

**Ex Parte Jackson**

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**Court :** US Supreme Court

**Decided On :** 1878

**Appeal No. :** 96 U.S. 727

**Appellant :** Ex Parte Jackson

**Judgement :**

Ex parte Jackson - 96 U.S. 727 (1878)

U.S. Supreme Court Ex parte Jackson, 96 U.S. 727 (1878)

**Ex parte Jackson**

**96 U.S. 727**

*PETITIONS FOR WRITS OF HABEAS CORPUS AND CERTIORARI*

## **SYLLABUS**

1. The power vested in Congress to establish "post offices and post roads" embraces the regulation of the entire postal system of the country. Under it, Congress may designate what shall be carried in the mail and what excluded.

2. In the enforcement of regulations excluding matter from the mail, a distinction is to be made between what is intended to be kept free from inspection, such as letters and sealed packages subject to letter postage, and what is open to

inspection, such as newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and other printed matter purposefully left in a condition to be examined.

3. Letters and sealed packages subject to letter postage in the mail can be opened and examined only under like warrant, issued upon similar oath or affirmation, particularly describing the thing to be seized, as is required when papers are subjected to search in one's own household. The constitutional guaranty of the right of the people to be secure in their papers against unreasonable searches and seizures extends to their papers, thus closed against inspection, wherever they may be.

4. Regulations against transporting in the mail printed matter which is open to examination cannot be enforced so as to interfere in any manner with the freedom of the press. Liberty of circulating is essential to that freedom. When, therefore, printed matter is excluded from the mail, its transportation in any other way as merchandise cannot be forbidden by Congress.

5. Regulations excluding matter from the mail may be enforced through the courts, upon competent evidence of their violation obtained in other ways than by unlawful inspection of letters and sealed packages; and with respect to objectionable printed matter, open to examination, they may in some cases also be enforced by the direct action of the officers of the postal service upon their own inspection, as where the object is exposed, and shows unmistakably that it is prohibited, as in the case of an obscene picture or print.

6. When a party is convicted of an offence and sentenced to pay a fine, it is within the discretion of the court to order his imprisonment until the fine shall be paid.

Page 96 U. S. 728

Section 3894 of the Revised Statutes provides that

"No letter or circular concerning illegal lotteries, so-called gift-concerts, or other similar enterprises offering prizes, or concerning schemes devised and intended to deceive and defraud the public, for the purpose of obtaining money under false

pretenses, shall be carried in the mail. Any person who shall knowingly deposit or send any thing to be conveyed by mail, in violation of this section, shall be punishable by a fine of not more than \$500, nor less than \$100, with costs of prosecution."

By an act approved July 12, 1876 (19 Stat. 90), the word "illegal" was stricken out of the section. Under the law as thus amended, the petitioner was indicted, in the Circuit Court of the United States for the Southern District of New York, for knowingly and unlawfully depositing, on the 23d of February, 1877, at that district, in the mail of the United States, to be conveyed in it, a circular concerning a lottery offering prizes, enclosed in an envelope addressed to one J. Ketcham, at Gloversville, New York. The indictment sets forth the offence in separate counts, so as to cover every form in which it could be stated under the act. Upon being arraigned, the petitioner stood mute, refusing to plead; and thereupon a plea of not guilty was entered in his behalf by order of the court. Rev.Stat., sect. 1032. He was subsequently tried, convicted, and sentenced to pay a fine of \$100, with the costs of the prosecution, and to be committed to the county jail until the fine and costs were paid. Upon his commitment, which followed, he presented to this court a petition alleging that he was imprisoned and restrained of his liberty by the marshal of the Southern District of New York, under the conviction; that such conviction was illegal, and that the illegality consisted in this: that the court had no jurisdiction to punish him for the acts charged in the indictment; that the act under which the indictment was drawn was unconstitutional and void; and that the court exceeded its jurisdiction in committing him until the fine was paid. He therefore prayed for a writ of habeas corpus to be directed to the marshal to bring him before the court, and a writ of certiorari to be directed to the clerk of the Circuit Court to send up the record of his conviction, that this court might

Page 96 U. S. 729

inquire into the cause and legality of his imprisonment. Accompanying the petition, as exhibits, were copies of the indictment and of the record of conviction. The court, instead of ordering that the writs issue at once, entered a rule, the counsel of the petitioner consenting thereto, that cause be shown, on a day designated,

why the writs should not issue as prayed; and that a copy of the rule be served on the Attorney-General of the United States, the marshal of the Southern District of New York, and the clerk of the Circuit Court. The Attorney-General, for himself and others, answered the rule by averring that the petition and exhibits do not make out a case in which this court has jurisdiction to order the writs to issue, and that the petitioner is in lawful custody by virtue of the proceedings and sentence mentioned in the exhibits, and the commitment issued thereon.

