

James Earl Ray: An infamous son of Alton

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ALTON – Alton is known as the place that gave the world Miles Davis, Robert Wadlow and the writings of abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy, but what is often not discussed is the fact Alton was the birthplace of convicted Dr. Martin Luther King assassin James Earl Ray.

Dr. King was killed while standing on his hotel balcony in Memphis from a rifle shot from the window of a hotel room across the street. Ray was convicted of firing that fatal round, and a 1978 Congressional report backs that claim as well, despite Ray himself claiming the shot was fired by a man named Raoul he met while smuggling goods from Canada. According to that report, Ray was a financially-motivated small-time criminal

who would not have acted alone in that historic murder. Instead of a mysterious man named Raoul, however, the report alleged Ray's brothers Jerry and John Ray. All the Rays, however, denied this association.

More evidence, however, was uncovered by the report stating James Earl Ray may have been behind a still-unsolved robbery of the Bank of Alton more than a year prior to the King assassination. According to both the Congressional report and a 2008 article from CNN, the bank was robbed by two men armed with a pistol and sawed-off shotgun. Both wore masks and fled with a sum of \$30,000.

James Earl Ray was also on the run from the law during that time, having escaped from the Missouri State Penitentiary in 1967 for robbing two St. Louis grocery stores and another one in Alton

The shotgun and partially-burned clothes used in the robbery were later found discarded in the National Cemetery in Alton, the Congressional report stated. The location, near a dead-end street adjacent to James Earl Ray's uncle, William Mayer, and the former residence of James Earl Ray and his mother, led authorities to believe he may have been involved.

James Earl Ray was in the vicinity of St. Louis as recently as three days prior to that robbery, a Congressional committee found. His brother John was also in the area at the time.

Another incriminating aspect of James Earl Ray's possible involvement with that Alton robbery was the fact authorities estimated his net worth at the time at around \$915 from his job at the Indian Trails Restaurant in Winnetka, Illinois, which is near Chicago, yet he was able to purchase a 1959 Chrysler for \$200 around the same time as the robbery as well as fund living expenses.

The day after the robbery, the Congressional committee found James Earl Ray had purchased a 1962 Plymouth from a dealership for \$210 in East St. Louis. He then drove to Montreal, Quebec, and placed a \$150 deposit on an apartment and bought \$250 worth of clothes before embarking on a one-week vacation to Gray Rocks, a resort north of Montreal for a cost of \$200. James Earl Ray denied robbing the bank and claimed those expenses depleted his savings.

Buying cars with more money than authorities thought the convicted small-time criminal should have occurred just before the assassination of Dr. King as well. He purchased a white Ford Mustang for \$2,000 in cash in Birmingham, Alabama in the summer of 1967 as well. It was purchased with mostly \$20 bills, which were the majority of what were stolen from the Bank of Alton.

James Earl Ray then returned to Birmingham to purchase a .30-06 high-powered hunting rifle for just under \$250 using \$20 bills a week before the assassination of Dr. King. He also purchased binoculars from a sporting goods store with \$20 bills, according to the report and CNN article.

That Mustang would be driven by James Earl Ray to Memphis where he would use that rifle to kill Dr. King. Many question this narrative and alleged a conspiracy possibly involving the U.S. Government or FBI, citing James Earl Ray's apparent lack of a motive. James Earl Ray described himself as a “mild segregationist” and was a noted racist.

In fact, when he was finally arrested for the murder of Dr. King, James Earl Ray's thumbprint was found on a note passed to a teller at a London bank during a robbery. He was using \$200 from that robbery to get an airline ticket to Brussels, Belgium, where he hoped to join with mercenaries in South Africa fighting to maintain its white rule, according to a CNN article.

The FBI did wiretap Dr. King's phones, however, after being given permission by then U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy in 1963. It was alleged Dr. King was a Communist sympathizer at that time – an allegation later proven wrong by the wire taps themselves.

Declassified documents do state Dr. King was allegedly unfaithful to his wife, and an anonymous letter sent to Dr. King attributed to one of his former followers, claimed to have recordings of that alleged infidelity and demanded Dr. King commit suicide after unleashing a vicious and racially-charged tirade against the Civil Rights leader.

Dr. King himself believed the letter came from the FBI, which was validated in 1975 by the Senate's Church Committee on U.S. Intelligence Overreach.

Because of that, many people believe the FBI had an involvement in Dr. King's assassination, a claim which holds no official merit, despite the Congressional committee report on the murder ruling a conspiracy was most likely involved and James Earl Ray did not act alone.

But it was his brothers, not the FBI, which the committee found possibly culpable in the case. Here is an excerpt from the conclusion of the 1978 report:

The committee concluded that there was a likelihood of conspiracy in the assassination of Dr. King. To summarize, several findings were central to the committee's conspiracy conclusion. First, James Earl Ray was the assassin of Dr. King, and Raoul, as described by Ray, did not exist. In reaching these conclusions, the committee rejected the

possibility that James Earl Ray was an unwitting “fall guy manipulated by others.” The committee found, rather, that Ray acted with full knowledge of what he was doing in the murder of Dr. King.

Secondly, an analysis of Ray's conduct before the assassination provided compelling indications of a conspiracy. Ray was not, in fact, a man without significant associations. His financing, in all likelihood supplied by the Alton bank robbery in July 1967, was strong evidence of significant criminal associations with his brothers during the preassassination period...

Third, the analysis of Ray's motive was crucial to the conspiracy conclusion. After examining Ray's behavior, his character and his racial attitudes, the committee found it could not concur with any of the accepted explanations for Ray as a lone assassin. Historically, Ray was a financially motivated criminal. While unsympathetic to the civil rights movement, he did not manifest the type of virulent racism that might have motivated the assassination in the absence of other factors. While the committee recognized the presence of other possible motives – racism or psychological needs – it concluded that the expectation of financial gain was Ray's primary motivation. The committee's finding on the motive, therefore carried conspiratorial implications.

Just as significant in the committee's ultimate conclusions on conspiracy was the evidence bearing on the complicity of the brothers, John and Jerry Ray.

James Earl Ray died in 1998, taking whatever secrets may have been behind the possible conspiracy and bank robbery to the grave with him.