

No 7th trial for Mississippi man freed from prison in 2019

Associated Press

A Mississippi man freed last year after 22 years in prison will not be tried a seventh time in a quadruple murder case, a judge ruled Friday after prosecutors told him they no longer had any credible witnesses.

Curtis Flowers was convicted multiple times in a bloody slaying and robbery at a small-town furniture store in 1996. The U.S. Supreme Court threw out the most recent conviction in June 2019, citing racial bias in jury selection.

"Today, I am finally free from the injustice that left me locked in a box for nearly twenty three years," Flowers said in a statement released by his lawyer. "I've been asked if I ever thought this day would come. I have been blessed with a family that never gave up on me and with them by my side, I knew it would."

Montgomery County Circuit Judge Joseph Loper signed the order Friday after the state attorney general's office, which had taken over the case, admitted the evidence was too weak to proceed with another trial.

"As the evidence stands today, there is no key prosecution witness ... who is alive and available and has not had multiple, conflicting statements in the record," Assistant Attorney General Mary Helen Wall wrote in a filing presented to Loper on Friday.

Four people were shot to death on July 16, 1996, in the Tardy Furniture store in Winona. They were owner Bertha Tardy, 59, and three em-



In this Monday, Dec. 16, 2019 file photo, Curtis Flowers speaks with reporters as he exits the Winston-Choctaw Regional Correctional Facility in Louisville, Miss. Mississippi's new attorney general must decide whether to take a quadruple murder case to a seventh trial. Curtis Flowers has had two mistrials and four reversed convictions in connection with the 1996 slayings of four people at a furniture store. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis, File)

ployees: 45-year-old Carmen Rigby, 42-year-old Robert Golden and 16-year-old Derrick "Bobo" Stewart. Relatives of some of the victims have maintained their belief that Flowers is the killer.

Flowers was convicted four times in the slayings: twice for individual slayings and twice for all four killings. Two other trials involving all four deaths ended in mistrials.

Each of Flowers' convictions was overturned. In June 2019, the U.S. Supreme Court tossed out the conviction and death sentence from Flowers' sixth trial, which took place in 2010. Justices said prosecutors showed an unconstitutional pattern of excluding African American jurors in the trials of Flowers, who is Black.

The Supreme Court ruling came after American Public Media's "In the Dark" investigated the case. Crucially, the podcast recorded

jailhouse informant Odell Hallmon in 2017 and 2018 recanting his testimony that Flowers had confessed to him. Hallmon's story of the confession had been key evidence in later trials, but he told the podcast on a contraband cellphone from behind bars that his story was "a bunch of fantasies, a bunch of lying."

"The only witness who offered direct evidence of guilt recanted his prior testimony, admitting he was lying when he said Mr. Flowers made a jailhouse confession to the murders," Wall wrote Friday.

The podcast also presented an analysis finding a long history of racial bias in jury selection by Montgomery County District Attorney Doug Evans, and found evidence suggesting another man may have committed the crimes. Evans stepped aside from the case after State Attorney General Lynn Fitch took office in January.

Governor Reeves extends Safe Return Order, eases restrictions on businesses, social gatherings as COVID-19 numbers improve

Press Release

On Monday, September 14, Governor Tate Reeves announced that he is extending the social distancing

"This prosecution was flawed from the beginning and was tainted throughout by racial discrimination," said defense lawyer Rob McDuff of the Mississippi Center for Justice. "It should never have occurred and lasted far too long, but we are glad it is finally over."

After the Supreme Court ruling, Flowers was moved off death row at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman and taken to a regional jail in the central Mississippi town of Louisville. He remained in custody because the original murder indictment was still active.

At the request of Flowers' attorneys, Loper set bond at \$250,000, with Flowers released in December after 10% of that amount was posted. The judge ruled Friday that all but \$10 of the \$25,000 should be returned to Matthew Popoli, who donated the money to support Flowers. Popoli had remained anonymous until Friday.

Winona sits near the crossroads of Interstate 55, the major north-south artery in Mississippi, and U.S. Highway 82, which runs east to west. It about a half-hour's drive from the flatlands of the Mississippi Delta. Among its 4,300 residents, about 48% are Black and 44% are white. Census Bureau figures show that about 30% live in poverty.

measures under the Safe Return order with a few amendments relaxing restrictions as Mississippi flattens the curve on new COVID-19 cases.

Continuing to work with state and national health experts on a data-driven, measured strategy to limit transmission, Governor Reeves has extended the Safe Return order until Wednesday, September 30 at 5:00 PM.

Under the amended Safe Return order, group gathering limitations are now at no more than 10 indoors or 50 outdoors when social distancing is not possible. If people are able to social distance, group gatherings are set at no more than 20 indoors or 100 outdoors.

Maximum capacity has

also been increased to 75% for retail businesses, restaurants, gyms, and seated diners at reception halls and conference centers. Party sizes in restaurants are now limited to 10 people per table, and gyms can be open 24 hours a day.

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Castalian Springs Water annual meeting will be held Monday, September 28, 2020, at West City Hall at 6:00 p.m.

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Kanye West makes presidential ballot in MS

Associated Press

Kanye West will appear as a presidential candidate on Mississippi's ballot in November, after being approved as a qualified candidate by the State Board of Election Commissioners on Tuesday.

The rapper has already qualified to appear on the ballot as an independent candidate in several states, including Arkansas, Idaho,

Iowa, Tennessee, Oklahoma and Utah.

To qualify in Mississippi, he was required to pay a \$2,500 fee to the Secretary of State's Office and get the signatures of at least 1,000 Mississippi voters.

"It was interesting to see him pick Mississippi, and obviously it will be interesting to see what happens with that vote on Nov. 3," Mississippi Secretary of State Michael

Watson said after the board's meeting. "But he did qualify."

West, who once backed Republican President Donald Trump, announced last month that he had broken with Trump and would launch his own presidential bid. His campaign filed paperwork July 15 with the Federal Election Commission. Neither West or his wife, Kim Kardashian West,

were present at the meeting of the Mississippi Board of Election Commissioners Tuesday.

Leah Willingham is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on under-covered issues.

Changes made to WMA Waterfowl Draw Hunts

Press Release

In an effort to promote a safe environment due to COVID-19, the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) has altered waterfowl draw hunts on Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) for the 2020-21 hunting season. New procedures are as follows:

- Hunters must be drawn to

participate in WMA waterfowl draw hunts.

- All waterfowl draw hunt applications (5 draw periods per WMA) will be open concurrently from October 1 to October 15 and all drawings and notifications will be completed by November 1.
- There will be no "stand-by" opportunity for non-drawn hunters to show up

the day of a hunt for a chance to fill a vacant spot.

- Drawn hunters will have 48 hours to confirm their reservation online before it is returned for a second drawing.

- Applicants who are not initially drawn will be entered into the second drawing to fill any unconfirmed hunting positions.

- Hunting units will be assigned when draw winners are notified.
- Drawn hunters and their

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