



**State of Tennessee  
Department of State  
Tennessee State Library and Archives**

**Tennessee Dept. of Correction  
James Earl Ray Inmate Records, 1952-1998  
RG 341**

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**COLLECTION SUMMARY**

**Creator:**

Tennessee. Department of Correction

**Inclusive Dates:**

1952-1998, bulk 1969-1998

**Scope & Content:**

Records contains approximately 2.0 cubic feet of documents and photographs related to James Earl Ray's incarceration in Tennessee state prisons for the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. There are three document boxes of unrestricted access materials and one document box of restricted access materials per TCA 10-7-504.

Aside from Ray's medical file (Box 4, Folders 6-7), which is among the restricted access material, the single largest portion of documents within the collection consists of his disciplinary records. These records span the years 1971-1991 (although there are no records for 1976), and they document the various rule violations Ray committed while in prison. These infractions ran the gamut from the relatively minor, such as dumping food and garbage on the floor in front of his cell, to more serious violations, such as setting property on fire or attempting to escape. As a result of these infractions, Ray was frequently placed in "Involuntary Administrative Segregation" (IAS), or solitary confinement. While in IAS, his status would be reviewed on a monthly basis, and these reviews are also included within the folders containing his disciplinary record. There is additional material in Box 3, Folder 2 related to his 1977 and 1979 escape attempts.

Among the other prison records are fingerprint cards and mug shots. While there are sixty-two mug shots of Ray from 1969 to 1996 in the collection (Box 2, Folder 11), there are only fifteen unique images (each image having multiple copies). The earliest mug shots show Ray with his eyes nearly closed. These are

most likely the images mentioned in a March 20, 1969, memorandum from Harry S. Avery, Commissioner of the Department of Correction (Box 3, Folder 8). Avery ordered the mug shots retaken because "I think the subject has literally tried to camouflage his looks by closing his eyes." Box 2, Folder 7 also contains copies of his criminal record from the FBI.

The correspondence in Box 1 is split into two groups: letters to or about Ray and letters written by him. Given the notoriety of the crime for which James Earl Ray was convicted, members of the general public and the media were constantly trying to contact him. Among the letters to and about Ray are numerous ones from people attempting to contact him, pleading his innocence, or asking for clemency on his behalf. Box 3, Folder 7 consists of release forms signed by Ray granting interviews with the media, including release forms for *Inside Edition*, *Hard Copy*, Morton Downey, Jr., and Geraldo Rivera. Box 3, Folder 11 contains package delivery notifications that frequently list the contents of the packages Ray was receiving. Finally, Box 3, Folder 24 houses Ray's visitation records.

Nearly one-third of the unrestricted access material is related to Ray's various court cases. Box 2, Folder 1 contains documents from *State v. James E. Ray*, relating to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The next folder contains documents from a second Tennessee case titled *State v. James E. Ray*, relating to his 1977 escape from Brushy Mountain Penitentiary. There are also materials related to a third *State v. James E. Ray* case, brought by the state of Missouri, in Folder 3. The remaining court case materials are related to suits Ray brought against various individuals.

Box 2, Folder 6 includes Ray's applications to Governor Lamar Alexander for an executive pardon. In his applications, Ray outlined his "conspiracy" claims about the assassination of King. He would further develop his conspiracy claims in his book *Who Killed Martin Luther King?*, which he wrote while in prison.

**Physical Description/Extent:**

2.0 cubic feet

**Accession/Record Group Number:**

RG 341

**Language:**

English

**Permanent Location:**

LXV-C-6-7

**Repository:**

Tennessee State Library and Archives, 403 Seventh Avenue North, Nashville, Tennessee, 37243-0312

**Administrative/Biographical History**

James Earl Ray was born in Alton, Illinois, on March 10, 1928, the oldest of nine children. Both of his parents were alcoholics and his father was in and out of prison. Ray quit school at the age of 15, having only made it to the eighth grade. In February 1946, Ray enlisted in the U.S. Army and was stationed in Germany. After several instances of getting in trouble, the Army sent him back to the United States and he was given a general discharge (neither honorable nor dishonorable) in December 1948, two days before his three-year enlistment was up.

Almost ten months after being discharged from the Army, Ray was arrested in Los Angeles, California, for attempting to rob a dry cleaning store. It would be his first of several arrests over the next decade. In 1960, he was sentenced to twenty years in the Missouri State Penitentiary for robbery. On April 23, 1967, Ray escaped from the Missouri State Penitentiary and spent the next year travelling to St. Louis, Chicago, Toronto, Montreal, Birmingham, and Los Angeles.

On March 30, 1968, he bought a rifle and scope at Aeromarine Supply Company in Birmingham, Alabama. On April 4, he used the rifle to assassinate Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis. After killing King, Ray fled to Toronto, where he acquired a Canadian passport using an alias. On May 6, he flew to London with the aim of going to Africa to fight for white regimes in Angola, Rhodesia, Congo, or South Africa. Ray was arrested at London's Heathrow Airport on June 8 while attempting to fly to Brussels, Belgium. He was extradited to the U.S. and arrived back in Memphis on July 19.

