

LD

King assassin Ray dead

UNITED STATES

NASHVILLE, Tenn./The Associated Press

JAMES EARL RAY, THE PETTY CRIMINAL who confessed to assassinating Martin Luther King Jr., then recanted and spent decades seeking a trial, died yesterday of liver failure. He was 70.

Ray, who was serving a 99-year prison sentence for the 1968 slaying, suffered from kidney and liver failure and had been hospitalized repeatedly since late 1996.

Ray was pronounced dead at 10:36 a.m. at Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital, a statement from the Tennessee Department of Correction said.

By pleading guilty in March 1969, Ray avoided the possibility of a conviction at trial and a death sentence. He then argued for years that he was coerced into making the plea.

His attempt to get a trial drew an unlikely coalition that included his family as well as King's family and other civil rights leaders who believe King was the victim of a murder conspiracy, not a lone man.

"America will never have the benefit of Mr. Ray's trial, which would have produced new



RAY

revelations about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., as well as establish the facts concerning Mr. Ray's innocence," Coretta Scott King, the slain civil rights leader's wife, said shortly after Ray's death.

Wayne Chastain, one of Ray's lawyers, agreed: "We still think he's innocent ... History will have to write the final verdict," Chastain said yesterday.

William Gibbons, the lead state prosecutor in Memphis, said Ray's legal petitions aimed at getting his guilty plea thrown out are now over.

"About the only thing I can say is I believe the history books will accurately record that James Earl Ray was the killer of Dr. King," Gibbons said.

The Rev. Joseph Lowery, a co-founder of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said he never believed Ray was smart enough to plan the assassination alone.

KILLED HIS FATHER

Dexter King, one of the slain civil rights leader's four children, met with Ray in 1997 at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville and said he no longer believed Ray killed his father.

But prosecutors cited the evidence against Ray and noted that courts had repeatedly upheld the guilty plea.

King was shot April 4, 1968, while standing on a second-floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. He was in town to lend support to striking sanitation workers.

The assassination touched off race riots in more than 100 cities and set off one of the biggest manhunts in U.S. history.

Ray, a fugitive from a Missouri prison where he was serving time for robbery, was staying in a flophouse near the Lorraine at the time of the assassination. He had a lengthy criminal record, including armed robbery, burglary, forgery and unauthorized use of a motor vehicle. He fled the city shortly after the shooting and was captured in London two months later.

When he pleaded guilty the following year, he agreed to a detailed description of how investigators said the crime happened.

Prosecutor Phil M. Canale Jr. said there was no evidence of a conspiracy. He did not outline a motive for the killing or accuse Ray, who was white, of being a racist.