

SUPREME COURT OF RHODE ISLAND

Almesallmy v. Lapinski

981 A.2d 1025 (R.I. 2009) · No. No. 2005-182-Appeal · Decided October 29, 2009

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Rhode Island affirmed a Superior Court judgment denying Mohammed Almesallmy's breach-of-contract claim arising from automobile repairs and awarding John Lapinski damages on counterclaims. The court held that Almesallmy waived appellate review of his contract claim by initiating the matter as a small-claims action, but could appeal the judgment on Lapinski's counterclaims. It upheld the findings that Almesallmy breached the contract by stopping payment on the \$200 check without justification and that Lapinski was entitled to statutory and bank-fee damages.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Rhode Island
JURISDICTION	Rhode Island
DECIDED	October 29, 2009
DOCKET	No. 2005-182-Appeal
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Pro se appeal from a Superior Court judgment denying the plaintiff's breach-of-contract claim and granting the defendant's counterclaims for breach of contract and statutory damages arising from a dishonored check.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	In a nonjury civil trial, factual findings are given great weight and will not be disturbed unless clearly wrong or unless the trial justice overlooked or misconceived material evidence on a controlling issue. Credibility determinations are reviewed under the same clearly-wrong standard.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Rhode Island Supreme Court opinion
PARTIES	Mohammed Almesallmy v. John Lapinski

TOPICS

- breach of contract
- appellate procedure
- standard of review
- damages
- civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Almesallmy could appeal the adverse judgment on his own breach-of-contract claim after initiating the matter as a small-claims action.
2. Whether the Superior Court's findings that a contract existed, Lapinski performed without breaching, and Almesallmy breached by stopping payment were clearly wrong or based on overlooked material evidence.
3. Whether Lapinski was entitled to statutory damages under Rhode Island General Laws § 6-42-3 for Almesallmy's dishonored check.

HOLDINGS

1. By filing a small-claims action in District Court, Almesallmy waived the right to appeal an adverse judgment on his own breach-of-contract claim.
2. The Supreme Court could review the \$757.07 judgment on Lapinski's counterclaims because Almesallmy was a defendant on those claims.
3. The Superior Court's findings that a contract existed, Lapinski did not breach it, and Almesallmy breached by stopping payment without justifiable cause were not clearly wrong and did not overlook material evidence.
4. Lapinski was entitled to judgment under Rhode Island General Laws § 6-42-3 because Almesallmy dishonored the \$200 check without a justifiable reason.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“The findings of fact by a trial justice sitting without a jury are entitled to great weight and shall not be disturbed on appeal unless the record shows that the findings are clearly wrong or unless the trial justice overlooked or misconceived material evidence on a controlling issue.” (1026-27)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Almesallmy asked mechanic John Lapinski to install a starter in his car for \$200. After changing his instructions several times, Almesallmy accepted the completed work and paid by check, but then stopped payment after a dealership allegedly told him the starter was improperly installed. Lapinski never received the \$200, incurred bank fees, and pursued counterclaims for breach of contract and statutory damages based on the dishonored check.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Almesallmy initially brought a small-claims action in District Court seeking damages for alleged improper installation of a car starter. The District Court denied his claim, granted Lapinski's counterclaim, and entered judgment against Almesallmy. Almesallmy appealed to the Superior Court, which after trial again denied his claim and entered judgment for Lapinski in the amount of \$757.07. The Supreme Court affirmed, holding that

the plaintiff had waived appellate review of his own small-claims judgment but could appeal the judgment on the counterclaims because he was a defendant on those claims.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The papers were remanded to the Superior Court following affirmance; no substantive modification or further proceedings were ordered.

CASES CITED

- Carpenter v. Hanslin, 900 A.2d 1136, 1141 (R.I. 2006)
- Burke-Tarr Co. v. Ferland Corp., 724 A.2d 1014, 1018 (R.I. 1999)

OPINION

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PER CURIAM.

981 A.2d 1025 (2009) Mohammed ALMESALLMY v. John LAPINSKI. No. 2005-182-Appeal. Supreme Court of Rhode Island. October 29, 2009. Mohammed Almesallmy. John Lapinski.

