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Monday, December 08, 2025

Page 1

Athens, Tennessee

Two Sweetwater Residents Indicted in 2024 Arson Case; School Addresses CEO's Legal Situation

A Tennessee Bureau of Investigation probe has led to the indictment of two Sweetwater residents in connection with a pair of fires reported in late 2024.

In November 2024, at the request of the Sweetwater Fire Department, TBI agents investigated two separate fire incidents at a home in the 700 block of West Morris Street. Following an extensive investigation, agents concluded that the homeowners, Melissa Whitfield, 49, and Jared Whitfield, 52, had intentionally set both fires.

On December 3, 2025, the Monroe County Grand Jury indicted the couple on charges of Arson, Aggravated Arson, and Tampering with Evidence. They were booked into the Monroe County Jail with bond set at \$300,000 each. Records indicate Melissa Whitfield has since posted bail and was active on social media as recently as Sunday morning.

Whitfield serves as President, CEO, and administrator of Cross Creek Christian School in Sweetwater. The school addressed the situation Friday in a public statement, acknowledging a "personal legal matter" involving Whitfield and assuring families that the Board is actively overseeing the issue. The Board appointed Wes Alford as its COO to support ongoing operations and emphasized that classes, activities, and the academic calendar continue without disruption.

Jared Whitfield had been employed as a firefighter with the Sweetwater Fire Department. The department and Cross Creek Christian School partnered as recently as October to present a fire prevention seminar for students.

Authorities stress that the charges remain allegations and that both defendants are presumed innocent unless proven guilty in court.

Anyone with information regarding intentionally set fires is urged to contact the Tennessee Arson Hotline at 1-800-762-3017.

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Monday, Dec. 08, 2025

Morning Fax®...Today's News This Morning Page 2

Athens, Tennessee

Meigs County Jail Decertified; Officials Work to Relocate Inmates and Reassure Public as 911 Prepares Contingency Move



The Meigs County Jail has been officially decertified after state inspectors determined the aging facility can no longer meet Tennessee Corrections Institute (TCI) standards. The decision, rooted in years of overcrowding and structural deterioration, has set off a series of urgent steps to relocate inmates, adjust staffing, and prepare for a potential relocation of the Meigs County 911 center, which operates in the same building.

The state's decision came less than 24 hours after county commissioners voted 6-4 to repair the current jail instead of building a new facility. Residents strongly opposed a proposed property tax increase that would have funded a new multimillion-dollar facility.

TCI determined that the repair plan fell short of meeting required standards and would have reduced the jail's certified capacity from 56 beds to 40, despite the jail housing an average of 60 inmates daily. The jail has spent the past 12 years under a corrective action plan to address overcrowding and layout deficiencies. Conditions inside the facility include cramped spaces, poor ventilation, and inmates with significantly different criminal histories being housed together. County officials were notified during a walkthrough of the jail that the decertification was effective immediately.

One of the immediate impacts is the required relocation of Tennessee Department of Corrections (TDOC) inmates, many of whom are serving multi-year felony sentences. Several of those inmates also served as trustees, handling daily operations such as cleaning, cooking, and laundry. With those individuals leaving the facility, the county anticipates the need to hire outside labor to handle essential duties. Some inmates—such as those convicted of sex offenses—are more difficult to place in other counties due to housing restrictions. *Continued on Page 4*

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Morning Fax®...Today's News This Morning Page 3

Athens, Tennessee

Truck Toted After Late-Night Crash Avoiding Deer on County Road 267



Just before midnight on Thursday, a 2005 Dodge Ram was destroyed after the driver swerved to avoid a deer while traveling east on County Road 267. The truck ran into a

ditch and struck a barbed-wire electric fence, which sparked a gas leak and prompted an emergency response.

The driver, an 18-year-old male and the vehicle's only occupant, was not injured. Fire officials noted the truck was a total loss.

Niota Rural Fire and North McMinn Fire responded to the scene. Authorities are reminding motorists to use caution, as deer activity increases significantly this time of year.

Photo by David Prater, Niota Rural FD

Community News You Can Use

- Tonight is the rescheduled date for the downtown Athens Jimmy Liner Memorial Christmas Parade. The parade begins at 6:30.
- The American Heritage Girls and Trail Life Boys will be honoring local armed forces members at Veterans Park in Athens on Saturday, December 13 at 12:00pm for National Wreaths Across America Day.
- The University of Tennessee has been confirmed, as of Sunday, to be playing the University of Illinois in the Liberty Mutual Music City Bowl. The Volunteer football team will be Nashville bound for the game scheduled from Nissan Stadium on Tuesday, December 30 with the kickoff at 5:30 pm. Television coverage will be on the ESPN Sports Network.

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Monday, Dec. 08, 2025

Morning Fax®...Today's News This Morning Page 4

Athens, Tennessee

Meigs County Jail Decertified (Continued from Page 2)

Local officials initially expected TDOC to remove its inmates but later learned that the county is responsible for finding available beds in surrounding jails and providing transportation. Jail administrators are calling other facilities in an effort to secure space amid regional overcrowding.

The jail decision followed an emotional emergency commission meeting that drew a standing-room-only crowd. Residents filled the courthouse, with those unable to enter gathering outside holding signs. Many expressed frustration over what they described as years of insufficient planning and lack of communication regarding jail conditions and funding needs.

