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Chambliss, Robert E. **Papers, 1972-1987**

Background:

On the morning of Sunday, September 15, 1963 a bomb planted by members of the Ku Klux Klan exploded outside the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, an African American church in Birmingham, Alabama. The blast did extensive damage to the building and killed four girls inside. Several other members of the congregation also suffered injuries. Robert E. Chambliss was the first person to be tried and convicted for the bombing.

Chambliss was born in Pratt City, then a Birmingham suburb, in 1904. He worked a variety of jobs including quarryman, miner and auto mechanic. A long-time member of the Klan, Chambliss was involved in several acts of Klan violence and suspected in several Birmingham area bombings. His skill as a bomb maker earned him the nickname "Dynamite Bob." Chambliss was a suspect in the Sixteenth Street Church bombing as early as 1963 and in 1977 he was convicted for his role in the attack. Chambliss spent the rest of his life in prison and died on October 29, 1985.

Scope and Content:

This collection was transferred from the FBI Birmingham field office to the Birmingham Public Library Archives in 2010. The bulk of the collection consists of letters written by and to Robert Chambliss during his stay in prison. These include letters written by Chambliss to his wife Flora Chambliss, to his niece Willie Mae Walker and to Howard Manning, who was Flora Chambliss' brother. The collection also includes letters received by Willie Mae Walker from J.B. Stoner, Dillard Simmons and Jimmy Ray Day.

In his letters Chambliss maintains his innocence of the bombing, blames other suspects and works to obtain a release from prison. In some letters Chambliss describes a relationship with Tommie Lee Hines, a mentally challenged African American man who lived in the cell next to Chambliss. Hines' 1978 conviction for the rape of three white women caused racial tension and civil rights demonstrations in Alabama and led to a brief resurgence of the Klan.

In addition to Chambliss' letters the collection contains miscellaneous items such as Flora Chambliss' book *Ritual of the Order of the Eastern Star*; a guest book of the Order of the White Shrine of Jerusalem; newspaper clippings relating to Robert Chambliss, J.B. Stoner, Gary Thomas Rowe, and Bill Baxley as well as full newspapers received by Robert Chambliss including *Israel is Embattled* and the *Thunderbolt*; and

papers relating to the divorce, realty payments, and taxes of Clarence and Eunice Dill, neighbors of Robert and Flora Chambliss. It is not known why this material was included with Chambliss' papers.

Related Collections:

Alabama. Tenth Judicial Circuit Court
State of Alabama vs. Robert E. Chambliss Trial Transcript, 1977

Birmingham, Ala. Police Department
Surveillance Files, 1947-1980

United States. Federal Bureau of Investigation
Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing Investigation Files, 1963-1965

Subject Areas:

Birmingham—1960s—Bombings—Sixteenth Street Church
Birmingham—Bombings—Robert E. Chambliss

Size: 1 linear foot (3 boxes)

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (Birmingham Office)

Restrictions: Standard preservation and copyright restrictions.

Guide Prepared by: Caitlin Moore and Hillary Miller

File Number:

Description:

1969.1.1

Correspondence: Robert E. Chambliss to Flora Chambliss, April 17, 1978 to April 25, 1979.

Robert Chambliss writes the same message to his wife in virtually every letter, urging her to contact the governor: "Mommie Please Call the Gov. Tell Him your condition and mine" (3-15-79). Chambliss claims that his lawyers are representing him poorly and are only after the court-appointed lawyer's fee (3-14-79, 3-27-79). Chambliss mentions bombings only once in this file, though not the church bombing in particular, when he makes several vague claims of other people's involvement but not his own involvement (4-24-79).

1969.1.2

Correspondence: Robert E. Chambliss to Flora Chambliss, May 1, 1979 to June 28, 1979.

Chambliss tells Flora of the man in the cell next to him, Tommie Lee Hines (Monday [May]-14-79), and Chambliss continues to update his wife on Hines' condition throughout their correspondence.

