

DETROIT

Rosa Parks' lawyer at center of missing artifacts case

Robert Snell The Detroit News

Published 12:01 a.m. ET Nov. 14, 2017 | Updated 12:33 p.m. ET Nov. 14, 2017

Detroit — More than 100 pieces of civil rights memorabilia, Motown and African-American history have disappeared and Rosa Parks' lawyer should be jailed until the items are found, a bankruptcy lawyer claims.

The allegation emerged in the bankruptcy case of prominent Detroit attorney Gregory Reed, a case that features claims about mansions with secret rooms, crates crammed full of historical objects and missing artifacts. The missing items includes iron slave shackles, an early draft of a Parks book, a century-old book signed by educator Booker T. Washington and gold records awarded to Motown artists including The Marvelettes.

Reed should be jailed until he reveals the location of the missing property and returns the items, a lawyer for bankruptcy trustee Kenneth Nathan wrote in a court filing. If the property was sold, Reed should relinquish the money, the lawyer argues.

Reed also should be fined every day until he complies with court orders, according to the trustee's legal team.

Reed's fate could be determined Tuesday in a case that has provided insight into the finances of a down-on-his-luck lawyer who has been accused of selling a rare Rosa Parks item and treating a nonprofit designed to preserve historical items as his personal piggy bank.

"This person is altering American history," Parks' niece Rhea McCauley, 65, told The Detroit News. "Oh, my goodness, this is so sad."

The case dates to 2014, when Reed filed bankruptcy in Detroit. It was a stark reversal of fortune for a Detroit lawyer who says his client list included singers Aretha Franklin and Anita Baker and who socialized with Motown founder Berry Gordy.

Reed became Parks' legal adviser after she was mugged in 1994 and has said he saved her from being a forgotten historical footnote.

"I was concerned in terms of that incident and what took place and wondered how I can better the life for Mrs. Parks," Reed told The News in 1997. "No one else was doing anything."

Reed, 69, did not respond to messages seeking comment Monday.

Parks became an iconic figure of the civil rights movement on Dec. 1, 1955, when she refused to relinquish her seat to a white passenger on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

Parks died at age 92 in 2005 in Detroit, where she had lived since 1957.

Reed faced controversy in 1997 when Parks' friends and civil rights leaders complained her legacy was being cheapened to sell everything from dolls to prepaid telephone calling cards.

"He was a co-worker and an employee of Auntie Rosa's. He has no ties to my family," McCauley said. "If he was walking down the street, I wouldn't know who he was."

Reed also represented Parks in a 1999 lawsuit against the rap group OutKast and its record companies for using her name in a song without permission. The case was settled for an undisclosed sum.

Reed worked out of a million-dollar Corktown firehouse where Parks maintained an office and he lives in a stately Indian Village home.

His link to Parks coincided with his efforts to preserve African-American art and civil rights objects. Reed helped establish the nonprofit Keeper of the Word Foundation to buy and preserve documents of historical significance.

In 1992, he paid more than \$120,000 for "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" manuscript by Alex Haley and three unpublished chapters.

Reed, however, shielded assets from creditors by commingling them with the foundation's and treated the nonprofit like his "personal piggy bank," U.S. District Judge Matthew Leitman wrote in a court filing.

In March 2014, Reed sold a letter from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to Parks for \$65,000. Reed said the letter "came from" the foundation's inventory but bank records show he spent the money paying his mortgage, car payment, utilities and credit card bills, according to court records.

Five months later, in August 2014, Reed was broke. He listed \$272,000 in assets and \$872,000 in liabilities in his bankruptcy filing.

The bankruptcy triggered a years-long search for assets by the bankruptcy trustee.

Nathan hired a treasure hunter, Royal Oak lawyer David Findling, to inventory assets and find others that could be sold to satisfy Reed's creditors, according to court records.

Reed failed to disclose assets and, when challenged, produced worthless items, including letters children wrote to Parks, according to bankruptcy records.

