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Lawyer: Chambliss to plead innocent to church slayings

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News staff writers

Robert Edward Chambliss, a 73-year-old North Birmingham man, was arrested Monday evening after being charged with four counts of first-degree murder in connection with the 1963 bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The bombing was a major unsolved act of violence occurring during the civil rights era.

In addition, highly reliable sources close to the investigation say that Georgia lawyer J.B. Stoner has been indicted in connection both with the 1963 bombing and with the 1958 bombing of Birmingham's Bethel Baptist Church.

Chambliss, of 2505 32nd Ave. North, who recently told *The Birmingham News* he has stomach cancer, was arrested at his home about 6:10 p.m.

CHAMBLISS'S ATTORNEY, Art Hanes Jr. of Birmingham, said Monday night he has no comment about the charges other than to say Chambliss "intends to plead not guilty."

Stoner, 52, of Marietta, Ga., is to be accused of involvement in the bombing of Bethel Baptist Church at 3233 29th Ave. North. No one was injured in that bombing. The same church was bombed three times between 1958 and 1962.

IN ALL THE hatred, fear and violence that marked the racial upheaval in America in the 1960s, few incidents so shocked the conscience of the nation as the dynamite bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

The brick church building had been used as headquarters for massive civil rights demonstrations led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He headed protests which lasted more than six months, eventually influencing Congress to

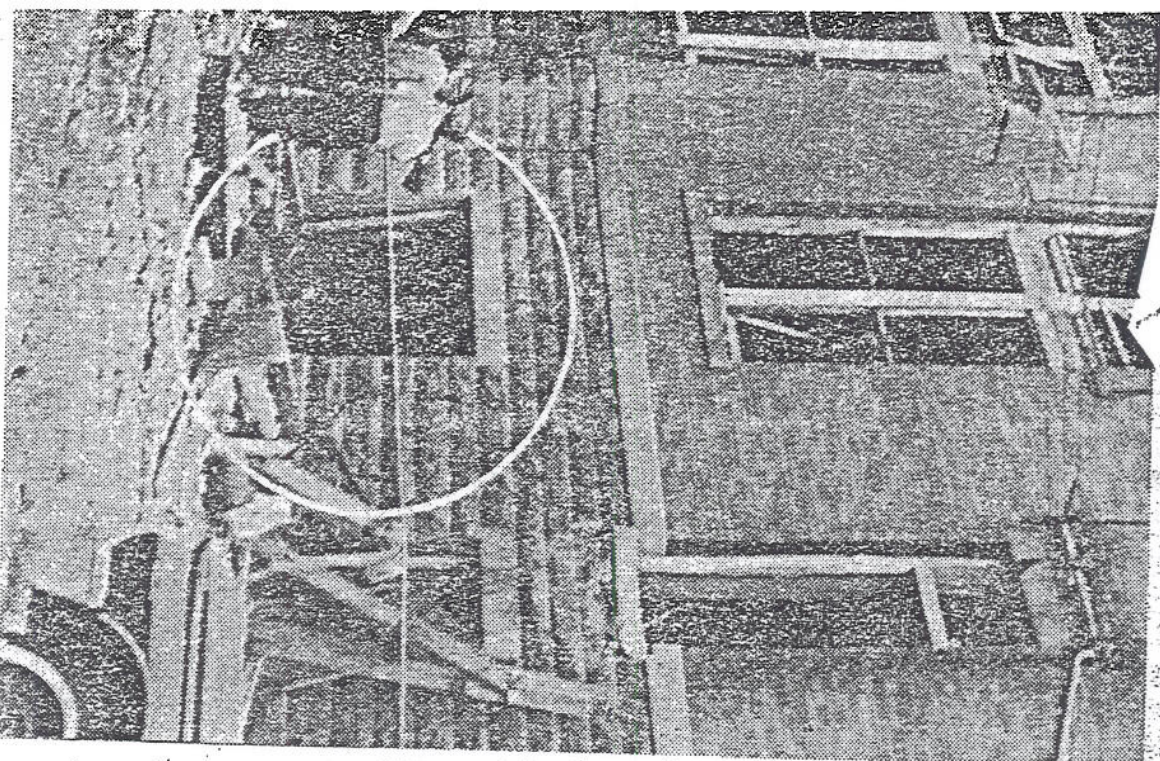
pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The explosion at 10:22 a.m. Sept. 1, 1963, in the outside stairwell shortly after Sunday school hours killed four young black girls who were in a restroom area near the blast site. Nineteen other persons were injured and rubble was hurled for blocks.