Chambliss often describes his failing health, writing in one letter that he has "Ben (sic) operated on 10 times 2 stroke 2 seorious (sic) hart (sic) attacks They took out over $\frac{3}{4}$ of my stomache (sic)" (5-11-79). After constant claims that he is not receiving his medicine or being allowed to see his doctor, he claims he knows of "8 Deaths or More old Mrs Stoner has caused" (6-28-79), referring to the woman he frequently accuses of denying him medical care.

In one letter, Chambliss writes that he has been hearing on the news that he is guilty and will serve a life sentence, but he maintains his innocence, stating "I have never Harmed anyone The Biggest Harm I've ever done to anyone Was to My Self" (5-21-79 #2). Chambliss urges Flora to have her brother Howard contact Billy Holt, who will be able to tell Howard who was "in on" the bombing; Chambliss then claims that the mayor, Art Hanes Sr., and police commissioner, Bull Connor, of Birmingham during 1963 "know all about the Bombing" (5-28-79).

An envelope in this file (post marked 5-15-79) contains multiple letters from Robert Chambliss to Flora Chambliss that have been written on the back of her letters, some of which seem to be only portions of longer letters; this envelope also contain a letter from Chambliss' sister Margie (on which he has made a note that he does not "Ever aim to Write Margie again") and Double Dividend coupons. Another envelope in this file (post marked 5-25-79) contains a disciplinary hearing notice from the Board of Corrections and letters to Chambliss from his lawyer, from the U.S. Post Office concerning his mail, from the Board of Pardons and Paroles; Chambliss forwarded these documents to Flora.

Two letters in this file were accompanied by newspaper clippings which have been photocopied and filed with the letters they accompanied; one is a clipping noting the funeral of Joseph L. Chambliss (5-15-79), and the other concerns Chambliss being denied a rehearing on an appeal of his conviction (6-28-79).

1969.1.3

Correspondence: Robert E. Chambliss to Flora Chambliss, July 1, 1979 to September 4, 1979.

Chambliss again names people he says were involved in or had knowledge of bombings, claiming that Hubert Page and Billy Holt paid off Art Hanes Sr. "To Keep Their Names out of it," and he also describes methods used to plant bombs (8-8-79, begun on the back of letter dated 8-6-79). In a later letter, he mentions these methods again and names Ann Garrett (wife of his nephew Floyd Clyde Garrett, a Birmingham police officer) as someone who can attest to those involved in the church bombing, noting an incident when "FC" shot at Ann when she begged him "To Pull out of That Mess" (8-14-79 #1). Chambliss again accuses "FC" of involvement in bombings in another letter, including an attempt to kill two other police officers for refusing to take part in bombings (8-17-79).

Chambliss writes that another black inmate from Decatur told him "Tommie Lee Has a Brother Looks Just Like Him They Picked up the Wrong one" (7-9-79, written on the back of a letter dated 7-6-79). In another letter, Chambliss tells his wife that an attempt is being made to cover up Tommie's rape in prison (8-6-79), which he claims knowledge of in a later letter (8-18-79, filed with letter dated 8-16-79).

1969.1.4

Correspondence: Robert E. Chambliss to his niece, Willie Mae Walker, July 3, 1983 to December 22, 1983.

Chambliss insists that Bill Baxley paid people to testify against him in court (7-3-83, 7-7-83, 7-30-83). In another letter, Chambliss claims that Gary Rowe, along with other KKK members, murdered three NAACP members and buried their bodies under an earthen dam, but the authorities refused to take any action against Rowe (envelope postmarked 8-12-83). The details of the crime suggest that he may be referring to the 1964 murders of three civil rights workers in Mississippi. In multiple letters, Chambliss urges Willie Mae to find Libby Ann (Elizabeth) Cobbs, Chambliss' niece who testified against him, and to convince Cobbs to recant her testimony (12-5-83, 12-8-83, 12-22-83).

A letter in this file is accompanied by a disciplinary report filed against Chambliss and a summary of Chambliss' disciplinary history during his time in the St.

Clair Correctional Facility (envelope postmarked 10-11-83).

