

## The Case That Shocked The Country

The unquiet deaths of Vida Robare  
and Alexander McClay Williams –  
the youngest person in Pennsylvania  
to die in the electric chair –  
for a crime he did not commit



Samuel Michael Lemon, Ed.D.

# Alexander McClay Williams

July 23, 1914 - June 8, 1931

Executed for a crime he did not commit.  
"Justice deferred is justice denied."

***The Case that Shocked the Country: The Unquiet deaths of Vida Robare, and Alexander McClay Williams*** -- the youngest person in Pennsylvania to die in the electric chair -- for a crime he did not commit, recounts a 1930 murder case in Delaware County, Pennsylvania. This story sent shockwaves across the country in newspaper headlines as far away as Texas, California, and Canada. Long before Trayvon Martin, Emmitt Till, or 14 year old George Stinney, also sent to the electric chair, there was Alexander McClay Williams.

**THE CASE THAT SHOCKED THE COUNTRY (2017)** is a stunning combination of legal history, a real life murder mystery, and a 30 year quest for justice for a long forgotten 16 year old African American youth who was buried in a pauper's grave, and remains the youngest known person, *to date*, to die in Pennsylvania's electric chair. The case of Alexander McClay Williams is a cautionary tale of what happens when systemic racism taints the criminal justice system; and how the dynamics of this case are as crucial and applicable today as they were when these events unfolded 90 years ago. Anyone interested in social justice, equal justice under law, and how a shocking legal case was corrupted by hate and bigotry, should learn how members of three previously unrelated families came together to confront a monumental injustice to set the record straight.

On October 3, 1930, at what was then a tough reform school in Glen Mills, PA, the lifeless body of a popular white school matron was discovered in her bedroom covered in blood. She had been brutally beaten, and was stabbed 47 times with an ice pick, suffering a fractured skull and broken ribs. There were no witnesses and little evidence. Her key ring was missing but no money was stolen. A man's bloody handprint was left on the wallpaper by the door of her room. Four days later, before a thorough investigation could be completed, 16 year old Alexander McClay Williams confessed after repeated interrogations conducted without due process, his parents, or an attorney in the room to protect him. The court waited nearly three weeks after Alexander had signed not one, but *three*, confessions, to appoint the county's only African America lawyer at the time, William H. Ridley, Esq. (1867-1945) to represent the youth. But Alexander's fate was sealed, and Ridley could not overcome the impact of the three likely coerced confessions, clearly tampered evidence, prosecutorial misconduct, an openly biased judge, or an all-white jury who must have been aghast at the most horrific crime in county history.

The Williams family, and other professional colleagues are working with the author to try to get Alexander's case into federal court on an amicus brief, to get his conviction vacated as George Stinney's was in December 2014.



(L-R) Alexander's sister Susie Williams Carter and the Williams family.