

SUPREME COURT OF TENNESSEE

Haley v. University of Tennessee-Knoxville

188 S.W.3d 518 (Tenn. 2006) · Decided March 17, 2006

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Tennessee held that filing a claim with the Tennessee Claims Commission activates the waiver provision of Tennessee Code Annotated section 9-8-307(b), even when the claim is later voluntarily withdrawn or dismissed without prejudice. The court also held that Tennessee Supreme Court Rule 23, which authorizes answering certified questions from federal courts, is constitutional and within the court’s inherent judicial power. The court declined to address additional questions outside the scope of the certified question.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Tennessee
WRITING FOR THE COURT	E. Riley Anderson, J.; William M. Barker, C.J.; Adolpho A. Birch, Jr., J.; Janice M. Holder, J.; Cornelia A. Clark, J.
JURISDICTION	Tennessee
DECIDED	March 17, 2006
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The United States District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee certified a question of Tennessee law to the Tennessee Supreme Court under Tennessee Supreme Court Rule 23 while considering the respondents' motion to dismiss Haley's federal action.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	De novo statutory interpretation of the Tennessee Claims Commission Act and determination of the Tennessee Supreme Court's authority to answer a certified question.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Tennessee Supreme Court opinion; binding authority on Tennessee law within the state.
PARTIES	Usha Haley v. University of Tennessee-Knoxville, Jan Williams

TOPICS

- appellate procedure
- statutory interpretation
- sovereign immunity
- federalism
- comity

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Tennessee Supreme Court Rule 23 authorizes the Tennessee Supreme Court to answer a certified question from a federal district court consistently with the Tennessee Constitution.
2. Whether filing a claim with the Tennessee Claims Commission activates the waiver provision of Tennessee Code Annotated section 9-8-307(b) even when the claimant later voluntarily withdraws or takes a nonsuit before the Commission acts.
3. Whether the Tennessee Supreme Court should answer additional questions concerning whether the University is a state officer or official and whether Haley's federal claims arose from the same acts or omissions.

HOLDINGS

1. Tennessee Supreme Court Rule 23 is a constitutional and appropriate exercise of the Tennessee Supreme Court's inherent judicial power; answering a certified question is not an adjudicative exercise of the appellate jurisdiction limited by Article VI, section 2 of the Tennessee Constitution.
2. The waiver provision in Tennessee Code Annotated section 9-8-307(b) is activated when the claim is filed with the Tennessee Claims Commission, even if the claimant later voluntarily withdraws the claim or takes a nonsuit before the Commission takes action.
3. The court declined to answer the additional questions because they were outside the scope of the question certified by the federal district court.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"The moment the plaintiff's claim is "filed" with the Claims Commission, the plaintiff has waived all other causes of action against any state officer or employee based on the same act or omission." (524)

"In light of the Legislature's unambiguous pronouncement in enacting the Claims Commission Act, we hold that the waiver provision of Tennessee Code Annotated section 9-8-307(b) is activated upon filing of the claim, even if the claim is later voluntarily withdrawn or non-suited." (524)

"We also hold that the withdrawal or voluntary non-suit of a claim before the Claims Commission activates the waiver provision of Tennessee Code Annotated section 9-8-307(b)." (525)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The University of Tennessee hired Haley as an associate professor in 2000, and she was denied tenure and promotion in May 2002. She sued in federal court under Title VII and 42 U.S.C. § 1983. She later filed a breach-of-contract claim with the Tennessee Claims Commission, withdrew it before Commission action, and received a dismissal without prejudice; the respondents argued that the filing nevertheless triggered the statutory waiver of related causes of action.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Haley filed federal claims alleging discrimination and a related § 1983 claim. She later filed a breach-of-contract claim with the Tennessee Claims Commission, then voluntarily withdrew it; the Commission dismissed the claim without prejudice. The respondents argued that the Claims Commission filing waived Haley's related federal and state causes of action. Rather than decide the motion, the federal district court certified the waiver question to the Tennessee Supreme Court, which accepted and answered it.

DISPOSITION

other

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The Tennessee Supreme Court answered the certified question for the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee. The federal district court retained jurisdiction to decide the underlying case and apply the answer.

CASES CITED

- Erie Railroad Co. v. Tompkins, 304 U.S. 64, 78 (1938)
- In re Elliott, 74 Wash. 2d 600, 446 P.2d 347, 350 (1968) (en banc)
- Lehman Bros. v. Schein, 416 U.S. 386, 391 (1974)
- Scott v. Bank One Trust Co., N.A., 62 Ohio St. 3d 39, 577 N.E.2d 1077, 1079-80 (1991)
- Peck v. Tanner, 181 S.W.3d 262, 265-66 (Tenn. 2005)
- In re E.N.R., 42 S.W.3d 26, 31-32 (Tenn. 2001)
- In re Cumberland Power Co., 147 Tenn. 504, 249 S.W. 818, 818-19 (1923)
- Belmont v. Board of Law Examiners, 511 S.W.2d 461, 462 (Tenn. 1974)
- Kane v. Kane, 547 S.W.2d 559, 560 (Tenn. 1977)
- Reece v. Findlay Industries, Inc., 83 S.W.3d 713, 717 (Tenn. 2002)
- Bayberry Associates v. Jones, 783 S.W.2d 553, 558 (Tenn. 1990)
- Shebestor v. Triple Crown Insurers, 826 P.2d 603, 606 n.4 (Okla. 1992)
- Carson Creek Vacation Resorts, Inc. v. State of Tennessee Department of Revenue, 865 S.W.2d 1, 2 (Tenn. 1993)
- Miller v. Childress, 21 Tenn. 320, 321-22 (1841)
- Henry v. White, 194 Tenn. 192, 250 S.W.2d 70, 72 (1952)
- Mathes v. State, 173 Tenn. 511, 121 S.W.2d 548, 550 (1938)
- White by Swafford v. Gerbitz, 860 F.2d 661, 662 (6th Cir. 1988)
- Sun Insurance Office, Ltd. v. Clay, 133 So. 2d 735, 742 (Fla. 1961)
- In re Petition of Burson, 909 S.W.2d 768, 772 (Tenn. 1995)