

Florida trial begins for convicted killer Gary Michael Hilton

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Jury selection commenced Monday in the oft-delayed murder trial of drifter Gary Michael Hilton, accused of killing a Crawfordville, Fla., nurse and Sunday school teacher in December 2007.

Exactly three years ago to the day, Hilton pleaded guilty in Dawson County to killing and beheading hiker Meredith Emerson, who went missing on New Year's Day 2008 on Blood Mountain in Union County. Hilton was able to avoid the death penalty by leading officials to the UGA graduate's body, which he had hidden in the Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Area north of Cumming.

A little more than two weeks before Emerson went missing, hunters discovered 46-year-old Cheryl Dunlap's decapitated body deep inside the Apalachicola National Forest. Leon County, Fla., officials identified Hilton as the "prime suspect" in Dunlap's death on Jan. 9 -- one day after he was charged with Emerson's murder.

Hilton unsuccessfully fought extradition to Florida, where prosecutors have announced they will seek the death penalty in the Dunlap case. The 64-year-old transient was originally scheduled to stand trial last June but public defender Ines Suber, citing a heavy caseload, was able to secure a postponement. Circuit Judge James Hankinson denied Suber's request for a change of venue.

Hilton, who suffers from multiple sclerosis, also is suspected of killing an elderly couple in North Carolina, John and Irene Bryant, in 2007 but he has not been charged in their deaths.