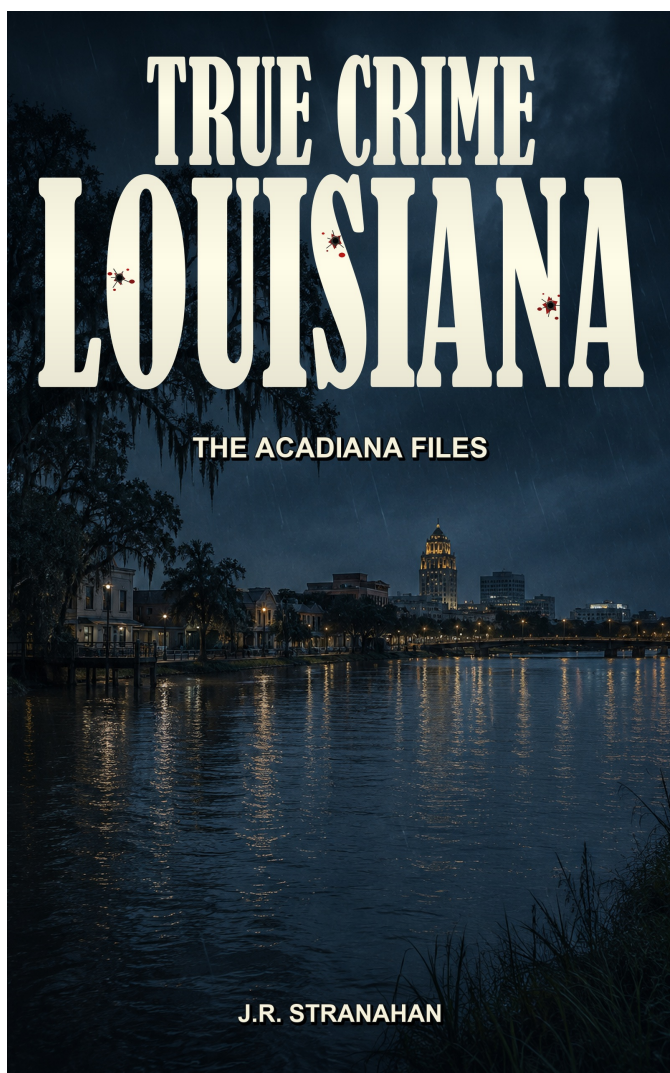


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Chapter One: The Bicycle on Saint Landry Street

At 1:47 on the morning of May 19, 2012, a camera recorded a bicyclist on Versailles Boulevard in Lafayette. Another view, about a minute later, placed the rider on Saint Landry Street after she crossed University Avenue. The images were grainy and incomplete, as surveillance images usually are. Their importance emerged only because Michaela Shunick did not arrive home.

Michaela was widely known as Mickey. She was twenty-one, a student at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and a cyclist in a city where a bicycle could be transportation, recreation, and identity at once. The preserved Find Mickey Now archive described the black and gold Schwinn Cutter she rode, including its glittery gold handlebars. It also listed her backpack, wallet, phone, and pink pepper spray. In the first days, such details were not trivia. They were identifiers for volunteers and investigators trying to recognize one person among thousands moving through a city.

She had left a friend's home in the Saint Streets area at about two in the morning. The intended ride was short enough to be familiar. When she did not complete it, friends and family began doing what families of missing adults often must do before the machinery of a major investigation is fully visible: they called, searched, printed, posted, and asked strangers to look again.

The public campaign grew rapidly. Flyers appeared. Volunteers organized searches. A website gathered official updates and practical information. The effort gave people something specific to do, but it also created a difficult stream of possible sightings, tips, rumors, and online claims. A large search is partly a problem of attention. Every genuine lead competes with hundreds that must be documented and cleared.

The cameras became a way to impose order on that uncertainty. Detectives reconstructed portions of Mickey's route and examined vehicles captured near her. On May 25, police said they wanted information about a newer white four-door Chevrolet Z71 that traveled in the same direction after the bicyclist appeared on video. Other vehicles also drew attention. By May 30 investigators had identified and cleared the occupants of an older car and another pickup. The white Z71 remained important.

Then the bicycle surfaced far from the route home. On May 27, fishermen found it beneath the Whiskey Bay bridge at Interstate 10 Exit 127. It was submerged except for a small portion of the frame. Police reported damage to the rear tire and sent the bicycle to the Louisiana State Police Crime Lab for examination. Searchers and divers worked the surrounding area. Sonar images prompted another dive several days later, but that effort did not produce evidence of value.

