

Judge sentences Hilton to death for Florida murder

Hilton currently serving life sentence for different slaying

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Gary Hilton

A drifter from Georgia learned his fate Thursday morning when a judge sentenced him to death for the 2007 murder and kidnapping of a nurse in northern Florida.

Gary Michael Hilton, 64, was found guilty in February of killing Cheryl Dunlap inside the Apalachicola National Forest.

He is currently serving a life sentence for the January 2008 slaying of Buford resident Meredith Hope Emerson in the Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Area.

Hilton escaped the death penalty in Georgia by agreeing to lead investigators to Emerson's body in Dawson County.

When Emerson was killed, Dawson County Sheriff's Lt. Col. John Cagle was nearing his retirement as a special agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

"For anybody here in Dawson County, some people had questions as to why we didn't seek the death penalty at that time," Cagle said.

"It was the conviction we got for the murder of Meredith Emerson that was the aggravating circumstance in the Cheryl Dunlap murder."

Cagle watched the sentencing Thursday morning on a live Internet feed from the Leon County, Fla., courtroom.

"The expression on his face - this was the first time that it appeared he was scared," Cagle said. "I wish we could carry out the sentence today. I'd be more than happy to assist them."

As the lead GBI investigator in the local case, Cagle and the Emerson family became close and continue to keep in touch.

"I think the Emersons will be pleased with the sentence. And I'm sure they, as I do, look forward to the trial in North Carolina so that that family can get some closure as well," Cagle said.

Hilton is also suspected in the 2007 double slayings of John and Irene Bryant in Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina, though he has not been officially charged in that case.

"I talked to the U.S. attorney and they are certainly proceeding in that case," Cagle said.

While no time table has been set, Cagle predicts the case will move forward this fall.

Hilton has 30 days file an appeal.