

GLOUCESTER TEEN CONVICTED OF FIRING INTO BUILDINGS

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Stephen Beckner was found guilty of shooting into a house and store on July 23.

A "hole in the law" enabled the defense to shoot down four charges against Stephen Beckner, but a jury on Thursday found the 18-year-old guilty of firing into a house and a store during a drunken shooting spree July 23 in the county.

Defense attorney Andrew A. Protogyrou of Norfolk persuaded Circuit Court Judge William H. Shaw III to dismiss the four charges against Beckner because there was nobody inside the buildings during the late-night shootings.

Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Monique Watson said during a recess in the trial that the new law under which Beckner was charged -- designed to address drive-by shootings -- requires that someone be in a building for such a shooting to be a felony. Otherwise, Watson said, the offense is a misdemeanor.

"There's a hole in the law," she said, adding that it would be more effective without the occupancy requirement.

In the two shootings in which Beckner was convicted, people were present. A couple and some neighbors were sitting on a deck behind their house when a bullet smashed through a front window. At D&S Grocery on Hickory Fork Road, a bullet shattered the glass front door as store employee Franklin Smith was preparing to close for the night.

Smith testified that he was bending over when the 30-30 bullet crashed through the store. He thanked God he wasn't killed.

Beckner, who was 17 at the time, testified that he and a friend, Everett Phillips, who was 18, had split a fifth of vodka before driving around shooting at buildings with a rifle Phillips had in his pickup truck. Beckner said he only fired the rifle one time, at Belroi Market, which was closed and unoccupied.

Phillips, who testified on Tuesday, blamed all of the shooting on Beckner. Phillips has pleaded guilty to six of seven charges in the rampage. He's scheduled to be sentenced on Monday.

Shaw allowed Beckner to remain free on bond until he is sentenced at a later date. He could be given a maximum of five years in prison on each conviction. *

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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