

Ex-county judge acquitted by jury in PB graft trial

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PINE BLUFF — A Jefferson County jury Wednesday acquitted former County Judge Jack Jones of four counts of theft of property, deciding he never concealed the offenses he was accused of and therefore couldn't be convicted.

The jury of five men and seven women deliberated for about 1½ hours before reaching its verdict on Jones, who was accused of using county resources for work on private and personal property during his last eight years in office.



Jones

Jones, who served as county judge from 1989 to 2006, hugged his attorney, Chuck Banks of Little Rock — and members of his family applauded — after retired Circuit Judge John Lineberger of Rogers, appointed by the Arkansas Supreme Court to handle the case, read the verdict in Jefferson County Circuit Court.

"I am just humbled by what this jury has done," Jones said. "It's set me free. I've been bound up for a while."

"I know this helped take me out of office in 2006 because there's rumors out there and there's no way I

can fight rumors."

Shortly after the 2½-year Arkansas State Police investigation began, Mike Holcomb defeated Jones in Jones' bid for a 10th term in office as Jefferson County county judge.

Special prosecutor Robert Dittrich said he has never "questioned the wisdom of a jury verdict" but noted that a legal provision that allowed him to file charges against Jones after the typical three-year statute of limitations set up a hurdle too high to overcome.

"We always knew the concealment issue was going to be difficult, and the jury apparently agreed it was a difficult issue," said Dittrich, the prosecuting attorney in Arkansas County.

Dittrich was allowed to file theft-of-property charges against Jones after the statute of limitations expired because Jones was an elected official and because Dittrich said he concealed information or evidence from investigators.

Banks, though, had argued at the trial and in pretrial hearings that Jones couldn't conceal things happening in broad daylight.

Jones was essentially charged in four separate matters: ordering county employees to work on Faith Missionary Baptist Church while on county time and with county equipment; having a woman in his office

Jones

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work while on county time on a personal estate for which Jones was paid \$25,250; having county employees work on his own personal property; and having county employees fix his motor home and tractor while on county time and with county resources.

The jury never got to answer those theft-of-property allegations because they decided he didn't conceal those purported crimes in the first place.

On Wednesday, Jones took the stand in his own defense and said he never ordered any county employee to work on private property.

"I have not used any county labor or anything that belonged to the county to enrich myself," he testified.

But former and current county employees testified that they did a variety of tasks for Jones while on company time, from painting fences on Jones' property and repairing his motor home to working years on the estate of a man Jones was appointed to represent.

During cross-examination, Dittrich attempted to show jurors that Jones contradicted himself.

For example, Jones told jurors that he allowed county employee Johnny Williams to paint a fence at his wife's farm to work off a personal loan of

between \$300 and \$400.

In a 2007 interview with Auditor Jerry Spratt of the Arkansas Division of Legislative Audit, Jones said Williams never painted the fence.

Banks, in closing arguments, said the entire investigation into Jones came down to a personal feud between Jones and two investigators with the Arkansas State Police, brothers Charles and Roger McLemore. Charles McLemore is now retired.

He said the investigators and Jones were once good friends but had a falling-out over the proposed naming of a road where Charles McLemore owned property off Middle Warren Road outside Pine Bluff.

Dittrich told jurors the feud is irrelevant because Jones was stealing from the county for his own benefit, and both McLemores have denied any personal vendetta against Jones.

Jones said he is unsure what he will do with his newfound freedom — just being charged kept him in the state and without a gun permit — but that his immediate plans didn't involve anything long-term.

"I'm going to go home, change clothes and go to church tonight," Jones said. "In the morning, I'm going to get up and start to get my hay equipment ready because my mother-in-law's hay needs to be cut and put in the barn. Other than that, I don't have anything else on my agenda."