



Ellis Walter Ruley (December 3, 1882 – January 16, 1959) was an African American folk artist and laborer. He began painting in the 1930s at his home in Norwich, Connecticut using house paint on cardboard and Masonite. He created colorful works that transcended his artistic inexperience. Art collector and author of *Discovering Ellis Ruley*, Glenn Robert Smith wrote, “Ruley’s paintings possess an undeniable power, a strange spell that lingers in the viewer’s mind as persistently as certain dreams.” In the latter decades of his life, Ruley worked furiously, creating hundreds of paintings. Sadly, though, following his mysterious death in 1959, Ruley and his art slunk into oblivion.

Ruley married Wilhelmina Fox, a German, white woman. Forming an interracial couple was audacious during this time, especially considering the presence of the Ku Klux Klan in Norwich for more than a decade. During his lifetime, Ruley sold his paintings locally and only achieved fame posthumously in the 1990s. Ruley worked almost his entire adult life in the construction trades, and had one daughter. Ruley died in 1959 under ambiguous circumstances. It is unclear whether he died from an accident or as the result of murder.

Members of Ruley’s family were very suspicious, and believed that Ruley may have been murdered, possibly by a neighbor who wanted his property, or as a result of racist animosity. Supporting their suspicions were the earlier death of Douglas Harris, Ellis Ruley’s son-in-law, in 1948, who was found head first down a well on the property. And an unexplained fire which destroyed Ruley’s home after his death. Harris’s death was found to be an accident by authorities at the time. An autopsy in 2014 by Dr. Michael Baden, a forensic pathologist, however, discovered that Harris’s hyoid bone had been broken, indicating that he had been strangled prior to his death.

After performing an autopsy on Ruley, Baden determined that Ruley could have collapsed due to “some cardiac abnormality or from his brain disease” but also stated that it is possible that he could have been pushed by someone else, possibly the result of a robbery or altercation. Because the circumstances surrounding Ruley’s death are uncertain, Baden concluded that Ruley’s death “cannot be categorized as a homicide.” Baden also noted that Ruley’s empty wallet had been found on Hammond Avenue about 20 feet from his body.