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SC Court of Appeals

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
IN THE COURT OF APPEALS

Appeal from York County
The Honorable William A. McKinnon, Circuit Court Judge

THE STATE,

Respondent,

vs.

ANTHONY NATHANIEL DRAYTON,

Appellant.

APPELLATE CASE NO 2025-001071

INITIAL BRIEF OF RESPONDENT

ALAN WILSON
Attorney General

JOSHUA A. EDWARDS
Assistant Attorney General

Post Office Box 11549
Columbia, SC 29211
(803) 734-3727

KEVIN S. BRACKETT
Solicitor, Sixteenth Judicial Circuit

1675 York Highway
York, SC 29745
(803) 628-3025

ATTORNEYS FOR RESPONDENT

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RESPONDENT'S STATEMENT OF ISSUES ON APPEAL

- I. Whether the trial court correctly denied Drayton's motion for a directed verdict.
- II. Whether the trial court abused its discretion by instructing the jury about factors to consider in assessing the believability of witnesses.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

A York County grand jury indicted Appellant Anthony Drayton for entering a bank with intent to steal. S.C. Code Ann. §16-11-380 (A). Drayton proceeded to jury trial on May 5–6, 2025, before the Honorable William A. McKinnon, Circuit Court Judge. Drayton was convicted and sentenced to 12 years' incarceration. This direct appeal follows.

FACTS

On September 29, 2023, a man entered a bank in Fort Mill wearing a wig and fake beard. He walked directly to a teller, Michelle Gainey, and handed her a note demanding money. State's Exhibit #1. The note was long, and Gainey did not have time to read it because the man snatched it out of her hand and said, "shut up, give me the money." Tr.p.76–77. Gainey immediately handed the man an envelope containing \$1,200 cash. Tr.p.72. The man walked out and Gainey called 911. Tr.p.79. Police recovered the fake beard behind the bank building. Tr.p.118.

Gainey felt scared because she "didn't know what he was going to do." Tr.p.79. She testified: "I just did what he told me to do." Tr.p.79. Gainey was "shaken up" by the event and "very nervous at work" after the robbery. Tr.p.68, 78. The State admitted the 911 call, in which Gainey is audibly upset as she struggles to speak with the operator. State's Exhibit #2. Gainey quit her job a few months after this incident and began working for the local government. Tr.p.72.

Drayton's sister, Brittany Johnson, testified Drayton lived with her in Simpsonville at the time. Tr.p.87. Drayton told her out of the blue one day that he robbed a bank. Tr.p.88. He showed her a picture of a screenshot from the Fort Mill police department's social media page with surveillance stills from the bank and said he was the person in the photos. State's Exhibit #4, Tr.p.88–89. At trial, Johnson identified Drayton as the person in the pictures. Tr.p.90. She told her mother, who called the police. Tr.p.90.

Drayton's mother testified Drayton drove a maroon car and had a girlfriend in Charlotte whom he visited on September 29th. Tr.p.102–03, 111–12. She testified she saw her granddaughter take a dark wig from Drayton's car and make a joke about that being his

“girlfriend.” Tr.p.104. She testified that on September 30th, the day after the robbery, Drayton texted her that he had gotten a new phone. Tr.p.115. She identified Drayton as the person in the surveillance stills. Tr.p.105–07.

Police arrested Drayton and seized his cell phone. They searched Drayton’s residence and seized another cell phone and a wig. Tr.p.126, 149. One of the phones had been used by Drayton since at least 2022. Tr.p.128. On September 29, 2023, at 1:10 a.m., there was an internet search for Halloween costumes and wigs and another search for beards. Tr.p.129–30. Shortly after, there was a search for banks in Fort Mill. Tr.p.130.

ARGUMENT

I. The trial court correctly denied Drayton's motion for a directed verdict.

Drayton argues the trial court erroneously refused to direct a verdict of not guilty because there was no evidence he intended to steal through threats or intimidation. Drayton did not make this argument at trial, and it is therefore not preserved for appellate review. Even if preserved, the evidence supports a finding that Drayton's conduct met the statutory elements. This Court should affirm.

A. Standard of review.

When reviewing a denial of a directed verdict, the appellate court views the evidence and all reasonable inferences in the light most favorable to the State. If there is any direct evidence or any substantial circumstantial evidence reasonably tending to prove the guilt of the accused, the court must find the case was properly submitted to the jury. State v. Gaines, 447 S.C. 609, 929 S.E.2d 411, 413 (Ct. App. 2026).

