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## JURY ACQUITS ATLANTIC CITY MAN OF MURDER DURING ROBBERY

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The jury did find William Ridley guilty of first-degree robbery and possession of a weapon.

An Atlantic City man was acquitted Wednesday of murdering a man shot in the back of the head during a robbery in an Atlantic City apartment complex two years ago.

William Ridley, 30, who was accused of shooting Eric Hose, also 30, of Atlantic City, on June 27, 2000, in a Venice Park complex, was acquitted of murder and felony murder - a killing committed during the commission of a crime.

In a trial that began Nov. 12, the jury deliberated for five hours over two days and came back with a verdict at about 2:45 p.m. Wednesday.

The jury did, however, find Ridley, who has been in prison since his arrest in July 2000, guilty of first-degree armed robbery, possession of a weapon and hindering apprehension. They found him not guilty of possession of a weapon for an unlawful purpose and tampering with evidence.

"It seems like the jury came up with a compromise verdict," defense attorney Michael Schreiber said. "I will make a motion to dismiss the armed robbery verdict and file a motion for a new trial on the weapons and hindering apprehension charges."

If the judge doesn't grant Schreiber's motion to set aside the armed robbery conviction, Schreiber said he will make that the subject of a motion for a new trial as well.

Atlantic County Assistant Prosecutor John Maher couldn't be reached for comment Thursday.

Twenty-seven witnesses took the stand in the trial; the defense called eight of them.

"The lack of credibility of the witnesses for the state got Ridley acquitted of murder," Schreiber said.

Ridley and Atlantic City residents Clayton Eric Valentine, 22, of Missouri Avenue, and Charles DeWitt Cottman, 25, of Murray Avenue, each were charged with first-degree conspiracy to commit armed robbery, second-degree conspiracy to possess a weapon for an unlawful purpose, in addition to weapons offenses, hindering apprehension and evidence tampering.

Valentine pleaded guilty on Oct. 8, 2000, to conspiracy to commit robbery and faces a maximum of seven years in prison. Cottman pleaded guilty to hindering his own apprehension Dec. 3, 2001, and faces five years in prison.

Valentine and Cottman have yet to be sentenced.

Schreiber said he believed statements from Valentine and Cottman accusing Ridley of the

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crime after they were arrested on July 5, 2000, swayed the jury to acquit his client on the murder and felony murder charges.

Cottman and Valentine told authorities that they knew Ridley was planning a robbery and provided a gun.

Ridley was arrested July 14, 2000.

Police were called to the Venice Park apartment complex at about 11:20 p.m. after neighbors heard gunshots and found Hose lying in the complex parking lot trying to breathe while bleeding profusely from the mouth.

The victim died a day later at Atlantic City Medical Center, City Division, after being taken off life-support machines.

Authorities believed Ridley shot Hose with a .38-caliber weapon during a robbery. Witnesses were reluctant to cooperate. But the Major Crimes Squad and city police Intelligence Unit were able to gain statements and recover the murder weapon, a .38-caliber revolver, along with a .22-caliber handgun and ammunition from the home of a friend of Valentine's.

Schreiber said that although his client was acquitted of the murder and felony murder charges, he still faces an extended term in prison because of two prior convictions - a robbery and a drug conviction.

Ridley faces 10 to 20 years in prison at sentencing on the armed robbery charge and another three to five years on the remaining charges of possession of a weapon and hindering apprehension, Schreiber said.

Ridley will be sentenced at 8:45 a.m. Jan. 30, 2003 in Superior Court Judge James Isman's courtroom.

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