

Imagine you've lost someone; it could be your son or daughter, your brother or sister. Imagine losing them in the worst possible way. What would be one thing that would make that loss worse? How about never knowing who took that person from you. Who stole that person's life and everything they would have done. If that said person would have taken one life it would be bad enough but how about eight lives? Eight different families affected by one person or persons.

Colonial Parkway in Virginia is a stretch of road that connects Williamsburg, Jamestown, and Yorktown; 23 miles of road that are surrounded by thick woods that make you seem secluded from the world. It's scenic area, beautiful but has a dark history. This darkness started on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1986, Columbus Day weekend when the bodies of 27-year-old Cathleen Thomas and her 21-year-old girlfriend, Rebecca Dowksi were found on the Cheatham Annex Overlook inside Thomas' car, Rebecca in the back while Cathleen was in the hatchback area. Both were fully clothed, not showing signs of sexual assault as well as no signs of robbery as their purses and money were also found in the car. Both women were restrained, strangled with rope and then their throats were cut. The bodies were also doused with diesel fuel, but after attempts to set both the car and the bodies aflame failed, the car was pushed down an embankment along the York River. It would stay there for almost three days until a passerby saw it and called it in as a traffic accident. No one was prepared for what they were going to find.

September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1987 the bodies of 20-year old David Knobling and 14-year-old Robin Edwards were found in the Ragged Island Wild Refugee near the James River, shot to death. They were found after a search party was formed after the Ford Ranger that belonged to Knobling was found in the parking lot with both the radio and windshield wipers on and some clothes found inside. The bodies were discovered along the water's edge of the James River by a search party that included Knobling's father.

On April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1988 two Christopher Newport University students were reported missing after that had attended a party together; it was the first date. Richard Call, 20 and Cassandra Hailey, 18 went missing and was never heard from again. Call's car was located at the York River Overlook the following day with some clothes scattered about but that was all that has ever been found of these two young adults. Although both are presumed to be dead, no bodies have ever been located.

The last two victims were found on October 19, 1989, Daniel Lauer, 20 and Annamaria Phelps, 18 were found by hunters near a rest stop between Williamsburg and Richmond on I-64. It was a logging road near Courthouse Road, a mile where Lauer's car was located at, heading the wrong direction from their final destination, Virginia Beach where they were headed to spend time during the Labor Day weekend. The bodies were found in an advanced state of decomposition as the victims went missing on September 5<sup>th</sup> of the same year. At least one of the victims seemed to have suffered knife wounds.

There you have it. Eight different people, eight murders that still leave us with unanswered questions. There is nothing that connects these victims together other than the place where their lives ended along with a few details of the crimes themselves. The families have always worked with the police, have always kept the story going all in hopes that someone will be brought to justice for their family members. A murder case isn't about the murderer, it's about the victims and although we always know

this it takes a case like this to really make it burn itself into my mind. All cases are bad, don't get my words twisted around that but when someone you love so much is taken from you and the person who took that person from you is never known, is never caught it's like a kick in the gut.

It's unknown whether we're looking for one person or more than one since some people think that it would be unbelievable that only one person could overpower two people alone. There is no evidence pointing in either direction. In fact, there doesn't seem to be any evidence that would give us any clue as to who is the culprit or culprits behind such acts. It has been speculated that the ones responsible could be someone that is within a branch of a law enforcement agency; etc a police officer or anyone else in that field or was impersonating one. Being someone of authority would give the person the upper hand in the situation. The only evidence that was found at one of the crime scenes was a clump of hair that was found between the fingers of Cathleen Thomas but nothing has come from this. In fact, although the families have been fighting for newer tests to be run, however, things are moving at a glacial pace if at all, knowing that they are not high on the priority list although they are optimistic for the future and that one day they will get the answers that they want. Personally, I never heard of this case until I was randomly looking up unsolved cases and picked Virginia. From there I was lead to Bill Thomas, the brother of Cathleen Thomas, one of the first murder victims and from there I was given many links where I learned more about this case. I also learned about all of the ups and downs that Bill and every other member of the victim's families have had to deal with when all they want is for someone, anyone to help find the person or persons who took a piece of their life, of their heart and destroyed it.

