

Alton H. Maddox Jr., 77, Lawyer in Tawana Brawley Rape Hoax, Dies

The case inflamed racial tensions, with Mr. Maddox later calling New York “the Mississippi of the ’90s.” After the fraud was revealed, he was unrepentant.

By Clyde Haberman

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5 MIN READ

Alton H. Maddox Jr., unrepentant to the end for his role in the 1980s Tawana Brawley kidnapping and rape hoax that inflamed racial hostilities in New York and beyond, a fraud that he helped perpetrate with the Rev. Al Sharpton and a fellow lawyer, died on Sunday at a nursing home in the Bronx. He was 77.

His death was confirmed by his son, Charles. He said he did not know the cause but added that his father had recently been struggling with dementia.

Ms. Brawley was a few weeks shy of her 16th birthday when, in late November 1987, she cast herself as a victim of rank depravity: She, an African American teenager, had been abducted, she said, and held for four days near her home in Wappingers Falls, N.Y., a Dutchess County town about 60 miles north of New York City. She said she was sexually assaulted by a half-dozen white men.

Indeed, she was found in appalling condition. She lay dazed in a trash bag with some of her hair chopped off, feces smeared on her and “KKK” and a racial epithet written in charcoal on her body. Her assailants, Ms. Brawley said, included law enforcement officials.

Shocking as all that was, it was but a prelude to incendiary charges made by three men who swept in from New York City and planted themselves at center stage. They were the voluble Mr. Sharpton and two lawyers who had collaborated in other racially charged cases, Mr. Maddox and C. Vernon Mason.

Their insults were nonstop, their allegations outlandish. The Ku Klux Klan, the Mafia and the Irish Republican Army were somehow all involved, they said. They accused the state’s attorney general, Robert Abrams, who led a seven-month grand jury inquiry into the Brawley matter, of having masturbated over a photo of her.

Mr. Maddox, who was given to referring to whites as “crackers,” went on later to call New York “the Mississippi of the ’90s” and New York’s governor at the time, Mario M. Cuomo, “the George Wallace of the ’90s.”



Alton Maddox in 1998. He once said, "I feel every time I go into court, I am trying to dismantle the Dred Scott decision, which says a Black person is three-fifths a human being. All my cases are just camouflaged Dred Scott." James Estrin/The New York Times

The three men held rallies to bolster their cause, attracting celebrities as allies. Bill Cosby offered a \$25,000 reward for information in the case. The boxing promoter Don King promised a \$100,000 donation toward Ms. Brawley's education. Spike Lee's 1989 film "Do the Right Thing" had wall graffiti that said, "Tawana told the truth."

But in October 1988, the grand jury concluded in a 170-page report that Ms. Brawley had not come anywhere near the truth, dismissing her account as fiction. There was no evidence of sexual assault, it said; she had smeared herself with feces, written the racial slurs herself and faked being in a daze. Her motive was not made clear, but a boyfriend said later that she had wanted to avoid the wrath of her stepfather for having stayed out late.

For Mr. Maddox, the consequences were severe. In May 1990, after he refused to respond to charges of misconduct in the Brawley case, appellate judges in Brooklyn suspended his law license. He never bothered to seriously try getting it back. "The white man thought that after 13 years I'd be so much on my knees," he said in 2003. "They don't know me."

There was also a price to pay in dollars. Steven Pagonis, a Dutchess County prosecutor accused by the Brawley team of having assaulted her, won a defamation suit against Messrs. Sharpton, Maddox and Mason. Mr. Maddox was held personally liable for \$97,000, a penalty that he paid with help from benefactors.

None of the three apologized for their roles in the hoax. Mr. Sharpton became a national figure with a television program. Mr. Mason, who was disbarred in 1995, became an ordained minister. And Mr. Maddox, who had moved to New York from Georgia in 1973, wrote columns for The Amsterdam News, offered radio commentary and for a while led a group called the United African Movement.

Even before the Brawley affair, he regarded himself as a racial combatant. (He would later describe himself as an "attorney-at-war.") "As long as racism exists, Black lawyers have to be on the cutting edge," he said in early 1987. "I feel every time I go into court, I am trying to dismantle the Dred Scott decision, which says a Black person is three-fifths a human being. All my cases are just camouflaged Dred Scott."

His best-known cases were distinctly race-related and, as with the Brawley episode, his go-to tactics included demanding that special prosecutors be named and urging clients to not cooperate.



Mr. Maddox, second from right, conferred with the Rev. Herbert Daughtry, second from left, and the lawyer C. Vernon Mason, right, outside a Queens courthouse in 1986. Mr. Maddox was representing one of three Black men who had been set upon by a band of white youths in the Howard Beach section of Queens. Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

In another prominent racial incident of that era, he represented one of three Black men who in 1986 were set upon by a band of white youths in Howard Beach, Queens, an attack that led to the death of Michael Griffith. (Three of the white youths were convicted.) He successfully defended a young Black man charged in 1987 with killing a white Roman Catholic priest who had wanted to have sex with him. In 1986, he won an acquittal for a Black teenager accused of having assaulted a white plainclothes police officer near Columbia University.

Mr. Maddox failed in his 1987 defense of a Black man who was ultimately convicted of slashing the face of a white model; Mr. Maddox had besmirched her character in court. But three years later he successfully defended Mr. Sharpton, cleared by a Manhattan jury of fraud and larceny charges brought by Mr. Abrams's office.

Mr. Maddox had a few scrapes of his own with law enforcement. In 1967, soon after graduating from Howard University, he was beaten by police officers in his hometown, Newnan, Ga., during an argument over a parking space. He was arrested, but it is not clear if he did jail time. Seventeen years later in New York, he scuffled with court officers and was charged with judicial obstruction. Representing himself at trial, he won an acquittal.

“I have always engaged in nontraditional tactics,” he said in 1990.

Alton Henry Maddox Jr. was born on July 21, 1945, in Inkster, Mich., near Detroit. His family moved to Newnan, southwest of Atlanta, during his boyhood. His father, Alton Sr., was an evangelical preacher, and his mother, Niece (Simms) Maddox, taught grade school. “My mother simply did not want me in contact with white people,” Mr. Maddox told The Washington Post Magazine in 1987. “That was the kind of society we lived in. So I never knew a subservient role.”

After graduating from high school in Newnan, he went to Howard and then to Boston College’s law school, receiving his degree in 1971. By then he had been married for four years to Leola Weaver, whom he had met in Georgia on a blind date. Ms. Maddox, who held two librarian jobs to help pay the bills after her husband lost his law license, died in 2017.

In addition to his son, Mr. Maddox is survived by two grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

On moving to New York in 1973, he worked at Harlem Legal Services, then led the juvenile justice project of the National Conference of Black Lawyers. He started his own law practice in 1981, teaming on occasion with Mr. Mason.

Mr. Maddox never wavered from his insistence that African Americans had endured “apartheid justice” and that it was his duty to resist.

“The only thing I know to do in a courtroom is to knock the door down and whip some butt,” he said in 2015, adding: “There’s a reason why nobody would ever let me back in a courtroom again. Because they don’t want any more butt whippings.”

Alex Traub contributed reporting.

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