B. Issue preservation.

Drayton's argument is not preserved for review because it was not raised and ruled on by the trial court. When Drayton moved for a directed verdict, the trial court interjected that Drayton's own mother and sister identified him as the perpetrator. Tr.p.182. The trial court clearly anticipated that Drayton's motion was based on insufficient proof of identity. Drayton did not correct the trial court's understanding and never advanced the specific argument he now presents on appeal: that there was no evidence of threats or intimidation. See State v. Johnson, 363 S.C. 53, 58, 609 S.E.2d 520, 523 (2005) (explaining "objection should be addressed to the trial court in a sufficiently specific manner that brings attention to the exact error"); Atl. Coast Builders & Contractors, LLC v. Lewis, 398 S.C. 323, 329, 730 S.E.2d 282, 285 (2012)

(explaining issue preservation rules “are designed to give the trial court a fair opportunity to rule”). Accordingly, the argument is not preserved for review because it was not raised with specificity by the appellant nor ruled upon by the trial court.

C. Analysis.

Even if preserved, the trial court correctly denied the motion. A criminal defendant is entitled to a directed verdict when the State “has failed to present evidence of the offense charged.” State v. Pearson, 415 S.C. 463, 469, 783 S.E.2d 802, 805 (2016). A trial court should submit the case to a jury when there is evidence from which any rational trier of fact could have found the essential elements of the crime beyond a reasonable doubt. Id. at 471, 783 S.E.2d at 806. The South Carolina code provides: “It is unlawful for a person to enter a building or part of a building occupied as a bank . . . with intent to steal money, securities for money, or property, either by force, intimidation, or threats.” S.C. Code Ann. §16-11-380 (A). The evidence supported a finding that Drayton’s conduct met the elements.

An intentional, face-to-face confrontation with a bank teller demanding money carries the implied threat of violence. See United States v. Wagstaff, 865 F.2d 626, 627 (4th Cir. 1989) (explaining intimidation under the federal bank robbery statute “occurs when an ordinary person in the teller's position reasonably could infer a threat of bodily harm from the defendant’s acts”) (quoting United States v. Higdon, 832 F.2d 312, 315 (5th Cir.1987)). And to walk into a bank wearing a disguise, hand the teller a demand note, and tell her to “shut up” and “give me the money” is conduct meant to intimidate. Cf. Wagstaff, 865 F.2d at 627 (4th Cir. 1989) (finding no evidence of intimidation where thief remained “at all times at least eight feet from the nearest teller,” made minimal eye contact, and “never presented any kind of written note”); see also United States v. Robinson, 527 F.2d 1170, 1172 (6th Cir. 1975) (holding “a jury would be

justified in finding intimidation where a man clothed in a 'leather coat' (so that a weapon could presumably be concealed) after waiting somewhat nervously in line, attempts, at best, a sham commercial transaction . . . and commands with the imperative 'give' a teller to turn over 'all (her) money'"); United States v. Ketchum, 550 F.3d 363, 367 (4th Cir. 2008) (explaining "intimidation does not require proof of express threats of bodily harm, threatening body motions, or the physical possibility of a concealed weapon. Indeed, intimidation generally may be established based on nothing more than a defendant's written or verbal demands to a teller") (citing United States v. Gilmore, 282 F.3d 398, 402 (6th Cir.2002)). Clearly the effect was to intimidate Gainey, who was traumatized by this frightening event. Explaining why she quit her job after this incident, she testified: "I didn't want to work there. . . . everybody that came in, I was thinking oh my God, they're going to rob me." Tr.p.85.

The supreme court addressed the intimidation element of robbery in State v. Rosemond, 356 S.C. 426, 430, 589 S.E.2d 757, 759 (2003) (explaining the "gravamen of a robbery charge is a taking from the person or immediate presence of another by violence or intimidation"). There, Rosemond "went behind the register [of a convenience store] and intimidated [the clerk] by glaring at her. Further, after his attempt to open the register failed, he acted with force by flipping the heavy register in the air and then lifting it and slamming it down to open it." Id. at 430, 589 S.E.2d at 759. The court held this evidence was sufficient to support a finding that Rosemond acted with force and intimidation.