When I was in contact with Bill, he generously agreed to answer some questions that I had for him. I have added the interview below and it adds more details from the case and who/how you can contact if you have any information regarding this case. Also, like always I have added pictures. Its cases like this you question so many things about the world. Why would someone be so cruel and take someone's life in the first place but why would you take so many from so many people. Taking someone's life not only hurts the victim but the victim's family. For those family members, lives were taken but the memories that they have of those people will last until their own dying breath. All we can hope for now is that we can solve this case, answer the countless questions and get justice served for these victims.

Interview with Bill Thomas; January 28, 2018 –

True Crime Alley – Hello Bill! First off thank you for agreeing to talk with me about the Colonial Parkway Murders. I know this is a big part of your life, being a voice for the victims. I was reading up on Cathleen and she sounds like she had a very impressive life even though it was tragically cut short. Being one of her older brothers, can you tell me about her in your own words?

Bill Thomas - Well, at the risk of sounding like every proud big brother on the planet, our younger sister Cathy was amazing. She was the youngest of four kids in our Boston Irish Catholic family and the only girl, yet Cathy more than held her own. My father was a Naval Officer, so we moved every two years when we were kids, so we stuck together and watched out for one another. Cathy was a ball of fire, with red hair and big blue eyes, with a big smile, very quick to laugh and have fun. She was a great

friend, funny, upbeat, with a strong sense of right and wrong, and she would always stick up for her friends.

As she grew up, Cathy proved to be one of those people who was good at anything she put her mind to—she was an excellent student and the best athlete of the four of us Thomas kids. If she was serious about something, Cathy excelled at it. For instance, when she ran track at Lowell High School in Massachusetts, they needed someone to be a shot putter. I am not sure that Cathy had ever even held the heavy metal ball that you were supposed to throw, but once she picked it up, she practiced and practiced until she was a very good shot putter, and starting winning competitions.

While Cathy surprised us when she announced that she wanted to follow my father and older brother Richard in attending the Naval Academy as part of the second class with women, when I think back on it, we shouldn't have been shocked. Once she was at Annapolis as part of the Class of 1981, she did extremely well, even though it was an environment that was very unwelcoming to women. In many ways, she was a pioneer and were are proud that my father, brother Richard and sister Cathy were the first father-son-daughter graduates of the United States Naval Academy.

One the saddest things about losing Cathy at age 27 is that she could have done anything as she made her way in life. After she left the Navy in 1986, she was thinking about go on to graduate school, and Cathy was one of those people who could have achieved anything

TCA -Now when these murders occurred, the first being in 1986, I wasn't even in grade school yet and I have to say I hadn't ever heard of this case until I was researching unsolved murders. At the time did this case get a lot of coverage or was this something that came around only after you and everyone else that has worked so hard of keeping the story alive? This seems like it would have gotten a lot of coverage outside of your surrounding areas.

BT -The Colonial Parkway Murders got a lot of media coverage in 1986-1989 in Virginia when Cathy and her girlfriend Rebecca Dowski were the first killed. Their murder was followed by three more double homicides over three years: Robin Edwards and David Knobling in September 1987, the disappearance and assumed murder of Keith Call and Cassandra Hailey in April 1988, and finally the murder of Annamaria Phelps and Daniel Lauer in September 1989. Sadly, the case went cold, and the FBI and the Virginia State Police did not seem to be putting any resources into the case.

In September 2009, almost 23 years after Cathy and Becky's murder, Mike Mather, an investigative reporter for WTKR News 3 in Norfolk did two lengthy television news stories about how the FBI had lost control of 78 highly graphic crime scene photos. The photos were out in public and being used by a local training academy without authorization. I was living in Los Angeles, and discovered the WTKR news stories online a few weeks later, quite by accident.

I was really upset about the FBI losing control of the photos—they should have never been leaked, and the FBI had not contacted us to let us know about the incident. I reached out to the other Colonial Parkway Murders families for the first time ever—we had never spoken to the other families, not even Rebecca's family, as we had not yet met Becky at the time of their deaths.

