

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ALABAMA
SOUTHERN DIVISION**

LEE WILLIAMSON, <i>et al.</i> ,	)	
	)	
Plaintiffs,	)	
	)	
v.	)	Case No. 2:24-cv-00139-SGC
	)	
HERITAGE PRESCHOOLS, LLC, <i>et</i>	)	
<i>al.</i> ,	)	
	)	
Defendants.	)	

ORDER¹

Pending before the court are two, related motions filed by Plaintiffs Lee Williamson and Aletta Williamson (collectively, “the Williamsons”): (1) an emergency motion to strike the defendants’ motions for summary judgment and (2) a motion for sanctions against the defendants, Heritage Preschools, LLC, and Heritage Preschools of Homewood, LLC (collectively, “Heritage” or “the defendants”). (Docs. 49, 52).² Heritage responded to the Williamsons’ motion to strike but filed nothing in response to their motion for sanctions, and the court heard oral arguments on October 29, 2025. (Doc. 50; *see* Doc. 55). For the following

¹ The parties have unanimously consented to magistrate judge jurisdiction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 636(c). (Doc. 25).

² Citations to the record refer to the document and page numbers assigned by the court’s CM/ECF electronic document system and appear in the following format: (Doc. __ at __).

reasons, the court will grant the Williamsons' motion to strike Heritage's motions for summary judgment and grant their motion for sanctions.

I. Background

The Williamsons filed this action under 42 U.S.C. § 1981, alleging Heritage discriminated against their minor son J.W., who is African American, by disciplining and expelling him for conduct white children engaged in without the same consequences. (Doc. 1). They also claim Heritage retaliated against them by immediately expelling J.W. when they complained about discrimination and indicated their intent to file a complaint against Heritage with the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. (*See id.*). After the parties unanimously consented to magistrate judge jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. § 636(c), the court entered an Initial Order. (Docs. 25, 26). Thereafter, the court denied the defendants' motion to dismiss and entered a scheduling order largely adopting the parties' Rule 26 report, including a September 19, 2025 dispositive motion deadline. (Docs. 13, 31, 32, 37).

A. The Defendants' Summary Judgment Motions

On Friday, September 19, 2025, Heritage Preschools and Heritage Preschools of Homewood filed separate motions for summary judgment with supporting exhibits at 6:43 p.m. and 7:27 p.m., respectively. (Docs. 47, 48). That morning, counsel for Heritage, Nelson Johnson, called the court's chambers and left a

voicemail seeking guidance in filing under seal Heritage's evidentiary material supporting its forthcoming summary judgment motions because of references to minors and private medical information. When chambers staff returned his call later that morning, Mr. Johnson again asked about filing Heritage's evidentiary submissions under seal due to sensitive content. After clarifying that he was seeking permission to file under seal rather than information on the mechanics of filing sealed documents, Mr. Johnson expressed concern when told he would first have to seek leave of court, because the dispositive motion deadline was expiring that day.³ Chambers staff informed him a motion filed by early afternoon might be resolved that day and reminded him any motion must indicate whether it was opposed.⁴ Mr. Johnson indicated he would attempt to contact opposing counsel.

When chambers staff called Mr. Johnson back a few minutes later, he repeated his concern that if Heritage submitted a motion to file under seal and did not receive a ruling that day, its motions for summary judgment would be late. Chambers staff noted that any motion he filed could include a request to extend the dispositive motion deadline pending a ruling on the motion to seal. After being reminded that a motion filed quickly could potentially be resolved before the end of the day, Mr.

³ The Initial Order emphasizes the parties' obligations to comply with the court's Civil Administrative Procedures Manual when redacting personal identifiers and filing documents under seal. (Doc. 26 at 4-5). The Civil Administrative Procedures Manual requires a party to seek leave of court to file a document under seal. Civil Administrative Procedures Manual at 13.

⁴ See Initial Order. (Doc. 26 at 4).

Johnson indicated he would file such a motion. At 12:06 that afternoon, he emailed opposing counsel, Artur Davis, seeking the plaintiffs' consent to a motion requesting to file Heritage's motions for summary judgment, briefs, and exhibits under seal in their entirety and to extend the filing deadline pending a ruling on the motion.⁵ (Doc. 52-1 at 4). Explaining the urgency of Heritage's predicament, Mr. Johnson asked for an answer by 1:30, giving defense counsel less than 90 minutes to reply. (*Id.* at 4). Mr. Davis responded five minutes later:

[W]e absolutely cannot consent to filing the entire depositions and summary [sic] motions under seal. We agreed on a redaction process, but not to place the briefing under some *cloak of confidentiality*. I am in mediation so I will have to be succinct, but we would strongly oppose the proposal you outline.

