

Robert Kennedy's papers under seal

BOSTON (AP) — A visitor to the spruced-up Robert F. Kennedy exhibit at the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum first encounters a large, moody photograph of the two brothers at the White House.

Their dark figures shadowed against light, their arms folded, heads bowed in apparently silent communion, it is a solemn portrait of Kennedy family closeness.

On Robert Kennedy's desk are scattered papers from September 1962, when he ordered federal marshals to escort black student James Meredith into the University of Mississippi.

There's a letter from Meredith, a phone message, memos and a scrap of paper on which Robert Kennedy had scrawled a fragment from a Robert Frost poem.

"I ... love ... this," whispers the exhibit's lone visitor, a middle-aged man in casual dress.

But scholars complain the library is still withholding key elements of Robert Kennedy's story.

Thirty years after his murder, most of Robert Kennedy's papers have remained closed to the public despite a law requiring that records related to his brother's assassination be opened.

"The family has refused to allow the kind of scholarly access to the papers that would permit a more honest scrutiny and appraisal of Robert Kennedy's role in public life," said Philip Zelikow, co-author of *The Kennedy Tapes*.

When Robert Kennedy resigned as attorney general in 1964 to run for the Senate, he completely cleaned out his Washington office.

After Robert Kennedy's murder in 1968, his widow, Ethel, gave his papers to the Kennedy Library. But the family retained control over them.

Since then, Ethel Kennedy has

given just one biographer access to RFK's personal papers — close family friend Arthur Schlesinger, who based his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Robert F. Kennedy and his Times* on the documents.

Some historians say the secrecy has made it difficult to get a balanced view of John and Robert Kennedy.

"I hope the family is starting to realize that the reluctance to release information has done more harm than good to the family name over the years," said Evan Thomas, a *Newsweek* editor writing a biography of Robert Kennedy.

"There's nothing in those files that is as damaging to the Kennedys as all the conspiracy theories that have grown up," he said.

In 1992, Congress enacted a law requiring an Assassination Records Review Board to gather and open all records concerning the president's death.

The board's official report, released last week, pried open many classified documents. But the panel failed to gain access to many of Robert Kennedy's papers.

Many of RFK's documents are scheduled to be declassified starting in 2000, said Stephen Plotkin, Robert F. Kennedy papers' curator. In the meantime, Plotkin said the Kennedy Library curators are as open as they can be within the law.