The discovery did more than add an object to an evidence room. It expanded the geography of the case. A ride through Lafayette had acquired an interstate corridor. Whoever transported the bicycle had access to a vehicle and enough time to choose a disposal point. The damaged tire supported the possibility that the bicycle had been struck. Investigators could now compare the physical object to video, vehicles, and injury reports.

The search for Mickey remained the public center of the case, but the investigation soon reached backward. In July 1999, Lisa Pate had disappeared from Lafayette. She was thirty-five and had children. Her remains were found months later near Church Point in Acadia Parish. For more than a decade there had been no conviction and no public answer sufficient to close the distance between her disappearance and the place where she was found.

The two women should not be flattened into a pairing. Their lives, families, and circumstances were different. What joined their cases was the eventual prosecution of Brandon Scott Lavergne. A federal appellate

opinion later recorded the legal fact plainly: Lavergne pleaded guilty to two counts of first-degree murder for the murders of Michaela Shunick and Lisa Pate. The spare sentence in *Lavergne v. Acadia Parish* is useful because it strips away later rumor. Two pleas. Two named victims. Two convictions.

Lavergne came under direct scrutiny after investigators connected the white pickup to him and examined other records. Louisiana State Police arrested him on July 5 for failing to comply with sex-offender registration requirements stemming from an earlier conviction. Lafayette police searched his home. His white truck was no longer available for an ordinary forensic inspection. It had been burned in Texas, and an insurance claim had been made after it was reported stolen. He had acquired a similar replacement.

An innocent act can sometimes look suspicious in isolation. A vehicle can burn. An owner can replace it. A person can suffer injuries and give a confused account. Investigators do not prove a murder by collecting odd coincidences and calling the pile enough. They seek connections capable of surviving adversarial testing. In this case, the route recorded on video, the type of truck, the bicycle's condition and disposal, Lavergne's injuries, his account of those injuries, and evidence recovered through warrants became parts of one chronology.

The public learned many of the most disturbing details at the plea hearing in August. The factual basis was built from Lavergne's admissions and the prosecution record. According to that account, his truck struck Mickey's bicycle. After she entered the truck, she tried to call for help. A struggle followed. Mickey used pepper spray and fought with a knife, seriously wounding him. After further violence, he drove into northern Acadia Parish. She fought again. He shot her there.

The details matter because they correct an easy and harmful narrative. Mickey was not merely carried away from a street. The record describes repeated resistance. Yet responsible telling cannot turn that resistance into spectacle. No victim should have to perform courage to merit

sympathy, and no reader needs a wound-by-wound reconstruction to understand that she tried to survive.

Lavergne transported her body and initially concealed it near an old cemetery in Evangeline Parish. He later returned and buried her. He disposed of property and traveled to the New Orleans area, where he sought medical treatment. A Jefferson Parish report noted the stab wounds and his uncertain account of where an alleged attack had occurred. After police released the truck images, the vehicle was destroyed.

These facts did not immediately answer the most urgent question for Mickey's family: where was she? An arrest can create the appearance of resolution while a family still lacks the right to bring someone home. Searchers continued. Investigators still needed either physical recovery or reliable information locating her remains.

The Lisa Pate charge added another pressure. By the prosecution's account at the plea, Lavergne had met Lisa in 1999 and kept her from returning to Lafayette when she wanted to see her children. He admitted killing her and leaving her body behind a former acquaintance's home, concealed with wood. Her remains were found that September. The admission provided a legal answer thirteen years later, but it could not restore the investigative time that had passed.

A Lafayette Parish grand jury indicted Lavergne on July 18, 2012, on two counts of first-degree murder. Prosecutors announced their intention to seek death. Capital prosecution changes every stage of a case. Jury selection becomes longer. Litigation over evidence and expert testimony expands. Defense counsel must investigate the defendant's history for possible mitigation. Families can face years of hearings, trial, direct review, and collateral challenges. None of that determines whether a death sentence is morally right. It explains why a negotiated life sentence can offer certainty that a capital verdict may not.

Negotiations produced a stark exchange. Lavergne would plead guilty to both murders and accept consecutive life sentences without parole. The

state would not pursue death. He would provide information leading investigators to Mickey's body. The agreement did not ask the families to treat life imprisonment as mercy. It used the state's charging power to obtain the location of a missing woman and final judgments in two murders.

On August 7, investigators went to property near Louisiana Highways 10 and 13 in Evangeline Parish. In an area near graves, they located a buried body. Lafayette Metro crime-scene personnel, the Evangeline Parish Sheriff's Office, forensic experts from Louisiana State University, and the Lafayette Parish Coroner's Office worked the recovery. Two days later the identification was confirmed as Michaela Shunick.