(*Id.* at 3) (emphasis added). Mr. Johnson responded:

While I find your position regrettable, given your opposition we will proceed with filing the Brief and Evidentiary Submissions publicly rather than moving forward with the motion to file under seal. This was ultimately an effort to protect your client's privacy, but we will respect and honor your position on the same and *file publicly in order to meet the deadline today*.

(*Id.* at 2) (emphasis added). Mr. Davis replied:

Nelson we expect appropriate reductions [sic] consistent with the court order re confidentiality but your approach of filing summary judgment and exhibits under seal is not something we can support, and I am very confident Judge Cornelius would not grant such a motion.

⁵ The email exchange between defense counsel and Mr. Davis appears to have crossed time zones. (Doc. 52-1). While Mr. Johnson's first email is time-stamped as being sent at 1:06 p.m., Mr. Davis's response is timestamped at 12:11 p.m. (*Id.* at 3-4).

(*Id.*).

That night, having abandoned its efforts to obtain court approval to file under seal and/or obtain an extension, Heritage made good on its promise to meet its deadline by filing its dispositive motions and all exhibits publicly. (Docs. 47, 48). The submissions total more than 1200 pages and were signed by Mr. Johnson's co-counsel Clint Maze and filed under his user login. (*Id.*). In the limited time that remained on the afternoon of the filing deadline, Heritage selectively redacted its exhibits, leaving J.W.'s full name untouched more than 1,000 times and his brother's approximately 100 times while marking through the names of nonparty minors, sometimes in the very same sentences. Heritage also publicly filed J.W.'s United Ability chart discussing his autism diagnosis and plan. There, his name appears more than 100 times, although Heritage scrubbed his date of birth and his parents' names, email and home addresses, and phone numbers.

B. The Williamsons' Motion to Strike

At 10:16 p.m. on the 19th, the Williamsons filed an Emergency Motion to Strike. (Doc. 49). Noting that Heritage's summary judgment submissions included "hundreds of pages that flagrantly violate" Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 5.2 and this district's Administrative Procedures Manual, the Williamsons asked the court to immediately strike the motions and prohibit Heritage from making any curative filing without appropriate redactions. They further indicated an intent to file an

additional motion for sanctions but first sought immediate relief to protect their children's privacy. (*Id.*).

Heritage responded Saturday morning at 8:02 a.m. with Mr. Maze admitting at least ten of Heritage's exhibits contained J.W.'s full name. (Doc. 50 at 2). He "accept[ed] full responsibility for his unintentional, yet significant failure to abide by Rule 5.2(a)(3)" and apologized to the Williamsons, their counsel, and the court. (*Id.* at 1-2). Although Mr. Maze's early-morning filing claimed he had conducted a "post-incident review" and identified many reasons for the failure, he provided none to the court or the plaintiffs, repeatedly characterizing it as "a lapse." The bulk of his response focused on three measures the court could take to cure Heritage's failure: (1) an order directing the Clerk to permanently seal the offending exhibits, (2) an order directing the Clerk to temporarily seal the offending exhibits pending Heritage's submission of properly redacted exhibits, and (3) an order directing the Northern District of Alabama's PACER Administrator to provide a list of any and all users who accessed the offending exhibits, requiring them to delete and destroy the exhibits, and requiring Mr. Maze to replace the unredacted exhibits with redacted exhibits at no additional cost. (*Id.* at 3-4).

Given the summary judgment motions and motion to strike were filed after the court closed on Friday, the court reviewed the parties' filings the following

Monday morning and directed the Clerk to seal Heritage's submissions.⁶ (Doc. 51). The next day, the Williamsons moved for sanctions for Heritage's public disclosure of J.W.'s name and confidential medical information. (Doc. 52). They claim Heritage also neglected to fully redact individual birth dates and Social Security numbers and that its limited redactions made it possible to connect personal information to the redactions in the indices. (*Id.* at 4). The Williamsons ask the court to strike Heritage's motions for summary judgment without the opportunity to refile or, alternatively, require Heritage to refile its motions and exhibits with proper redactions with unredacted copies filed under seal. (*Id.* at 10). They also request an order requiring Heritage to disclose its wrongdoing to the parents of the nonparty minors it improperly named and pay the Williamsons' reasonable attorneys fees resulting from Heritage's improper disclosures. Again, Heritage did not respond in writing to the Williamsons' motion for sanctions.