Some of the letters in this file were penned for Chambliss by J.B. Stoner. Stoner also added his own notes to a letter by Chambliss concerning problems with his new address (11-1-83), and another of Chambliss' letters is accompanied by a letter requesting medical parole for Chambliss, which was authored by Stoner but intended for Willie Mae to copy, sign, and send to the parole board (11-20-83).

1969.1.5

Correspondence: Robert E. Chambliss to Willie Mae Walker, January 9, 1984 to December 26, 1984.

Chambliss again urges Willie Mae to find Libby Ann Cobbs, but he now tells her to have someone file a lawsuit against Cobbs for "many millions of dollars" (3-15-84). Chambliss claims to have filed twenty federal cases against various people throughout his imprisonment that will make any attorney wealthy if he should take up Chambliss' cause (2-9-84). This count of open cases increases throughout Chambliss' letters to Willie Mae.

Chambliss sends another letter pre-written by Stoner for Willie Mae to sign and send to a judge who may have the power to release Chambliss (1-19-84). Chambliss writes an ad for Willie Mae to place in Birmingham newspapers, pleading for anyone to help him get out of prison before he dies (7-5-84). Stoner adds his own notes in multiple letters (7-30-84, 9-10-84, 12-26-84) and writes separate letters to Willie Mae (3-15-84, 5-26-84).

1969.1.6

Correspondence: Robert E. Chambliss to Willie Mae Walker, January 28, 1985 to July 29, 1985.

A letter in this file describes the April 15, 1985 riot at the St. Clair Correctional Facility, where several prison employees were taken hostage by armed inmates; Chambliss writes that he, J.B. Stoner, and another prisoner were kept in the basement to protect them from the riot (4-25-85).

Stoner adds his own note to a letter from Chambliss (1-28-85).

1969.1.7

Correspondence: Robert E. Chambliss to Howard Manning, August 28, 1979 to November 7, 1979.

In a letter in this file, Chambliss names people that he claims were involved in bombings, implies that Gary Thomas Rowe was working with the C.I.A., and scoffs that the KKK was “Crazy Enough To Believe They [the bombers] Were Doing it To Help The Klan” (9-3-79). Chambliss claims that Earl Morgan (Birmingham district attorney at the time of his trial) was intent on seeing that only Chambliss was convicted (9-14-79). Chambliss implicates Floyd Garrett again and says he is trying to have six other people talk to Floyd about helping to get Chambliss out of prison (9-24-79).

Without admitting any guilt in the bombings, Chambliss admits in one letter to some vague possibility that his actions led him to his imprisonment: “I Ben (sic) Praying Night and Day If I Had Listened To My Dear Poor Little Sweet Mommie years ago I Wouldn’t Be In This Mess Now” (9-12-79). Later, Chambliss tries to find some reason or explanation for his troubles: “Howard Tell Mommie I Was Called To Preach over 40 years ago and Bro Gentry Wanted To ordain Me I Told Him Not yet I’ve Ben (sic) Catching The Devil Ever Since” (9-28-79).

This file also contains papers from Howard Manning that have no relation to Chambliss, such as a billing statement from the Department of Education and resumes (filed at the back).

1969.2.1

Correspondence: Miscellaneous mail received at the Chambliss home (2505 32nd Avenue North, Birmingham, AL), 1967 to 1987.

This file includes records of the purchase of and payments on a burial plot at Elmwood Cemetery for Robert and Flora Chambliss, graduation and wedding invitations, Mother’s Day cards, a phone bill, and letter to Flora from “Clara.” These are arranged either by the postal stamp date on the envelopes or by the date of the ceremony on the cards; all those that are undated are placed at the back of the folder.

