

Robert Durst Charged With Murder in 1982 Disappearance of His Wife

Mr. Durst was recently convicted of murdering a friend because of what she knew about his wife's disappearance from their Lewisboro, N.Y., home.



By Charles V. Bagli

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When Kathie McCormack Durst, the young wife of a Manhattan real estate heir, vanished from her Westchester County, N.Y., home on a cold, rainy night in 1982, she left an enduring mystery that has tormented her family and friends and fascinated investigators and the public ever since.

On Tuesday, Joseph Becerra, a State Police investigator, quietly filed a criminal complaint in Lewisboro, N.Y., charging the man who many had long suspected of killing her: Ms. Durst's husband, Robert A. Durst, the notorious estranged son of the storied family that built some of New York City's most recognizable buildings.

The second-degree murder complaint, which precedes a formal murder charge, was filed only days after Mr. Durst, who is 78 and frail, was sentenced to life in prison for the 2000 murder of Susan Berman in Los Angeles.

The jury in Los Angeles also found that the prosecution had proven special circumstances in the execution-style murder of Ms. Berman, who was Mr. Durst's confidante and had served as his spokeswoman when his wife died: Mr. Durst killed her because he feared that she was about to reveal to investigators what she knew about the disappearance and murder of Kathie Durst.

Ms. Durst's disappearance nearly 40 years ago marked the beginning of a long, strange, cross-country saga as the authorities sought to ensnare Mr. Durst, who was eventually tried for two other murders. But Mr. Durst proved a cunning, if odd, foe for investigators. Until this month, he had never been convicted despite decades of suspicion and occasionally incriminating behavior.

Mr. Becerra, who declined to comment, has been involved with the case for more than 20 years, and is one of the investigators who has been working on a case against Mr. Durst that is being pursued by Miriam E. Rocah, the Westchester district attorney. Her office is bringing about two dozen witnesses before a grand jury with the goal of charging Mr. Durst with murder.

Mr. Becerra's single-page complaint is short on details. It says that the grounds for the allegations against Mr. Durst are contained in the files of the Westchester district attorney, the New York State Police and the Los Angeles district attorney, as well as "conversations with numerous witnesses and observations of defendants, recorded interviews and observations of Mr. Durst's recorded interviews and court testimony in related proceedings."

The charge offers the promise of a resolution to a case that has long been the focus of speculation, but has provided precious little real evidence; Ms. Durst's body was never found, and there was no official crime scene. But whether the new charge, and an eventual indictment, will provide new details of Ms. Durst's disappearance remains unknown.

Robert Abrams, the attorney for Kathie McCormack Durst's family, expressed surprise. "My clients, Kathie's siblings, and I were unaware of this development. Sometimes it takes 40 years for justice. We are grateful for the work, dedication and commitment of District Attorney Roca and her staff."

In an email, a spokeswoman for the district attorney's office confirmed that the criminal complaint had been filed but declined to comment further.

The new murder charge comes as Mr. Durst's survival appears to be in question. Mr. Durst, who has been held in the medical ward of Twin Towers Correctional Facility for the past five years, recently tested positive for Covid-19 and was put on a respirator.

Mr. Durst's lawyers have filed notice that they intend to appeal the Los Angeles conviction. Mr. Durst has yet to retain a lawyer in New York.

Over the course of four decades, Mr. Durst has crisscrossed the country under a cloud of suspicion, inspiring a film, a documentary, books and numerous TV specials.

He is the eldest son of a New York real estate titan, Seymour Durst, and the family empire is now valued at about \$8 billion. But Mr. Durst has been estranged from his family since the mid-1990s, when his younger brother Douglas was tapped to take control of the family business.

Understand the Robert Durst Case

A high-profile murder. On Oct. 14, Robert A. Durst was sentenced to life without parole for the 2000 killing of Susan Berman, a journalist and close confidante. Mr. Durst, onetime heir to a New York real estate empire, was convicted of first-degree murder by a jury in September. Here is what else you should know:

He met Kathie Durst, the youngest daughter of a lower-middle-class family from Long Island, in 1971. He was nine years older and a wealthy bachelor, and they married after a whirlwind romance. After several years, their relationship started splintering. Kathie began taking a more independent path, attending nursing school before entering the Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

But after a January 1982 weekend at their stone cottage on Truesdale Lake about 50 miles northeast of Manhattan, Ms. Durst was never heard from again. Mr. Durst told the police that he put his wife on a Manhattan-bound train in nearby Katonah. Kathie Durst, who was months away from graduating medical school, planned to start a clinic rotation the next day.

Prosecutors in Los Angeles said that Ms. Berman, at Mr. Durst's behest, made a crucial phone call pretending to be Ms. Durst that diverted investigators.

At first, with no charges filed, Kathie Durst's disappearance fell from the headlines.

But in 1999, Mr. Becerra got a tip. The tip did not pan out, but he became engrossed in the case and interviewed many witnesses, leading the Westchester district attorney to reopen the investigation in 2000.

Mr. Durst fled New York after learning that the investigation was once again live.

Mr. Durst has since admitted that he lied to police about his whereabouts at the time his wife vanished. Evidence and testimony presented at trial in Los Angeles indicated that Mr. Durst had engaged in an escalating pattern of emotional and physical violence against Ms. Durst. He has insisted he did not kill her.

Ten months after Ms. Berman's death, Mr. Durst was arrested in Galveston, Texas, in the murder and dismemberment of a man who lived across the hall from him in a rooming house where Mr. Durst was posing as a mute woman. At trial, Mr. Durst claimed that the man died as a result of an accident as they grappled over a gun. He was acquitted of murder.

Mr. Durst became something of a national sensation in 2015, after the broadcast of a six-part HBO documentary, "The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst." He provided the filmmakers with 20 hours of interviews and access to 60 cartons of personal papers, legal documents, credit card bills and phone records. The raw tapes from "The Jinx," in which Mr. Durst made a number of damaging admissions, were played in court in Los Angeles.