

SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS OF WEST VIRGINIA

Wayne Patterson v. Danaya Steiner, Danaya Steiner (aka Danaya Reid), Joe Steiner, and Jaime T. Adkins

No. 11-1666 (Kanawha County 11-C-1211) · No. No. 11-1666 · Decided March 8, 2013

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia affirmed the dismissal of Wayne Patterson’s petition for summary relief under West Virginia Code § 55-3A-1 et seq., which sought possession of residential property allegedly wrongfully occupied by the respondents. The court held that the respondents’ occupancy was lawful because it was authorized by heirs of the decedent, and the record did not establish the alleged property damage. The court also declined to reverse based solely on the respondents’ failure to file a response.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Per curiam; Chief Justice Brent D. Benjamin; Justice Robin Jean Davis; Justice Margaret L. Workman; Justice Menis E. Ketchum; Justice Allen H. Loughry II
JURISDICTION	West Virginia
DECIDED	March 8, 2013
DOCKET	No. 11-1666
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Wayne Patterson appealed the Kanawha County Circuit Court's dismissal with prejudice of his petition for summary relief under West Virginia Code §§ 55-3A-1 et seq. for alleged wrongful occupation of residential rental property.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	De novo review of the circuit court's dismissal of the petition.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Nonprecedential memorandum decision under West Virginia Rule of Appellate Procedure 21
PARTIES	Wayne Patterson v. Danaya Steiner (aka Danaya Reid), Joe Steiner, Jaime T. Adkins

TOPICS

eviction

landlord tenant

probate procedure

appellate procedure

standard of review

PRACTICE AREAS

landlord-tenant law

real property

probate and estate administration

civil procedure

appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Patterson, as administrator of the decedent's estate or as an heir, could obtain summary relief under West Virginia Code §§ 55-3A-1 et seq. based on alleged wrongful occupation.
2. Whether the respondents' occupation was wrongful and whether the allegations and record established a statutory basis for summary eviction based on unauthorized occupation or property damage.
3. Whether the circuit court erred by dismissing the petition with prejudice.

HOLDINGS

1. The circuit court properly dismissed Patterson's petition because the record did not establish that respondents were wrongfully occupying the property or had committed the type of property damage that would support summary relief under the statute.
2. A circuit court's order dismissing a complaint or petition is reviewed de novo.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“The circuit court’s dismissal of petitioner’s petition is reviewed de novo.” (3)

“For the foregoing reasons, we find no error in the decision of the Circuit Court of Kanawha County and affirm its order, entered August 22, 2011, denying petitioner’s petition for summary relief for wrongful occupation of residential rental property.” (4)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Patterson sought possession of residential property at 825 Barrett Drive in South Charleston, West Virginia, claiming to be the owner and alleging that the respondents were occupying the property without authorization and had damaged it. Patterson was the administrator of the estate of Josephine Patterson and also one of her heirs. The circuit court found that respondents occupied the premises at the invitation of two other heirs, making their occupation lawful, and found no persuasive indication that they had damaged the real property.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Patterson filed a petition for summary relief in magistrate court seeking possession of residential property and alleging unauthorized occupation and property damage. The respondents removed the matter to circuit court, which held a hearing and dismissed the petition with prejudice, while allowing Patterson limited access to inspect the property and estate storage and allowing respondents to remain in possession pending agreement among the heirs or further court order. The circuit court denied Patterson's motions to reconsider, and Patterson appealed. The Supreme Court of Appeals affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- State ex rel. McGraw v. Scott Runyan Pontiac-Buick, Inc., 194 W. Va. 770, 461 S.E.2d 516 (1995)
- Napier v. Napier, 211 W. Va. 208, 564 S.E.2d 418 (2002)
- Voss v. King, 33 W. Va. 236, 10 S.E. 402 (1889)
- State v. Julius, 185 W. Va. 422, 408 S.E.2d 1 (1991)

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS Wayne Patterson, FILED March 8, 2013 Petitioner Below, Petitioner RORY L. PERRY II, CLERK SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS OF WEST VIRGINIA vs.) No. 11-1666 (Kanawha County 11-C-1211) Danaya Steiner (aka Danaya Reid), Joe Steiner, and Jaime T. Adkins, Respondents Below, Respondents MEMORANDUM DECISION Petitioner Wayne Patterson, pro se, appeals the circuit court's order, entered August 22, 2011, dismissing his petition for summary relief for wrongful occupation of residential rental property.

