who lives on Hilton Head. He called Joe after Sandy Smith found a gate pass for a Hilton Head gated community with Joe's name on it. This gate pass was found inside Stephens car, which was supposed to be searched for evidence by police and Stephens mom was the only one to find this pass. For those of you who aren't familiar, a visitor to one of Hilton Head's gated communities must obtain a gate pass in order to enter this usually means stopping by a gate house producing an ID and telling an armed guard whose house you're going to visit then you are provided a gate pass to enter the community. This man that the Highway Patrol interviews called a gate pass for Stephen 10 days prior to his death and the pass was still in the car with his name on it. The forensics team must have missed this and Stephens Mom must have been the only one who cared enough to examine this call, the source and motivate investigators to follow up on this lead. Even then investigators still pretty much brushed past this interview. Joe was an older man and recently in divorce. He said that he met Stephen online but said no money was exchanged in their encounter. Joe said that he doesn't do this kind of thing. Often. He said that they hooked up on June 28. But it was a one night stand. Joe said that he texted Stephen A few times after that and didn't realize that he passed away until after he was contacted by Sandy. Now keep in mind that investigators just heard the day before that there were rumors as Stephen was running from an older guy when he was killed. A guy that he possibly hooked up with. And then they made a man who fits this description. And they don't even bother to ask him for an alibi. So who knows if there's any truth to this older man rumor whatsoever, but all of this shows sloppy police work at the very least a couple days later. An investigator named Todd Proctor steps in. Proctor interviews a man and we'll call him Kevin and the investigation takes another turn.

Todd Proctor 20:28

But I'll tell you, my office is out of Charleston. So I have no ties to Hampton. There's no big name in Hampton, that worries me. You know, and I want you to feel at ease about that as well. Because I've heard this name, people associated with his name had been going around kind of threatening or putting the heat on people saying, you know, keep your mouth closed, if you heard something, whatever.

Mandy Matney 20:56

And the conversation gets very interesting.

Kevin 20:58

First of all, it was shot. Then we heard it was a hit and run but recently, probably a week ago, we can half ago, I'd say something like that. I heard that these two maybe three young men were in a vehicle. They were riding down 601 saw a car on the side of the road, I guess saw the boy walking, they turn back around, I guess they were intending to I don't want to say you know mess around with him or something like that and stuck something out the window and it hit him in I don't know if he hit him in the head or back or where it hit him. And then



EPISODE 04: Who Killed Stephen Smith? Part Two

that's pretty much all I heard. I did hear names and um, or heard a name. And that name was he goes by Buster murder

Mandy Matney 21:49

So there's a lot more to this interview and others, but there's just not enough time in this episode. So stay tuned for part three of who killed Stephen Smith. And be sure to check out FITSnews.com where you can see crime scene photos and read interviews from this case for the latest updates in all of these cases, subscribe to FITSnews.com. And to support our mission go to MurdaughMurdersPodcast.com. So for the latest developments on this case, visit FITSnews.com or follow me on Twitter at [twitter.com/mandy M A N D Y Matney M A T N E Y](https://twitter.com/mandyMANDYMatneyMATNEY) and don't forget to leave a five star review unless you're going to be nasty and talk about my vocal fry. The Murdaugh Murders Podcast is created by me, Mandy Matney and my fiance David Moses produced by Luna shark productions

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