

THE CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG
REMEMBRANCE
PROJECT



It Happened Here: Willie McDaniel

In a piece commissioned by this project,
Charlotte spoken-word artist Hannah Hasan begins:

**“Before he was murdered on the land where he lived ...
He was someone’s husband
Partner in life
He probably loved on and hugged on
Cherished his wife
Made special moments with her
Planned a future, a family ... ”**

A young Black girl found Willie McDaniel’s body early Sunday morning, June 30, 1929, on the edge of woods and a cotton patch near his home. He was lying face-down, his neck broken and abrasions on his neck and wrists.

McDaniel, 22, had moved with his wife to the Newell community in eastern Mecklenburg County to farm. He rented a home and land from Mell Grier, a white man from a family of longtime Mecklenburg landowners.

The afternoon before his body was found, witnesses later testified in court, McDaniel had asked Grier to be paid for work he and his wife had done for him. Grier refused. McDaniel said something quietly. Grier accused him of “muttering,” then threw a rock the size of a baseball at his head. The two grappled before Grier went into his house, returning with a shotgun. McDaniel fled. Grier at first took aim but, witnesses said, his young niece pushed his gun away. Grier pursued McDaniel. Witnesses said they did not see McDaniel alive again.

Friends of McDaniel hired a lawyer within days, believing he’d been lynched. Another Black tenant farmer testified to the coroner’s jury that Grier told him he didn’t kill McDaniel; McDaniel had “brought it on himself.” That jury of six white men “strove for an hour and a half to pierce the mystery,” reported the July 5 Charlotte News, then “gave up,” ruling McDaniel “came to his death of a broken neck caused by a person or persons unknown.” A grand jury then took up the case. For that investigation, the rural police, insisting McDaniel’s fellow tenant farmers and wife “know something,” arrested and jailed them as material witnesses. Grier was not arrested or jailed.

The grand jury investigation produced no indictments. No one was held accountable for Willie McDaniel’s death.

The specific location of the lynching remains unknown, but the land that was Grier’s farm became part of Reedy Creek Park and Nature Preserve, Joseph W. Grier Academy elementary school and homes. Mecklenburg County has committed to erecting a historical marker on Reedy Creek Park and Nature Preserve grounds.

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