

# The Charlotte Observer

"I've paid a price I shouldn't have had to pay."

## Parker now free

*Young accusers in N.C. later swore he hadn't hurt them*



CHAD RACHMAN - SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

Freed Monday after 14 years behind bars, James Parker hugs his sister Wanda Johnson in Brooklyn, N.Y. Though he was awed by the busy streets, he said later, "I want to show I can make it."

BY LISA HAMMERSLY MUNN  
Staff Writer

James Bernard Parker, sentenced to three life terms in one of North Carolina's biggest child sex assault cases, was set free Monday after 14 years behind bars.

He walked out of a Brooklyn, N.Y., courthouse and wept as he embraced a sister he hadn't seen in 15 years.

"I've paid a price I shouldn't have had to pay," said Parker, 44. "I didn't do those crimes."

In the past three years, lawyers, UNC Chapel Hill journalism students and the Observer have raised questions about Parker's guilt and whether his reported crimes at a Monroe public housing project ever took place.

All three boys who testified against him in court have signed affidavits in the past two years saying Parker didn't commit the crimes.

A December 2002 Observer investigation found 15 reported victims and witnesses who said that the crimes never happened or that Parker wasn't the attacker.

And four Charlotte lawyers worked without pay for hundreds of hours to win a new hearing on his case.

But Parker, who had maintained his innocence since the 1990 crimes were reported, ultimately won his freedom by accepting a deal from prosecutors last May to plead guilty to lesser charges.

Even then he remained jailed. He was extradited to New York to face a pending 15-year-old robbery case. Monday, he finalized a plea deal on that charge and was

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### From Arrest to Release

#### May 20, 1990

Monroe police arrest 29-year-old James Parker after a two-week investigation.

#### January, May 1991

Parker is convicted of sex crimes in two separate trials and sentenced to three life terms.

#### November 2004

Parker, 44, is freed after plea deals on lesser charges. He still denies the sex crimes.

#### Series Online

Read the Observer investigation:  
<http://www.charlotte.com/mld/charlotte/4745575.htm>

# Accusers later swore he didn't do it

**Parker** from LA

scriptions for their attacker.

Few children initially told their parents. The stories came out only when school counselors in Monroe began asking questions.

James "Sonny" Rogers, who was the lead investigator for the Monroe police, said Monday that he still believes Parker was guilty of sexually molesting children in Monroe, about 25 miles southeast of Charlotte.

"The victims and their families have to live with whatever's happened. I did my job," said Rogers, now a church pastor.

Noell Tin, Parker's lead attorney in Charlotte, said, "There were times when I worried we would never see this day. I've always believed in James' innocence. We wouldn't have done the case otherwise."

After Parker was convicted in 1991, he wrote letters to news organizations and legal groups maintaining his innocence and asking for help. He wasn't scheduled for parole until age 97.

He wrote Duke Law School's fledgling Innocence Project in 1999. UNC Chapel Hill journalism students decided to focus on Parker's case in 2001, and the N.C. Center on Actual Innocence targeted his case.

Journalism graduate student Joshua Myerov wrote his master's thesis about the crimes, and that convinced the Observer to take a look.

Tin and three other lawyers helped Parker win a new hearing that was scheduled for last May.

Then prosecutors offered a plea deal. And on May 24, Parker pleaded guilty to reduced charges in the sex crimes in exchange for the state's



PHOTOS BY CHAD RACHMAN - SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

**James Bernard Parker smiles as he prepares to leave State Supreme Court a free man in the Brooklyn borough of New York on Monday. Parker was released after serving 14 years behind bars.**

promise to free him.

Immediately afterward, Parker told family and spectators he didn't commit the crimes.

"I never molested any children," he said. Pleading guilty was "the only way I could get out."

Monday, Parker said he hopes to get training and find a job in New York.

He has an appointment with social services early next month on the training.

Then on Dec 17, he's scheduled to return to court to learn if he has to register as a convicted sex offender.

"I would like to get my name back," Parker said. "They took my name and my job, and those were the only two things that I had."



**James Bernard Parker smiles as he watches his sister Wanda Johnson prepare Thanksgiving leftovers at her apartment in Brooklyn on Monday.**

freed on time served.

About 1:40 p.m. Monday, the former Monroe day laborer walked with his sister to a nearby home in Brooklyn. He spoke on a cell phone for the first time and marveled at the Christmas decorations, according to the New York Daily News. He ate a belated Thanksgiving dinner of turkey, chicken, macaroni and cheese and collard greens.

"It's a great accomplishment that he's free," said Richard Rosen, a UNC Chapel Hill law professor and board member for the N.C. Center on Actual Innocence. "But I think the system didn't work for James Parker. It didn't work at time of trial. And frankly it didn't work at the end when he was pressured to plead guilty to a crime he didn't do."

Rosen said he doesn't blame Parker or his attorneys for accepting the plea deal, however. If they had failed to convince a judge, Parker likely would have gone back to prison for life. "Innocent people, as well as guilty people, plead guilty under those circumstances," Rosen said.

Parker's release Monday was an inconclusive end to a case that some legal experts compared with the 1989 Little Rascals day-care sex abuse scandal in Edenton.

Authorities initially said at least 19 Monroe children were attacked. But they found no physical evidence. As in the Edenton case, the children told police fantastic stories, including details of being tied to trees and fed poisoned ice cream. They gave a wide range of de-