



The Disappearance and Murder of JonBenét Ramsey¹

The Ramsey Family lived in Boulder, Colorado. John and Patsy had two children, Burke, age 9 and JonBenét, age 6. They lived very well. According to financial records on the Ramsey family computer, John was worth \$6 million. John was a former President of Access Technologies, a company that he had recently sold to Lockheed Martin. Patsy was a stay-at-home mom and former beauty queen (Miss West Virginia, 1977). They were extremely social and threw parties in their home quite often.

The Ramseys' Memory of Events

On Christmas night, 1996, John, Patsy and JonBenét Ramsey drove to their Boulder, Colorado, home a few blocks from a party at a friend's house. Six year old JonBenét fell asleep in the car, so her parents carried her into the house and up the stairs to her bedroom. John and Patsy went to bed soon after as they planned to rise early and prepare for a trip to their second home on Lake Michigan.

The next day, Patsy awoke just after 5 am and went to the kitchen. On the staircase she found a three page note that said that JonBenét had been kidnapped by a "small foreign faction" and was being held for a ransom of \$118,000 and would be executed if the money was not delivered. JonBenét would be exchanged for the money on December 27 (the next day). Patsy yelled to John as she ran back up the stairs and opened the door to JonBenét's room. Finding her missing, John and Patsy decided to phone the police. The 911 dispatcher received Patsy's call at 5:25 a.m. The police arrived at the Ramsey home seven minutes later.

Ransom Note Details

- Detectives determined that the note had been written at the house on a pad of paper found in the Ramsey's kitchen, with a Sharpie pen also found there. The amount of money demanded in the ransom note was considered

¹ This case study was developed by Pherson Associates, LLC in April 2007 to illustrate the value of generating multiple hypotheses and the Analysis of Competing Hypotheses (ACH) methodology. It is a true case study based on materials taken from the public domain. The study is copyrighted material and may not be duplicated without permission from Pherson Associates, LLC (library@pherson.org).

unusually low by investigators, due to the Ramsey's wealth. One theory is that the amount matches a bonus that John Ramsey received that year. Another theory is that the amount resembles his liabilities, listed on his home computer at \$1,118,000. The amount demanded was actually broken down into denominations (100s, 20s, 10s, etc.)

- Investigators took writing samples from dozens of people including: John and Patsy Ramsey and their son, Burke Ramsey; John Ramsey's children from his first marriage; John's friend Fleet White; Bill McReynolds, who portrayed Santa Claus at the Ramseys' Christmas party; neighbor Joe Barnhill; and over 60 other individuals.
- John Ramsey was cleared by handwriting experts as the note's author, but Patsy's status was not as straightforward. Despite having at least five of Patsy's handwriting samples, along with "historic" samples of her writing, they could not say definitively that the author was Patsy, but neither could they say that the author was not Patsy. There were no other matches identified. Investigators focused on Patsy as a suspect for this reason. They asserted that her handwriting "changed" after the murder.
- According to Boulder Police Investigator, Steve Thomas, "the most significant evidence in this case was the pen, the pad, the ransom note, and the handwriting, and when we finished an investigation after 18 months, and presented our case to the district attorney's office presumably for them to move it forward, one statistic that was cited in that presentation was that out of 73 people, whose handwriting was examined in this case, there was only one whose handwriting showed evidence to suggest authorship who was in the home that night who couldn't be eliminated as the author and that was Patsy Ramsey." Steve Thomas left the Boulder Police Department as a result of frustration over this case and went on to write a book about the case and why he believed that Patsy Ramsey was guilty.
- All parties agree that the author of the note murdered JonBenét. Therefore, Thomas's assertion that Patsy Ramsey wrote the letter, along with his perception of the Ramsey's lack of cooperation leads to his belief of Patsy Ramsey's guilt.

The Police Investigation

The Boulder City Police conducted a cursory search of the Ramsey home but did not find any obvious signs of a break-in or forced entry. Following this search, the police reportedly allowed friends and family into the Ramsey home, and they did not seal off any parts of the house. In the meantime, John made arrangements to acquire the ransom, which a friend, John Fernie, picked up that morning from a local bank.

