

Nickey Vs. Mississippi

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Court : US Supreme Court

Decided On : May-21-1934

Appeal No. : 292 U.S. 393

Appellant : Nickey

Respondent : Mississippi

Judgement :

Nickey v. Mississippi - 292 U.S. 393 (1934)

U.S. Supreme Court Nickey v. Mississippi, 292 U.S. 393 (1934)

Nickey v. Mississippi

No. 298

Argued February 5, 6, 1934

Decided May 21, 1934

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APPEAL FROM THE SUPREME COURT OF MISSISSIPPI

SYLLABUS

1. Contentions based on the Federal Constitution, which were raised and adversely decided by a state supreme court, as shown by the discussion in its opinions with specific reference to that instrument, are reviewable by this Court, notwithstanding the failure of the appellant to mention them in his assignment of errors to the state court, as required by its rules. P. [292 U. S. 394](#) .

2. There is no constitutional command that notice of the assessment of a tax, and opportunity to contest it, must be given in advance of the assessment. It is enough that all available defenses may be presented to a competent tribunal before exaction of the tax and before the command of the state to pay it becomes final and irrevocable. P. [292 U. S. 396](#) .

3. A state may collect taxes, assessed against one parcel of property within its jurisdiction, from other parcels within the state, owned by the same person, though he be a nonresident. P. [292 U. S. 396](#) .

4. A nonresident who appears in a suit brought against him by a state to collect a tax on part of his property, and voluntarily gives a bond to secure the release of his other property from an attachment in the suit, has no ground to contend that the resulting substitution of his personal liability, to the extent of the bond, for the liability *in rem* of the property attached was in violation of due process. P. [292 U. S. 397](#) .

167 Miss. 650, 145 So. 630, affirmed.

See *also* 146 So. 859, 147 *id.* 324.

Appeal from the affirmance of a decree for *ad valorem* taxes in a suit in chancery brought by the state on the relation of the Attorney General, and accompanied by an attachment of other property of the defendants on which the taxes had been paid.

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MR. JUSTICE STONE delivered the opinion of the Court.

This case is here on appeal, 237 of the Judicial Code, from a decree of the Supreme Court of Mississippi allowing recovery of delinquent taxes assessed upon appellants' lands within the state and overruling their contention that the assessment of the tax and the decree for its payment infringe the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. 167 Miss. 650, 145 So. 630, 146 So. 859. So far as the state court discussed these contentions with specific reference to the Constitution of the United States, both in its original opinion and in an opinion denying the appellants' application for rehearing, they may be reviewed here notwithstanding the failure of appellants to mention them in their assignment of errors to the state supreme court, as required by its rules. *Wall v. Chesapeake & Ohio Ry. Co.*, [256 U. S. 125](#) ; *Saltonstall v. Saltonstall*, [276 U. S. 260](#) , [276 U. S. 267](#) ; *Cumberland Coal Co. v. Board of Revision of Tax Assessments*, [284 U. S. 23](#) , [284 U. S. 24](#) . We confine our opinion to the questions thus discussed.

Appellants, nonresidents of Mississippi, are owners of tracts of land in Tunica County, Mississippi, all of which were assessed for local and state taxation for the year 1928. They failed to pay the tax on one tract alone, and the state, on relation of the Attorney General, brought the present suit in the chancery court of Tunica County to recover the unpaid tax as a debt of the owners. This suit was begun by attachment of other lands of appellants' on which the tax had been paid. The bill of complaint alleges that the appellants are engaged in removing timber from the land on which the tax has not been paid; that the land without it is not of sufficient value to

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pay the tax, and that, unless they are restrained from cutting the timber, the state and its municipal subdivisions will be deprived of the tax. The bill prays that appellants be enjoined from cutting the timber until the tax is paid, and that it be satisfied from the attached lands.

Appellants appeared generally in the suit and secured the release of the attachment by giving bond, in the sum of \$10,000 -- an amount in excess of all taxes claimed and recovered -- by which they and their surety became bound to

satisfy any decree which might be recovered in the suit. In their answer, they set up numerous defenses on state grounds, all of which, so far as now material, have been resolved against them, and may not be reviewed here. They also set up two distinct defenses, which are urged here: first, that they are, and at all times have been, nonresidents of the state, and that the tax demanded was assessed without service of any process on them, or notice to them, or opportunity to be heard in any proceedings for its assessment, and without their appearance in any such proceedings; that, in consequence, the state taxing officers were without jurisdiction to assess the tax, and that any collection is an infringement of the Fourteenth Amendment. Second, that the decree of the state court, so far as it purports to adjudicate any right of the state to satisfy the tax liability out of lands of appellants within the state other than those upon which the tax was assessed, or to impose upon appellants any personal liability for the tax, is likewise a violation of due process.

