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"The Watcher" True Story – What Really Happened in The Westfield New Jersey Home

Created by *American Horror Story's* Ryan Murphy, here's the creepy story that's based on real-life events.

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 | PUBLISHED: OCT 13, 2022 11:09 AM EDT

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PHOTO BY JULIO CORTEZ

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Netflix's new limited series *The Watcher* has officially hit the streaming service. While the show is based on the true story of a stalker who used creepy letters to terrorize the owners of a New Jersey home, the dramatization takes a few departures from the real story. So naturally, we've laid out a detailed [timeline](#) of what really happened at The Watcher house so you can properly dissect it (and we even dedicated two episodes of our haunted house podcast, [Dark House](#), to analyzing the bizarre tale).

Here's what you need to know first: The home at 657 Boulevard in the small suburban town of Westfield, New Jersey was built in 1905. The shingle-style house with Dutch Colonial features has six bedrooms and four bathrooms, spanning 3,869 square feet. When Derek and Maria Broaddus bought the home in June 2014 for nearly \$1.4 million, their excitement quickly turned to dread as they began receiving threatening letters from "The Watcher." The anonymous harasser claimed that the home had been a point of obsession for their family for decades, and that since their father's passing, they had been put in charge of watching over it. And so began the mystery of The Watcher's identity.

Ahead, take a look at the home's crucial history from when it was first built at the turn of the century to when the first horrifying letters arrived in the mailbox, all the way to where it stands now.

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1913: William H. Davies, a one-term mayor who was elected in 1932, purchases 657 Boulevard **for \$1**.

July 16, 1947: William H. Davies **sells the house** to his son Ernest and daughter-in-law Frances for \$1.

1951: Ernest and Frances Davies sell the house to Dillard and Mary Bird and Nora Bird (a widow), and it's reportedly another \$1 sale.

1955: The Birds sell the house to Lawrence and Mary Holmes Shaffer. According to their son, Bill Shaffer, the couple paid about \$23,000 for the home.

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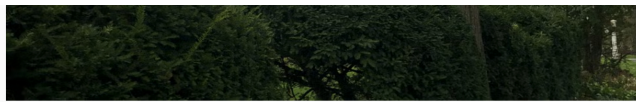
1963: The Shaffers sell the house to Seth and Floy Bakes for an undisclosed amount.

November 29, 1990: Seth and Floy Bakes sell the house to John and Andrea Woods for \$370,000.

Week of May 26, 2014: The Woodses receive a letter from "The Watcher" thanking them for taking care of the house. The Woodses, both retired scientists, told the Broadduses that they remembered thinking the letter was more strange than threatening, ***The Cut reported***.

June 2, 2014: The Broadduses close on 657 Boulevard for \$1,355,657.





SABRINA TOTO

June 5, 2014: The Broadusses receive their first letter from The Watcher, which is dated June 4, 2014. The letter details the author's obsession with the house, and also mentions things like the make and model of Derek and Maria's Honda minivan and seeing contractors arriving to start renovations, making it clear that The Watcher has physically laid eyes on the house. The couple reaches out to the Woodses to ask if they had any idea who the letter could be from.

June 6, 2014: Andrea responds to the Broadusses, telling them that they received one letter days before closing the sale but threw it away. The Woodses went with Maria to the police station, where Detective Leonard Lugo instructs her not to tell anyone about the letter.

Week of June 9, 2014: Detective Lugo brings Michael Langford—one of the adult children living at home with his mother at 661 Boulevard, next door to the Broadusses—to police headquarters for an interview. Michael, who another neighbor described as "kind of a Boo Radley character," denied knowing anything about the letters.

June 18, 2014: The Broadusses receive a second letter from The Watcher, which includes alarming information that the author has learned the names (and even nicknames) of Derek and Maria's three young children, and asking if they've "found what's in the walls yet."

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Late June 2014: With few updates from the local police department, the Broadusses launch their own investigation. They employ a private investigator, who stakes out the neighborhood and runs background checks on the Langfords, though the results aren't noteworthy. They also hire Robert Lenehan, a former FBI agent, to conduct a threat assessment. Lenehan recognizes several old-fashioned tics in the letters that point to an older writer. For example, the envelope was addressed "M/M Braddus," and the sentences had double spaces between them. Lenehan also notes that the writing style itself suggests The Watcher is a "voracious reader" and "less macho."

July 18, 2014: The Broadusses receive a third letter from The Watcher, asking where they have gone to and demanding that they stop making changes to the house.

December 2014: The Westfield police tell the Broadusses they've run out of options in their investigation.

February 21, 2015: Less than a year after buying the home, the Broadusses decide to sell 657 Boulevard. The house is listed for \$1.495

million to reflect renovation work they had done.



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March 17, 2015: The Broadduses lower the asking price to \$1.395 million after prospective buyers are scared off by the letters.

May 14, 2015: 657 Boulevard remains on the market, and the price drops to \$1.25 million.