In the afternoon, a Boulder Police Detective asked Fleet White, a friend of the Ramseys, to take John Ramsey and search the house for "anything unusual." They

started in the basement and checked the bathroom and “train room.” The two went into a “wine cellar” room where John found his daughter’s body covered in a white blanket. The body of JonBenét was removed later that evening after the issue of a search warrant, and with the consent of the parents.

The Autopsy Findings

The results of the autopsy showed that JonBenét was killed by strangulation and/or a skull fracture. A garrote made from a length of nylon cord and the handle of a paintbrush had been used to strangle her and her skull had suffered blunt trauma. JonBenét was likely sexually assaulted either digitally or with a paintbrush. (There was no evidence of rape). The brush end of the paint brush was found in a tub of Patsy Ramsey’s art supplies, but the top third never was located despite extensive searching of the house by law enforcement in subsequent days. It was noted by experts that the construction of the garrote required a special knowledge of knots held by sailors or other experts. Investigators considered that John Ramsey likely knew how to tie this knot from his considerable experience with sailing. The autopsy also revealed that the child had eaten pineapple only a few hours before the murder, of which both her mother and father claimed to be unaware. There was a bowl of pineapple on the kitchen table with a spoon in it. Neither Patsy nor John remembers putting this bowl in the table nor feeding it to JonBenét.

Boulder County Coroner Dr. John Meyer’s report also noted the following details:

- JonBenét was wearing a long-sleeved, white knit shirt with a silver star embroidered on the front, and a gold necklace with a cross on it. Her blond hair was in two ponytails and she wore a yellow metal band on her right middle finger, a yellow ID bracelet that bore the name “JonBenét” on one side and the date “12/25/96” on the other side.
- Someone had drawn a red ink heart on the palm of her left hand.
- Green Christmas garland, like the garland decorating the spiral staircase in the house, was tangled in JonBenét’s hair.
- JonBenét was wearing long underwear, and a pair of white panties underneath with printed rosebuds and the words “Wednesday” in the waistband. Urine stains and several red stains were found. Dr. Meyer stated that the stains looked like blood in a search warrant affidavit.
- Evidence of vaginal injury was found by Dr. Meyer, but no semen was found on the body. The coroner also reported that the pubic area appeared to have been wiped with a cloth.
- The report also noted that a white cord was tied around her neck. A similar cord was tied around her right wrist. Seventeen inches of cord hung from the knot of the cord around her neck, and the end was tied “in multiple loops

around a length of a round tan-brown wooden stick." The stick had paint spots and varnish stains.

- He found "deep ligature furrow encircles the entire neck" with abrasions and hemorrhages surrounding the marks.
- Dr. Meyer was unable to pinpoint a time and cause of death. JonBenét had a skull fracture 8.5 inches long. Dr. Meyer was reportedly unable to determine whether JonBenét died of a skull fracture or strangulation. Based on the state of rigor mortis that her body was experiencing when she was discovered, initial police reports suggested that she died between 10 pm and 6 am.
- DNA taken from JonBenét's underpants and fingernails was identified as "foreign" and reportedly doesn't match DNA samples provided by dozens of family and friends, including John Ramsey. FBI checks against sex offender databases came back negative. The DNA was reportedly identified as male, however. In May, 1999, detectives continued collecting additional DNA samples from people who may have been in contact with JonBenét before her death, in what sources said was an effort to eliminate as many potential suspects as possible. The DNA has since been declared of little use because of contamination and other problems. Apparently, DNA can survive up to 5 days and so the DNA underneath JonBenét's fingernails could have been from experiences prior to her assault and murder.