Respondents Danaya Steiner (aka Danaya Reid), Joe Steiner, and Jaime T. Adkins, pro se, failed to file a response. The Court has considered the parties' briefs and the record on appeal. The facts and legal arguments are adequately presented, and the decisional process would not be significantly aided by oral argument. Upon consideration of the standard of review, the briefs, and the record presented, the Court finds no substantial question of law and no prejudicial error.

For these reasons, a memorandum decision is appropriate under Rule 21 of the Rules of Appellate Procedure. Petitioner filed a petition for summary relief in the magistrate court pursuant to West Virginia Code §§ 55-3A-1, et seq., demanding possession of real property located at 825 Barrett Drive, South Charleston, West Virginia 25309.1 Petitioner indicated in his petition that he was the "owner" of the property, and alleged that respondents were engaged in the unauthorized occupation of the property.

Petitioner also alleged that they had damaged the property. Respondents removed the action to the circuit court. The circuit court conducted a hearing on petitioner's petition on August 4, 2011. In an order entered August 22, 2011, the circuit court ruled as follows: 1 West Virginia Code §§ 55-3A-1, et seq., provide remedies for wrongful occupation of residential rental property.

1 Petitioner's petition for Wrongful Occupation of the premises is hereby dismissed with prejudice.[2] Petitioner, as Administrator of the Estate of Josephine Patterson,[3] shall be afforded access to the premises for a single inspection to be performed at a reasonable time and without

breach of the peace. Petitioner shall arrange for his inspection through Counsel for Respondents[4] which may entail monitoring by law enforcement officials to ensure there be no breach of the peace.

Respondents[5] shall permit Petitioner, as Administrator of decedent's estate, access to the storage facility where the household goods and furnishings of the decedent are now stored. Likewise, subject to the terms of any contract with the storage facility for the use thereof, Respondents shall assign their rental contract or right of use of the storage facility to the Petitioner, as Administrator of the estate and Petitioner, as Administrator, shall accept the same.

Rents for use of the storage facility payable after the date of said assignment shall be the responsibility of the Petitioner, as Administrator of Decedent's estate. Petitioner shall not terminate or interfere with the provision of utility services provided to the premises which were or may be subscribed or contracted for by the Respondents.

The Respondents shall be responsible for the payment of all utility services consumed by them upon the premises. The Respondents shall be permitted to remain in the possession of the premises, without interference by Petitioner, until agreement for continued occupancy or disposition of the premises is made by all heirs of the decedent, or until further order of this court, whichever event may sooner occur.

2 Earlier in its order, the circuit court found that "[t]he Petitioner, as Administrator of the estate of the decedent, Josephine Patterson, is not entitled to title or possession of the real property of the Decedent[;] rather, the same descended to her heirs at law aforesaid." 3 Petitioner is also an heir at law of Josephine Patterson, his mother, along with George Patterson, Gail Reid, Alzerita Murlin, his brother and sisters.

4 Respondents had legal representation during the proceedings below. 5 According to an affidavit of Alzerita Murlin dated July 20, 2011, two of respondents, Danaya Steiner and her husband Joe Steiner, are relatives of Josephine Patterson's heirs at law. Ms. Murlin stated that Ms. and Mr. Steiner had her and Gail Reid's authorization to reside at the premises.

