

Willard Vs. Willard

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Court : US Supreme Court

Decided On : May-02-1892

Appeal No. : 145 U.S. 116

Appellant : Willard

Respondent : Willard

Judgement :

Willard v. Willard - 145 U.S. 116 (1892)

U.S. Supreme Court Willard v. Willard, 145 U.S. 116 (1892)

Willard v. Willard

No. 318

Argued April 18, 1892

Decided May 2, 1892

145 U.S. 116

APPEAL FROM THE SUPREME COURT

OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

SYLLABUS

Under the Act of August 15, 1876, c. 297, relating to partition of real estate in the District of Columbia, a tenant in common in fee, whose title is clear, may have partition as of right, but by division or sale, at the discretion of the court.

A pending lease for years is no obstacle to partition between owners of the fee.

A bill in equity, under the Act of August 15, 1876, c. 297, need set forth no more than the titles of the parties, and the plaintiff's desire to have partition by division of the land, or, if in the opinion of the court this cannot be done without injury to the parties, then by sale of the land and division of the proceeds.

This was a bill in equity filed January 3, 1888, by Henry K. Willard against Joseph C. Willard, under the Act of August 15, 1876, c. 297, which is copied in the margin, [* for partition](#)

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of land in Washington bounded on Pennsylvania Avenue on the south, Fourteenth Street on the east, and F Street on the north, containing more than 33,000 square feet, and with the building thereon known as "Willard's Hotel."

The allegations of the bill were that the plaintiff and the defendant were the owners of the land in fee simple as tenants in common, and each the owner of an undivided half; that the plaintiff became and was the owner of his half under a deed from Henry A. Willard, dated December 1, 1887, and duly recorded, and that the plaintiff desired to have partition of the land, and to have his share thereof set apart to him in severalty, or, if in the opinion of the court the land could not be specially divided between the parties without loss and injury to them, and to the purposes for which the land was used, that, for the purposes of partition, it might be sold and the proceeds divided between him and the defendant, and he prayed for partition accordingly.

The answer, filed March 6, 1888, alleged that the plaintiff's father, Henry A. Willard, and the defendant, were the owners in fee simple, as tenants in common, of the land, and that it was of great value, and for the past twenty-five years and upwards had been leased by Henry A. Willard and the defendant to different persons for hotel purposes, and was now under lease and used as an hotel at a remunerative rental; that the defendant had no knowledge of the conveyance to the plaintiff, and required proof thereof, and denied that the defendant should be compelled to make or suffer partition of the land, or that it was within the power of the court to deprive him, against his will and without his consent, of his interest and estate in the whole land either by a partition in severalty or by a sale thereof.

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A general replication was filed, and proofs taken, which showed the following facts: the defendant and Henry A. Willard made a lease of the land for five years and four months from January 1, 1884, at an annual rent of \$20,500, to Phoebe D. Cook, which was afterwards assigned, with the lessors' consent, to Orring G. Staples. On December 1, 1887, Henry A. Willard conveyed to the plaintiff an undivided half of the land in fee simple by deed duly recorded. The property was peculiarly adapted to hotel purposes, and was worth in its present condition more than \$600,000, and could not be divided without serious loss.

The court in special term, on July 7, 1888, ordered a sale in accordance with the provisions of the act of Congress, and appointed trustees to make a sale and conveyance, and to pay the proceeds into court. The decree was affirmed in general term, on October 22, 1888. 6 Mackey 559.

The defendant appealed to this Court, and assigned the following errors in the decree:

"1st. The property was under lease for a term of years at the time the bill was filed, and the plaintiff not entitled to possession."

"2. Under the Act of Congress of August 15, 1876, a tenant in common has not an absolute right to partition, but it is discretionary with the court, and something besides the existence of the tenancy must be averred and shown in order to call such discretion into exercise, which was not done in this case. "

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MR. JUSTICE GRAY, after stating the case as above, delivered the opinion of the Court.

In a court having general jurisdiction in equity to grant partition, as in a court of law, a tenant in common, whose title in an undivided share of the land is clear, is entitled to partition, as a matter of right, so that he may hold and enjoy his property in severalty. Story, Eq.Jur. 653, 656; *Parker v. Gerard*, Ambler 236, *Calmady v. Calmady*, 2 Ves.Jr. 568; *Wiseley v. Findlay*, 3 Rand. 361; *Smith v. Smith*, Hoffman Ch. 506, and 10 Paige 470; *Donnell v. Mateer*, 7 Iredell Eq. 94; *Campbell v. Lowe*, 9 Md. 500.