Similarly, Drayton entered a bank wearing a wig and fake beard. He walked directly to the teller and handed her a note demanding money. Gainey did not have time to read the entire note before Drayton snatched it out of her hand and said, "shut up, give me the money." Tr.p.76–77. This is conduct which would place an ordinary person in fear of violence, and

supports a finding that Drayton entered the bank with the intent to steal by threats or intimidation. See State v. Taylor, 434 S.C. 365, 371, 862 S.E.2d 924, 927–28 (Ct. App. 2021) (explaining intent may be inferred through conduct). This Court should affirm.

II. The trial court correctly instructed jurors about factors they should consider in assessing the believability of witnesses.

Drayton argues a portion of the trial court’s jury instruction was an unconstitutional charge on the facts. Drayton did not object to the instruction at trial, and the issue is therefore not preserved for appellate review. Even if preserved, the trial court properly instructed the jury on factors to consider when assessing the believability of witnesses. The instruction did not elevate any particular facts and was not directed toward witnesses associated only with one party. This Court should affirm.¹

A. Standard of review.

A trial court’s decision regarding jury instructions is reviewed for an abuse of discretion. State v. Lemire, 406 S.C. 558, 565, 753 S.E.2d 247, 251 (Ct. App. 2013).

B. Issue preservation.

Drayton acknowledges he did not object to the court’s charge at trial, but argues he was not required to object to preserve this issue for appellate review because he claims on appeal that the instruction was an unconstitutional charge on the facts. He argues this type of claim is exempt from the usual issue preservation requirements. That is not the law.

South Carolina appellate courts do not follow the “plain error” rule. Moses v. State, 442 S.C. 263, 268–69, 898 S.E.2d 174, 177 (Ct. App. 2024); State v. Sheppard, 391 S.C. 415, 421, 706 S.E.2d 16, 19 (2011) (“This Court . . . has routinely held the plain error rule does not apply in South Carolina state courts.”). Instead, a party must make a contemporaneous and specific objection to preserve an issue for appellate review. It is a litigant’s duty to bring to the court’s

¹ The instruction is part of Judge McKinnon’s standard jury charge. This Court recently rejected another challenge to the instruction, affirming the conviction in an unpublished opinion. State v. Lawson, Op. No. 2026-UP-019 (S.C. Ct. App. filed January 21, 2026) (petition for writ of

attention any perceived error, and the failure to do so amounts to a waiver of the alleged error. This is true even when the appellant bases his claim of error on constitutional grounds and even when the appellant alleges the instruction was a charge on the facts. State v. Daniels, 401 S.C. 251, 255, 737 S.E.2d 473, 475 (2012) (holding claim that jury charge unconstitutionally shifted the burden of proof was not preserved for appeal because “[i]t is axiomatic that an objection to a jury charge may not be raised for the first time on appeal”); State v. Lemire, 406 S.C. 558, 573, 753 S.E.2d 247, 255 (Ct. App. 2013) (“As to Lemire’s arguments that the charge was redundant, confusing, and tantamount to a charge on the facts, these concerns were neither raised to nor ruled upon by the trial court and are therefore not preserved for appeal.”) (emphasis added).

Drayton bases his argument entirely on State v. Orr, 128 S.C. 279, 122 S.E.2d 771 (1924), a case he acknowledges “has not been used since.” Brief of Appellant at 16. There, the appellate court reversed Orr’s conviction because the trial court erroneously told the jury Orr admitted killing the victim, which Orr had not. In a perfunctory opinion, the Orr court reversed Orr’s conviction, stating the “rule of court” requiring an objection to jury charges “must give way to the constitutional provision as to a charge on the facts.” Neither this Court nor the supreme court has ever cited Orr for the proposition that a claim of an unconstitutional charge on the facts is exempt from issue preservation requirements.

Even assuming Orr ever was good law, it has been abrogated many times over by subsequent opinions and by statute. State v. Holland, 261 S.C. 488, 503, 201 S.E.2d 118, 125–26 (1973) (“Holland now takes the position, contrary to his stated objection, that the charge was a comment upon the facts. If the appellant thought the foregoing charge violated Art. V, Sec. 26 of the Constitution, counsel should have made timely objection upon such ground. No such

