

<https://www.ldnews.com/story/news/local/2018/05/24/50-years-later-unsolved-peggy-reber-murder-still-haunts-lebanon/623907002/>

# 50 years later, unsolved Peggy Reber murder still haunts Lebanon

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Lebanon Daily News



Few Lebanon residents usually cared what happened in the cheap apartment at 770 Maple St., where rumors of a rapid rotation of visiting men was best left ignored.

But after Mary Reber returned to the apartment in the early morning of May 26, 1968 and found her 14-year-old daughter, Margaret Lynn “Peggy” Reber, brutally assaulted and murdered, people in Lebanon would spend the rest of their lives wondering what happened that night.

Kevin Uhrich, a 9-year-old child, was horrified by the murder in his neighborhood and lived with the fear that the killer would strike again.



Michelle Gooden, a five-year-old child who was fascinated by the case, spent much of her adult life trying to end the injustice of a child-killer getting away with murder.

John Ditzler, an assistant district attorney in the late 2000s who reviewed the evidence, is still fascinated by the case, even though he could not determine the killer.

“If I die and go to heaven, that’s one of the first questions I want to find out,” Ditzler said.

But while the unsolved crime remains a source of angst 50 years later – and a cause for passionate argument among people who believe they know the culprit’s identity – some hope the painful memories of that case will help ensure no one ever gets away with such a terrible crime in Lebanon again.

**More:**[Grieving mother faced insults, blame after Peggy Reber's brutal murder](#)

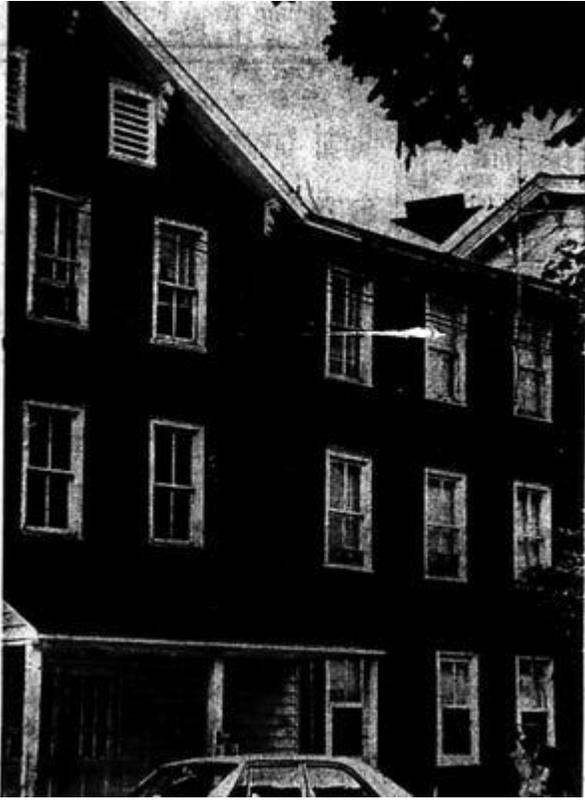
**More:**[The Peggy Reber murder: Here's what happened](#)

## **“A terrifying summer”**

Although 1960s Lebanon maintained a quiet working-town image, Reber’s neighborhood wasn’t the city’s richest or most wholesome, according to Urich, who grew up nearby.

“It was a tough little neighborhood,” he said. “There were a lot of kids, but it was also kind of tough in terms of sporadic fits of violence.”

Still, no one was prepared for what happened on the evening of May 25. Reber, a ninth-grade student at Henry Houck Elementary School, was strangled with a belt by an unknown perpetrator and anally assaulted by multiple objects, including a fiberglass bow that was repeatedly inserted so far it punctured internal organs and was left protruding just under her skin in the chest area.



District Attorney Alvin B. Lewis Jr. did not calm fears, instead hoping to instill a sense of urgency among the public to find the slayer.

“The girl’s killer may be a sex maniac who will probably strike again,” Lewis warned.

His grim words may not have flushed people who knew what happened out of hiding, but for Urich and his family, it made Lebanon seem a scarier place. The national headlines – including the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy – did little to curb fears.