1. Section 3122 of the Mississippi Code of 1930 declares that every lawful tax is a debt for the recovery of which an action may be brought in the state courts, "and, in all actions for the recovery of *ad valorem* taxes, the assessment rolls shall only be *prima facie* correct." In construing and applying this section in the present case, the state court held that the tax recovery of which it

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allowed was a debt collectible by suit. But, as the statute makes the assessment roll only *prima facie* correct, the court, following its decision in *George County Bridge Co. v. Catlett*, 161 Miss. 120, 135 So. 217, ruled that it is open to a defendant in such a suit to assail the correctness and legal sufficiency of the assessment; that it is the proceeding in court, and not the assessment, which finally fixes the liability to pay the tax, and, since appellants had appeared in the suit and had had full opportunity to be heard before the decree was rendered upholding the assessment, there was no denial of due process.

Accepting, as we must, this construction of the laws of the state by its highest court, they infringe no constitutional limitation. There is no constitutional command

that notice of the assessment of a tax, and opportunity to contest it, must be given in advance of the assessment. It is enough that all available defenses may be presented to a competent tribunal before exaction of the tax and before the command of the state to pay it becomes final and irrevocable. *Wells, Fargo & Co. v. Nevada*, [248 U. S. 165](#) ; *Bristol v. Washington County*, [177 U. S. 133](#) , [177 U. S. 146](#) ; *McMillen v. Anderson*, [95 U. S. 37](#) ; see *American Surety Co. v. Baldwin*, [287 U. S. 156](#) , [287 U. S. 168](#) .

2. The question remains whether the state, in conformity with due process, may declare the tax, lawfully assessed upon one tract of appellants' land, a debt collectible from other property of theirs within the state and from the appellants themselves by a judgment *in personam*. It can no longer be questioned that a state may collect taxes, assessed against one parcel of property within its jurisdiction from other parcels within the state, owned by the same person, though he be a nonresident. *Scottish Union & National Insurance Co. v. Bowland*, [196 U. S. 611](#) , 196 U. S. 632 ; *Bristol v. Washington County*, *supra*, [177 U. S. 145](#) ; compare *Marye v. Baltimore & Ohio R. Co.*, [127 U. S. 117](#) , [127 U. S. 123](#) -124; see *Iowa v. Slimmer*, [248 U. S. 115](#) , [248 U. S. 120](#) . To

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that extent, at least, the power of the state over the property within its bounds may be exerted to affect the interest of the common owner. The power to collect the tax from property within the state is always exercised at the expense of the owner, even though a nonresident, and an obligation *in rem* is thus imposed on his ownership, which is within the control of the state because of the presence there of the physical objects which are the subject of ownership. As it is an incident of property that it may be made to respond to obligations to which its owner may be subject, no want of due process is involved in satisfying an obligation imposed upon the ownership of one item of property by resort to another which is subject to the same ownership.

Here, the suit was brought to compel payment of the tax out of the attached property. The end sought was the same as that constitutionally achieved in

Scottish Union & National Ins. Co. v. Bowland, supra, by distraint upon the nonresident's property to satisfy a tax assessed upon other property within the taxing state, and is equally free from constitutional objection. By giving their bond to release the attachment, the appellants have voluntarily substituted their personal liability on the bond for the liability which might otherwise have been satisfied from the attached property. As the tax, payment of which is decreed, is less than the amount of the bond, it is only this personal liability upon the bond which the state seeks to enforce here.

It is unnecessary to decide the different question with respect to appellants' personal liability to pay the tax which would be presented if the decree had exceeded the amount of the bond, or if appellants had appeared and defended the suit without giving bond or securing release of the attachment. See *Dewey v. Des Moines*, [173 U. S. 193](#) ; *Scottish Union & National Insurance Co., supra*, 196 U. S. 632 . Compare *York v. Texas*, [137 U. S. 15](#) .