The legal proceeding followed on August 17. Lavergne entered guilty pleas. The court accepted the factual basis and imposed the agreed sentences. Contemporary reporting from the hearing, including [WAFB's account of the court statement](#), preserved the sequence. The [Associated Press report](#) recorded the result: two first-degree murder pleas and life imprisonment.

A plea hearing is not a trial in miniature. Jurors do not hear competing experts. Witnesses are not cross-examined before them. The court instead determines whether the plea is knowing and voluntary and whether a factual basis supports it. The defendant waives rights that include trial by jury, confrontation of witnesses, and the privilege against self-incrimination. That waiver produces a conviction as real as one returned after trial, but the public record often remains narrower.

Lavergne later filed civil litigation attacking people and organizations connected to coverage and investigation. Those cases did not unsettle the murder convictions. The Fifth Circuit held that claims which implied the guilty pleas were invalid could not proceed as civil-rights damages actions while the convictions stood. In a separate decision involving NBC, the court noted that he was serving two life sentences and that neither side disputed the national attention the Shunick case received. These later opinions are procedural, but they confirm the continuing

legal posture without requiring reliance on a television retelling.

The investigation also shows why digital and physical evidence should not be placed in competition. Surveillance cameras did not solve the case alone. The bicycle did not. A vehicle description did not. Medical treatment records did not. Public tips did not. Each became useful through relationship to the others. A timeline connected a street image to a truck, a truck to a person, a person to injuries, and later admissions to places where evidence had been concealed.

The public search mattered in a different way. It kept Mickey visible. It generated information, maintained pressure, and created an archive that continues to offer resources for families of missing people. Yet public energy also carries risk. False identifications spread faster than corrections. Individuals can be accused online without evidence. Search areas can be contaminated. The Find Mickey Now archive repeatedly directed information to police and asked the public to stay clear of active scenes. That restraint was part of the search, not an obstacle to it.

Lisa's case exposes another imbalance. Mickey's disappearance drew extraordinary attention in 2012. Lisa's death had spent years outside that spotlight. The plea joined their names in headlines, sometimes with Mickey first and Lisa reduced to the other victim. That ordering may reflect the path of the investigation, but it should not become a measure of worth. Lisa was not a supporting fact in someone else's case. Her unresolved killing became one of the two murders for which Lavergne admitted responsibility.

The convictions supplied answers about legal responsibility. They did not answer every question about investigative delay, every disputed claim made in later civil suits, or every suspicion attached to Lavergne after his arrest. Authorities explored whether other cases might be connected. Suspicion is not a verdict. The honest boundary is the two murders admitted and adjudicated.

The strongest ending for this file is therefore not Lavergne's sentence. It is the persistence of two names. Michaela Shunick's family and

community transformed a search into an organized public effort, then preserved what they learned for others. Lisa Pate's family finally received a conviction after thirteen years. Neither outcome makes the losses equivalent or complete. Both insist that the record begin where the crime did, with the person who was taken.

Reconstructing a route from imperfect cameras

The surviving timeline is a useful lesson in what surveillance can and cannot do. A camera covers a frame, not a city. It records whichever angle, light, and resolution the owner happened to install for another purpose. Investigators must locate systems along a probable route, persuade owners to preserve recordings before automatic deletion, synchronize clocks that may be wrong, and distinguish the relevant person or vehicle from ordinary overnight traffic.

Mickey's bicycle was visually distinctive enough to assist comparison. Her clothing and direction of travel mattered too. Still, the initial images did not show an entire encounter. They supplied points on a route. The white pickup became significant because it appeared in temporal and geographic relation to those points. Detectives then had to identify vehicles, interview occupants, and rule out innocent drivers.

That clearing process is part of good investigation and deserves more attention than it receives. Two vehicles initially publicized were located and their occupants excluded. Each exclusion narrowed the work and spared an innocent person from lingering suspicion. A public request should therefore be updated when an object of interest is cleared. Without that correction, the internet preserves the accusation longer than police preserve the interest.

Time synchronization can also deceive. The archived update gave one surveillance timestamp as 1:48 p.m. even though the known route was around two in the morning, an apparent typographical error in the public notice. The surrounding entries and chronology make the intended period clear, but the mistake illustrates why a single copied timestamp should not override the larger record. Source criticism sometimes means

recognizing that an official page can contain a simple clerical error.

The bicycle as evidence and symbol

For the public, the Schwinn represented Mickey. For investigators, it was an item requiring controlled recovery and examination. Those meanings overlapped but were not identical. Searchers wanted to see it as proof of a route or struggle. Examiners needed to document water exposure, damage, trace material, and chain of custody before drawing conclusions.

