

Arrest made in wrong conviction rape
Man freed had served 21 years

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Kenneth Wicker, who was convicted for a series of sexual attacks in 1985, committed another rape that wrongly sent another man to prison for 21 years, authorities said.

Wicker was arrested Friday afternoon at his Decatur home and charged with rape, bringing full circle a travesty of justice that began with a case of mistaken identity in spring 1985.

On Jan. 23, Willie Otis "Pete" Williams was released from prison after a DNA test pushed for by the Georgia Innocence Project showed he didn't commit an April 1985 rape he always contended he did not do.

Wicker, 47, served just four years after pleading guilty in 1987 to one count of rape and two attempted sexual assaults. An earlier trial ended in a mistrial.

The victims went along with the light sentence, a prosecutor then said, to avoid the ordeal of testifying in another trial. The Wicker attacks were similar to the two attacks Williams was convicted of in September 1985.

In a news conference, Fulton County District Attorney Paul Howard said Wicker's DNA matched that in rape kits from the April 1985 attack that led to Williams' conviction and a June 17, 1985, rape that Wicker committed.

"The evidence flowed from the same person," Howard said, adding investigators did not connect the April 1985 and June 1985 rapes to Wicker because they were investigated by separate police agencies.

"The April 5 case [was] a Fulton County investigation," said Howard. "The Wicker case in June was investigated by the Atlanta Police Department. And those two agencies never compared notes."

But an August 1985 report written by a Fulton County detective indicated that he asked Atlanta police about similar attacks. But Williams' attorney at the time, Michael Schumacher, said Friday the April 1985 attacks were not linked to Wicker because authorities were already locked in on Williams as a suspect.

Schumacher even brought up the Wicker assaults in a 1986 hearing while trying to get his client a new trial. That hearing, at which the attorney even had brought Wicker into the courtroom, most likely laid the groundwork that led to Wicker's arrest Friday.

"There's no way he'd be arrested now without that," Schumacher said. "I laid the trail of crumbs for someone else to come and pick up."

There are eerie similarities in looking at police reports from the time.

The attacks that Wicker pleaded guilty to occurred May 4, June 17 and July 5 of 1985.

He was arrested in July 1985 after the last victim jotted down his license plate number.

Williams was accused of raping a woman April 5, 1985, and of attempting to rape another five days later. He was arrested April 28, 1985.

"But the attacks continued with the same M.O., down to the same words — he asked the victims about 'Carol,'" Schumacher said.

Williams' case was resuscitated by the Georgia Innocence Project after it got a letter from him in 2005.

Williams was not available for comment Friday.

Howard said he and members of his staff have talked to the victim of the April 1985 rape that sent Williams to prison. She and another victim said in 1985 that they were certain it was Williams.

"It was very disturbing for [the rape victim] after all this time to discover it might have been the wrong person," he said. "I think she would still rely on her identification. But she realizes the scientific evidence conclusively shows her identification was not correct."

Howard said Wicker did not go into custody peacefully. "I won't go into details, but we encountered some difficulty — it was not the most calm-natured arrest."