

## Ashe Deputies Cleared in Fatal Shooting

Written by Steve Frank

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Three Ashe Deputies have been officially exonerated in a shooting that killed an Ashe man last year. Friday, a letter was sent to Special Agent in Charge of the State Bureau of Investigation, Paula Carson, along with Sheriff James Williams, and Chief Jeff Rose, exonerating Deputies Josh Hopkins, Jeremy Munday, and Jake Howell in the shooting death investigation of Walter Mark Houck. Deputy Howell worked for West Jefferson Police Department at the time of the November 21st incident. In the letter, signed by District Attorney Tom E Horner, DA Horner praised the State Bureau of Investigation for the “hard work and the extensive investigation” done by the Agency. DA Horner continued stating that he and his Chief Assistant District Attorney Leigh Bricker had reviewed all the facts of the investigation, the toxicology reports, autopsy, etc. They both concluded that “given the circumstances of the situation, all above mentioned law enforcement officer found themselves in, the shooting was justified under the law.” District Attorney Horner thanked all the State Bureau of Investigation agents for their hard work in this difficult matter. Sheriff James Williams stated he was pleased to finally receive word from the District Attorney’s office clearing his deputies of any wrong doing in the unfortunate shooting death of Mr. Houck. Sheriff Williams stated that his officers arrived at the scene after being dispatched to a man shooting toward neighbor’s houses all afternoon – hours after darkness had fallen. They observed a man inside with a weapon, who had been shooting all afternoon in a closely populated community, who had shot up his own home, who had weapons and ammo stockpiled at the door. They observed Houck inside with a weapon. At that point they asked Houck to step outside to speak to them. Houck came out carrying a high powered rifle. Officers asked Houck to put down the weapon. Instead he pointed the high powered rifle at them. At that point, they had no choice but to defend themselves.

Williams stated it has been a long wait for the officers involved, as well as their families. I always had complete confidence in my deputies, and knew they had followed procedure, their training and judgment, and that they had no other choice in the matter. I had no doubt in the outcome of the investigation conducted by the State Bureau of Investigation. However, needless to say, it is always a relief for all when the facts support the judgment of those involved, and now it has been validated by Chief District Attorney Tom Horner and his staff.