I contacted the Call family via their Facebook page about the case, and they were very welcoming. In talking with Keith's sister Joyce and brother, Chris that weekend, it occurred to me that we could leverage the FBI's embarrassment about the crime scene photos to force them to put resources into our case, which was stone cold at that point. The FBI Assistant Special Agent in charge of the case, Brian Hanlon, admitted to me, "Your sister's case is at the bottom of a very dusty pile." That really motivated me to talk with the Calls, the Hailey family, Rebecca's brother Bob Dowski and eventually all of the families to put pressure on the FBI to do something about the Colonial Parkway Murders. The good news is that the Virginia media was very supportive of the families, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation responded to our pressure campaign by putting an agent back on what had been a very cold case.

TCA - I read that Detective Steve Spingola believed that at least your sister and Rebecca Dowski's murder was linked to the 1996 murder of Lollie Winans and Julie Williams. That leaves a huge 10-year window between cases if they are. What are your thoughts on this?

BT - Steve Spingola, a highly respected homicide detective from Milwaukee traveled to Virginia at our invitation in 2010 with another investigator, Michael Grogan. After reviewing the cases and the crime scenes, Steve wrote up a report, which he made available on Amazon. He theorized that the murders of Julie Williams and Lollie Winans at the Shenandoah National Park in 1996 might be related to that of Cathy Thomas and Rebecca Dowski in 1986. There are a lot of similarities between those two cases, although the FBI feels that they have another suspect for the Williams and Winans double homicide.

I still think that it might be possible that Cathy and Becky's murder could be related to the Williams/Winans murder, even though they are 10 years and about 180 miles apart in Virginia. They both involve athletic, young lesbian couples in a Virginia national park patrolled by rangers, killed using rope and knives while outdoors on a three-day weekend. One additional striking thing is that there are 3 National Park Service Rangers who were working on the Colonial Parkway in 1986 who were also working at the Shenandoah National Park in 1996, including one man who was a person of interest in Cathy and Becky's murder. 10 years later, this ranger was on the investigative team that worked the Williams/Winans murder. I always found that odd.

TCA - People have speculated that there could be more than one killer. Do you believe that this is the work of one person or more and why?

BT - I think most people who think there might be two killers have wondered how one person could gain control of eight healthy young people in four double homicides. I think it would be quite possible for one person to do so if they were aggressive, well prepared, and asserted control over the couples quickly. It might make you think of someone who had military or law enforcement training.

TCA - Is there anything that connects these eight victims together other than where their lives ended?

BT - Nothing that connects all four couples, no. The commonalities seem to be cars, lover's lanes, isolated rural locations in the Tidewater area of Virginia, no robbery, no sexual assault, limited sign of struggle. In several examples, purses and wallets are out as if someone asked for a driver's license and registration. In a few examples, car windows are left halfway down. A number of law enforcement experts have said that they feel like an "authority figure," a police officer or someone who presented as such, approached the couples while they were parked.

If you use the Thomas/Dowski and Call/Hailey incidents, which are five minutes apart along the Colonial Parkway, the Edwards/Knobling murder site is about a half hour to the southeast at Ragged Island, and the Phelps/Lauer murder location is about 30 minutes to the northwest along Interstate 64. Three of the murders took place in the same 5-week "back to school" period between Labor Day and Columbus Day. Two of murders happened on 3-day weekends. Three of the four murders occurred along major rivers, the York and the James Rivers, and there were attempts to place the bodies in the water.

TCA -Does the FBI have a profile of the suspect or suspects? If they do, would you be able to tell me about what they are looking for as far as a suspect?

BT - I am aware of the kind of person that the FBI is looking for in the Colonial Parkway Murders, but would not be able to comment on that.

TCA -Do you think the person or persons who committed these murders is still alive?

BT - Yes, I do. Unless they got hit by a bus, the Colonial Parkway Murders started 31 years ago. If the killer was in his (or her) 20's or 30's back then, they should be in their 50's or 60's now.

TCA -How has event affected your life overall?