During the October 29, 2025 hearing, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Maze both acknowledged they knew in advance that the defendants' summary judgment filings would contain minors' names and sensitive medical information. Mr. Johnson acknowledged calling the court regarding the procedure for filing under seal. He also stated that when he spoke to the court on the morning of September 19, he did not

⁶ The court ordered the offending documents sealed, rather than stricken, because documents that are stricken without being sealed may still be publicly accessed.

know which exhibits would be submitted and had not yet made any redactions. Tellingly, he conceded that he did not think it was possible to redact the motions effectively without omitting key contents, thus, Heritage's request to file everything under seal. Mr. Maze denied reading the emails between Mr. Johnson and opposing counsel, despite having been copied, because his attention was on finalizing the draft motions. Later, however, he stated he knew there was no agreement to file under seal and so redactions would need to be made. He acknowledged ultimate responsibility for filing Heritage's summary judgment motions, claiming he attached the evidentiary submissions without first reviewing them to ensure they were appropriately redacted. To this day, neither Mr. Johnson nor Mr. Maze have explained their decision to redact the names of nonparty minors but not those of J.W. or his brother. Nor did they explain their decision to forgo both a motion to file J.W.'s medical records under seal and a motion to briefly extend the dispositive motion deadline.

II. Standard of Review

“Courts have the inherent authority to control the proceedings before them, which includes the authority to impose ‘reasonable and appropriate’ sanctions.” *Martin v. Automobili Lamborghini Exclusive, Inc.*, 307 F.3d 1332, 1335 (11th Cir. 2002). To exercise its inherent power to sanction, a court must find that the

sanctioned party acted in bad faith. *Id.* The Eleventh Circuit reviews a district court's imposition of sanctions for abuse of discretion. *Id.*

While sanctions available under the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure “reach[] only certain individuals or conduct, the inherent power extends to a full range of litigation abuses.” *Chambers v. NASCO, Inc.*, 501 U.S. 32, 46 (1991). “A court must . . . exercise caution in invoking its inherent power,” and “when there is bad-faith conduct in the course of litigation that could be adequately sanctioned under the Rules, the court ordinarily should rely on the Rules rather than the inherent power.” *Id.* at 50. “[I]f in the informed discretion of the court, neither the statute nor the Rules are up to the task, the court may safely rely on its inherent power.” *Id.*

“Because of their very potency, inherent powers must be exercised with restraint and discretion.” *Id.* at 44. “A primary aspect of that discretion is the ability to fashion an appropriate sanction for conduct which abuses the judicial process.” *Id.* at 44–45. The Supreme Court has held that even “particularly severe sanction[s],” such as the “outright dismissal of a lawsuit,” are “within the court's discretion.” *Id.* at 45; *see also Martin*, 307 F.3d 1332 (affirming district court’s sanctions of (1) dismissal of case with prejudice, (2) finding counsel jointly and severally liable for the opposing party’s attorneys’ fees and costs for the entire action, which exceeded \$1.5 million, (3) referral of one attorney to the federal bar and the grievance committee of the state bar, and (4) referral of counsel’s behavior to the state attorney

and United States Attorney to examine whether counsel committed any legal violations).

“A finding of subjective bad faith or something tantamount to it is necessary to support a sanction issued pursuant to a court's inherent power.” *Johnson v. Dunn*, 792 F. Supp. 3d 1241, 1259 (N.D. Ala. 2025) (citing *Purchasing Power, LLC v. Bluestem Brands, Inc.*, 851 F.3d 1218, 1223 (11th Cir. 2017)). “A finding of bad faith is warranted where an attorney knowingly or recklessly raises a frivolous argument, or argues a meritorious claim for the purpose of harassing an opponent. A party also demonstrates bad faith by delaying or disrupting the litigation or hampering enforcement of a court order.” *Id.* (internal citations omitted). “[I]n the absence of direct evidence of subjective bad faith, [the bad faith] standard can be met if an attorney's conduct is so egregious that it could only be committed in bad faith.” *Purchasing Power*, 851 F.3d at 1224–25; *see also Roadway Exp., Inc. v. Piper*, 447 U.S. 752, 767 (1980) (stating inherent powers require a finding that “counsel's conduct . . . constituted or was tantamount to bad faith”). “This is not the same as simple recklessness, which can be a starting point but requires something more to constitute bad faith.” *Purchasing Power*, 851 F.3d at 1225 (citing *Barnes v. Dalton*, 158 F.3d 1212, 1214 (11th Cir. 1998)).

