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King probe data released

WASHINGTON (AP) — A pair of men's shorts with an unusual laundry mark was one of the clues that FBI agents pursued in their search for the assassin of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, according to newly disclosed FBI files.

Agents also investigated seven men named John Willard because the suspected assassin used that name when he checked into a rooming house near the hotel where King stayed on his fatal visit to Memphis, Tenn.

Those details emerged in a review of 412 pages of FBI files on its investigation of the April 4, 1968, slaying of the civil rights leader. The FBI released the documents from a total of 18,000 pages to comply with requests under the Freedom of Information Act. There was no indication when additional files would be made public.

A House committee is now investigating the King slaying.

THE FIRST BATCH of papers dealt with the investigation's early days and did not refer to James Earl Ray, who was arrested in London on June 8, 1968, and pleaded guilty to shooting King. Ray, now serving a 99-year prison term, has since recanted and is seeking to change his plea and go to trial.

The papers showed that hundreds of FBI agents chased scores of rumors and tips from citizens and tried to use such clues as the shorts and a man's T-

shirt to track the killer's identity. The underwear was found in a suitcase the assassin apparently left at the rooming house.

Agents called on the Textile Marking Machine Co. of Syracuse, N.Y., for help in tracing the laundry markings. The theory was that pinpointing the laundry that washed the assassin's underwear might provide further clues to his identity and his whereabouts.

Calls to all of Textile's sales representatives disclosed that only one area of the United States (the Northeast) utilizes this code system," one memo said. Agents were ordered to check out a three-page list of laundries that might have made the marking.

THE FBI'S NEWARK bureau, checking out New Jersey laundries, mentioned in its findings in an April 8 memo that one Haddonfield, N.J., cleaner "advised he does not launder underwear...."

The first batch of documents did not indicate whether the laundry mark was ever traced. Nor did the documents show whether any of the John Willards became involved in the case.

Agents in New York asked the American Express Co. for credit records on anyone named John Willard. The credit card company came up with seven, all with different middle names or initials.

Agents found one John Willard at his home in Oxford, Miss., and determined that he had been mowing his lawn at the time King was shot.

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