In fall 2015, the trustee won permission to enter Reed's 5,000-square-foot Tudor-style home and inventory personal property. Investigators documented the items while taking more than 400 photographs.

Inside the 15-room home, the trustee found original artwork, valuable artifacts, antiques, autographed books, a baby grand piano and museum display items.

In the garage, the trustee found six large, wooden shipping crates sent to Reed from the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago. The crates contained framed museum exhibits, autographs from The Four Tops and other groups, gold records from Motown artists, original sheet music from The Temptations and the Jackson 5's first contract with Steeltown Records.

Reed said most of the items belonged to his nonprofit but the collection was not included in an inventory initially submitted to the court, Findling wrote in a filing.

Days after the inspection of Reed's home, he was ordered to preserve the items. In December 2015, he was ordered to turn over the property to the bankruptcy trustee.

Findling's team entered Reed's house on July 10, 2017, and learned more than 130 items were missing, according to court records.

The basement, once filled with framed artwork and posters for museum exhibits, was emptied. And valuable paintings had disappeared from the walls, the trustee's lawyer Erica Ehrlichman wrote in a court filing.

"(Reed) may have hidden it, he may have sold it and pocketed the proceeds, he may have transferred it to a friend for 'safekeeping,'" she wrote.

While Findling has recovered some property, including the Malcolm X manuscript and proceeds from the January sale of the Corktown firehouse, which netted \$1,060,000, Reed has failed to turn over much of the property, according to court records.

The missing property includes slave shackles, an African drum, a tribal mask, a gold key to the city of Detroit, a Rosa Parks figurine and a 1963 poster from King's Walk to Freedom in Detroit.

The property also includes autographed copies of "Up From Slavery" signed by Washington in August 1907 and framed gold records of "Please Mr. Postman" by The Marvelettes, "It's Alright With Me" by Patti LaBelle, Rosa Parks dolls, photos and civil rights memorabilia.

In a filing, Reed said the list of missing items was inaccurate and included items owned by third parties.

Reed said he preserved all property covered by the judge's order.

"Many assets were secretly removed in an unorganized method (that) intentionally or negligently created confusion," he wrote.

His home might have been burglarized, Reed added.

"Objects of the past teach us about not only history, but about ourselves as well. That's why preserving historical objects is such a critical task and why museums are called culture keepers," said LaNesha DeBardelaben, senior vice president of education and exhibitions at The Wright Museum. "These objects remind us of the struggle, the strength, the survival, the strategies, the success and often the suffering that our people endured. Objects help us remember."

The request to jail Reed has support. Reed's ex-wife, Verladia Blount, filed paperwork supporting a motion to hold Reed in contempt for failing to turn over property.

Reed has many hiding places, his ex-wife said.

Blount describes his Indian Village home as something out of a mystery novel.

"There is a secret room located in the library on the first floor," Blount wrote in a court filing. "If you push on the paneling, the paneling opens to reveal another door, which is secured by a lock opened with a key."

Reed kept valuables and documents in the secret room, she wrote.

When the bankruptcy trustee's Realtor tried to access the room, Reed refused, according to a court filing.

U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Marci McIvor will consider the request to jail Reed at a hearing Tuesday.

The provenance of most items is unclear in court filings but none appear to be from Parks' personal collection, said lawyer Lawrence Pepper

, who represents the civil rights icon's relatives.

In 2014, The Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development, a charity founded by the civil rights leader, sold hundreds of items it owned to a foundation controlled by the son of billionaire investor Warren Buffett

for \$4.5 million

.The sale included Parks' Presidential Medal of Freedom.

"The medal was missing but turned up when a judge threatened to put (one of Parks' friends) in jail," Pepper said.

He has met Reed and was surprised to learn of the bankruptcy and treasure hunt.

"It seems kind of sad to me," Pepper said. "He knew (Parks) personally. To be counsel for somebody who is so famous, I think that counts for something."

rsnell@detroitnews.com

(313) 222-2486

Twitter: @robertsnellnews