The court's inherent power to sanction extends to violations of Rule 5.2(a). *See DeSouza v. Park W. Apartments, Inc.*, No. 3:15-CV-01668 (MPS), 2018 WL

7575205, at *1 (D. Conn. June 14, 2018) (citing *Engeseth v. Cnty. of Isanti, Minn.*, 665 F. Supp. 2d 1047, 1048 (D. Minn. 2009) (invoking court's “inherent power” in sanctioning attorney for violations of Rule 5.2(a))). The Eleventh Circuit reviews a district court’s imposition of sanctions for abuse of discretion. *See Barnes*, 158 F.3d at 1214. Finally, 28 U.S.C. § 1927 provides that any attorney “who so multiplies the proceedings in any case unreasonably and vexatiously may be required by the court to satisfy personally the excess costs, expenses, and attorneys’ fees reasonably incurred because of such conduct.”

III. Analysis

Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 5.2(a) requires redacting any material filed with the court containing a date of birth, name of a minor, social security number, taxpayer identification number, or financial account number so it only shows the year of birth, initials of the minor, and the last four digits of the person's social security number, taxpayer identification number, or financial account number. The court’s Civil Administrative Procedures Manual for CM/ECF also requires these redactions. That Manual states:

a party wishing to file a document containing the personal data identifiers specified above may conventionally file, with leave of court, an un-redacted document under seal. This document shall be retained by the court as part of the record. The court, however, will require a redacted version of the pleading to be filed electronically for the public file. Caution is recommended with regard to other personal identifiers, such as driver’s license, medical records, treatment and diagnosis,

employment history, individual financial information, and proprietary or trade secret information.

Id. at 13. Further, the Initial Order governing this case states, “Except in extraordinary circumstances, all filings shall be consistent with the Court’s Civil Administrative Procedures Manual,” and “Counsel are reminded to comply with the court’s Administrative Procedures Manual for electronic filing with respect to redacting personal identifiers . . . and other personal or sensitive information, in compliance with the E-Government Act.” (Doc. 26 at 3-4). The court’s CM/ECF e-filing website reminds filers that “E-filed documents should not contain personal data identifiers – please see the Procedures Manuals and the Property Redaction Techniques” on the court’s website.⁷ Finally, as a last precaution, filers are presented with the following warning before they finalize their filing: “Attention!! Pressing the NEXT button on this screen commits this transaction. You will have no further opportunity to modify this transaction if you continue. Have you redacted?”

Here, the sole question is whether Heritage’s conduct in failing to redact the Williamsons’ children’s names and J.W.’s medical information is “unintentional,” as Mr. Maze claims, or is instead the result of bad faith on the part of Heritage and/or its counsel. Given the factual record detailed above, the court finds Mr. Maze and

⁷ The Procedure Manuals and Proper Redaction Techniques webpage are hyperlinked on the landing page.

Mr. Johnson intentionally acted in bad faith when they publicly filed documents containing the Williamsons' minor children's and J.W.'s private medical records.

Heritage, through its counsel, knew certain information should be redacted or filed under seal.⁸ Nevertheless, Heritage filed its motions and evidentiary submissions with selective redactions after (1) the parties exchanged emails the day before the deadline discussing the need for redactions in other, unrelated future filings,⁹ (2) Mr. Johnson called the court's chambers the morning of the deadline to discuss the need for redactions and potential sealed filings because the evidence included J.W.'s confidential and sensitive medical information, (3) Mr. Johnson

