

Crime lab begins its tests on

The University of Rhode Island crime lab will try to determine whether James Earl Ray was the killer.

By Rachel Zoll
ASSOCIATED PRESS

SOUTH KINGSTOWN, R.I. — James Earl Ray's rifle, locked in an evidence box for nearly 20 years, was fired yesterday in the first of the tests that Ray hopes will clear him in the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Ray, 69, imprisoned in Tennessee

and gravely ill with liver disease, initially pleaded guilty to killing the civil rights leader April 4, 1968, but almost immediately recanted. He has asked for a trial ever since.

The tests, using an electron microscope, were not available when Ray went to prison. He hopes they will show that the bullet that killed Dr. King came from another weapon.

A report should be released next month, said Robert Hathaway, the criminalist leading the testing team. He also said it is possible that the markings on the bullets being tested will not be distinct enough to lead to a definitive conclusion.

Ray's Remington .30-06 rifle was retrieved yesterday from a padlocked, black case marked "evidence," and the three fragments of the bullet taken from Dr. King's body were displayed in a clear container.

Later, researchers fired six shots into a tank of water.

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bullet and rifle in King slaying

The slugs will be compared with the bullet from Dr. King's body to look at the marks left by the gun barrel. Each gun barrel has one-of-a-kind markings that are transferred onto bullet casings to create an imprint as unique as a fingerprint.

The marks will undergo a preliminary examination at the University of Rhode Island before going to a private lab, CamScan USA Inc., in Cranberry Township, Pa., where the electron microscope will be used.

Hathaway and Marshall Robinson, an independent contractor who

does firearms examinations for the Waterbury and Bridgeport Police Departments in Connecticut, also fired two shots each.

The tests are to continue today and tomorrow, with up to 12 more shots being fired.

Defense lawyer Jack McNeil said that, even if the tests show the bullet came from Ray's gun, it does not prove that Ray fired the weapon, and he will continue to seek a trial to prove he is innocent.

Dr. King was gunned down on a motel balcony in Memphis.

Ray has acknowledged owning the rifle, but has said that a gun-runner he knew only as "Raoul" dropped the gun — with Ray's fingerprints on it — near the murder scene to frame him.

Tests in the 1970s by the FBI and a congressional committee failed to prove beyond a scientific doubt that Ray's rifle was the murder weapon. The committee concluded in 1978 that Ray killed Dr. King, but may have been helped by others.

Dr. King's family supports Ray's request for a trial.