In order to avoid a jury trial in which he would probably receive the death penalty, Ray pled guilty to first degree murder on March 10, 1969. He was sentenced to 99 years in prison and was incarcerated at Brushy Mountain Penitentiary in Petros, Morgan County, Tennessee. Three days later, Ray recanted his guilty plea and concocted various conspiracy theories, which he would embellish for the rest of his life, to explain his innocence. Prominent in these stories was a mysterious drug dealer named "Raoul." It should be noted, however, that while the name was spelled "Raoul" in Ray's book *Who Killed Martin Luther King?*, in the documents within these records, Ray consistently spelled the name "Roual."

Ray made numerous escape attempts while incarcerated at Brushy Mountain. All of his attempted escapes – May 1971, February 1972, June 1977, and November 1979 – were ultimately unsuccessful, although it took three days for authorities to capture him after his 1977 attempt. One year was added to his 99-year prison

sentence because of the 1977 escape. In June 1981, while in the prison library, Ray was attacked by three African American inmates and stabbed 22 times. He recovered from his wounds, but was transferred from Brushy Mountain to the Tennessee State Penitentiary in Nashville for his safety. He would later be transferred to Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville around the time the Tennessee State Penitentiary was closed.

James Earl Ray died on April 23, 1998, from liver and kidney disease. He remained unrepentant to the end.

## **Organization/Arrangement of Materials**

The materials in these records were transferred to the Tennessee State Library and Archives from the Department of Correction in 1.5 records cartons. The half-box of material contained restricted access material per TCA 10-7-504 that had been separated by Department of Correction personnel prior to transfer. The full records carton contained unrestricted access material. During assessment of the material in both boxes, however, the restrictions outlined in TCA 10-7-504 were deemed not applicable to two documents among the restricted access materials. These items were moved to the unrestricted access materials. On the other hand, several documents found among the unrestricted access material were determined to fall under the restrictions outlined in TCA 10-7-504, and these items were relocated to the box containing restricted access material.

In both cases, the restricted and unrestricted access materials had simply been left in their original folders, which were then placed in the boxes. These folders had, for the most part, no organizational structure other than a very loose chronological order. Frequently, multipage documents were separated within a folder, and sometimes they were even scattered across two or more folders. Attachments to documents or correspondence had, in almost all cases, also become separated from their main document or letter. Therefore, a researcher may find documents in various folders within the collection that are labeled as an attachment, but it is unclear what document they were attached to.

The material in the folders was then sorted by document type and housed in document boxes. However, the two folders containing Ray's medical file (Box 4, Folders 6-7) and his correctional counseling file (Box 2, Folder 13) were left in their original order and form.

## Conditions of Access and Use

### Restrictions on Access:

Per TCA 10-7-504(c), access to documents containing medical, mental health, substance abuse, or educational information is restricted until 2068.

### Restrictions on Use and Reproduction:

While the Tennessee State Library and Archives houses an item, it does not necessarily hold the copyright on the item, nor may it be able to determine if the item is still protected under current copyright law. Users are solely responsible for determining the existence of such instances and for obtaining any other permissions and paying associated fees that may be necessary for the intended use.

## Index Terms

### Personal/Family Names:

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929-1968 -- Assassination  
Ray, James Earl, 1928-1998

### Corporate Names/Organizations/Government Bodies:

Brushy Mountain Penitentiary  
Riverbend Maximum Security Institution  
Tennessee. Department of Correction

### Subjects:

Actions and defenses -- Tennessee -- History -- 20th century  
Assassination -- United States -- History -- 20th century  
Courts -- Tennessee -- History -- 20th century  
Courts -- United States -- History -- 20th century  
Escaped prisoners -- Tennessee -- History -- 20th century  
Prisoners -- Tennessee -- History -- Sources  
Prisoners -- United States -- History -- Sources  
Prisons -- Tennessee -- History -- 20th century

### Document Types:

Administrative reports  
Civil court records  
Clippings (information artifacts)  
Correspondence  
Criminal court records

Identification photographs  
Medical records  
Memoranda  
Official reports  
State government records

## **Acquisition and Appraisal**

### **Provenance and Acquisition:**

James Earl Ray's inmate records were transferred from the Department of Correction to the Tennessee State Library and Archives in July 1998.

## **Processing and Administrative Information**

### **Preferred Citation:**

RG 341, Tennessee Dept. of Correction, James Earl Ray Inmate Records,  
Tennessee State Library and Archives

### **Processing Information:**

Processing completed by William M. Thomas in May 2015.