⁸ It is unlikely the court would have granted Heritage permission to file its entire submissions under seal because of the public's common law right to access judicial proceedings and to inspect and copy public records and documents. *See Romero v. Drummond Co.*, 480 F.3d 1234, 1245 (11th Cir. 2007). While this right of access does not apply to the "private process" of discovery, *see id.* at 1245–46, it does apply to material filed in connection with substantive pretrial motions. *See Chicago Trib. Co. v. Bridgestone/Firestone, Inc.*, 263 F.3d 1304, 1312 (11th Cir. 2001). A party must show good cause to overcome the common law right of access. *Romero*, 480 F.3d at 1245. In ruling upon any motion to seal, the court must consider whether allowing access to the documents would impair court functions or harm legitimate privacy interests, the degree of and likelihood of injury if made public, the reliability of the information, whether there will be an opportunity to respond to the information, whether the information concerns public officials or public concerns, and the availability of a less onerous alternative to sealing the documents—such as proper redactions. *See id.* at 1246.

⁹ On September 17, 2025, the Williamsons' counsel, Patricia Okonta, emailed opposing counsel to discuss the Williamsons' forthcoming motion for sanctions for spoliation of evidence. (Doc. 52-1 at 7). Because some of the documents in support of that motion included her client's confidential medical information, she asked if Heritage would oppose a motion for leave to submit relevant portions under seal. (*Id.*). Mr. Maze, replied later that evening, denying Heritage spoliated evidence and opposing the motion for sanctions but consenting to the motion to file under seal. (*Id.* at 6). The following day, Alexandra Bronsky, also counsel for the Williamsons, sent an email concerning additional redactions "about Heritage personnel that may be medical and are definitely sensitive and employment-related." (*Id.* at 5). She asked for Heritage's consent to redact and seal that information; Mr. Maze replied, "Of course. Thank you for being so conscious [sic]." (*Id.* at 4-5).

stated to the court that Heritage would move to file certain documents under seal and briefly extend the dispositive motion deadline, (4) the parties exchanged additional emails that afternoon about the need to seal and redact sensitive documents, and, most revealingly, (5) Mr. Johnson expressly stated Heritage would publicly file information it knew was sensitive “in order to meet the deadline today.” (Doc. 52-1 at 2). This sequence of events shows Heritage recognized the need for privacy and confidentiality but intentionally filed J.W.’s name and medical information on the public record to get its motions filed on time.

That Heritage redacted some dates of birth, addresses, phone numbers, and the names of many minors, again, demonstrates its awareness of the privacy requirements of Rule 5.2 and the Civil Administrative Procedures Manual. Despite this, Heritage has offered no plausible explanation for why it chose to redact the full names of nonparty minors but not those of the Williamsons’ children.¹⁰ The court agrees with the Williamsons – this fact shows Heritage intentionally and selectively applied Rule 5.2.¹¹

¹⁰ While the court acknowledges Heritage made some efforts to redact personal identifiers and the names of nonparty minors from its exhibits, its work was subpar. The court found at least one instance where Heritage missed the redaction of a nonparty minor’s first name, even though the name was redacted elsewhere on the same page. Although its efforts were sloppy, that Heritage took the time to redact the names of other minors while leaving J.W.’s and his brother’s untouched, is in itself revealing, especially given it used their initials throughout its motions and briefs.

¹¹ The court distinguishes Heritage’s actions in carelessly missing some personal identifiers and names of nonparty minors when making its redactions from its calculated steps to leave untouched the names of the Williamsons’ minor children. The court found not a single instance where either of their names were redacted. The court finds the former was only grossly negligent.

The court's finding that Heritage acted in bad faith is further supported by Mr. Maze's response to the Williamsons' emergency motion, submitted less than 10 hours after the Williamsons filed their motion. (Docs. 49, 50). This quick turnaround (1) suggests Mr. Maze anticipated the Williamsons' objection and was prepared to quickly issue a *mea culpa*, (2) calls into question Mr. Maze's representation that he conducted a "post-incident review," much less one that was meaningful, and (3) indicates he was more aware of the contents of his email inbox than he stated during the October 2025 hearing. Further, Mr. Maze's proposed solutions all involved additional work on the part of the court rather than some attempt by Heritage to remedy its egregious error.¹²

In addition, the court finds it ironic that in the defendants' response, Mr. Maze quoted opposing counsel's email from the previous day, which he claimed not to have read at the time. In another blame-shifting exercise, Heritage doubled-down, pointing to the plaintiffs' objection to sealing everything "under some cloak of confidentiality" and contending its only interest was in protecting the Williamsons' privacy. In his email the day before, Mr. Johnson likewise claimed an altruistic

