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Rosa Parks' lawyer accused of secretly hoarding memorabilia, avoids jail



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A years-long drama involving missing civil rights and Motown memorabilia took another turn in federal court for the key figure in the case: the late Rosa Parks' attorney, who avoided going to jail Tuesday for allegedly hiding more than 100 artifacts.

Instead, a judge gave Detroit lawyer Gregory Reed another three weeks to surrender the items, which include iron slave shackles, Parks' key to the city of Detroit, a 1907 autographed copy of educator Booker T. Washington's 1901 autobiography "Up From Slavery," and gold Motown records such as "Please Mr. Postman" by the Marvelettes.

According to documents filed in U.S. Bankruptcy Court, Reed, Parks' longtime personal lawyer, isn't entitled to any of the missing items and was ordered two years ago to turn them over to pay off creditors. The bankruptcy case also includes allegations that Reed played fast and loose with his collection of civil rights and Motown memorabilia, pretending to be a historian who showcased the items at exhibits, but instead using them for his personal gain.

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For example, court records show, Reed had acquired the only known letter from Dr. Martin Luther King to Rosa Parks, thanking her for her bravery in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955 when she refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white person in what became a defining moment of the civil rights movement.

But Reed — instead of donating it to a museum — ended up selling the letter to a collector in California and keeping the profits, court records show. This allegation, among others,

surfaced after Reed filed bankruptcy in 2014.

A year later, bankruptcy lawyers searched Reed's Indian Village home and discovered his massive collection of civil rights and Motown artifacts, records show. They took photographs of items they presumed to be valuable artifacts and requested that they be surrendered to satisfy creditors.

In July of this year, however, lawyers went back to the home and discovered that many of those items were missing — 137 in total, records show.

In October, lawyers filed a detailed inventory list of the missing items in federal court. Each item had a corresponding photo number, along with a description, such as "assorted photographs of Alex Haley," "Records: Johnny Mathis 'I'll Search My Heart,'" and "Framed gold record of 'You don't Have to be a Star' by Marilyn McCoo and Billy Davis Jr."

Following a hearing Tuesday morning in Detroit, U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Marci McIvor — who had the option of locking Reed up — requested that lawyers determine the value of the missing items.

In a Nov. 9 court filing, Reed said the list of supposed missing items is "false or a fabrication." He denied hiding anything and said that he preserved all of the items that the court had ordered him to.

Reed also suggested foul play by the trustee's lawyer.

"Trustee sent a false list and photographs alleging items were not turned over or accessible to the (trustee's lawyer) for removal," Reed wrote. "Many assets were secretly removed in an unorganized method (that) intentionally or negligently created confusion."

Reed also suggested that his house may have been broken into, writing, "There have been various home invasions" and breaking and enterings on his block in Indian Village.

But a lawyer for bankruptcy trustee Kenneth Nathan — who is trying to recover the assets for creditors — has argued that Reed belongs behind bars until he discloses where the missing items are, and should be fined every day until they turn up.

In an Oct. 13 court filing, the Findling Law firm — acting on behalf of the trustee — asked for the "imprisonment of (Reed) until he disclosed the location of the missing Burns property and causes it to be turned over." Or, if the items were sold, lawyers wrote, then Reed should turn over the proceeds from that sale.

David Finding of Royal Oak, one of the lawyers working for the trustee, declined comment.

Detroit attorney Bobby Frierson, a lawyer for Reed, could not be reached for comment.

As Parks' personal attorney, Reed has been involved in numerous lawsuits and controversies involving Parks' assets and name.

Twice, he sued record companies over the use of Parks' name – without her permission – in a song: once in 1999, then again in 2004, when he sought \$5 billion from record companies and two bookstore chains that sold a record with a song titled “Rosa Parks.”

During that lawsuit, when questions surfaced about whether Reed and other lawyers were serving in the best interests of Parks, a federal judge appointed former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer as Parks' guardian ad litem to protect her interests.

Reed tried to get Archer thrown off the case, but the judge denied the request and concluded that Archer was needed to protect Parks' best interests as she was suffering from dementia and poor health.

The case settled in 2005 for a substantial, undisclosed amount. Reed's cut was one-third.

During that time, Parks' relatives had accused Reed and Parks' longtime friend, Elaine Steele, of pursuing lawsuits against the record companies for financial gain.

When the lawsuit was settled, Archer said: “What is important is that Mrs. Parks will be well taken care of for the rest of her life.”

In 2007, Reed also thought he owned the fingerprint and arrest card from Parks' 1955 run-in with police after refusing to give up her bus seat in Alabama.

But officials at Troy University in Montgomery said the school owns the real document, not Reed, who had loaned a copy to Disney World for its National Treasures exhibit at Epcot Center in Florida.

Reed, who said a stranger handed him the cards during a museum groundbreaking ceremony in 1998, has long maintained his were the originals.

Parks' assets and estate have long been the subject of controversy. She and her husband, who moved to Detroit in 1957, had no children but more than a dozen nieces and nephews who have long squabbled over the right to her estate.

The Detroit civil rights icon died in Detroit in 2005.

A fight over her estate still lingers.

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