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Lawyer: Some justice for teen executed 86 years ago

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Samuel Lemon (left) and pastor Keith Collins in Green Lawn Cemetery in Chester Township, where Alexander McClay Williams is buried.



by **Mari A. Schaefer**, Staff Writer [@MariSchaefer](#) | mschaefer@phillynews.com

The criminal record of Alexander McClay Williams has been expunged, more than 80 years after the 16-year-old African-American youth was executed for the murder of a woman.

"I'm proud and relieved that we have reached a place where I think that some justice in a small way has been served," said attorney Robert C. Keller, among the advocates who still are hoping for full exoneration for Williams.

"He did not commit the crime," said Samuel Lemon, a Neumann University administrator, who has spent more than three decades collecting evidence he hopes could still fully exonerate Williams.

Williams was convicted by an all-white jury in the stabbing death of Vida Robare, matron at the Glen Mills School for Boys.

Lemon's great-grandfather William H. Ridley, Williams' defense lawyer, tried to keep Williams out of the electric chair.

While last week's action by Delaware County Judge John Cappuzzi was welcome on one level, Lemon still wants complete exoneration and, perhaps, to find the boy's body, which was buried in a now-abandoned Delaware County cemetery.

"It is not a win," he said. "It is a tragedy that still is very distasteful to me and very sad."

The boy stood 4-foot-7 and weighed 91 pounds when he was sent to the school in 1926 at age 12 for setting fire to a barn.

On Oct. 3, 1930, Robare, 34, was resting in a bedroom of the cottage on school grounds where she lived with her son, Dale, 10, when she was stabbed 47 times with an ice pick. Two of her ribs were broken, and her skull was fractured.

Williams had been sent on an errand around the time of the killing and later confessed under police interrogation. He was convicted at a two-day trial after the jury deliberated for four hours.

Lemon said it would have been impossible for the teen to commit the murder, hide the weapon, wash off the blood, and return to his work crew in the 20 minutes he was not supervised.

"There is very little real evidence," said Lemon, who believes race was a factor in the conviction. "It is heartbreaking when you see what they did."

Ridley, the only defense attorney on the case, was given \$10 for expenses to defend Williams, Keller said. The prosecution had a number of attorneys and witnesses, he said.

"There is no way the government wasn't going to get their conviction," Keller said.

Keller said there was reasonable doubt as to whether Williams killed Robare. Evidence not presented at trial included a bloody hand print and the fact that Robare's ex-husband, Fred, lived on the school grounds. Vida Robare had cited "extreme cruelty" by her husband as grounds for divorce, according to public records.

As part of the agreement to expunge the record, the court file and docket will remain intact for historical purposes, Keller said.

Keller said he was glad there was some resolution in the case while Williams' sister Susie Carter, 87, the only living sibling, is still alive.

"When I think about him as they put the hood over his head," Keller said, "I can't imagine what this child was thinking as volts of electricity were going through his body."

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