The damaged rear tire was consistent with an impact, but consistency is not exclusivity. Damage can have more than one cause. Its real force came when Lavergne's factual account described striking the bicycle and when other evidence tied his truck to the route. This is a recurring principle: a physical fact becomes stronger when an independent statement predicts or explains it.

Whiskey Bay also demonstrates concealment as behavior. The bridge was distant from Mickey's last recorded location. Disposal beneath it required travel and separated her property from the place where she was hidden. Investigators could use that separation to consider route, timing, fuel, toll or traffic records, and familiarity. The choice of site did not speak a suspect's name, but it described what the responsible person did after the crime.

Two investigations joined by one plea

Lisa Pate's file entered the prosecution through work that is less visible in the public timeline. Her remains had been found in 1999. By 2012, records and witnesses from the older case had aged thirteen years. The state nevertheless obtained an indictment and an admission.

Cold cases often advance when a new investigation provides a lawful reason to revisit an old suspect, compare methods, or reinterview associates. That does not mean similarity proves connection. It means information from one file can generate a lead in another. The files must

then be kept analytically separate so evidence of the newer offense does not simply substitute for proof of the older one.

The grand jury's two-count indictment signaled that prosecutors believed each murder independently supported first-degree charges. At the plea, Lavergne admitted both. The sentence on each count was life without parole, ordered consecutively. Because a person can serve only one life, consecutive terms may appear symbolic. Legally they preserve separate judgments for separate victims. If one conviction were ever invalidated, the other sentence would remain.

That separate accounting matters to families. Combining cases can improve efficiency and bargaining power, but it can also make one victim seem evidentiary support for another. The judgment should make clear that each death received its own count and sentence.

What plea bargaining revealed and concealed

The negotiated resolution disclosed a factual basis that the public might otherwise have waited years to hear. It located Mickey and described Lisa's killing. It also avoided trial, which means some evidence was never tested through live cross-examination in open court. That is not a defect unique to this agreement. It is the ordinary tradeoff of a plea.

Capital leverage intensifies the exchange. Prosecutors possessed authority to seek death. Defense counsel had a duty to reduce that risk. Information about recovery had value to the state and to Mickey's family. The parties converted those interests into a binding resolution. Ethical evaluation should acknowledge that the defendant held information created by his own crime, while also recognizing that bargaining obtained something force could not guarantee.

No agreement can compel emotional closure. The word is especially inadequate where a family learns both where a person was buried and how she fought to live. Information can end uncertainty while beginning a more detailed grief. Legal finality and emotional recovery should never be treated as synonyms.

The work after the headline

Recovery required a full forensic process even after information identified the location. Technicians documented the site, excavated carefully, maintained evidence control, and transferred remains for identification. A confident belief was not announced as certainty until the coroner's work supported it. The official archive reflects this discipline: the August 7 statement said investigators strongly believed the body was Mickey's, while the August 9 update confirmed identification.

That two-day difference embodies a larger ethic. Families and the public urgently wanted a name. Officials waited for the responsible authority to provide it. Premature identification can inflict devastating error. A body recovery is not complete when searchers recognize clothing or location. Scientific and legal confirmation matters.

The volunteers' work also continued beyond recovery. The archive preserved guidance for other missing-person families. That transformation from emergency campaign to resource is unusual and important. It treats experience as something that can lower the burden on the next family, while keeping Mickey's name attached to assistance rather than only violence.

Lisa Pate outside the shadow

Available public sources preserve fewer details about Lisa's life than about the search for Mickey. That inequality should be stated instead of repaired with invention. Lisa was a mother. She wanted to return to Lafayette and her children, according to the factual basis summarized after the plea. Her disappearance did not prompt the same scale of searchable digital archive because it occurred in 1999, before social media and before online video systems became ordinary.

The difference in record volume does not indicate a difference in value. It indicates technology, publicity, circumstance, and what institutions chose to preserve. A victim-centered account must sometimes center a person by acknowledging how little the public archive allows us to say.

Lisa's thirteen-year wait for legal resolution should also correct the idea that cold cases are solved only by a laboratory miracle. This one advanced through a newer homicide investigation, documentary work, interviewing, prosecutorial strategy, and admission. Old cases need preservation not because a breakthrough can be predicted, but because no one knows what future event will make the material newly useful.

The limits of the final judgment

After two guilty pleas, responsible doubt has a narrow shape. It does not require pretending legal responsibility is unsettled. Lavergne admitted the murders in court and received judgments that remained valid at the cutoff. Doubt instead concerns claims beyond those convictions: rumors of other victims, speculation about every unexplained disappearance, and details not included in the factual basis.