ORDER

The plaintiff, Mohammed Almesallmy, appeals pro se from a Superior Court judgment in favor of the defendant, John Lapinski. The judgment denied Almesallmy's breach-of-contract claim arising from a dispute over car repairs and granted Lapinski's counterclaim in the amount of \$757.07. This case came before the Supreme Court for oral argument on October 6, 2009, pursuant to the Court's order that the parties show cause why the issues raised in this appeal should not summarily be decided without further briefing or argument.[1] After considering the record and the memorandum submitted by Almesallmy, we are of the opinion that cause has not been shown and that the case should be decided at this time. For the reasons set forth below, we affirm the judgment of the Superior Court. On January 9, 2003, Almesallmy requested that Lapinski install a starter in his car. Lapinski, a mechanic with twenty-seven years experience, examined the car and identified numerous problems, including a starter that did not work. Lapinski *1026 agreed to install a new starter for \$200. Then, in a series of conversations between the parties, Almesallmy changed his mind and asked Lapinski to remove the new starter and then reinstall the new starter four times. Eventually, Lapinski completed the job and Almesallmy paid him with a \$200 check. However, on January 15, 2003, Almesallmy called his bank and requested a stop-payment order on his \$200 check to Lapinski. Almesallmy said he ordered the stop payment because, after having his car examined by a dealership, he was told that the starter was not properly installed. As a result of Almesallmy's stop-payment order, Lapinski incurred overdraft fees on his bank account and

never received the \$200 payment for his work. On November 23, 2004, a trial was held in the Superior Court.[2] The Superior Court trial justice denied plaintiff Almesallmy's breach-of-contract claim, granted defendant Lapinski's breach-of-contract counterclaim and his counterclaim under G.L. 1956 § 6-42-3,[3] and awarded Lapinski a judgment of \$655, plus prejudgment and postjudgment interest, totaling \$757.07. The trial justice found very few inconsistencies between Almesallmy's and Lapinski's testimony. He found that a contract existed and that Lapinski never breached the contract because he repeatedly attempted to do whatever Almesallmy asked of him. On the other hand, the trial justice found that Almesallmy breached the contract when he stopped payment on his \$200 check to Lapinski without justifiable cause. The trial justice agreed with Lapinski that § 6-42-3(a) applied, that Almesallmy had violated this provision, and that as a result Lapinski was entitled to damages under § 6-42-3(b) of three times the value of the check, plus a \$25 collection fee. In addition, the trial justice awarded Lapinski \$55 in damages for bank fees and prejudgment and postjudgment interest. On appeal, Almesallmy argues that he paid Lapinski \$200 in good faith and Lapinski breached his contractual obligations by installing a "bad" starter. At the onset, we observe that by filing a small-claims action in District Court, Almesallmy waived his right to appeal any adverse judgment on his breach-of-contract claim. See G.L. 1956 § 10-16-1; Rule 7.00 of the District Court Rules of Small Claims Procedure (stating that "[p]laintiff waives the right of appeal from any adverse decision rendered in a small claim"). This Court will, however, consider Almesallmy's appeal of the trial justice's judgment for \$757.07 on Lapinski's counterclaims because Almesallmy was a defendant on those claims. See Rule 7.00. We review the trial justice's decision in a nonjury civil trial with deference. "The findings of fact by a trial justice sitting without a jury are entitled to great weight and shall not be disturbed on appeal unless the record shows that the findings are clearly wrong or unless the trial justice *1027 overlooked or misconceived material evidence on a controlling issue." *Carpenter v. Hanslin*, 900 A.2d 1136, 1141 (R.I.2006) (quoting *Burke-Tarr Co. v. Ferland Corp.*, 724 A.2d 1014, 1018 (R.I.1999)). This Court will not disturb a trial justice's credibility determinations unless they are clearly wrong. *Id.* After review of the record and Almesallmy's Sup.Ct.R. 12A statement, we conclude that the trial justice's findings of fact are not clearly wrong nor did he overlook material evidence about whether Almesallmy and Lapinski entered a contract and whether Almesallmy breached it. See *Carpenter*, 900 A.2d at 1141. We likewise determine that the trial justice did not overlook material evidence in ruling that Lapinski was entitled to a judgment under § 6-42-3 because Almesallmy dishonored his \$200 check without a justifiable reason. Conclusion We affirm the judgment of the Superior Court, to which we remand the papers in this case.

NOTES

[1] Neither party appeared at oral argument. Consequently, the case was decided after a review of the record and the written statement submitted by Almesallmy.

[2] Almesallmy initially filed a small-claims suit in District Court, seeking \$398.52 in damages from defendant John Lapinski. A trial was held on September 8, 2003. The District Court judge

denied Almesallmy's claim, granted defendant Lapinski's counterclaim, and entered a judgment against Almesallmy for \$702. Almesallmy appealed the judgment against him to the Superior Court.

[3] General Laws 1956 § 6-42-3(a) provides that "[i]f a check, draft, or other instrument has not been paid within thirty (30) days after the holder has sent a notice of dishonor to the maker or drawer of a check, draft, or other instrument that has been dishonored" the holder may seek relief in District Court or in a small-claims proceeding. Section 6-42-4 provides that the drawer of a check is not liable under § 6-42-3(a) if the stop payment order is justified.