2 Petitioner filed motions to reconsider, which motions the circuit court denied in orders entered August 22, 2011, and November 3, 2011, respectively. In its first such order, the circuit court "advise[d] the [petitioner] he can refile an action as an 'owner' of the property located at 825 Barrett [Drive], South Charleston, West Virginia, if plaintiff believes that to be true." Petitioner now appeals.6 The circuit court's dismissal of petitioner's petition is reviewed de novo.

See Syl. Pt. 2, *State ex rel. McGraw v. Scott Runyan Pontiac-Buick, Inc.*, 194 W.Va. 770, 461S.E.2d 516 (1995) ("Appellate review of a circuit court's order granting a motion to dismiss a complaint is de novo."). Petitioner argues that he satisfied the requirements of § 55-3A-1 to be entitled to summary relief under West Virginia Code §§ 55-3A-1, et seq. Petitioner states that he is

a tenant in common/co-owner of the premises.⁷ Even assuming arguendo petitioner would be able to bring a petition pursuant to §§ 55-3A-1, et seq., as an heir at law, as opposed to being the administrator, the circuit court's order denying his petition indicates that he would not be able to prove his case. "Under W. Va. Code § 55-3A-1(a), a landlord may bring a summary eviction proceeding when 'the tenant is wrongfully occupying such property in that the tenant is in arrears in the payment of rent, has breached a warranty or a leasehold covenant, or has deliberately or negligently damaged the property or knowingly permitted another person to do so[.]'" Napier v. Napier, 211 W.Va.

208, 214, 564 S.E.2d 418, 424 (2002). In the case at bar, petitioner alleged unauthorized occupation and property damage. However, the circuit court found that respondents "were in occupancy of the premises at the request and invitation of Gail Reid and Alzerita Murlin, two of the heirs of the Decedent and their occupation was and is lawful." The circuit court's order also indicates that respondents were not likely to have committed property damage in that the order noted that they treated Josephine Patterson's personal property with due care.⁸ There is no evidence that respondents treated the real 6 On May 1, 2012, petitioner filed a motion for judgment after respondents failed to file a response to his appeal within the time specified in this Court's scheduling order.

This Court thereafter entered an amended scheduling order on May 9, 2012, directing respondents to file a response "within twenty days of the date of this order (emphasis in original)." Respondents still failed to file a response. Pursuant to Rule 10(d) of the West Virginia Rules of Appellate Procedure, if a respondent fails to respond to an assignment of error, this Court will assume that the respondent agrees with petitioner's view of the issue.

However, as set forth below, petitioner's brief and a review of the record have failed to convince the Court that reversal is appropriate. Accordingly, the Court declines to rule in petitioner's favor simply because respondents failed to file a response. See, e.g., Syl. Pt. 8, State v. Julius 185 W.Va. 422, 408 S.E.2d 1 (1991) ("This Court is not obligated to accept the State's confession of error in a criminal case.

We will do so when, after a proper analysis, we believe error occurred."). ⁷ See Syl. Pt. 3, Voss v. King, 33 W.Va. 236, 10 S.E. 402 (1889) ("One joint tenant or tenant in common may, in an action of unlawful detainer, recover the possession of the whole land, without joining his cotenant in the action."). ⁸ The circuit court found that "[t]he household goods and other personal property of the Decedent 3 property with less care.

Therefore, after careful consideration, this Court concludes that the circuit court did not err in dismissing petitioner's petition pursuant to §§ 55-3A-1, et seq. For the foregoing reasons, we find no error in the decision of the Circuit Court of Kanawha County and affirm its order, entered

August 22, 2011, denying petitioner's petition for summary relief for wrongful occupation of residential rental property.

Affirmed. ISSUED: March 8, 2013 CONCURRED IN BY: Chief Justice Brent D. Benjamin Justice Robin Jean Davis Justice Margaret L. Workman Justice Menis E. Ketchum Justice Allen H. Loughry II formerly situate in the premises were removed by Respondents and placed into a secured storage facility prior to the institution of this action.” 4