BT - That is a tough question. I have had a very happy life so far, with a great family, a longtime relationship with my partner Pamela, an artist. My ex-wife Valerie and I have a 19-year-old son Chris, who is now a sophomore in college. I have happy life and work relationships, a great career first in music, then consumer electronics and now in entertainment. There is a lot of joy in my life.

Losing Cathy has been difficult—the worst part about it is seeing your own grief reflected and magnified in the eyes of your family. Seeing what my parents, and my older brother Richard and younger brother Jack have gone through has been very hard. My mother lost her best friend, her only daughter, and her youngest child, and she died at age 75 without ever knowing what happened to Cathy. That sort of experience can weigh on you.

Still, for me, the positives in life greatly outnumber the negatives.

TCA - Not having any sense of closure since this case is still unsolved it must have been hard for your whole family and still is. Was there anything that you all did to help cope with this together and separately? Do you keep in contact with the other victim's families?

BT - Funny, I am working on outlining a new book on this part of the experience—the life lessons we have learned going through the Colonial Parkway Murders. I will also be speaking to groups of investigators and other groups, including the CUE Center for Missing Persons Conference in March 2018 in Wilmington, NC, and at the CrimeCon Convention in Nashville in May.

One thing you have to decide is whether or not you are going to let this sort of profound loss destroy you. After about a year of grieving, you have to make that decision. I have seen family members who did let loss and grief lead to their destruction. Drugs, alcohol, depression, they are all right there waiting for you.

Or you can be like me—a stubborn Irishman who refuses to give in. It is important to stay positive, to laugh, to look for reasons to be happy, to keep moving forward.

I do stay in touch with the other Colonial Parkway Murders families, although not as much as I would like. I live in Los Angeles and most of them live in Virginia. I am hoping to see them all as we have new developments in the case.

TCA - If anyone has any information about this case what is the best way to contact someone about this?

BT - Our preference is that someone contact me to start with, and we can put them in touch with the appropriate FBI or Virginia State Police investigators. The FBI handles the Thomas/Dowski and Call/Hailey cases. The Edwards/Knobling and Phelps/Lauer homicides are each handled by separate Virginia State Police offices.

People can contact us through our Colonial Parkway Murders Facebook page which is linked below.

TCA - Lastly, is there anything that you would like to say to everyone?

BT - Just to say thank you for their support of the Colonial Parkway Murders families. They can learn about the case by following us on our three Facebook pages:

Colonial Parkway Murders Facebook Page

Maintained by Bill Thomas and writer Kristin Dilley

<https://www.facebook.com/ColonialParkwayCase/>

Two other Colonial Parkway FB pages

Not as active, maintained by Joyce Call Canada and Jennifer Phelps

<https://www.facebook.com/What-happened-to-Richard-Keith-Call-Cassandra-Hailey-48312425938/>

<https://www.facebook.com/Colonial-Parkway-Victims-Gone-But-Not-Forgotten-152566591439809/>

### Colonial Parkway Murders Wikipedia Page

We try to keep this up to date and accurate—there are many media links at bottom of the page, including television interviews, newspaper stories, podcasts and blog posts like this one.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonial\\_Parkway\\_Murders](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonial_Parkway_Murders)

Finally, I hope it is clear that I am very optimistic that we can solve the Colonial Parkway Murders. 2018 is going to be our year!



Top – Rebecca Dowski, Robin Edwards, Keith Call and Annamaria Phelps

Bottom – Cathleen Thomas, David Knobling, Cassandra Hailey, and Daniel Lauer

## COLONIAL PARKWAY MURDERS

From 1986 to 1989, four young couples died at the hands of what the FBI long ago concluded was most likely a serial killer or killers. For years investigators actively and exhaustively worked the case, compiling a list of 150 possible suspects. But no one was ever arrested.



### THE VICTIMS

**1 KILLED** – Cathleen Marian Thomas, 27, and Rebecca Ann Dowski, 21, were found strangled with their throats cut at a Colonial Parkway overlook Oct. 12, 1986. The double slaying made the front page of the New York Post.

**2 KILLED** – David Lee Knobling, 20, and Robin Margaret Edwards, 14, were discovered shot to death at Ragged Island Game Refuge on Sept. 23, 1987 – three days after Knobling's pickup was discovered abandoned in the parking lot with the door open.