June 2, 2015: The Broadduses file a civil lawsuit against the Woodses seeking a full refund of the \$1.3 million they paid for the home, along with the title to the house, renovation expense reimbursement of "hundreds of thousands of dollars," attorney fees and triple damages.

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June 17, 2015: Lee Levitt, the Broaddus family's lawyer, attempts to seal the court documents, but is too late.

June 18, 2015: The Broadduses take the house off the market at \$1.25 million.

June 19, 2015: NJ.com reports on the lawsuit, making The Watcher national news. Just days later, Tamron Hall covers the news on the Today show.

June 26, 2015: Westfield Police Chief David Wayman confirms possession of three Watcher letters and assures the public that his team conducted "an exhaustive investigation" into the unknown identity of the author.

July 2, 2015: The Westfield Leader publishes an article with anonymous quotes from neighbors of Derek and Maira, questioning if they actually did any renovations and claiming that contractors were never seen at the house.

January 2016: The Woodses file a countersuit against the Broadduses for defamation, including a counterclaim for damages. The Woodses



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attorney, Richard Kaplow, says his clients were not legally required to disclose the note they received prior to closing the sale of 657 Boulevard.

March 24, 2016: The house is put back on the market **for \$1.25 million.**



AP

May 24, 2016: Derek and Maria borrow money from family members to purchase another home in Westfield, using an LLC to keep the location private.

September 26, 2016: The Broadduses **file an application** to tear down 657 Boulevard, hoping to sell the lot to a developer who could divide the property and build two new homes in its place. Because the two new lots would measure 67.4 and 67.6 feet wide, less than 3 inches under the mandated 70 feet, an exception from the Westfield Planning Board is required.

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January 4, 2017: The **Westfield Planning Board rejects the subdivision proposal** in a unanimous decision following a four-hour meeting. More than 100 Westfield residents attend the meeting to voice their concerns over the plan.

February 1, 2017: Derek and Maria **rent 657 Boulevard** to a couple with adult children and several large dogs who say they are not afraid of The Watcher.

February 20, 2017: A **fourth letter** from The Watcher arrives at 657 Boulevard, dated February 13th, the day the Broadduses gave depositions in their lawsuit against the Woodses. The author taunts Derek and Maria about their rejected proposal, and suggests they intend to carry out physical harm against their family.

October 9, 2017: The Broadduses list the house for \$1.125 million.

October 18, 2017: Judge Camille M. Kenny **throws out** the remaining claims in the Broaddus lawsuit against the Woods family and also dismisses all four counts made in the Woods counterclaim against the Broadduses.

December 24, 2017: Several families receive anonymous letters signed "Friends of the Broaddus Familv." The letters had been delivered by hand



to the homes of people who had been the most vocal in criticizing Derek and Maira online. (Derek later [admits](#) to writing these letters.)

November 13, 2018: *The Cut* publishes "[The Haunting of a Dream House](#)" story online; it also appears in the November 12, 2018 issue of *New York Magazine*.



ERIC LIEBOWITZ/NETFLIX

In Netflix's new series, Bobby Cannavale plays Dean Brannock.

August 1, 2018: Police Chief David Wayman resigns amid an investigation into his involvement in a March 2018 hit and run incident.

December 2018: Following an unrelated scandal within the Westfield police department, the Broaddus case is turned over to the Union County Prosecutor's Office and a new investigation is started from scratch. The prosecutor's office decides to follow up on a lead from the previous investigation—female DNA had been found on one of the envelopes—asking neighbors on Boulevard to voluntarily submit DNA samples for comparison. According to a report by [The Cut](#), several neighbors weren't home during this canvas of the neighborhood, and two people refused to submit samples.

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December 5, 2018: [Netflix](#) wins a six-studio bidding war for the rights to produce a movie based on the story.

January 2019: The prosecutor's office notifies Derek and Maria that none of the DNA samples they'd procured matched the sample found on the envelope.

January 9, 2019: [Detective Leonard Lugo](#) is demoted from Lieutenant to patrol sergeant in the wake of a Union County Prosecutors Office investigation into his involvement in alleged police corruption and misconduct. Lugo is said to have produced false police reports in an attempt to cover up a hit and run incident involving ex-police Chief David Wayman in March of 2018.

July 1, 2019: Derek and Maria Broaddus sell 657 Boulevard to Andrew and Allison Carr [for \\$959,000](#).

October 13, 2022: *The Watcher* starring Naomi Watts and Bobby Cannavale premieres on Netflix. *American Horror Stories* creator Ryan Murphy is executive producer.

Listen to [Dark House](#) for a more in-depth look at the real story of [The Watcher](#). [hairs](#) and his involvement in alleged police corruption and misconduct. Lugo is said to have produced false police reports in an attempt to cover up a hit and run incident involving ex-police Chief David Wayman in March of 2018.

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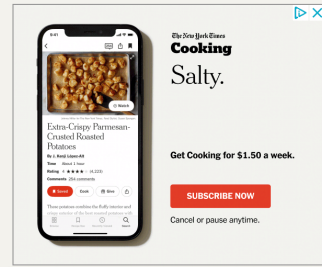
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