Those killed were Denise McNair, 11, and Cynthia Wesley, Carol Roberson and Addie Mae Collins, all 14.

With head bowed, and smoking cigarette, Chambliss emerged from his home Monday afternoon in custody of Sheriff's Deputies. He was taken to County Jail where he is being held without bond.

The arrest followed a one-day special grand jury session, and climaxed a long investigation by Atty. Gen. Bill Baxley who last February said he was renewing the church bombing case, saying, "There are some people Turn to Page 8, Column 1



US BLAST DESTROYED STEPS LEADING INTO THE CHURCH circle shows the area where the dynamite explosion went off

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Lawyer: Chambliss to plead not guilty

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in Jefferson County who ought to be pretty nervous right now."

BAXLEY, WHO accused the Ku Klux Klan of the church bombing, said, "We know who did it. The ones who are still alive are going to be brought to justice."

For many months the investigation seemed to languish, but investigators stuck to the case, and Birmingham Police Capt. Jack LeGrand and Sgt. E.H. Cantrell devoted almost two years to the investigation.

During the investigation Baxley drew on Birmingham police and FBI files as well as his own extensive interviews to bring the case to this point.

Chambliss, in several earlier interviews, has insisted he did not bomb the church, and has said the explosion was not a bombing, but a gas explosion.

After the grand jury reported Monday, Deputy Atty. Gen. George Beck said he could not say if anyone had been indicted. But once he said he "was pleased" with the work of the grand jury, a reporter followed officers to Chambliss' home and saw officers bring him out.

During an earlier grand jury session, Chambliss was called as a witness in connection with the church bombing case.

At that time, Chambliss threatened a Birmingham News photographer and later the same day charged at a television cameraman, knocking his camera to the floor.

An employe at Municipal Garage in the late 1940s, Chambliss most recently worked in a hardware store a block from his home. He is now retired.

When Baxley announced his renewal of the bombing cases, he said he already had been working on the case a long time. The church bombing story began to resurface when it was revealed that Baxley had been talking with former Birmingham FBI informer Gary Thomas Rowe in late 1975.

There were reports at Rowe had turned over a list of nine names to Baxley who Rowe said were involved in planning and carrying out the bombing.

Some of the evidence in the church bombing case reportedly was obtained

against possible suspects in the early years of the probe by means of illegal wiretaps, and thus inadmissible in court.

The statute of limitations on federal bombing charges and most other charges that might have resulted from the crime have expired.

But there is no statute of limitations on federal crimes punishable by death or on state charges of murder with universal malice—the intention of killing anyone who happens by.

Beck said Monday that more evidence in the bombing cases will be presented to future grand juries.

Gov. George Wallace, through press secretary Billy Joe Camp, said Monday he stands by his previous statements dating back to 1963, condemning the bombing. The governor said on numerous occasions that most citizens of Birmingham showed restraint and he said that the instigators should be brought to justice.

GEORGIA ATTORNEY STONER, who at 16 was an organizer of a Chattanooga, Tenn., Klan and who also once was a young kleagle in Tennessee, was raised in Walker county. Now residing in Marietta, Ga., Stoner has lived much of his life in Atlanta and is a graduate of Atlanta Law School.

Stoner, contacted today by The News, said he has not been arrested, but expects to be.

He said, "No, sir, I haven't bombed anything and I didn't have anybody bomb anything."

The attorney said he intends to fight extradition because, "I might be murdered if I'm brought back to Birmingham."

"I'm trying to catch up on my work here, so I can go to jail. I expect to be arrested today," said Stoner.

STONER CLAIMED he once was offered \$25,000 by an FBI agent in 1957 or 1958 to shoot Martin Luther King.

"That was the same fellow who wanted me to bomb Shuttlesworth's church," added Stoner.