objection was interposed at the trial and it cannot be raised for the first time on appeal.”); Lundy v. Lititz Mut. Ins. Co., 232 S.C. 1, 10, 100 S.E.2d 544, 548 (1957) (holding appellant failed to preserve argument that just charge was a comment on the facts by failing to object); Rule 20(b), SCRCrimP (“Notwithstanding any request for legal instructions, the parties shall be given the opportunity to object to the giving or failure to give an instruction before the jury retires, but out of the hearing of the jury. Any objection shall state distinctly the matter objected to and the grounds for objection. Failure to object in accordance with this rule shall constitute a waiver of objection.”); S.C. Code Ann. § 17-23-100 (“In all cases tried before a jury, other than cases in a magistrates or municipal court, after the court has delivered to the jury a charge on the law in the case, the court shall temporarily excuse the jury from the presence of counsel and litigants in order to give counsel and litigants an opportunity to express objections to the charge or request the charge of additional propositions made necessary by the charge, out of the presence of the jury.”).

Drayton’s argument ignores the basic purposes of issue preservation. Atl. Coast Builders & Contractors, LLC v. Lewis, 398 S.C. 323, 329, 730 S.E.2d 282, 285 (2012) (“Issue preservation rules are designed to give the trial court a fair opportunity to rule on the issues, and thus provide us with a platform for meaningful appellate review.”); I’On, L.L.C. v. Town of Mt. Pleasant, 338 S.C. 406, 422, 526 S.E.2d 716, 724 (2000) (explaining issue preservation requirement “prevents a party from keeping an ace card up his sleeve—intentionally or by chance—in the hope that an appellate court will accept that ace card and, via a reversal, give him another opportunity to prove his case”). The issue is not preserved for review.

C. Analysis.

Issue preservation aside, the trial court's instruction was proper. Regarding the credibility of witnesses, the trial court instructed the jury as follows:

Credibility and believability of the witnesses. Ladies and gentlemen, when I say that you must consider all the evidence, I do not mean you must accept all the evidence as true or accurate. You should decide whether you believe what each witness had to say and how important that testimony was. In making those decisions, you may believe or disbelieve any witness in whole or in part. The number of witnesses testifying about something doesn't necessarily matter.

In deciding whether you believe a witness, I suggest that you ask yourself a few questions. Did the witness impress you as one who is telling the truth? Did the witness have any particular reason to not tell the truth or have a personal interest in the outcome of the case? Did the witness seem to have a good memory? Did the witness have the opportunity and ability to accurately observe the things he or she testified about? Did the witness appear to understand the questions clearly and answer them directly? Did the testimony differ from other testimony or other evidence?

However, please keep in mind that a simple mistake does not mean a witness wasn't telling the truth as he or she remembers it. People naturally tend to forget some things or remember them inaccurately. So, if a witness misstated something, you must decide whether it was because of an innocent lapse, or mistake in memory, or an intentional deception. The significance of your decision may depend on whether the misstatement is about an important fact or about an unimportant detail.

(Tr.p.194–95). Drayton complains only of the last paragraph of the charge.

The purpose of jury charges is “to enlighten the jury and to aid it in arriving at a correct verdict.” State v. Blurton, 352 S.C. 203, 207–08, 573 S.E.2d 802, 804 (2002). The learned trial court decided this instruction would assist the jury in understanding their role and responsibility as jurors. Its decision to give the charge was within its discretion. See James v. Mickey, 26 S.C. 270, 2 S.E. 130, 132 (1887) (explaining requested instruction that “loose and off-hand . . . declarations should not be entitled to the same weight as those earnestly made” would have been

proper, but decision whether to give instruction “was a matter of discretion with [the trial court], depending upon the facts, and the character of the declarations admitted”).

The complained-of language is not materially different from the language in the previous two paragraphs, of which Drayton does not complain. Both portions of the charge concern factors which may influence whether a juror should believe a witness’s testimony. In the preceding paragraph, the trial court instructed the jury to consider whether the witness has any bias and whether the person “seem[s] to have a good memory.” (Tr.p.194). Similarly, the complained-of language instructs jurors to consider whether the testimony in question concerns an important fact, and thus may inform their assessment whether any misstatements are intentional or unintentional. This innocuous instruction merely conveys to the jury their responsibility to use their common sense to assess the credibility of each witness. See State v. Aleksey, 343 S.C. 20, 27, 538 S.E.2d 248, 251 (2000) (explaining “jury instructions should be considered as a whole, and if as a whole they are free from error, any isolated portions which may be misleading do not constitute reversible error”); State v. Brandt, 393 S.C. 526, 549, 713 S.E.2d 591, 603 (2011) (“A jury charge which is substantially correct and covers the law does not require reversal.”).

