

By [ERNIE SUGGS](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Published on: 06/27/06

Atlanta was smart to make a deal to get the papers of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. before a New York auction planned for this week, an executive at Sotheby's said Monday.

David Redden, Sotheby's vice chairman and director of the King sale, said several other groups were waiting to compete for the coveted collection, which King's heirs sold for \$32 million.

Redden said he was bound by a confidentiality agreement and would not go into any of the deal's financial particulars – such as how much money the auction house received to prepare for the bidding or whether the King estate incurred any penalties when it was called off last Friday.

He would say only that the SunTrust Bank loan that paid for the collection came directly to Sotheby's. He would not say what portion of it would go to the King estate: Martin Luther King's four children, Yolanda, Martin III, Dexter and Bernice.

"I can confirm that it has been received [by Sotheby's]," Redden said of the money.

The collection is a treasure trove of handwritten documents and books that belonged to the civil rights leader.

Institutions that have shown interest in King's papers in the past include the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History at the New York Historical Society, the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin and Boston University, where King earned his doctoral degree.

"There was significant interest, and Atlanta was smart for having done what they did so quickly," said Redden, who declined to identify any other potential bidders.

The papers were to be sold at auction this Friday.

Although he would not disclose the details, Redden said several other groups were interested in buying the papers outright.

"The closer you get, there does become an auction frenzy," Redden said. "I was worried. I was concerned [about the reaction from the other groups]. But I think it is an indication of how suitable Atlanta is for the collection, that I didn't have a bunch of shouting and yelling."

Since 2003, the New York City auction house has been preparing to auction off the papers, which include King's handwritten notes, sermons and letters, stored for years in Coretta Scott King's basement.

Earlier this month, Sotheby's announced that the papers would finally be auctioned on June 30. Redden said the announcement of the auction date, coupled with the recent death of Coretta Scott King, served as a catalyst to get people interested.

He said it was unusual, however, to cancel an auction days before the set date to sell a lot outright.

"Once you get in the auction mode, you stay in the auction mode. But this is the best conclusion we could possible have," Redden said.

The collection, which is on display at Sotheby's, will remain open to the public until Thursday. Redden said workers will begin taking it down Friday in preparation for the Atlanta buyers to set up arrangements to ship it home.

"I have not actually had the details confirmed on when it is going to Atlanta," Redden said. "It has been paid for, so it can go to Atlanta expeditiously."

Redden said Sotheby's will inventory and pack the collection and recommend a fine arts shipper to transport it.

When the papers were shipped from Atlanta to Sotheby's, Redden said a crew that included the auction house's staff and security drove them to New York.

"They are papers and books, which are sturdy materials," Redden said. "Papers can last for hundreds or thousands of years. The trip should be uneventful."

Once they are back in Atlanta, experts say, Morehouse College, the custodian of the papers, will have to treat them with kid gloves if they are to last for thousands of years.

"It has so much to do with how the pieces are treated," said Scott Krawitz of Alvarez Fine Art Services, a leading art and paper conservator. "Atlanta tends to be a humid environment. And with so much humidity in the air, I would tell anyone who has a valuable collection to have their home properly heated and air-conditioned."

Heather Becker, CEO of the Chicago Conservation Center, which restored many pieces of art damaged by Hurricane Katrina, said the preservation of the papers will depend first on their current condition. The papers had been in Mrs. King's basement for decades, before Sotheby's took them under its care.

"A conservator should take a look at them and determine if there is a high level of acidic qualities," Becker said.

As if they were reading from the same script, Becker and Krawitz both said the collection had to be matted and archived. It should also be framed in light-resistant glass, and light and humidity should be carefully monitored.

Redden said he is confident the papers will be in good hands upon their return to Atlanta, although he is somewhat sad to see them go. Parts of the collection have been at Sotheby's at least six years.

"If I didn't have an emotional connection, I wouldn't be working here," Redden said. "We have grown extremely attached to the material.

"We felt we became close to Dr. King himself by having this material close to us."