CPLR 303: Commencement of Federal Action in New York Does Not Result in Designation of Attorney as Agent for Service of Process in State Court Actions

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CPLR 303: Commencement of federal action in New York does not result in designation of attorney as agent for service of process in state court action

Under CPLR 303, \(^{40}\) "[t]he commencement of an action in the state by a person not subject to personal jurisdiction" creates an implied designation of the nondomiciliary's attorney as agent for service of process. \(^{41}\) Available only to a party to the original action, \(^{42}\)

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\(^{40}\) CPLR 303 (Supp. 1978-1979) provides in part:

The commencement of an action in the state by a person not subject to personal jurisdiction is a designation by him of his attorney appearing in the action . . . as agent, during the pendency of the action, for service of a summons pursuant to section 308, in any separate action in which such a person is a defendant and another party to the action is a plaintiff if such separate action would have been permitted as a counterclaim had the action been brought in the supreme court.

CPLR 303 was amended in 1972 to allow service pursuant to CPLR 308. Ch. 487, [1972] N.Y. Laws 1819 (McKinney). See The Quarterly Survey, 47 St. John's L. Rev. 148, 157 (1972). Thus, in addition to personal service within the state, the alternative methods of service under CPLR 308 are now available. See CPLR 308(2)-(5) (Supp. 1978-1979). Prior to this amendment, only personal service on the attorney was valid. See Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp. v. Dupper, 33 App. Div. 2d 682, 305 N.Y.S.2d 918 (1st Dep't 1969) (mem.), discussed in The Quarterly Survey, 44 St. John's L. Rev. 758, 773 (1970). For a general discussion of CPLR 303, see 1 WK&M 303.01-.08.


The designation of the nonresident's attorney as agent for service of process under CPLR 303 does not act to remove the personal immunity granted to the nonresident plaintiff. See Landsman v. Rabinowitz, 208 Misc. 126, 144 N.Y.S.2d 241 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1955). But see Resort Airlines, Inc. v. Sternberg, 208 Misc. 383, 144 N.Y.S.2d 70 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1955). Nevertheless, since valid service may be made on the attorney, CPLR 303 operates to curtail the immunity privilege. The agency designation of the attorney exists during the pendency of the nonresident's action. Service may be made only from the time that the action is commenced to the moment a final judgment is entered. See Banco de Brasil v. Madison...
this procedure is limited to a separate action that "would have been permitted as a counterclaim had the first action been brought in the supreme court." Recently, in *Rockwood National Corp. v. Peat, Marwick, Mitchell & Co.*, the Appellate Division, Second Department, construed CPLR 303 to extend only to actions instituted in state court and thus found it inapplicable when the nonresident's original action was commenced in federal court.\(^4\)

In *Rockwood*, shareholders of Rockwood National Corp. (Rockwood) brought an action in the District Court for the Southern District of New York alleging violations of federal securities laws by Durick and Siegel, two of its corporate officers, and its auditor, Peat, Marwick, Mitchell & Co. (PMM).\(^4\) In this action, Durick and Siegel cross-claimed against PMM, disclaiming all liability.\(^7\) In a

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\(^5\) CPLR 303 (Supp. 1978-1979). CPLR 303 extends to any claim that could have been brought as a counterclaim in New York supreme court. Id. CPLR 3019, which governs counterclaims, states that a counterclaim "may be any cause of action in favor of" a defendant against a plaintiff. CPLR 3019(a) (1974). Thus, the separate CPLR 303 cause of action need not be related to the subject matter of the original suit. Norry v. Land, 44 Misc. 2d 556, 254 N.Y.S.2d 176 (Sup. Ct. Monroe County 1964).

\(^6\) 63 App. Div. 2d 978, 406 N.Y.S.2d 106 (2d Dep't 1978) (per curiam).

\(^7\) Id. at 978, 406 N.Y.S.2d at 107.


\(^9\) 63 App. Div. 2d 978, 406 N.Y.S.2d at 106. Durick and Siegel's cross-claim alleged that PMM was solely responsible for any misrepresentations and any judgment for the plaintiffs should be fully borne by PMM. Brief for Respondent at 4, Rockwood Nat'l Corp. v. Peat Marwick, Mitchell & Co., 63 App. Div. 2d 978, 406 N.Y.S.2d 106 (2d Dep't 1978) (per curiam).
related action brought by Rockwood against PMM in the Supreme Court, Westchester County, PMM counterclaimed against nonresidents Durick and Siegel and served their attorney with process. PMM contended that the interposition of the cross-claim in the federal suit subjected Durick and Siegel to in personam jurisdiction pursuant to CPLR 303. Rejecting this argument, the lower court dismissed the counterclaim for lack of personal jurisdiction.

