

SUPREME COURT OF ALABAMA

Samsal ex rel. Daniel v. Cole

904 So. 2d 1251 (Ala. 2004) · Decided December 30, 2004

SUMMARY

The Alabama Supreme Court considers a sheriff's petition for a writ of mandamus challenging an order requiring production of a complete criminal investigative file in a related civil action. Applying Ala. Code § 12-21-3.1, the court holds that the trial court exceeded the permissible scope of discovery by ordering production of the entire file, but that unique crime-scene photographs could be produced upon a showing of undue hardship and unavailability from other sources.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Alabama
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Nabers, Chief Justice; Nabers; Houston; See; Lyons; Brown; Johnstone; Harwood; Woodall; Stuart
JURISDICTION	Alabama
DECIDED	December 30, 2004
DISPOSITION	writ_granted
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The Tuscaloosa County sheriff petitioned the Alabama Supreme Court for a writ of mandamus directing the Jefferson Circuit Court, Bessemer Division, to set aside a discovery order requiring production of a complete criminal-investigation file in a related civil action.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Whether the trial court exceeded the discretion afforded by Ala. Code 1975, § 12-21-3.1(c), in ordering discovery of law-enforcement investigative materials.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Alabama Supreme Court opinion
PARTIES	Edmund M. “Ted” Sexton, Sheriff of Tuscaloosa County v. Chad Edward Cole, Rhonda Samsal

TOPICS

- discovery dispute
- appellate procedure
- statutory interpretation
- evidence
- civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Ala. Code 1975, § 12-21-3.1(c), permits a noncriminal party in a civil action to obtain law-enforcement investigative materials when the party proves undue hardship and unavailability from other reasonable sources.
2. Whether the Jefferson Circuit Court exceeded its statutory discretion by ordering production of the sheriff's entire investigative file rather than limiting production to the specifically requested crime-scene photographs.
3. Whether Cole waived any objection to production of the crime-scene photographs by actively seeking their production.

HOLDINGS

1. Ala. Code 1975, § 12-21-3.1 does not create an absolute privilege; the statutory exceptions govern whether investigative materials may be discovered in a civil proceeding.
2. The crime-scene photographs were discoverable because Cole established that they were unique, unavailable from other reasonable sources, and necessary to avoid undue hardship.
3. The trial court's order exceeded the scope of the request as narrowed during the proceedings because it required production of the entire investigative file rather than limiting production to the crime-scene photographs.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“We note at the outset that the privilege established in that Code section is not absolute and that the exceptions set forth in that statute are dispositive of this petition.” (1252)

“PETITION GRANTED IN PART AND DENIED IN PART; WRIT ISSUED.” (1253)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

A criminal case in Tuscaloosa County, *State v. Chad Cole*, docket number CC-02-99, arose from a shooting involving Darren Scott Daniel, Jr., the minor child of Rhonda Samsal. Samsal's related Jefferson County civil action sought damages arising from the shooting. The Jefferson Circuit Court ordered Sheriff Sexton to produce his complete criminal-investigation file, while Cole ultimately focused his request on unique crime-scene photographs taken contemporaneously by a sheriff's investigator. The photographs were unavailable from other reasonable sources, and their absence would impose undue hardship at the civil trial.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Rhonda Samsal filed a civil damages action in Jefferson County arising from a shooting in which Chad Cole was alleged to be the aggressor and Samsal's minor child was the victim. The Jefferson Circuit Court ordered Sheriff Sexton, who was not a party to the civil action, to produce his complete investigative file. Cole and Samsal sought the materials, but Cole subsequently narrowed his request to unique crime-scene photographs and

demonstrated their unavailability from other sources and the resulting undue hardship. The Supreme Court granted the mandamus petition in part, denied it in part, and directed entry of an order consistent with its opinion.

DISPOSITION

writ_granted

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The trial court was directed to enter an order consistent with the opinion, granting discovery of the crime-scene photographs but avoiding production of the sheriff's entire investigative file.

OPINION

NABERS, J.

