

Two Innocent Black Men in U.S. Freed after 39 Years in Prison



Cleveland, November 22 (RHC)-- Two black men imprisoned in the U.S. for nearly 40 years for a murder they did not commit were freed on Friday, making them the longest-held U.S. prisoners to be exonerated.

Ricky Jackson, 57, and Wiley Bridgeman, 60, were both exonerated in a 1975 murder after a key witness against them, who was 13 years old at the time, admitted last year that he lied during his testimony.

Eddie Vernon, now 53, told a minister who visited him at a hospital in 2013 that he had never actually witnessed the crime. He said Cleveland, Ohio police detectives coerced him into testifying that the men killed businessman Harry Franks on May 19, 1975.

"I guess a lot of people will want me to hate that person and carry animosity towards them, but I don't," Jackson said. "People see him as a grown man today, but in 1975 he was a 12-year-old kid and he was manipulated and coerced by the police and they used him to get us in prison."

The exoneration process began three years ago with a story published in Scene Magazine in 2011, detailing flaws in the case, including the questionable testimony of Vernon. The Ohio Innocence Project, which took up their case after the Scene article, said Jackson and Bridgeman's 39 years imprisonment marks them as the longest-serving exonerees in U.S. history.

The two men, serving life sentences, were initially sentenced to death under an Ohio capital punishment law that was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1978. According to a study released in April, one in every 25 death row inmates in the United States is innocent. Approximately 3,000 U.S. prisoners are waiting to be put to death.

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