

# **A bullet to the head for the James Files JFK 'confession'**

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**I**n a cell in an Illinois prison sits a 75-year-old ex-Mafia man who says he was the real assassin of US President John F Kennedy. James Files, who claims he was the legendary 'grassy knoll gunman' of 22 November 1963, is due for parole soon. The precise date of his release is not clear, having previously been given as January 2016 and Spring 2016, both of which are now well behind us.<sup>1</sup> Illinois Department of Corrections gives the parole date of 5 June 2016 and a discharge date in 2019. No doubt, once he regains his liberty, Files (now ostensibly a devout Christian) will have a lucrative old age in the limelight. Mainstream journalists have lavished attention upon Files' tales in a way that they have not done with other assassination 'confessions', of which there has been no shortage. It's easy to see why. Files is a genuine gangster and a would-be killer (his 30-year sentence was for an attempted murder committed in 1991), and he presents a simple story that circumvents the bewildering forest of forensic, ballistic and eyewitness evidence relating to the case.

An entirely representative example of such coverage can be taken from *The Daily Mail*, which has published at least four stories about Files in the last three years. In a 2015 story, Files is quoted as telling his interviewer:

'I was aiming at Kennedy's right eye. When I pulled the trigger it was almost like looking from six feet away through the scope. As I squeezed his head moved forward. I missed and got it right along the temple, right behind the eye. I squeezed off my round. I hit him and blew his head backward. I fired one shot and one shot only.'<sup>2</sup>

It's punchy, pithy, stuff and it transports the reader back in time to stand in the shoes (and look through the sniperscope) of the mystery grassy knoll gunman, then just 21 years old.

Stephen Fagin is curator of the Sixth Floor Museum, which is housed in the former book depository building on the outskirts of Dallas, Texas. From there the 'official' assassin – Lee Harvey Oswald – is said to have fired on

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<sup>1</sup> See <<http://tinyurl.com/ycbfmfjy>> or <[http://www.idoc.state.il.us/subsections/search/inms\\_print.asp?idoc=N14006](http://www.idoc.state.il.us/subsections/search/inms_print.asp?idoc=N14006)>

<sup>2</sup> <<http://tinyurl.com/qzfs4jb>> or <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3308941/Mob-hitman-James-Files-stands-claims-man-responsible-President-John-F-Kennedy-s-assassination-prepares-release.html>>

Kennedy. Refreshingly, the museum does not take a partisan line on assassination research and holds a wealth of evidence concerning all theories. Mr Fagin says:

'It is possible that those who continue to believe in Files do so because he offers a neat, clean answer with all the gaps filled in. There is also the tantalizing promise of hard evidence emerging once he is released from prison. That alone might be enough to sustain some interest, at least in the short term.'<sup>3</sup>

Files has an interesting history and there can be no doubt that he had significant Mafia connections. But his confession that he shot JFK is a lie, a fabrication invented more or less from the whole cloth. This article shows how the hoax took shape, and illuminates the overlooked proof that the story is a lie.

## **Enter West and Vernon**

**I**n 1978, Chicago FBI Agent Zach Shelton was put to work investigating an inter-state hijacking gang, of which Files was the ringleader. The hijackers were unsophisticated, simply overpowering lorry drivers at rest points along their routes and making off with their vehicle and its cargo. Special Agent Shelton, sure that Files must be operating with the blessing of the local Mob, got an informant to penetrate the gang to see what he could learn. Among the information that Shelton received was the informant's account of accompanying Files on a trip to Dallas, during which they drove through downtown Dealey Plaza, the scene of Kennedy's assassination. The informant told Shelton that Files had begun acting strangely and had said: 'If the American people really knew what happened there, they wouldn't know how to handle it.'

Not the most penetrating insight ever offered concerning the assassination, and not evidence of anything at all, but it stuck in Agent Shelton's memory. Files wound up in an Illinois prison in 1991, convicted of the attempted murder mentioned above. In 1992, Agent Shelton – now transferred to the Bureau's office in Beaumont, Texas – came across a newspaper story about a preacher-turned-private-investigator called Joe West. The article said that Mr West had a source who could place mobsters Charles Nicoletti and Johnny Roselli in Dallas on the day of Kennedy's murder. Still interested in the 'Mob did JFK' theory, Agent Shelton got in touch. It transpired that West's source was (like Files) a jailed criminal and, also, unreliable. In spite of this, Agent Shelton passed on Files' name, suggesting that Mr West might want to contact Files to see what he might know. Mr West then contacted Files

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<sup>3</sup> Email to author 21 March 2017.