Page 96 U. S. 732

MR. JUSTICE FIELD, after stating the case, delivered the opinion of the court.

The power vested in Congress "to establish post offices and post roads" has been practically construed, since the foundation of the government, to authorize not merely the designation of the routes over which the mail shall be carried and the offices where letters and other documents shall be received to be distributed or forwarded, but the carriage of the mail and all measures necessary to secure its safe and speedy transit and the prompt delivery of its contents. The validity of legislation prescribing what should be carried, and its weight and form, and the charges to which it should be subjected, has never been questioned. What should be mailable has varied at different times, changing with the facility of transportation over the post roads. At one time, only letters, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and other printed matter, not exceeding eight ounces in weight, were carried; afterwards, books were added to the list; and now small packages of merchandise, not exceeding a prescribed weight, as well as books and printed matter of all kinds, are transported in the mail. The power possessed by Congress embraces the regulation of the entire postal system of the country. The right to designate what shall be carried necessarily involves the right to determine what shall be excluded. The difficulty attending the subject arises not from the want of power in Congress to prescribe regulations as to what shall constitute mail matter, but from the necessity of enforcing them consistently with rights reserved to the people, of far greater importance than the transportation of the mail. In their enforcement,

a distinction is to be made between different kinds of mail matter -- between what is intended to be kept free from inspection, such as letters, and sealed packages subject to letter postage, and what is open to inspection, such as newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and other printed matter purposely left in a condition to be examined. Letters and sealed packages of this kind in the mail are as fully guarded from examination and inspection, except as to their outward form and weight, as if they were retained by the parties forwarding them in their own domiciles. The constitutional guaranty of the right of the people to be secure in their papers against unreasonable searches and seizures extends to their papers, thus closed against inspection, wherever they may be. Whilst in the mail, they can only be opened and examined under like warrant, issued upon similar oath or affirmation, particularly describing the thing to be seized, as is required when papers are subjected to search in one's own household. No law of Congress can place in the hands of officials connected with the postal service any authority to invade the secrecy of letters and such sealed packages in the mail; and all regulations adopted as to mail matter of this kind must be in subordination to the great principle embodied in the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution.

Nor can any regulations be enforced against the transportation of printed matter in the mail which is open to examination so as to interfere in any manner with the freedom of the press. Liberty of circulating is as essential to that freedom as liberty of publishing; indeed, without the circulation, the publication would be of little value. If, therefore, printed matter be excluded from the mails, its transportation in any other way cannot be forbidden by Congress.

In 1836, the question as to the power of Congress to exclude publications from the mail was discussed in the Senate, and the prevailing opinion of its members, as expressed in debate, was against the existence of the power. President Jackson, in his annual message of the previous year, had referred to the attempted circulation through the mail of inflammatory appeals, addressed to the passions of the slaves, in prints, and in various publications, tending to stimulate them to insurrection, and suggested to Congress the propriety of passing a law prohibiting,

under severe penalties, such circulation of "incendiary publications" in the Southern States. In the Senate, that portion of the message was referred to a select committee of which Mr. Calhoun was chairman, and he made an elaborate report on the subject in which he contended that it belonged to the States, and not to Congress, to determine what is and what is not calculated to disturb their security, and that to hold otherwise would be fatal to the States; for if Congress might determine what papers were incendiary, and as such prohibit their circulation through the mail, it might also determine what were not incendiary, and enforce their circulation. Whilst, therefore, condemning in the strongest terms the circulation of the publications, he insisted that Congress had not the power to pass a law prohibiting their transmission through the mail, on the ground that it would abridge the liberty of the press. "To understand," he said,

"more fully the extent of the control which the right of prohibiting circulation through the mail would give to the government over the press, it must be borne in mind that the power of Congress over the post office and the mail is an exclusive power. It must also be remembered that Congress, in the exercise of this power, may declare any road or navigable water to be a post road; and that, by the act of 1825, it is provided 'that no stage, or other vehicle which regularly performs trips on a post road, or on a road parallel to it, shall carry letters.' The same provision extends to packets, boats, or other vessels on navigable waters. Like provision may be extended to newspapers and pamphlets, which, if it be admitted that Congress has the right to discriminate in reference to their character, what papers shall or what shall not be transmitted by the mail, would subject the freedom of the press, on all subjects, political, moral, and religious, completely to its will and pleasure. It would in fact, in some respects, more effectually control the freedom of the press than any sedition law, however severe its penalties."

