

Former Geneva contractor convicted of bilking elderly couple

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GENEVA — A Geneva County jury deliberated four hours Wednesday before finding a former Geneva contractor guilty of scamming an elderly couple out of their life savings to pay for an incomplete construction project.

Ricky Wilson, now of Bonifay, Fla., was charged with felony theft of property by deception for allegedly taking \$22,785.82 from James and Linda Strickland and not completing the renovation of their home in Black.

"It was just a scam," said Geneva County Assistant Prosecutor Stephen

Smith during closing arguments. "It was a way to get money from people he could manipulate."

This is the second time Wilson faced criminal charges for his alleged actions toward an elderly couple. Geneva residents Jerry and Mildred Grimes were the defendants in a case last year. But the jury then returned a not guilty verdict.

"I think because we showed he had done this before it may have helped the jury see he did not intend to finish the work he had started," said Smith.

Wilson's defense attorney this week and during the previous trial said the court proceedings should have been in civil court.

"You have to consider the intent at the time of negotiating the contract," said Wilson's attorney, David Harrison. "We are talking about a breach of contract. If he meant to deceive, he would have taken the money and run."

The Stricklands testified they contracted with Wilson on Aug. 21, 2003, to replace the roof and build a bathroom onto their master bedroom.

Wilson was paid in increments through Nov. 21 for completing some of the work. His last discussion with the Stricklands was on Dec. 3.

"This was the first time in 20 years we could not have Thanksgiving and Christmas at granny and grandpa's house," said Mr. Strickland.

"I hated it for him," said Strickland, a good friend of Wilson's father, Don. "For a while, Ricky was a good old boy. He was a good carpenter. But I think his father's death hit him hard. He was not doing things right."

A sentencing hearing will be held within a month. Wilson faces from 2 to 20 years in a state penitentiary, a fine up to \$10,000 and restitution.

"I hope he'll realize what's he was doing to people," said Mr. Strickland, a part-time security guard at the Veterans Administration mental health clinic in Dothan. He is 77 and his wife is 65.

"We don't want someone like Wilson to take advantage of our senior citizens," said Smith when asked why the

district attorney's office decided to take Wilson to trial a second time.

"We will prosecute anyone who victimizes elderly people like this," he said. "Going to prison may be the only justice the Grimes and Stricklands get."

The Grimes filed a civil lawsuit against Wilson last year and were granted a default judgment for \$82,757 because Wilson did not file an answer to the lawsuit.

Court documents indicate Wilson's request for bankruptcy was dismissed in 1997 but was granted Chapter 13 bankruptcy in January 2003. He also has nine civil lawsuits dating back to 1997 in Geneva County.