

Death sentences upheld for Stokes

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — The Pennsylvania Supreme Court has upheld three death sentences against a man convicted of killing three people during a 1982 restaurant robbery.

The sentences against Ralph Trent Stokes were proper, the court on Wednesday concluded after an automatic review.

Stokes alleged errors by a Common Pleas Court judge and his own attorney during trial. The justices rejected all but one of Stokes' claims in a 22-page opinion written by Justice Ralph J. Cappy.

The justices agreed the Common Pleas judge incorrectly instructed the jury on one of the aggravating circumstances that led to the death penalties. However, because the jury had found a second aggravating circumstance and no mitigating circumstances, the death penalties were affirmed.

"The sentences were not arbitrarily arrived at; nor were they the product of passion or prejudice; the evidence supports the aggravating factor of death occurring in the course of a felony and we find no excessiveness or disproportionality when compared to the sentences imposed in similar cases," Cappy wrote.

Chief Justice Robert N.C. Nix Jr. and Justices Rolf Larsen and Nicholas P. Papadakos concurred.

Stokes, 29, was convicted of first-degree murder, robbery, weapons charges and conspiracy in the slaying of a mailman and two employees at Smokin' Joe's Korner on City Line Avenue.

Stokes and a partner, Donald Jackson, wore blue jumpsuits and ski masks into the restaurant and bar March 12, 1982. Jackson testified during trial.

After locking four employees in a walk-in refrigerator, Stokes and Jackson were looting the restaurant when mailman Peter Santangelo happened on the scene, according to the court opinion.

Stokes forced Santangelo to lie down on the kitchen floor, then shot and killed Mary Figueroa, the restaurant manager and wife of one of its owners, and employee Eugene Jefferson, the opinion states. Santangelo tried to escape, but Stokes cornered him at the locked front door and fired three times, killing him also, according to the opinion.

Jackson pleaded guilty to charges of robbery, conspiracy and second-degree murder. He testified against Stokes as part of a plea bargain.

Clipped By:



k_celeste_abrahams

Fri, Jun 9, 2017