**3 MISSING** – Richard Keith Call, 20, and Cassandra Lee Hailey, 18, disappeared from a Colonial Parkway overlook April 10, 1988, just three miles from where Thomas and Dowski were killed. Exhaustive searches turned up no sign of them.

**4 KILLED** – Daniel Lauer, 21, and Annamaria Phelps, 18, disappeared from a New Kent County rest stop off Interstate 64 on Sept. 5, 1989. Phelps died of a stab wound; it was impossible to tell how Lauer died.

THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

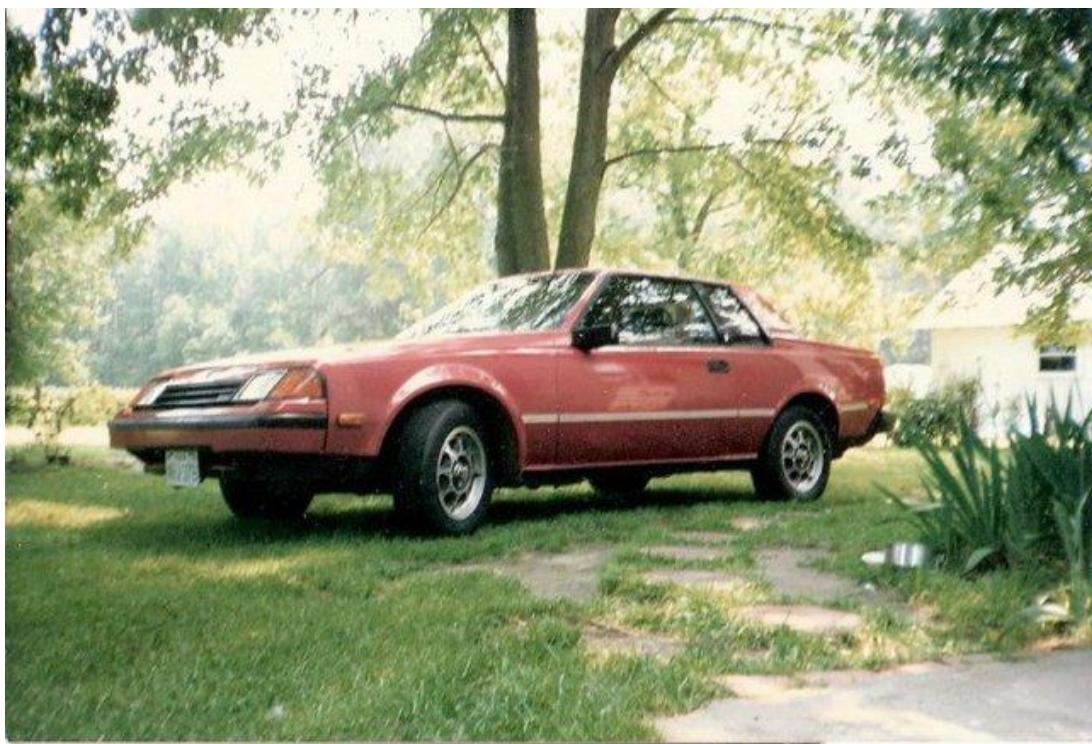
This is a map that points out the four locations where the murders took place.



Cathleen Thomas' 1980 Honda Civic, where both her body and the body of Rebecca Dowski were found with their throats cut.



David Knobling's Ford Ranger truck as found in the Ragged Island parking area. Knobling and Robin Edwards' bodies were found shot in the head along the water's edge of the James River.



Keith Call's red 1982 Toyota Celica is shown at the Call home. Keith Cassandra Hailey were last seen on their first date and after their disappearance, were never found.



Daniel Lauer's 1964 Chevy Nova was found heading in the wrong direction from Virginia Beach the destination where he and his companion, Annamaria Phelps were headed. They were found on a logging road, the bodies badly decomposed but appearing to have stab wounds.



The logging road off I-64 where the bodies of Daniel Lauer and Annamaria Phelps were found.