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Chicago man threatens to burn papers of first black Harvard graduate if university doesn't offer to pay him more

Posted by Matt Rocheleau October 16, 2013 07:32 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

A Chicago man who found the 143-year-old papers of Harvard University's first African-American graduate is threatening to burn the rare documents unless the university offers to pay him more money.

"I'll roast and burn them," Rufus McDonald, 52, [told the Chicago Sun-Times](#) newspaper in an interview Tuesday. "It might sound crazy, but people who know me know I'd really do it — I'm sick and tired of Harvard's BS."

McDonald told the Sun-Times he believes Harvard is trying to take advantage of him and university officials offered him an "insulting" \$7,500 for the papers of [Richard Theodore Greener](#), who, in 1870, became the first black graduate of the Ivy League institution then called Harvard College.

A Harvard spokesman contacted by the Sun-Times declined to comment, but a university source familiar with the negotiation told the Chicago newspaper Harvard officials offered to pay McDonald "significantly more" than \$7,500.

The Sun-Times reported that McDonald recently sold two documents — Greener's law diploma and law license — for \$52,000 to the University of South Carolina, where Greener studied and later became the school's first black faculty member.

McDonald still has Greener's 1870 diploma, which, by itself, has been appraised at \$65,000, according to the Sun-Times. That document and the other papers McDonald still possesses have drawn interest from Harvard, museums and others.

In 2009, McDonald found the papers while clearing out the attic of an abandoned Chicago home that was being prepared for demolition, the Sun-Times reported. Historians had long believed the papers would never be found, and how the documents wound up in a city where Greener never lived remains a mystery.

An African American who did not go to college, McDonald told the Sun-Times he wants a fair price for the documents "so my 9-year-old twins can have the chance I didn't and go to college if they want to."

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mjrochele@gmail.com. Looking for more coverage of area colleges and universities? Go to our [Your Campus pages](#).

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