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Murder suspect dies in prison - Ruptured ulcer - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - October 14, 2004 - page 01

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A man accused of torching a home to cover up the shooting and stabbing deaths of an elderly woman and her son last year in Mid-City died Tuesday in Orleans Parish Prison, the Sheriff's Office said.

Paul Willis, 52, died of a ruptured peptic ulcer, which probably had him writhing in pain for 12 hours before he collapsed, said Dr. Frank Minyard, Orleans Parish coroner. An autopsy showed that Willis' ulcer and death were the result of natural causes, Minyard said Wednesday.

Medical staff at the prison had thought Willis, who had been treated periodically for high cholesterol and chest pains, died of a heart attack when he was found dead on his tier Tuesday afternoon, acting Orleans Criminal Sheriff William "Bill" Hunter said.

Hunter said medical records at the jail indicate Willis never complained or was treated for any stomach problems. The sheriff said Willis was pronounced dead at the prison and taken directly to the coroner's office for an autopsy.

Willis' death came a day before he was scheduled to appear in Criminal District Court for pretrial motions in the September 2003 killings of Patrina and James Saporito. The 75-year-old woman and her 38-year-old son were found slain at their South Jefferson Davis Parkway home.

Police said Willis and his wife, Cheryl, who is in custody, had been tenants at the Saporito home for 18 years. The Willises fell behind on rent, police said, and owed the Saporitos $5,000.

The Saporitos were killed to avoid paying the bill, police said.

Police said Willis shot and repeatedly stabbed James Saporito, who had been trying to make arrangements with Willis concerning the debt. When Patrina Saporito walked in on the killing, police said, Willis attacked her so viciously her head was nearly severed from her body.

Patrina Saporito had more than 31 stab wounds covering her body. Her son was shot twice in the head and stabbed more than 20 times, authorities said.

After the attack, police said, Paul and Cheryl Willis allegedly set the house on fire and left town. Police found the Willises five months later, in February, in a Georgia motel room.

Willis had tried to avoid a trial by pleading innocent by reason of insanity. But, in August, he was found competent to stand trial.

Paul Willis had been charged with two counts of first-degree murder and aggravated arson. His wife faces a charge of being an accessory after the fact to the killings and, if convicted, could be sentenced to up to five years in prison, the Orleans Parish district attorney's office said.

A motion hearing in her case is scheduled for Nov. 18 in Section C of Criminal District Court.

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