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Authorities confirm change of venue for second man accused in dragging death of Jasper man

HOUSTON (AP) — The second of three white men to be tried for dragging a black man to death may face trial this summer in the Austin-area city of Georgetown instead of Jasper in East Texas, authorities confirmed Tuesday.

In a surprise move, Jasper's district attorney has decided the trial of Lawrence Russell Brewer should be outside of Jasper, a town of 8,000 that already has withstood one capital murder trial in the case.

Prosecutor Guy James Gray said he changed his mind Friday, one day after a judge ruled against moving proceedings.

Gray worried that defense attorney Doug Barlow might have improved grounds for an appeal if Brewer is convicted.

On Wednesday, state District Judge Monte Lawlis is scheduled to meet with attorneys to reexamine whether to move the trial for the June 7 slaying of James Byrd Jr.

Brewer is charged with capital murder for Byrd's death. The 49-year-old man was found torn to pieces after he was chained and dragged behind a pickup truck for nearly three miles.

In February, a Jasper jury convicted 24-year-old John William King of capital murder and sentenced him to death.

Georgetown, with its modern 10-year-old courthouse and big-city amenities of nearby Austin, about 25 miles to the south, has emerged as a top contender for the trial, outdistancing other possibilities such as Kerrville, New Braunfels and Corpus Christi.

Jury selection in Brewer's trial currently is scheduled to begin May 17, but a change of venue could push it to summertime. Georgetown's courthouse will have a courtroom available in July.

"We don't welcome a trial such as this, but my understanding is the (hosting) district judges make that call ... and the county has to honor it," Georgetown Mayor Leo Wood said.

The defense has said repeatedly that if Brewer, a 32-year-old ex-convict, is tried in Jasper they would have strong grounds for an appeal. They claim Jasper County residents have a vested interest in convicting all three suspects in an effort to vindicate the town's image.

Williamson County Judge John Doerfler said Tuesday he was contacted by Jasper officials, who indicated to him that Georgetown is a likely candidate.

"We don't welcome a trial such as this, but my understanding is the (hosting) district judges make that call."

— Leo Wood
Georgetown mayor

"They intimidated it was," Doerfler said. "I don't know for sure."

Georgetown's six courtrooms, the biggest of which can seat about 120 spectators, already are equipped with metal detectors.

The city of about 22,000 residents has played host to high-profile trials before, including:

—In 1983, a Georgetown jury convicted Bexar County nurse Gene Jones for the murder of a Kerrville baby and sentenced her to 99 years in prison.

Henry Lee Lucas was convicted in 1984 of strangling an unidentified hitchhiker near Georgetown. His death sentence was commuted last year to life in prison.

—A jury in 1994 convicted and condemned Kerry Max Cook for a 1977 East Texas murder.

That conviction in Cook's third trial was overturned on grounds of prosecutorial misconduct in 1996.

This past February, Cook pleaded no contest on the eve of his fourth trial and was sentenced to 20 years of time already served.

Inmates surrender after holding nurse hostage for nine hours

LUBBOCK, Texas (AP) — Two male inmates at a prison mental hospital held a female nurse hostage for nine hours Tuesday before releasing her and turning her up to authorities.

Convicted robber Julius E. Grulkey, 27, and killer Curtis Joseph Robertson, 23, were transferred from the Montford Unit to two different prisons after about 8:20 p.m.

That was about 45 minutes after the 40-year-old Cynthia Jobe, said Texas Department of Justice spokesperson Glen Castlebury.

"She was not hurt in any way," Castlebury said. "After Jobe's release, FBI agents entered the unit and the inmates were holed up and complied with the command — the two were shown the personal belongings brought into the prison."

Castlebury said the two did not indicate why they held her for their personal effects, which are kept in the unit until inmates are released.

The men barricaded themselves, with the small room around 10 a.m. after injuring two other inmates, and they attacked him and cut him," Castlebury said.

An on-site negotiating team spent the day persuading Grulkey and Robertson to surrender and an employee of the Texas Tech Health Sciences Center has worked at the prison since it opened in July.

"This one correctional officer was moving the inmates, and they attacked him and cut him," Castlebury said. "Another officer came to his aid and the two were released."

"That's when they grabbed the nurse and held her in a file room."

Guards David Richardson, 28, and Jeffrey Williams were treated for injuries at the prison's infirmary and transported to a Lubbock hospital. Castlebury said the guards were treated and released from the hospital.

Narbeaz has been on the job just four months, Castlebury said.

The unit, named for Texas Tech Chancellor James H. Beets, holds about 900 male offenders committed to the prison by judges who deem them not mentally sound enough to be in conventional lockups.

Unlike most units, which might have one negotiator on site, the state's three psychiatric units have teams trained to negotiate with inmates in the units, Castlebury said.

"It's very touchy. That's why we have negotiators on board there," he said.

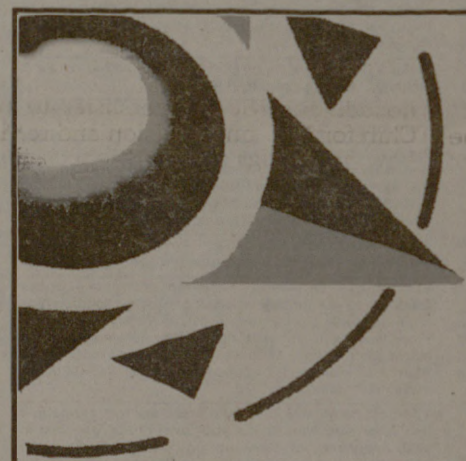


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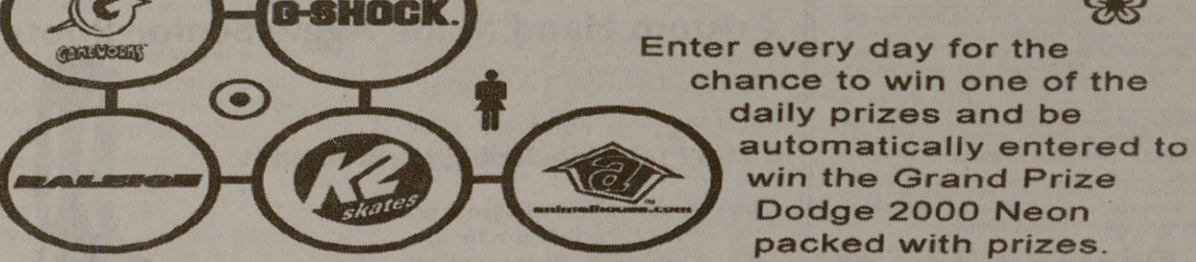
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