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U.S. Supreme Court rules in favor of Alabama death row inmate

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James McWilliams (ADOC)

The U.S. Supreme Court has reversed a ruling from a federal appeals court in an Alabama death row inmate's case.

James McWilliams, 60, has been on death row since 1986 after he was convicted of raping and killing a store clerk in Tuscaloosa. After several appeals focusing on the fact McWilliams did not have an independent mental health expert at his trial, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals denied McWilliams' appeal in 2015.

Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed the appeals court decision and remanded the case to back to a lower court for further review.

No execution date has been set for McWilliams.

According to court documents from the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals decision, McWilliams said the Tuscaloosa County Circuit Court where he was convicted should have granted him a continuance before sentencing, because some psychiatric records had only arrived at court the morning of his sentencing. McWilliams lawyers were only permitted to review the documents during a brief recess at the clerk's office, court documents showed.

Before his trial, a Tuscaloosa "Lunacy Commission" of three doctors told the court McWilliams was not mentally ill at the time of the crime, competent to stand trial, and was faking psychotic symptoms.

Dr. John Goff, Cheif of Psychology at Bryce Hospital at the time of McWilliams trial, tested McWilliams and wrote a report to the circuit court. Goff diagnosed McWilliams with "organic personality syndrome." However, the report was delivered to the inmate's lawyers two days before the sentencing hearing, followed by dozens of mental health records and a prison file showing that McWilliams was taking psychotropic drugs.



The judge refused the defense's request to delay the hearing, and sentenced McWilliams to death.

Later, McWilliams filed a Rule 32 petition stating his counsel was ineffective both at trial and at sentencing. In 2001, the Alabama circuit court denied the petition and in 2004, the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals denied to review the case.

Justice Stephen Breyer delivered the majority opinion Monday. In the opinion, he stated, "In reaching this conclusion, however, the Eleventh Circuit only considered whether '[a] few additional days to review Dr. Goff 's findings' would have made a difference. It did not specifically consider whether access to the type of meaningful assistance in evaluating, preparing, and presenting the defense... would have mattered. There is reason to think that it could have."

"The trial judge relied heavily on his belief that McWilliams was malingering. If McWilliams had the assistance of an expert to explain that '[m]alingering is not inconsistent with serious mental illness,' [from the American Psychiatric Association]... he might have been able to alter the judge's perception of the case," Breyer wrote.

Justice Samuel Alito wrote a dissenting opinion. "We do not tolerate this sort of bait-and-switch tactic from litigants, and we should not engage in it ourselves," he said of McWilliams' previous appeals.

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"The Court's approach is acutely unfair to Alabama. The State surely believed that it did not need to brief the second question presented in McWilliams's petition... It will come as a nasty surprise to Alabama that the Court has ruled against it on the very question we declined to review--and without giving the State a fair chance to respond," he wrote.

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