Under the English statutes of 31 Hen. VIII. c. 1, and 32 Hen. VIII. c. 32, in force in the State of Maryland before 1801, and

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therefore in the District of Columbia, any tenant in common in fee might compel partition at law by division of the estate held in common. Alexander's British Statutes in Maryland 311, 312, 332; *Lloyd v. Gordon*, 2 Har. & McH. 254; Rev.Stat.D.C. 92. It is unnecessary to consider how far the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia had equity jurisdiction in cases of partition before the Act of Congress of August 15, 1876, c. 297, because this act expressly empowers the court, exercising general jurisdiction in equity, in its discretion, to compel all tenants in common of any estate, legal or equitable, to make or suffer partition, either by division of the estate, or, if it satisfactorily appears that the estate cannot be divided without loss or injury to the parties interested, then by sale of the estate and division of the proceeds among the parties, according to their respective rights and interests. 19 Stat. 202. This statute, while it authorizes the court to compel a

partition by division or by sale at its discretion as the facts appearing at the hearing may require, does not affect the general rule governing every court of law or equity having jurisdiction to grant partition, that partition is of right, and not to be defeated by the mere unwillingness of one party to have each enjoy his own in severalty.

In equity, as at law, a pending lease for years is no obstacle to partition between owners of the fee. Co.Lit. 46a, 167a; Com.Dig. Parcener, C. 6; *Wilkinson v. Joberns*, L.R. 16 Eq. 14; *Hunt v. Hazelton*, 5 N.H. 216; *Woodworth v. Campbell*, 5 Paige 518; *Thruston v. Minke*, 32 Md. 571; *Cook v. Webb*, 19 Minn. 167. The decision in *Hunnewell v. Taylor*, 6 Cush. 472, cited by the appellant, was governed by an express statute of Massachusetts authorizing a petition for partition "by any person who has an estate in possession, but not by one who has only a remainder or reversion," which was presently modified by an enactment that partition might be had notwithstanding the existence of a lease of the whole or part of the estate. Mass. Stat. 1853, c. 410, 1; Gen.Stat. c. 136, 3, 67; Pub.Stat. c. 178, 3, 68. In *Moore v. Shannon*, 6 Mackey 157, there was an outstanding life estate, so that the plaintiff was not in possession of the freehold, and

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was therefore denied partition. See Co.Litt. and Comyn's Dig., *ubi supra*; *Evans v. Bagshaw*, L.R. 8 Eq. 469, and L.R. 5 Ch.App. 340; *Brown v. Brown*, 8 N.H. 93.

The present bill, after setting forth the titles in fee of the parties, alleges that the plaintiff desires to have partition of the land and his share set apart to him in severalty, or, if in the opinion of the court this cannot be done without injury to the parties and to the purposes for which the land is used, then by sale of the land and division of the proceeds, and prays for partition accordingly. The bill, following the statute, and seeking partition in either mode, as the court in its discretion might think fit, is in proper and sufficient form. Any allegation of special reasons for partition, or for having it made in one way or in the other, would have been unusual and superfluous. The decisions in Maryland cited by the appellant were made under statutes authorizing partition only when it would be for the interest and advantage of the parties that the land should be sold, and therefore held that it

must be so alleged in the petition. *Tomlinson v. McKaig*, 5 Gill. 256; *Mewshaw v. Mewshaw*, 2 Md.Ch. 12.

This disposes of the only errors assigned or argued. It is not denied, and could not be, upon the proofs, that if the plaintiff was entitled to partition, it was rightly ordered to be made by sale, and not by division of the estate.

Decree affirmed.

MR. JUSTICE BREWER was not present at the argument, and took no part in the decision.

*

" An act relating to partition of real estate in the District of Columbia"

"SEC 1. All tenants in common and co-parceners of any estate in lands, tenements, or hereditaments, equitable as well as legal, within the District of Columbia may, in the discretion of the court, be compelled in any court of competent jurisdiction to make or suffer partition of such estate or estates. In proceedings for partition, all persons in interest shall be made parties in the same manner as in cases of equity jurisdiction, and in proceedings for partition under this act, the court may, in addition to the powers herein conferred, exercise such powers as are or may be conferred by virtue of the general equity jurisdiction of the court."

"SEC. 2. The court in all cases, in decreeing partition, may, if it satisfactorily appears that said lands and tenements, or any estate or interest therein cannot be divided without loss or injury to the parties interested, decree a sale thereof and a division of the money arising from such sale among the parties according to their respective rights and interests."

"SEC. 3. In all such sales, unless the court shall by special order direct or require, on good cause shown, that the sale be made for cash, the purchase money shall be payable one-third on day of sale, one-third in one year, and one-third in two years thereafter, with interest, the deferred payments to be secured to the parties

according to their respective interests by good and sufficient mortgage upon the premises so sold, which shall be subject to the approval of the court."

19 Stat. 202.

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