In a unanimous, per curiam decision, the appellate division affirmed. The court interpreted CPA 227-a, the predecessor of CPLR 303, to be inapplicable to an action commenced in a federal court located within New York. Although the court found the language of CPLR 303 to be unclear, it believed that the legislature did not intend to change prior law when it enacted the statute. Concluding that the commencement of an action in federal court does not provide a basis upon which to serve a nondomiciliary's attorney under CPLR 303, the Rockwood court declined to rule on whether a broader reading of the statute would have been constitutionally permissible. In addition, the court did not indicate whether the provisions of the statute would have applied if the original action had been brought in state court.

Although some courts have intimated that the commencement of a federal action is within the scope of CPLR 303, the Rockwood court declined to rule on whether a broader reading of the statute would have been constitutionally permissible. In addition, the court did not indicate whether the provisions of the statute would have applied if the original action had been brought in state court.

63 App. Div. 2d at 978, 406 N.Y.S.2d at 106. The state action was brought by Rockwood National Corp. and two subsidiary corporations. Id. Alleging PMM negligently audited their corporate records, the plaintiffs sought damages for accounting malpractice. Brief for Appellant at 7, Rockwood Nat'l Corp. v. Peat, Marwick, Mitchell & Co., 63 App. Div. 2d 978, 406 N.Y.S.2d 106 (2d Dep't 1978) (per curiam). In its counterclaim, PMM alleged that Rockwood, Durick, and Siegel concealed information and otherwise made false representations as to the validity of the corporation's records. Brief for Appellant at 8-9.


Id., 406 N.Y.S.2d at 106.

Id. The case was heard by Presiding Justice Gulotta and Justices Shapiro, Cohalan and O'Connor.


Id. Under CPA 227-a, "[t]he commencement of any action or proceeding in any court of this state by any person not residing in this state shall be deemed a designation" of his attorney as agent for service of process. Ch. 161, [1949] N.Y. Laws 342 (emphasis added). In contrast, CPLR 303 provides that "[t]he commencement of an action in the state by a [nonresident] is a designation" of his attorney for service of process. CPLR 303 (Supp. 1978-1979) (emphasis added).

63 App. Div. 2d at 978, 406 N.Y.S.2d at 107; see notes 64-66 and accompanying text infra.

Id.; see notes 64-66 and accompanying text infra.

court appears correct in its assessment of the statute's legislative history. CPA 227-a was directed to instances where a counterclaim was stricken by the court,\(^7\) or where a counterclaim could not be interposed in a court of limited jurisdiction.\(^8\) Thus, the legislature provided a means by which personal jurisdiction could be obtained over a nondomiciliary who was immune from service of process, thereby permitting defendants to adjudicate these claims in a separate action. In enacting CPA 227-a to deal with situations where counterclaims could not be interposed,\(^9\) it does not appear that the legislature otherwise intended to abrogate the immunity generally given to nonresidents who are parties to judicial proceedings in the state. Furthermore, the Rockwood court correctly recognized that a


\(^{8}\) 1949 REPORT, supra note 57, at 200-01. The Report referred to the Municipal Court of the City of New York which had no power to grant affirmative equitable relief as an example of when a counterclaim could not be interposed in a court of limited jurisdiction. Thus, in an action for breach of contract, the defendant could not counterclaim for reformation or cancellation of the contract. Instead, he would have to commence a separate action in another court. Id. at 173 n.1.

\(^{9}\) New York courts previously had refused to alter the general immunity rule which applied to nonresident plaintiffs, see note 42 supra, notwithstanding its harsh effect on local defendants. See Petrova v. Roberts, 216 App. Div. 814, 216 N.Y.S. 897 (2d Dep't 1926), aff'd mem., 245 N.Y. 518, 157 N.E. 841 (1927); Roberts v. Thompson, 149 App. Div. 437, 134 N.Y.S. 363 (4th Dep't 1912).

