



The Trial of James Finch

The Defense is calling character witnesses. Finch is in the hot seat. Prosecutors want to send him to prison for the rest of his life.

By Burnie Thompson

TALLAHASSEE - Finch sits in the hot seat. It's a green leather and mahogany chair to the left of his attorneys, facing Chief Judge Mark Walker. Today, he wears a black blazer, an untucked gray button-up shirt, jeans, and black loafers.

He's to my 10 o'clock, I'm behind him; front row in the middle of the gallery.

Finch is antsy. By the end of the week, he could be in prison for the rest of his life. There's a big diamond ring on his right ring finger, and in his hand is a rolled up napkin. He squeezes it and rolls it around his palm. It's rolled up like a tiny white blanket. He dabs his nose with it every now and then in the cold courtroom the same way others who are a bit chilly do. I have my jacket off. Mostly, though, Finch dangles his right arm over the chair squeezing and holding his tiny white napkin.

Finch's hair is black and combed down. He has bangs like a Roman emperor, but not really. His eyes are blue and often averted to the wall or down at the forest green carpet. Now I know it's actually forest green rather than that weird shade of green I had described earlier because Sara Moon told me so. Ashley Finch confirms it, so we're going with forest green for sure. Finch shifts in his seat like someone late for work waiting for his number to be called at the DMV.

At 72, the wrinkles in his face look more like creases today. Either he's dehydrated or he's held that same expression for far too long.

The Defense is calling Finch's character witnesses. Men who've known him for 50 years, 40 years, and for a long time. Each of the southern gentlemen explains how Finch built up the community over the decades with roads and buildings and infrastructure - always on time and always under budget. And often with his own money.

Mostly, they talk about how Finch taught them to be better producers in their own craft, and they say that you can count on Finch like clockwork. Defense attorney Guy Lewis speeds through about seven of them before lunch time. The jury paid attention to the first five, and even laughed as a couple of them turned on the southern charm and humor. But the jury didn't resonate too much with their country club demeanor, though. Let's just say their dinner tabs probably differ by a zero or two. It was a good thing their testimonies were short and sweet.

The next character witness was a plot twist. This man sauntered right by the jury with a dark hoodie and black jeans. One thing you knew before he ever got to the witness stand is that Willie Carpenter takes his time.

Willie B - as his friends call him - said he grew up with Finch in Panama City. They were best friends as kids. He must've been a skinny, skinny kid because today he could turn sideways and slip out of a jail cell if the guard wasn't paying attention. He and Finch graduated together from Bay High in 1970. Willie told the jury that now he lives near the 17th Street ditch "over in that part of town."

"We came up through life together, drag racing," Willie said. "He'd come over to our house and my mama would feed him collard greens." Even Finch smiled. The jury chuckled and looked over at Finch. The jury liked Willie, who has a face like Sammy Davis Jr. when Sammy was older.

He told the jury that Finch is "straight-up people."

Willie's neighborhood had a dangerous ditch along the road for more than 40 years. Willie said that he had wrecked in it one time, and 10 more people did too. One lady crashed in it and died. But local politicians had no interest in fixing that ditch, he said, at least not on the east side where he lived. It was big and deep. "There were snakes and alligators in it." That all changed in 2016 when then-City Manager Joel Schubert and Finch decided to "fix it now." By 2017, Finch had it fixed in a single year.

"It's beautiful now," Willie said.

Prosecutors are determined to throw Finch in prison over the 17th Street Ditch project. They say Finch made millions by bribing former Commissioner Antonius Barnes with checks totaling \$45,000, which Barnes deposited into his fledgling business bank account.

Prosecutors told the jury that it doesn't matter that the Lynn Haven staff, City attorney, and Manager Schubert recommended the "Do It Now" project to the City Commission back in 2016.

The Commission listened to the staff's recommendation for Finch to fix the 17th Street Ditch, and voted 4-0 in favor. Barnes missed that meeting.

Finch, at age 65, financed the project himself in 2016 for \$5 million at 2.55 percent interest over 30 years. He told the City not to start paying it back until the project was completed, which it was in April 2017. Finch will be 95 when he gets his final payment from the City. Just one more thing about that loan: The City asked Finch if he would please add another \$790K to the 17th Street Ditch mortgage. Vickie Gainer, the city's grant and contract manager, wanted the storm drains fixed around her home. Finch obliged.

Back to Finch's childhood friend, Willie B. When asked on the witness stand if he and Finch were still friends, Willie nodded and said, "He'd do anything for me, and I'd do anything for him."

Next up was Ron Sharpe, the executive director for Arc of the Bay. He tells the jury that they teach job skills and other attributes to kids with autism, Spinal Bifida, and sensory disabilities. It's not easy. They don't get much funding from state or local government. "We're the forgotten agency," he says. But Finch doesn't forget Arc of the Bay. Sharpe said that Finch has donated about a million dollars over the years. After his testimony, Prosecutor Andrew Grogan cross examined Sharpe, asking about the tax deductions that Finch gets by donating to the 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

Prosecutors told the jury that Finch is very wealthy, and he didn't get that way without friends in government who were eager to steer contracts his way for bribes. Grogan said that bribes aren't always sacks of cash dropped off in backrooms. He says Finch did it by writing checks to Commissioner Barnes in the open.

Finch is so wealthy, prosecutors said, that he even has a private jet. They asked the first few wealthy character witnesses if they had ever been on Finch's jet. One of them said yes.

"I wish they would've asked Willie if he's been on my plane," Finch later told me with a smile. He wiped his bangs over to one side, shaking his head. "You know what I'm talkin' about? Them sonofabitches."

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