The charge is distinguishable from the instructions given in the cases cited in the Brief of Appellant. Unlike the Stukes charge, the instruction was not directed towards a specific witness or party. Cf. State v. Stukes, 416 S.C. 493, 499–500, 787 S.E.2d 480, 483 (2016) (holding instruction that a victim’s testimony “need not be corroborated” was a comment on the facts because by “addressing the veracity of a victim’s testimony in its instructions, the trial court emphasizes the weight of that evidence in the eyes of the jury. . . . Specifying this qualification applies to one witness creates the inference the same is not true for the others”); see also State v.

Rayfield, 369 S.C. 106, 120, 631 S.E.2d 244, 251–52 (2006) (Pleicones, J., dissenting) (“By specifically charging that the alleged victim’s testimony need not be corroborated, the trial court singles out the alleged victim and ‘appears to express an opinion on her credibility.’”). Further, there is no indication the jury misapprehended the meaning of the charge, as in Stukes, where the jury asked whether the “victim’s testimony must be accepted as being true” and the trial court gave no curative instruction. Id. at 497, 787 S.E. 2d at 482.

Likewise, the charge did not single out or emphasize any specific fact, such as a defendant’s flight. Cf. State v. Grant, 275 S.C. 404, 406, 272 S.E.2d 169, 170 (1980) (disapproving charge which instructed that flight can show consciousness of guilt). Nor did the charge establish an inference regarding a contested fact or element. Cf. State v. Burdette, 427 S.C. 490, 503, 832 S.E.2d 575, 582 (2019) (holding “a trial court shall not instruct the jury that it may infer the existence of malice when the deed was done with a deadly weapon”). Instead, it applied equally to all the testimony offered at trial.

In Cox v. Gustafson, 493 P.2d 52 (Or. 1972), the Oregon Supreme Court examined a nearly identical charge and held it was not a comment on the evidence because it did not instruct the jury “on the probative value of the evidence.” Id. at 162 (citing Franks v. Smith, 444 P.2d 954, 957 (Or. 1968)). The court explained:

The instruction given was an attempt to aid the jury in weighing the evidence by elaborating upon the import of the previous instruction concerning a witness found false in one part of his testimony. The instruction is similar in purpose to those set out in ORS 17.250, such as the jury need not find in conformity with the testimony of a number of witnesses who do not sound reasonable as against a lesser number of witnesses whose testimony does sound reasonable, or the evidence is to be weighed according to the evidence which it is in the power of one side to produce and the other to contradict.

Cox at 53–54. The court further explained the instruction was not prejudicial because it merely stated a “truism” that is “obvious to most jurors” Id. Thus even if the charge was erroneous, it was not prejudicial. See State v. Workman, 443 S.C. 369, 377, 905 S.E.2d 119, 123 (2024) (“Erroneous or incomplete jury instructions are subject to a harmless error analysis.”).

That is particularly true in this case, where the evidence against Drayton was overwhelming and the only other argument on appeal is that his conduct did not meet the statutory elements of threats or intimidation. Further, Drayton admitted during sentencing that he is the person who committed this crime. Tr.p.223–40. This statement would be admissible against him at a second trial. See Rule 801(d)(2), SCRE. Retrial would be pointless. See State v. Sroka, 267 S.C. 664, 665, 230 S.E.2d 816, 817 (1976) (“Any doubt about the correctness of [the verdict] is eliminated by the admission of appellant in open court, after conviction and during the pre-sentence inquiry by the trial judge, that he had participated in the robbery with a sawed-off shotgun. Further review of the record, therefore, is rendered unnecessary.”); State v. Patterson, 263 S.C. 176, 182, 209 S.E.2d 39, 41 (1974) (explaining appellant waived appellate issue by virtue of his subsequent admission at co-defendant’s trial because “on retrial no honest and rational jury could fail to convict the appellant of murder”). This Court should affirm.

CONCLUSION

For all of the foregoing reasons, the conviction and sentence of the lower court should be affirmed.

Respectfully submitted,

ALAN WILSON
Attorney General

JOSHUA A. EDWARDS
Assistant Attorney General

KEVIN S. BRACKETT
Solicitor, Sixteenth Judicial Circuit

BY:


JOSHUA A. EDWARDS

Office of the Attorney General
Post Office Box 11549
Columbia, SC 29211
(803) 734-3727

ATTORNEYS FOR RESPONDENT

June 23, 2026