Mr. Calhoun, at the same time, contended that when a State had pronounced certain publications to be dangerous to its peace and prohibited their circulation, it was the duty of Congress to respect its laws and cooperate in their enforcement; and whilst, therefore, Congress could not prohibit the transmission of the

incendiary documents through the mails,

Page 96 U. S. 735

it could prevent their delivery by the postmasters in the States where their circulation was forbidden. In the discussion upon the bill reported by him, similar views against the power of Congress were expressed by other senators who did not concur in the opinion that the delivery of papers could be prevented when their transmission was permitted.

Great reliance is placed by the petitioner upon these views, coming, as they did in many instances, from men alike distinguished as jurists and statesmen. But it is evident that they were founded upon the assumption that it was competent for Congress to prohibit the transportation of newspapers and pamphlets over postal routes in any other way than by mail; and of course it would follow that if, with such a prohibition, the transportation in the mail could also be forbidden, the circulation of the documents would be destroyed and a fatal blow given to the freedom of the press. But we do not think that Congress possesses the power to prevent the transportation in other ways, as merchandise, of matter which it excludes from the mails. To give efficiency to its regulations and prevent rival postal systems, it may perhaps prohibit the carriage by others for hire, over postal routes, of articles which legitimately constitute mail matter, in the sense in which those terms were used when the Constitution was adopted, consisting of letters, and of newspapers and pamphlets, when not sent as merchandise; but further than this, its power of prohibition cannot extend.

Whilst regulations excluding matter from the mail cannot be enforced in a way which would require or permit an examination into letters, or sealed packages subject to letter postage, without warrant, issued upon oath or affirmation, in the search for prohibited matter, they may be enforced upon competent evidence of their violation obtained in other ways; as from the parties receiving the letters or packages, or from agents depositing them in the post office, or others cognizant of the facts. And as to objectionable printed matter, which is open to examination, the regulations may be enforced in a similar way, by the imposition of penalties for

their violation through the courts, and, in some cases, by the direct action of the officers of the postal service. In many instances, those officers can act

Page 96 U. S. 736

upon their own inspection, and, from the nature of the case, must act without other proof; as where the postage is not prepaid, or where there is an excess of weight over the amount prescribed, or where the object is exposed, and shows unmistakably that it is prohibited, as in the case of an obscene picture or print. In such cases, no difficulty arises, and no principle is violated, in excluding the prohibited articles or refusing to forward them. The evidence respecting them is seen by every one, and is in its nature conclusive.

In excluding various articles from the mail, the object of Congress has not been to interfere with the freedom of the press, or with any other rights of the people, but to refuse its facilities for the distribution of matter deemed injurious to the public morals. Thus, by the act of March 3, 1873, Congress declared

"that no obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, pamphlet, picture, paper, print, or other publication of an indecent character, or any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or procuring of abortion, nor any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use or nature, nor any written or printed card, circular, book, pamphlet, advertisement, or notice of any kind, giving information, directly or indirectly, where, or how, or of whom, or by what means, either of the things before mentioned may be obtained or made, nor any letter upon the envelope of which, or postal card upon which indecent or scurrilous epithets may be written or printed, shall be carried in the mail; and any person who shall knowingly deposit, or cause to be deposited, for mailing or delivery, any of the hereinbefore mentioned articles or things, . . . shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and, on conviction thereof, shall, for every offence, be fined not less than \$100, nor more than \$5,000, or imprisonment at hard labor not less than one year nor more than ten years, or both, in the discretion of the judge."

All that Congress meant by this act was that the mail should not be used to transport such corrupting publications and articles, and that anyone who attempted to use it for that purpose should be punished. The same inhibition has been extended to circulars concerning lotteries -- institutions which are supposed to have a demoralizing influence upon the people. There is no

Page 96 U. S. 737

question before us as to the evidence upon which the conviction of the petitioner was had; nor does it appear whether the envelope in which the prohibited circular was deposited in the mail was sealed or left open for examination. The only question for our determination relates to the constitutionality of the act, and of that we have no doubt.

The commitment of the petitioner to the county jail until his fine was paid was within the discretion of the court under the statute.

As there is an exemplified copy of the record of the petitioner's indictment and conviction accompanying the petition, the merits of his case have been considered at his request upon this application; and, as we are of opinion that his imprisonment is legal, no object would be subserved by issuing the writs; they are therefore

*Denied.*