



Department of Investigation

Press Release

ADOI "Sting" Snares Title Seacher Forging NYC Land Deeds & DOF Supervisor Taking Payoffs At Brooklyn City Register's Office

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FRIDAY, JANUARY 14, 2000 -- EDWARD J. KURIANSKY, Commissioner of the Department of Investigation (DOI), today announced the felony arrest of WILLIAM McCUNE, an "independent" title searcher working out of the Department of Finance's (DOF) city Register's Office in Brooklyn, for fraudulently altering owners names on deeds to private and City-owned properties in King County, and then filing the phony deeds with DOF. Unbeknownst to McCUNE, the individuals who paid him between \$200 and \$300 to illegally change the deeds were, in fact, participating in a DOI undercover operation.

In a separate complaint, GEORGE RODRIGUEZ, a DOF supervisor in the Brooklyn City Register's Office, was charged with unlawfully taking gratuities from DOI undercover investigators, posing as title searchers, in return for providing them with expedited copies of certified property deeds.

According to Commissioner Kuriansky, title search companies commonly employ title searchers to research the background of a parcel of real property to ensure that there are no liens or taxes due at the time of a sale or other financial transaction concerning the property. In recent years, however, several individuals previously employed by title search companies have ventured out on their own as independent title searchers. Generally, these independent searchers operate at one or another of the City Register's offices, working out of their briefcases and offering their services directly to the public for a fee.

In 1998, DOI commenced an investigation after receiving numerous complaints from the Brooklyn city Register's Office that independent title searchers were charging members of the public exorbitant fees for services that were either free of cost or only a nominal amount. Often, it is alleged, the public would wrongly assume that the independent title searchers assisting them were actually DOF employees, and not until the requested information was provided would the independent searcher reveal that they were not City employees and that there was a substantial fee for their services, sometimes as much as \$500.

In response to these allegations, DOI sent an undercover agent, posing as a property owner, to the Brooklyn Register's Office. On July 22, 1999, according to the complaint, the undercover was introduced to the defendant McCUNE, an independent title searcher, by a confidential informant, who requested that McCUNE assist the informant in filing a deed for a parcel of property in Brooklyn that the informant did not actually own. In the undercovers presence, it is alleged that McCUNE fraudulently altered the deed so that the informant's name appeared as the owner of record. McCUNE then filed the phony deed with the Register's Office, for which he was paid \$200 by the informant.

It is further alleged that August 19, 1999, the DOI undercover agent again met McCUNE at the Register's Office, and this time McCUNE fraudulently altered the deed to a vacant lot owned by the City so that the

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undercover agent's name appeared as the owner of record--supposedly to enable the undercover to operate a parking lot on the property. First checking the Register's records to verify that the property did indeed belong to the City, McCUNE then completed the paperwork necessary for falsely recording the undercover as the owner of the property. On August 23, 1999, McCUNE filed the fraudulent deed with the City Register and was paid a total of \$300 by the undercover agent.

A second phase of the investigation focused on GEORGE RODRIGUEZ, a supervisor in the Brooklyn Register's Office. Copies of certified deeds can be obtained for a fee of \$4 per deed, which must be paid only to cashiers at the Register's Office. Generally, requests for copies of certified deeds take from 5 to 7 business days. However, in his official capacity as a supervisor, RODRIGUEZ can issue certified deeds immediately.

According to the complaint RODRIGUEZ, on 4 occasions between April 28, 1998, and July 23, 1998, took payoffs of \$10 to \$50, depending on the number of deeds requested, from DOI undercover agents, posing as title searchers, to expedite the issuance of certified deeds.

Commissioner Kuriansky noted that the Department of Finance, working with DOI, has now placed signs within all the City Register's Offices advising the public that DOF provides staff to assist them in researching property. In addition, independent searchers have been advised that they cannot conduct business on City property, and that any attempts to do so will result in their ejection from the Register's Office and, if warranted, their arrest for criminal trespass.

McCUNE (also known as Troy McCune), 33, of 90 Downing Street in Brooklyn, was charged with Forgery in the Second Degree, Falsifying Business Records in the First Degree, and

Offering a False Instrument for Filing in the Second Degree. If convicted, he faces up to 7 years in prison.

Rodriguez, 32, of the Bronx, has been employed by DOF since October 1989. He has been suspended without pay. RODRIGUEZ was charged with Receiving Unlawful Gratuities. If convicted, he faces up to 1 year in prison.

Commissioner Kuriansky expressed his sincere appreciation to Department of Finance Commissioner Andrew S. Eristoff and his staff for initially bringing the matter to light, and for their cooperation during the course of the investigation.

The investigation was conducted by DOI Assistant Commissioner and DOF Inspector General Vincent E. Green and members of his staff, including Deputy Inspector General Maureen Thomas, Assistant Inspector General Joe Medina, and Investigator Roxanne Harmon.

The Office of Brooklyn District Attorney Charles J. Hynes is prosecuting the cases. Assistant District Attorney Richard K. Farrell is handling the matters.