Crime Scene Evidence

In subsequent searches of the Ramsey home over the next few days, several pieces of evidence were found in addition to what has been described:

- A broken basement window was found. According to John Ramsey, he had broken the window once when he locked himself out of the house, but investigators were unable to confirm how long the window had been broken. Investigators found a spider web outside on the window-well grate. Police tests indicated that sounds coming from the basement could not be heard in the master bedroom. There is one report that a neighbor heard a scream, but no further information was available.
- Two dissimilar footprints in the wine cellar that did not match any of the shoes in the residence; a third footprint of an unknown person on the outer part of a broken window of the room by the wine cellar; a possible footprint on a suitcase, placed directly below the same window.
- One of the footprints found by detectives near JonBenét's body in the wine cellar was believed to be a Hi-Tec hiking shoe. Reportedly, no one amongst JonBenét's family, friends or acquaintances owns a shoe that matches that print.
- A pubic hair was found on the blanket that JonBenét was wrapped in. It does not belong to John, Patsy or Burke Ramsey.

- A rope that was foreign to the residence was found on the bed of the guest room near JonBenét's room.
- The other part of the paint brush used in the assault on JonBenét was found in Patsy Ramsey's art supplies.
- A later theory emerged that physical marks on JonBenét's body suggested the use of a stun gun.
- A palm print was found on the wine cellar door but none of the prints taken from family and friends matches it.
- The duct tape and cord used in the murder were not found in the Ramsey house.
- Evidence was discovered that JonBenét may have wet her bed that night, and that her clothing had been changed.
- The Ramseys both said their son, Burke, was asleep the morning of Dec. 26 until his father awakened him to take him to the Whites' house after police were called. But an enhanced version of the tape of Patsy's 911 phone call seems to reveal Burke's voice in the background, asking what's going on.

Patsy and John left the home, now an official crime scene, to stay with friends. Once JonBenét's body was released to them for burial, they returned to their home town of Atlanta, Georgia, to bury her there. They returned a week or so later. But before they left, they were interviewed by the police on December 26 and 27. On December 27 they provided also physical evidence, blood, hair and fingerprints.

Based upon unfolding events, friends of the Ramseys engaged legal counsel for the couple. Police focused on the Ramseys immediately as suspects for several reasons, possibly including the statistic that 9 out of 10 murders in homes are committed by someone living in the home. Early police statements also indicated that they found no footprints in the snow around the house, although it was later shown in crime scene photographs that the walkways to the house were clear. Additionally, police found no evidence of breaking and entry.

Upon their return, the Ramseys voluntarily provided five handwriting samples. Their desire to cooperate diminished, however, as it became clear that the police and media focused solely upon them as suspects. Police investigators point to this lack of cooperation as reason for suspicion. In 1998, the Ramseys, who had to date refused to take a polygraph exam, agreed, but only if the test was administered by an "independent" expert. They argued that the FBI was not "independent." Both Patsy and John Ramsey passed the exam but Boulder Police rejected the results, questioning the methods and the questions asked. In fact, Patsy and John were asked different questions which, according to former investigator Steve Thomas, is

unusual. Thomas asserts that it took Patsy three attempts and two examiners to pass her polygraph exam.

A Grand Jury was convened and heard evidence for a year. After deliberating for four months, the Grand Jury returned no indictments. Burke Ramsey was interviewed extensively by the Grand Jury and reportedly cleared of suspicion.

According to the Boulder police, they formally interviewed more than 600 people in this case, investigated about 140 potential suspects, logged about 1400 items of evidence, and built a file approximately 40,000 pages long.

Epilogue

In 2008, "touch DNA" technology tests revealed that new DNA collected from a pair of long johns which Jon Benet was wearing over her underwear when her body was found matched a sample previously taken from the child's panties. Boulder County District Attorney Mary Lacy said that "the unexplained third-party DNA on the clothing of the victim is very significant and powerful evidence...it is therefore the position of the Boulder District Attorney's Office that this profile belongs to the perpetrator of the homicide." Lacy blamed "evidence reported by the media" rather than "evidence that had been tested in court" for suspicions cast on the Ramseys as the case was investigated, suspicions that she said "created an ongoing living hell for the Ramsey family and their friends." Lacy confirmed that no one in the Ramsey family was considered a suspect and formally apologized in a letter to John Ramsey for the cloud of suspicion his family has lived under for nearly 12 years.