Some residents argued that poor long-term planning had created the crisis now facing the county. Others said they were unable to support higher property taxes without clear evidence of progress or accountability.

Following lengthy debate, commissioners voted to repair the existing jail. The following day, the state's decertification rendered that plan unviable.

Because the county's 911 communications center is located in the same building as the jail, concerns were raised about possible interruptions if the center must relocate. Meigs County 911 leadership addressed those concerns, announcing that emergency services will remain fully operational regardless of any move.

The county maintains a fully equipped and functional backup dispatch center at the Meigs County Emergency Operations Center, located about three miles away. Staff are prepared to transition operations to the backup site without disrupting emergency or non-emergency call handling. While some advanced systems may be temporarily limited during a relocation, the center will remain staffed 24 hours a day and continue dispatching first responders without interruptions.

County leaders must now determine how to regain jail certification. Options under consideration include constructing a new jail or exploring a combined justice center. In the meantime, officials are working to move inmates safely, secure staffing for daily operations, and assess the long-term future of the current facility.

The decertification places added pressure on local law enforcement and county officials, who must navigate both the immediate logistical challenges and the broader financial implications of resolving the issue. **Source:** [Local 3 News](#)

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Athens, Tennessee

McMinn County Arrest Reports

12-04-25

Richard Perry, 45 of Sweetwater, charged with receiving, and or concealing stolen property, driving on a revoked license, failure to have insurance, use of a stolen or lost license plate, and intentional vandalism by tampering with, or removal of a transdermal device. Bond \$3,000.

Eddie Wilcox, 54 of Athens, charged with DUI.

Bobby Kate, 37 of Athens, charged with felony aggravated assault.

Matthew Huston, 37 of Etowah, charged with shoplifting, theft of property, violation of probation for driving on a revoked license, Bond \$3,500.

Joshua Jarka, 24 of Sweetwater, charged with DUI. Bond \$1,000.

12-05-25

Christopher Hester, 47 of Athens, charged with simple possession casual exchange of schedule 6, simple possession casual exchange of schedule 4 - Alprazolam. Bond \$4,000.

Tina Heddon, 45 of Athens, charged with casual exchange and possession of meth. Bond \$6,000.

Timothy Finney, 32 of Athens, charged with manufacturing, sale, delivery, or possession of fentanyl for resale, maintaining a dwelling for drug use, unlawful drug paraphernalia, and violation of a drug free school zone. Bond \$31,000.

Johnny Warren, 24 of Radcliffe, Kentucky, charged with disorderly conduct and misuse of 9-1-1. Bond \$2,000.

Michael Laviette, 28 of Etowah, charged with possession of schedule 2 drugs.

Aubrey King, 27 of Ten Mile, charged with disorderly conduct and violation of probation for public intoxication. Bond \$3,000.

Peyton Womack, 23 of Athens, charged with state violation of probation for evading arrest, and failure to appear in Meigs County, being held without bond.

Nasaya Vincent, 25 of Englewood, charged with vandalism, simple possession casual exchange of schedule 3 suboxone, and drug paraphernalia. Bond \$9,000.

Those accused are considered innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. Information gathered using public sources.

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Monday, Dec. 08, 2025

Morning Fax®...Today's News This Morning Page 6

Athens, Tennessee

Obituaries

Kathern Arvedah King Henry, 88 of Athens, passed away on Wednesday, December 3 at NHC of Athens. She was a member of Hilltop Baptist Church and was retired from Thomas and Betts Corporation. Funeral services will be 1pm Monday, December 8 in the chapel of Laycock-Hobbs Funeral Home. A graveside service will be 2 pm Monday at McMinn Memory Gardens following the funeral service. The family will receive friends from 12-1pm Monday before the service at the funeral home. Laycock-Hobbs Funeral Home will be in charge of the arrangements.

Charlotte Hawkins, 80 of Athens, passed away on December 4 in Athens. She was born in Georgia and graduated from Rhinehart Junior College and earned another degree from Berry College. She had a long career as a Christian school educator and secretary spending the majority of her career at Victory Baptist Academy in Shelbyville, TN. Services were held December 6, 2025 at Rainwater Funeral Home in Summerville, GA. Interment was at Westhill Cemetery in Trion, GA. Smith Funeral & Cremation Services of Athens is in charge of local arrangements and Rainwater Funeral Home is in charge in Georgia.

Benson Craig "Ben" Needham, 94 of Athens, passed away peacefully on Thursday, December 4, at Morning Pointe Assisted Living. In 1995, Ben and Martha retired from Memphis to the mountains of East Tennessee, drawn by the breathtaking views, the quiet pace of life, and the wide-open space to indulge their shared passion for gardening and flowers. Long-time faithful members of the Church of Christ, they joined the Idlewild congregation in Athens, where Ben lent his building expertise to help construct a new meetinghouse. Visitation will be open for friends and members of the community on Thursday, December 11th from 5pm-7pm, with a service beginning at 7pm at Laycock Hobbs Funeral Home in Athens, TN. A graveside service will be held on Friday, December 12th at 2pm at McMinn Memorial Gardens in Athens. Laycock-Hobbs Funeral Home is in charge of arrangements.

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