¹² Citing fairness, Heritage pointed out it had originally proposed to file under seal Heritage's motions in their entirety, but the Williamsons found this "solution" objectionable. (Doc. 50 at 3). Thus, even while supposedly taking accountability, Heritage seems to be shifting the blame to the plaintiffs, suggesting it would not be in this mess if opposing counsel had simply agreed to Heritage's request to file everything under seal at the outset. This overlooks that permission to file under seal was not the Williamsons' to give, but the court's.

motive in requesting consent to file Heritage's submissions under seal and found "regrettable" the plaintiffs' opposition. But Heritage completely misses the point—it was not an either/or proposition; Heritage could have protected the plaintiffs' private information while publicly filing its dispositive motions. This, however, would have required Heritage to do exactly what it proposed after the fact—properly redact the exhibits—a time-consuming process. Not only did the Williamsons have every right to insist upon it, the law required it. There was nothing noble or magnanimous in Heritage's offer to file under seal. Facing a time crunch, it simply presented a much more convenient alternative.

Finally, Mr. Maze and Mr. Johnson's arguments at the hearing were wholly unpersuasive. While Mr. Maze acknowledged his ultimate responsibility as the senior attorney under whose signature these documents were filed, he also disclaimed any responsibility for the redactions. He told the court he understood it would be time consuming to redact the documents; it was the responsibility of other staff to do so; and he simply selected PDF documents that were titled "redacted" without reviewing them to confirm the redactions. Further, in explaining his threat to file the summary judgment motions publicly, Mr. Johnson attempted to shift the blame to opposing counsel, who rightly maintained it would be inappropriate to file the entire submission under seal. He also argued the Williamsons were satisfied when the court rectified Heritage's error by subsequently sealing the offending

documents while complaining they would not permit him to submit the motions wholly under seal in the first instance.

It is clear defense counsel knowingly submitted Heritage's motions for summary judgment without fully complying with Rule 5.2. In doing so, they were able to make the dispositive motion deadline without risking a potential denial of a last-minute, opposed motion to seal or motion to extend the deadline. Put more succinctly, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Maze gambled that it was better to beg forgiveness than seek permission.

Had counsel simply filed the motions without alerting the court and the Williamsons that they knew the submissions would contain the sensitive medical information of a two-year-old child and were considering options to avoid publication of that sensitive information, the court might be persuaded this was an unintentional oversight.¹³ However, the sequence of events combined with the calculated manner in which Heritage redacted its submission, leads the court to the inescapable conclusion Heritage's actions were intentional. Because counsel failed to obtain permission from the court in advance and the plaintiffs did not assent to their request, Heritage ditched plan A to file everything under seal. Instead, in defiance of court orders, rules, and opposing counsel's insistence they take

¹³ To be clear, the court finds bad faith in counsel's admitted failure to review the documents despite the filing system's multiple warnings about redaction requirements. This is a knowing disregard of a duty under both the Federal Rules and the rules of this court.

appropriate steps, defense counsel affirmatively decided to leave J.W.’s name and private health information for public consumption, just as they had promised. This constitutes a knowing disregard of their obligations under Rule 5.2. Further, counsel’s conduct in intentionally publishing a minor’s name and sensitive medical records is so egregious it can only have been done in bad faith.

The court therefore turns to the question of an appropriate sanction. “The purpose of the inherent power is both to vindicate judicial authority without resorting to contempt of court sanctions and to make the non-violating party whole.” *Purchasing Power*, 851 F.3d at 1225 (citing *Chambers*, 501 U.S. at 45–46). “This power is . . . for rectifying disobedience, regardless of whether such disobedience interfered with the conduct of the trial.” *Id.* Rule 11 limits sanctions “to what suffices to deter repetition of the conduct or comparable conduct by others similarly situated.” Although it does not apply here, the court finds Rule 11 instructive in fashioning an appropriate sanction.

Heritage’s conduct has caused the Williamsons to spend unnecessary time and costs in filing its motions to seal and motion for sanctions. It has also caused this court to spend unnecessary time and resources resolving a dispute of its own making, all because Heritage faced a deadline for which it had not adequately planned. During the hearing, Mr. Maze conceded an award of attorney fees would be appropriate but objected to the Williamsons’ request that the court strike the motions

for summary judgment without leave to refile because it would unfairly prejudice his client.