### **Electronic Location and Access:**

<http://www.tn.gov/tsla/history/state/recordgroups/findingaids/rg341.pdf>

## DETAILED COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

### CONTAINER LIST

Contents/Item Title	Date	Box	Folder
Clippings	1970-1987	1	1
Correspondence	1969-1970	1	2
Correspondence	1971-1980	1	3
Correspondence	1981-1997	1	4
Correspondence -- Ray, James Earl	1969-1997	1	5
Court records -- Affidavits	1969-1994	1	6
Court records -- <i>Carl Clifford Crafton v. Mark H. Luttrell</i>	1972	1	7
Court records -- Detainer warrants	1969-1983	1	8
Court records -- Judicial complaints	1971-1995	1	9
Court records -- <i>John B. May, et al. v. Mark H. Luttrell</i>	1972	1	10
Court records -- <i>James E. Ray v. Herman C. Davis, et al.</i>	1983	1	11
Court records -- <i>James E. Ray v. Percy Foreman and William Bradford Huie</i>	1969, undated	1	12
Court records -- <i>James E. Ray v. Robert W. Hill</i>	1972	1	13
Court records -- <i>James E. Ray v. National Archives and Records Service</i>	1979	1	14
Court records -- <i>James E. Ray v. Jeff Reynolds, et al.</i>	1991-1992	1	15
Court records -- <i>James E. Ray v. J. H. Rose</i>	1974-1983	1	16
Court records -- <i>James E. Ray v. Lake F. Russell and William S. Neil</i>	1969-1970	1	17
Court records -- <i>James E. Ray v. Time, Inc.</i> [1976]	undated	1	18
Court records -- <i>James E. Ray v. U.S. Department of Justice</i>	1988-1997	1	19
Court records -- <i>State v. John Willie Partee, et al.</i>	1982-1983	1	20
Court records -- <i>State v. James Earl Ray</i>	1968-1986	2	1
Court records -- <i>State v. James Earl Ray</i> [escape]	1977-1978	2	2
Court records -- <i>State v. James E. Ray</i> [Missouri]	1983	2	3
Court records -- U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations	1978	2	4
Financial records -- IRS forms	1990	2	5
Legal documents -- Clemency applications	1980-1982	2	6
Legal documents -- Criminal record	1969-1991	2	7
Legal documents -- Marriage certificate	1978	2	8
Legal documents -- Power of attorney	1970	2	9
Legal documents -- Probation records	1959-1988	2	10
Photographs -- Mug shots [62 photographs]	1969-1996	2	11
Prison records -- Confiscated property	1991-1994	2	12
Prison records -- Correctional counseling file	1987-1996	2	13
Prison records -- Death	1998	2	14
Prison records -- Disciplinary records	1971-1975	2	15

Prison records -- Disciplinary records [*no records for 1976*]	1977-1981	2	16
Prison records -- Disciplinary records	1982-1985	2	17
Prison records -- Disciplinary records	1986-1991	3	1
Prison records -- Escape attempts	1977-1979	3	2
Prison records -- Fingerprint cards	1991, undated	3	3
Prison records -- Incompatible inmate notices	1983-1995	3	4
Prison records -- Individual program plans	1991-1994	3	5
Prison records -- Inmate inquiries	1988-1997	3	6
Prison records -- Media contact release forms	1980-1994	3	7
Prison records -- Memoranda	1968-1993	3	8
Prison records -- Miscellaneous records	1969-1987	3	9
Prison records -- Orientation	1987-1996	3	10
Prison records -- Package delivery notifications	1969-1998	3	11
Prison records -- Parole hearings	1994	3	12
Prison records -- Personal property inventories	1971-1998	3	13
Prison records -- Personal property memoranda	1993-1995, undated	3	14
Prison records -- Personal property miscellaneous forms	1987-1997	3	15
Prison records -- Personal property storage requests	1991-1998	3	16
Prison records -- Personal property transfer requests	1982-1998	3	17
Prison records -- Prison employment	1976-1998	3	18
Prison records -- Program reviews	1985-1986	3	19
Prison records -- Reclassification reviews	1976-1997	3	20
Prison records -- Religious evaluations	1969-1981	3	21
Prison records -- Sentence summaries	1969-1990	3	22
Prison records -- Transfers	1976-1991	3	23
Prison records -- Visitation history	1969-1997	3	24
Prison records -- Waivers	1991-1994	3	25
<b>**RESTRICTED ACCESS MATERIALS**</b> <b>PER TCA 10-7-504</b>			
<b>Contents/Item Title</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>
Prison records -- Correctional counseling file	1994	4	1
Prison records -- Diagnostic summary	1987-1988	4	2
Prison records -- Education	1992-1993	4	3
Prison records -- Health summary	1987-1996	4	4
Prison records -- Medical correspondence	1974-1996	4	5
Prison records -- Medical file	1974-1993	4	6
Prison records -- Medical file	1994-1998	4	7
Prison records -- Medical memoranda	1969-1998	4	8
Prison records -- Psychological evaluations	1952-1969	4	9
Prison records -- Stabbing	1981	4	10