An offender who committed two murders may attract suspicion for more. Police are entitled to investigate that possibility. Writers are not entitled to promote it into an unstated conviction. The disciplined boundary protects other families from false answers and keeps investigators free to follow evidence rather than public expectation.

From public tip to admissible proof

The white pickup demonstrates the long distance between something noticed and something usable in court. A viewer could say a truck appeared after Mickey on two camera views. Investigators needed the original recordings, information about each system's clock, a reliable extraction method, and testimony establishing where the cameras pointed. They then needed a basis to connect that class of truck to Lavergne rather than every similar vehicle in Acadiana.

Vehicle records, photographs, interviews, and the truck's later destruction narrowed the field. The burned remains could still preserve identifiers and patterns of damage, but fire changes what examiners can recover. The insurance claim generated another documentary trail: a reported theft, dates, statements, and financial interest. Each record

was created for a different purpose. Their agreement made the chronology harder to dismiss as coincidence.

Tips work the same way. A caller may identify a vehicle, mention a hospital visit, or report an unusual trip. The tip guides investigators toward a record. It does not become true because it was phoned to a police line. Detectives verify ownership, obtain medical or business records through proper legal process, and compare time. In a public search receiving a high volume of calls, lead sheets must document not only promising information but why a lead was cleared.

This discipline protects the case from hindsight. Once Lavergne pleaded guilty, every detail associated with him could seem obviously incriminating. Before arrest, investigators had to show why each step justified the next. A valid result should remain understandable when the certainty of the plea is removed from the beginning of the story.

Search warrants and the privacy boundary

Searching a home, vehicle, phone, or medical record requires legal authority. Probable cause is built in an affidavit describing facts that make evidence likely to be found in the specified place. The warrant must be particular enough to constrain the search.

In a missing-person emergency, investigators may also seek voluntary consent, preservation requests, subpoenas, or exigent access where law permits. Each route has different limits. A person's willingness to help does not authorize an unlimited search of unrelated private material.

The Shunick investigation moved rapidly across digital, vehicle, property, and medical information. Its public success should not obscure those boundaries. Evidence obtained lawfully is more durable at trial, and careful warrants reduce the chance that an important item will later be excluded.

A family's need and a prosecutor's duty

Families can favor different resolutions. Some want a trial that exposes every available fact. Others want certainty, recovery, and an end to repeated hearings. Prosecutors represent the state, not individual relatives, but ethical practice requires listening carefully and explaining what a proposed agreement can and cannot deliver.

The decision to exchange capital exposure for information placed an intensely personal need inside a public prosecution. Recovering Mickey was not a sentimental extra. It served identification, burial, evidence, and dignity. It also prevented Lavergne from maintaining control over the location indefinitely.

For Lisa's family, the same bargain brought a judgment in a case that had waited since 1999. The agreement therefore carried distinct value for two families. Treating it only as the end of the more publicized search would misunderstand its structure.

How archived updates preserve a search

The Find Mickey site kept dated notices that now perform historical work. Readers can see police seek vehicles, clear two of them, describe the bicycle recovery, reduce tip-line hours as call volume changed, and later announce the body recovery. The archive shows uncertainty being revised rather than hidden.

That transparency allows correction. The apparent morning and afternoon timestamp inconsistency can be recognized because surrounding dates and route information remain visible. Deleted or silently edited notices would make the evolution harder to reconstruct.

Families maintaining such archives should preserve original files and capture agency releases with dates. Web links disappear. Screenshots without addresses or timestamps are harder to authenticate. A simple folder containing releases, media contacts, flyer versions, and search maps can later become the clearest public record of work otherwise scattered across social platforms.

The moral weight of ordinary objects

True-crime accounts often turn property into iconography. Mickey's bicycle is particularly vulnerable to that treatment because it was visually distinctive and central to the search. The object should point back to her life as a cyclist and to the evidentiary route, not become a decorative emblem of violence.

The same applies to her backpack, phone, pepper spray, and the truck. In court, each item would have a defined relevance. In public memory, each can accumulate emotion. Responsible writing explains what the object established and then releases it. It does not ask readers to admire concealment or repeatedly imagine the struggle.

Lisa's case contains fewer preserved objects in the public account. That lack should not make her story feel less tangible. Uneven archives are facts about preservation, not about whose absence mattered more.

Sources for this file

The principal sources are the [archived official search timeline](#), the [Fifth Circuit opinion confirming both guilty pleas](#), [contemporaneous coverage of the plea factual basis](#), and the [Associated Press report of the convictions and sentences](#).

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