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May 23, 2018

**SMITH PLEADS GUILTY TO FIRST-DEGREE MURDER IN 2017 KILLING OF AUNT**

State Attorney Melissa Nelson announces today that Phillip Jason Smith, 39, of Jacksonville, pleaded guilty to First-Degree Murder. Pursuant to the plea agreement, the Honorable Bruce Anderson sentenced Smith to Life in Florida State Prison without the possibility of parole.

On Jan. 26, 2017, police were dispatched to the residence of 74-year-old Janice Fulton on Jacksonville's Westside after family members became concerned with her whereabouts. Fulton shared her home with Smith, her nephew, after he was released from a four-year prison sentence in May 2016 for burglary and elderly exploitation crimes.

Fulton's family entered her home in the afternoon and saw obvious signs of a struggle and an attempt to clean up the scene. Fulton's car was also missing. At that point, the family called police.

Investigative efforts showed that Smith's cellphone was located in Locust Grove, Georgia. Police there were asked to conduct a welfare check on the occupants of Fulton's car, which Smith was driving. Smith consented to the search and, upon examination, police discovered Fulton's body with obvious signs of trauma to her face, head, and body. It was concealed by a tarp.

A Grand Jury indicted Smith for First-Degree Murder on Aug. 15, 2017, and the State filed a Notice of Intent to Seek the Death Penalty the same day. The decision to not seek death was made with the full support of Fulton's family and law enforcement.

"After considerable review, we determined this resolution brings finality to the litigation, certainty in the outcome, and honors the wishes of the victim's family," said State Attorney Melissa Nelson.

The case was investigated by the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office and assisted by the Locust Grove Police Department. It was prosecuted by Assistant State Attorney London Kite.