The constitutionality of a California statute identical in purpose to CPA 227(a) was sustained by the United States Supreme Court in Adam v. Saenger, 303 U.S. 59 (1938). In so holding, the Court stated:

> There is nothing in the Fourteenth Amendment to prevent a state from adopting a procedure by which a judgment in personam may be rendered in a cross-action against a plaintiff in its courts . . . . The plaintiff having, by his voluntary act . . . submitted himself to the jurisdiction of the court, there is nothing arbitrary or unreasonable in treating him as being there for all purposes for which justice to the defendant requires his presence. It is the price which the state may exact as the condition of opening its courts to the plaintiff.

Id. at 67-68 (emphasis added); see Frank L. Young Co. v. McNeal-Edwards Co., 283 U.S. 398 (1931); See generally Restatement (Second) of Conflict of Law § 83 (1969); Restatement (Second) of Judgments § 21, comment a (1942).

Conditions on the use of a state's facilities are not limited to its court system. The state, for example, may stipulate that before a foreign corporation may do business in the state, it must meet certain registration requirements and designate the Secretary of State as the corporation's agent for service of process. See, e.g., N.Y. BUS. CORP. LAW § 1304 (1972). Similarly, a condition attached to a nonresident's use of state roadways is the designation of the Secretary of State for service of process. See VEH. & TRAF. LAW § 253 (1970 & Supp. 1978-1979). The United States Supreme Court has upheld the constitutionality of such statutes, declaring that, where the state has a "special interest" in protecting its citizens, regulations on nonresidents are permissible. See McGee v. International Life Ins. Co., 355 U.S. 220 (1957); Hess v. Palowski, 274 U.S. 352 (1927).
constitutional issue would be presented if CPLR 303 were interpreted to apply to actions commenced in federal court. Since the right to utilize the federal courts is protected by the Constitution, and federal courts confer immunity upon parties to their proceedings, it is unclear whether New York could base jurisdiction on the institution of a suit in a federal court located in New York.

The result in Rockwood can also be justified on the ground that CPLR 303 was intended to enable a resident defendant to obtain jurisdiction over a nonresident plaintiff who purposefully and voluntarily entered the state to institute an action for his own benefit. The assertion of a cross-claim that is essentially defensive in nature, as was done in Rockwood, should not be considered within the scope of CPLR 303. It is submitted that only cross-claims that are unrelated to the main cause of action are sufficiently similar to the "commencement of an action" to justify application of CPLR 303.

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61. See Donovan v. City of Dallas, 377 U.S. 408 (1964); Terral v. Burke Constr. Co., 257 U.S. 529 (1922); Markham v. City of Newport News, 292 F.2d 711 (4th Cir. 1961). In Terral, the Court stated that, "a State may not, in imposing conditions upon a party, exact from it a waiver of the exercise of its constitutional right to resort to the federal courts." 257 U.S. at 532.
62. The federal courts grant immunity as a convenience of the court, based on "their own notions of fairness and expediency." 2 Moore's FEDERAL PRACTICE ¶ 4.20 (3d ed. 1978); see Page Co. v. MacDonald, 261 U.S. 446 (1923); Stewart v. Ramsey, 242 U.S. 128 (1916). The extension of immunity to a party attending federal proceedings is deemed a procedural regulation and thus it may be neither controlled nor limited by state law. See Marlowe v. Baird, 301 F.2d 169 (6th Cir. 1962); Hardie v. Bryson, 44 F. Supp. 67 (E.D. Mo. 1942).
63. Referring to the problems raised by a state asserting jurisdiction over a party who is attending a federal action, Dean McLaughlin states that the decision reached by the Rockwood court, "avoided a serious constitutional difficulty." CPLR 303, commentary at 70 (Supp. 1978-1979).
64. See 1949 REPORT, supra note 57, at 174, 193.
66. CPLR 3019(b) (1972), provides that "[a] cross-claim may be any cause of action in favor of one or more defendants." Thus, they are "ancillary" to the main claim and independent jurisdictional grounds need not be established. 2 H. KOOMAN, FEDERAL CIVIL PRACTICE ¶ 13.16 at 202 (1969); see, e.g., R.M. Smythe & Co. v. Chase Nat'l Bank, 291 F.2d 721 (2d Cir. 1961); Glens Falls Indem. Co. v. United States, 229 F.2d 370 (9th Cir. 1955); United States v. Manufacturers Hanover Trust
ARTICLE 9 — CLASS ACTIONS

CPLR 901: Class action denied in products liability case where common questions of design defect and misleading advertising held not to predominate over individual questions of causation and reliance

Enacted in 1975, article 9 of the CPLR expanded the applicability of the class action device in New York and removed certain judicially imposed barriers to its use. Under CPLR 901, a plenary...