1969.2.2

Correspondence: Letters to Robert E. Chambliss, November 25, 1977 to September 25, 1985

Flora writes to Chambliss that “everything is pretty bad now a day’s [. . .] It will be worse when that boy next to you comes up for trial” (6-15-79). She later writes that “they sure are having war around B’ham” (perhaps in

reference to Tommie Lee's appeal?) (Sun. [July]-8-79). Mentions Sky Lab falling in the same letter. Flora has heard that J.B. Stoner and Gary Thomas Rowe will be going up for trial in the fall but expresses her doubt, writing "So the news say's But I don't much believe it" (7-19-79). Flora: "that is all that is going to help you is to expose them all"; she also urges him to speak about it only to Andy Kilpatrick [Birmingham journalist who covered the bombing investigation and trial] (7-24-79).

Chambliss received several letters from his sisters Margie and Bennie and from Flora's brother Howard from August to October of 1979, during which time Flora was sick, hospitalized, and likely unable to write.

Willie Mae tells Chambliss of a phone call she made to the police about a disturbance near her home, and she is alarmed that the police officer recognized her by voice and knew her name and where she lived, concluding that her house must be bugged for this to be possible (6-27-84). Willie Mae writes Chambliss that there is no way he will be able to get out on good time and that lawyers have told her that they will not touch his case (8-29-84).

This file contains two letters from the F.B.I. concerning Chambliss' request and receipt of records under the Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts (11-25-77, 11-29-77); these are the only letters received at his home address, all others were received in prison. Undated letters and cards received by Chambliss are filed in the back.

1969.2.3

Correspondence: Letters to Willie Mae Walker from Jimmy Ray Day, J.B. Stoner, Dillard Simmons, and Elmwood Cemetery Mausoleum and letters sent by Willie Mae Walker, November 9, 1983 to August 1, 1984.

J.B. Stoner wants Libby Ann Cobb to say she lied about Chambliss under oath (12-7-83). In several letters, Stoner tries to explain the concept of "good time" to Willie Mae and insists she find a lawyer who can help Chambliss get out on "good time" (4-1-84, 4-17-84, 4-23-84, 7-1-84). Stoner later decides that Willie Mae should work to have Chambliss released by medical parole, and he writes that Chambliss has Alzheimer's, which will qualify him for medical parole because it is a terminal illness (1-15-85).

On the day before Chambliss' death, Stoner writes Willie Mae to inform her that Chambliss has been moved to Lloyd Noland Hospital in Birmingham and that "they don't expect him to live" (10-28-85). In the same letter, Stoner

maintains Chambliss' innocence, saying that "Even in his prayer, he always said he was innocent."

Dillard Simmons, a prison friend of Chambliss, describes Chambliss' failing mental condition, saying that Chambliss has trouble remembering recent events and often breaks down crying (Sunday). Simmons also describes Chambliss' increasing paranoia and says Chambliss is "living in another time era in his mind" (undated). Simmons relays a rumor that Chambliss will possibly be transferred to a center for aged and infirmed inmates where he will receive better medical care (undated).

- 1969.2.4 This file contains Flora Chambliss' book, *Ritual of the Order of the Eastern Star*, and papers upon which Chambliss and other unknown people wrote, including three statements written by Robert Chambliss relieving Howard Manning of his Power of Attorney and turning it over to Willie Mae Walker.
- 1969.2.5 This file contains a guest book bearing the symbol and motto of the Order of the White Shrine of Jerusalem: "In Hoc Signo Spes Mea," meaning "In this sign [the cross] is my hope." The book contains entries from dates ranging from March 1972 to March 1973.
- 1969.2.6 Copies of newspaper clippings relating to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing and to Robert E. Chambliss and his trial.
- 1969.2.7 Copies of newspaper clippings relating to J.B. Stoner.
- 1969.2.8 Copies of newspaper clippings relating to Gary Thomas Rowe.
- 1969.2.9 Copies of newspaper clippings relating to former Attorney General Bill Baxley.
- 1969.3.1 Portions and some full issues of *Israel is Embattled* newspapers and *Thunderbolt* newspapers.
- 1969.3.2 Documents relating to Clarence and Eunice Dill, Robert and Flora Chambliss' neighbors, including documents relating to their taxes, real estate, and divorce.
- 1969.3.3 This file contains a deed and chain of title for property owned by Clarence and Eunice Dill.

