

The Editorial Board

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Editorial

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Mistakes D.A.'s office must never repeat

It came just in time for Christmas. But freedom was still two years too late for Richard Jackson, the Yeadon native who spent that much time in prison for a murder he apparently did not commit.

Jackson was convicted by a jury of brutally killing his friend and former lover, Alvin Davis of Upper Darby. The evidence against him was as flimsy as it was fragile: Fingerprints found at the crime scene, which were the source of considerable controversy even at the time of his trial.

That controversy has been settled, finally. The FBI crime lab has examined the evidence and announced that it agreed with more than 50 of the top fingerprint experts in the country: The prints do not match.

Jackson was freed from prison last week and Delaware County District

Attorney Patrick Meehan expects to file a motion dismissing the charges. That should happen immediately.

Despite his ordeal, Richard Jackson should be thankful for a number of reasons:

■ He had supportive parents. When Verna and Richard Jackson Sr. were convinced of their son's innocence, they stood by his side during the nightmare that consumed his life. Some people would have walked away. The Jacksons are exemplary.

■ He had a sharp and aggressive defense attorney in Michael Malloy. In a court system that assigns often inexperienced, sometimes incompetent and always over-worked lawyers to criminal defendants - particularly minorities - Jackson was lucky enough to have a dogged advocate in court.

■ The case against him was incredibly weak.

All authorities had were the fingerprints. They had no witnesses, no motive, no DNA evidence. They didn't even have a circumstantial case. And the Upper Darby police and the D.A.'s initial fingerprint expert had serious disagreements about those prints even during the trial.

The possibility that a man could be sent to prison for life on such evidence is frightening. The fact that the D.A.'s office at one point threatened Jackson with the death penalty in an attempt to coerce a guilty plea is shocking. And testimony that the D.A.'s office attempted to interfere with the fingerprint expert association's own internal investigation of the case - until it was too late for Malloy to file an appeal - is deeply

troubling.

Meehan promised to "review" the procedures used. The Upper Darby police department procedures were used. The Republican, who begins his second term in office next month and who may have other political ambitions, should be reviewing the procedures of his own staff. There was a prosecution that should have been brought, and some of the people who were employed reek in the light of the case, and where it went wrong.

Only an honest and open review of the case, and where it went wrong, can begin to restore confidence in County's system of justice. It is late to undo the suffering of Jackson, but Meehan must do what he can to assure the public that no one else will be treated like that, ever again.