Mr. Maze's belated concern for prejudice to his client is unavailing. After all, Heritage chose him and Mr. Johnson as its representatives and is bound by their litigation decisions. Had Heritage missed the dispositive motion deadline entirely, it would be well within this court's inherent power to refuse to consider an untimely motion. Therefore, the court finds it appropriate to strike Heritage's motions for summary judgment in full. This is the least severe sanction likely to deter future similar misconduct and to vindicate the authority of the court. Further, it most closely restores the parties to the position they would have occupied but for Heritage's counsel's misconduct.

In addition, the court finds it necessary to publicly reprimand both Mr. Maze and Mr. Johnson and to award the Williamsons their fees and costs incurred in bringing their motion to strike and motion for sanctions, including the costs incurred traveling to and from the October 2025 hearing. A public reprimand is necessary to advise clients, counsel, and presiding judges of Mr. Maze and Mr. Johnson's actions so they may anticipate the possibility of similar misconduct. Again, Mr. Maze has already acknowledged an award of fees and costs would be appropriate to compensate the Williamsons for the unnecessary expense. The court, however, rejects his contention that any award be levied against him alone. While Mr. Maze

bears responsibility for filing the exhibits with the court, it was Mr. Johnson who informed the Williamsons that Heritage would move forward with filing their documents publicly so Heritage would not miss a deadline. Therefore, the court finds Mr. Johnson also bears responsibility for this misconduct and will assess the Williamsons' fees and costs against both attorneys equally.

Finally, the court warns Mr. Maze and Mr. Johnson it will tolerate no further misconduct or blatant gamesmanship from them in this matter. Should they fail to heed this warning, the court will readily consider greater sanctions, including additional monetary penalties, disqualification from further participation in this matter, suspension from practice in the Northern District of Alabama, and referral to the Alabama State Bar or any other appropriate licensing authority.

IV. Conclusion

For the foregoing reasons, the Williamsons' motion to strike and motion for sanctions are **GRANTED**. (Docs. 49, 52). The court **STRIKES** Heritage's motions for summary judgment. (Docs. 47, 48). The Clerk is **DIRECTED** to (1) maintain under seal Documents 47-4, 47-5, 48-5, 48-6, 48-7, 48-8, 48-9, 48-10, 48-11, 48-15, 48-16, 48-17, 48-18, 48-19, and 48-20; (2) unseal Documents 47, 47-1, 47-2, 47-3, 48, 48-1, 48-2, 48-3, 48-4, 48-12, 48-13, and 48-14; and (3) term Heritage's response to the Williamsons' motion to strike Heritage's motions for summary judgment.

(Doc. 50). Mr. Maze and Mr. Johnson **SHALL** pay the Williamsons their reasonable costs and expenses incurred in prosecuting their motion for sanctions.

The court **PUBLICLY REPRIMANDS** Clint Maze and Nelson Johnson for the misconduct described in this order. To effectuate that reprimand, Mr. Maze and Mr. Johnson are **ORDERED** to send a copy of this order to each client, opposing counsel, and presiding judge in every pending state or federal case in which they are counsel of record,¹⁴ whether separately or jointly, as well as every attorney in their law firm. They are **ORDERED** to comply with this requirement within **7 days** and to certify to the court within 24 hours of that compliance that the requirement has been met. To further effectuate the reprimand and deter similar misconduct by others, the Clerk is **DIRECTED** to submit this order for publication in the Federal Supplement.

Mr. Maze and Mr. Johnson are **ORDERED** to meet and confer with the Williamsons' counsel within **14 days** regarding the amount of the fees and costs incurred by the Williamsons' counsel in connection with their motion to strike and motion for sanctions. If counsel cannot agree on the amount to be awarded, the Williamsons **SHALL** file their request for fees and costs and supporting

¹⁴ By this, the court refers to the individual judge presiding over each case in which Mr. Maze and Mr. Johnson have, individually, appeared, not merely the chief judges of the district or circuit courts in which they have pending matters.

documentation no later than **October 15, 2026**. Any objection to the Williamsons' request **SHALL** be filed within **7 days** thereafter.

DONE this 22nd day of September, 2026.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Staci G. Cornelius", is written over a horizontal line.

STACI G. CORNELIUS
U.S. MAGISTRATE JUDGE