

Supreme Court Justice Thomas' Family Sells Properties to Wealthy Republican Donor



Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas sold three properties in Georgia, including his childhood home, to Texas real estate magnate and GOP mega-donor Harlan Crow in 2014, according to an investigative report by ProPublica. Thomas did not disclose the sale of the properties on his financial disclosure form for that year, nor did he report his extensive travel financed by Crow over the past two decades. Experts interviewed by ProPublica stated that the law passed after the Watergate scandal requiring officials to provide details about most real estate transactions over \$1,000. Thomas' mother still resides in the home where he once lived, and Crow paid contractors tens of thousands of dollars for improvements to the property.

Crow's company reportedly spent around \$134,000 on the three Savannah properties owned by Thomas, his mother, and his brother, with the other two parcels located nearby. The report also noted that Crow purchased the properties based on the dwellings' size, quality, and livability. In a statement, Crow said he approached the Thomas family about maintaining the historic site to educate future generations about Thomas's life story, from poverty to prominence.

ProPublica could not confirm whether Crow paid a fair market value for the properties. Judges are not required to disclose sales of their primary residences, but Thomas listed the Savannah property as "rental property" on previous financial disclosures, including in 2014. Unlike the vacations, arguably within the personal hospitality exclusions, there is no apparent exclusion for this transaction, according to Arthur Hellman, an ethics professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

Last week, ProPublica reported that Thomas and his wife, Virginia Thomas, traveled in Indonesia aboard Crow's 162-foot yacht, frequently vacationed at his lavish Adirondacks resort, and flew on his private plane on trips worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. The post-Watergate statute applies to gifts, but justices have questioned whether they apply to them.

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The report sparked swift calls for action by Democrats and outside government watchdog groups. Senate Democrats called on Chief Justice John Roberts to investigate Thomas's trips and to champion the creation of a high-court code of ethics. Democrats vowed to consider legislation if that doesn't happen and stated that a hearing is planned to examine ethics issues at the court.

In conclusion, the sale of the properties by Justice Thomas to a major GOP donor without proper disclosure raises ethical concerns and legal questions, particularly in light of the justice's extensive travel financed by the same donor. It remains to be seen whether Chief Justice Roberts will take action to investigate these issues and whether Congress will consider legislation to address ethics issues at the Supreme Court.