NABERS, Chief Justice. Edmund M. “Ted” Sexton, the sheriff of Tuscaloosa County, petitions this Court for a writ of mandamus ordering the Jefferson Circuit Court, Bessemer Division, to set aside an order compelling Sheriff Sexton to release to Chad Edward Cole, a defendant in a civil action pending in that court, Sheriff Sexton’s complete file in a criminal case instituted in Tuscaloosa County styled State v. Chad Cole and carrying the docket number CC-02-99.

Sheriff Sexton was specifically required to produce “all records, statements, photographs, videos, notes, correspondence, [and] memos” relating to that criminal action, in which Cole is the defendant. The plaintiff in the Jefferson County civil action, Rhonda Samsal, also requested discovery from Sheriff Sexton of those same materials and has filed responsive pleadings, consistent with those filed by Cole, with this Court urging us to deny Sheriff Sexton’s petition.

From the scant materials before us it appears that the criminal action in Tuscaloosa County involved a shooting in which Cole was alleged to be the aggressor and *1252Darren Scott Daniel, Jr., the minor child of the plaintiff Rhonda Samsal, the victim.

The Jefferson County civil action seeks damages as a result of that incident. Sheriff Sexton is not a party to the Jefferson County civil action. Sheriff Sexton, before the trial court and in argument to this Court, asserts a statutory privilege afforded by Ala.Code 1975', § 12-21-3.1.

We note at the outset that the privilege established in that Code section is not absolute and that the exceptions set forth in that statute are dispositive of this petition. Of particular relevance to our consideration of this matter are § 12-21-3.1(a) and § 12-21-3.1(c), which state as follows: “(a) Neither law enforcement investigative reports nor the testimony of a law enforcement officer may be subject to a civil or administrative subpoena except as provided in subsection (c). “(c) Under no circumstances may a party to a civil or administrative proceeding discover material which is not authorized discoverable by a defendant in a criminal matter.

Noncriminal parties may upon proper motion and order from a court of record: Secure photographs, documents and tangible evidence for examination and copying only by order of a court imposing such conditions and qualifications as may be necessary to protect a chain of custody of evidence; or protect the prosecutors', law enforcement officers', or investigators' work product; or to prevent the loss or destruction of documents, objects, or evidence.

Such discovery order may be- issued by a court of record upon •proof, by substantial evidence, that the moving party will suffer undue hardship and that the records, photographs or witnesses are unavailable from other reasonable sources.” (Emphasis added.)

We further note that Cole, in pleadings before the tidal court, sought application of this exception and also effectively abandoned his request for “all records” by discussing a particular need to obtain crime-scene photographs that, he says, were unavailable from any other source. Cole also noted that the investigator for the Tuscaloosa Sheriffs Office who took those photographs had agreed to testify and needed those photographs for his testimony.

Cole’s pleadings established that the photographs of the scene taken by the sheriffs investigator were unique, having been taken contemporaneously with the initial investigation of the incident that formed the basis of the civil action; that similar photographs could not be obtained from any other source or by any other means; and that the absence of those photographs at the trial of the civil action would impose an undue hardship on the litigants.

By making this showing of undue hardship and unavailability, Cole satisfied the requirements of the statute. Cole, the defendant in both actions, effectively waived any objection he might have to the production of the photographs by actively seeking their production.

We cannot say, on the record before us, that the trial court exceeded the discretion afforded-to it by § 12-21-3.1(c), but given the willingness of the parties seeking production to limit their previous broad requests to a specific set of photographs, we conclude that the trial court’s order exceeded the scope of the request before it, as modified during the proceedings.

In accordance with this conclusion, we grant Sheriff Sexton’s petition insofar as it seeks to avoid the production, of his entire investigative file, but we deny the petition as to the production of the crime-scene photo*1253graphs, which are discoverable under § 12-21-3.1(e), and we direct the trial court to enter an order consistent with this opinion. PETITION GRANTED IN PART AND DENIED IN PART; WRIT ISSUED.

HOUSTON, SEE, LYONS, BROWN, JOHNSTONE, HARWOOD, WOODALL, and STUART, JJ., concur.