“It was a terrifying summer,” he said. “It was a time to lock your doors.”

The panic gradually faded as weeks turned into months without an identified suspect, he said. Police eventually arrested and tried Art Root, a troubled Lancaster County man with a history of crime.

But a jury found him not guilty of the murder in 1970, lending credence to many Lebanon residents who believed police arrested the wrong man. In the

decades that followed, the case continued to be a thorn in the side of Lebanon County law enforcement, where police officers and prosecutors occasionally tried their hand in solving the crime.

Then, in 2008 – 40 years after the murder – public pressure to solve the county’s most notorious slaying finally came to a boil.

## **Justice for Peggy**

Gooden, a Lebanon native who had since moved to North Carolina, became the catalyst. In her 2012 book, “Justice Denied: The Unsolved Murder of Peggy Reber,” she recounts how dozens of Lebanon residents came to her with tips and information after her interest in the case - and dissatisfaction with law enforcement efforts to solve it - were published in the Lebanon Daily News and broadcast by WLBR radio host Laura LeBeau.

A growing group of residents, many of whom displayed “Justice for Peggy” bumper stickers, called for the Lebanon County district attorney’s office to open a grand jury investigation into the case. Eventually, Lebanon County District Attorney Dave Arnold complied.

“The community came together,” said Gooden, who believed law enforcement had failed Peggy Reber by not conducting a better and more thorough investigation.



As the case percolated in the district attorney’s office, Ditzler - now a magisterial district judge - was tapped to investigate.

“The idea that you could solve this horrible murder after 40 years was interesting to me,” said the then-prosecutor. Given the public pressure to find a killer, he poured himself into the case, working “morning, noon and night” to examine the evidence.

But Ditzler’s enthusiasm soon turned to disappointment. He became convinced that there simply wasn’t strong evidence pointing to any particular suspect – and he grew increasingly concerned about the “mob mentality” of people who were certain who killed Peggy Reber and wanted police to make what Ditzler was sure would be an irresponsible arrest.

“As I sit here today (in 2018) having spent a considerable amount of time on that case, I have no idea who killed Peggy Reber,” he said. “Not one person has ever come up with a factual narrative about who killed Peggy Reber and how they know.”



The grand jury did not issue an indictment against any suspect, and its report, published in July 2009, was starkly critical of Gooden and others who had questioned law enforcement’s efforts. Gooden, in turn, blasted the grand jury for attacking her, LeBeau, and the Lebanon Daily News rather than focusing on the murder it was tasked with helping to solve.

Still, Gooden believes the time she spent agitating for an investigation was worth it since the reexamination of the case brought its facts back into the light.

“There is more to justice than a jail cell. In this case, Peggy got truth that she didn’t have before,” she said.

## **Forever unsolved?**

The grand jury report expressed pessimism about the case ever being solved.

“(W)e firmly believe that only a detailed and corroborated confession and/or the existence of compelling forensic evidence could lead to a final resolution of this case,” it states.



Not much has changed in the 10 years since then, according to Arnold, who remains Lebanon County’s district attorney.

“Just as I always have, I still want to solve this case as much as anyone does,” Arnold wrote in an email. “I understand that it has deeply impacted a lot of people in our community. However, everyone also needs to remember that it’s quite possible that the correct person, Arthur Root, was arrested and tried, but found not guilty at trial....That being said, we will always hold out hope and put forth our best effort to get a true answer as to who murdered Peggy. Unfortunately, we have not received any valid or useful new information that would lead to us being more optimistic than we were previously.”

Still, Lebanon natives can't forget Peggy Reber. Uhrich is working on a new book on the murder to mark the occasion of its 50th anniversary, complete with new details about the case.

“We went down a bunch of new alleys,” he said.

Gooden, meanwhile, is traveling back to Lebanon County to visit Peggy Reber’s grave one more time, to mark the 50th anniversary of her death.

“What’s left to do for Peggy Reber but to remember her?” she asked. “You do it because she didn’t get justice, and she’s a child, and that should never happen again.”