repeatedly at his Illinois address, via phone calls, personal visits and letters. Files consistently rebuffed West's attentions. An example of one of Files' letters to Mr West, disavowing knowledge of the assassination, is reproduced on Dave Perry's website.<sup>4</sup>

In 1993, Joe West died of complications after heart surgery, and this is where Files' story really begins. Predictably, Files has claimed that Joe West was bumped off by shadowy conspirators, who interfered with his medication. Why they didn't simply dispose of Files himself and save themselves a lot of effort is unclear. What passed between Files and West in their unrecorded one-to-one conversations is not known. After West's death, his documents pertaining to his JFK investigation ended up in the hands of his friend Bob Vernon, a Dallas TV producer, and this paperwork led Vernon straight to Files.<sup>5</sup> And it appears that once he realised that West's mouth had been shut for good, Files' mouth suddenly sprang open, pouring out detail after detail to Mr Vernon about how the assassination was pulled off by the Mafia in general and James Files in particular. The fact that a television producer might be willing to pay a goodly sum for a taped confession may have played a part in it, because that was exactly what happened next.

Like any experienced criminal, used to improvising elaborate lies on a regular basis, Files had been presented with a golden opportunity and he seized it with both hands. DVDs and TV documentaries have resulted from the Files-Vernon collaboration; and no doubt Files – whose ostentatious conversion to Christianity and renunciation of sin (such as bearing false witness) is almost too 'pat' – will derive a regular income from the media upon his release.

To take a snapshot of how his tales are being received, one can look to reader reviews submitted to Amazon.com. Stephen Fagin of the Sixth Floor Museum is cautious, saying: 'I would not consider online book or DVD reviews to be a reliable indicator of support for James Files, as those can easily be rigged by posting under different user names.'<sup>6</sup> It's a fair point. However, Amazon customers can select to read only the reviews submitted by verified purchasers of individual books. There are about half a dozen publications touting the James Files story. Let's take just one of them: Wim Dankbaar's *Files on JFK: Interviews with Confessed Assassin James E. Files, and More New Evidence of the Conspiracy that Killed JFK* (published in 2008). From this,

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<sup>4</sup> <<http://dperry1943.com/files.html>>

<sup>5</sup> *The Sun-Journal* (Lewistown, Maine) 29 September 1994. See <<http://tinyurl.com/y7ug9rsa>> or <<https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=QMYgAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=IWofAAAAIIBAJ&pg=1425,6224101&hl=en>>.

<sup>6</sup> See note 3.

anyone can verify for themselves that 72 per cent of readers have given him five stars out of five. This isn't for its literary merit – several readers have commented on the numerous typos and basic English usage errors in Dankbaar's work.

The effusive opinions of verified purchaser 'Roy the Media Boy' are entirely representative:

'For years now, the debunkers have attempted to punch a hole in the incredible story detailed by Files. To date, they continue tilting at a windmill. The detailed story that Files tells, is supported by numerous individuals in this book, and continues to stand the test of time. We can ponder whether Files actually fired the fatal head shot, (as he claims), but there is NO doubt that he was at Dealey Plaza, knows who else was there, and all the other skeletons surrounding this murder of the ages. I have an extensive library regarding the JFK assassination, and this book would be in my Top 5.'

## **Into the firearms thicket**

The key issue in the supposed 'controversy' surrounding James Files' story of shooting JFK concerns firearms and ballistics, as one might expect if familiar with JFK research generally, and it is argued with ferocious pedantry from all sides. Files claims to have used an XP-100 pistol to fire at Kennedy from the grassy knoll. The supposedly corroborative evidence for this is a couple of .222 shell casings found on the grassy knoll in October 1987 by assassination researcher John Rademacher. And this is where the nitty gets gritty, but not so gritty as to be incomprehensible to the layman.

Manufactured between 1963 and 1998, the distinctive-looking Remington XP-100 (from 'Experimental Pistol') is normally a .221 with a lengthy barrel. But the shells that supposedly corroborate the Files 'confession' are .222 calibre. Much effort has been expended on arguing the toss on the .221/.222 calibre difference. For example, Files-sceptic JFK researcher Dave Perry states: '[...] Remington Arms' staff expert on the XP-100, when contacted on April 1, 1998, flatly denied the pistol was ever chambered for the .222.'<sup>7</sup> But a devout firearms enthusiast states: 'Initial plans to chamber the XP-100 in the .222 [size] changed because that case had too much capacity to be efficient in the pistol's short barrel.'<sup>8</sup> So it appears that Remington's staff were correct in that the pistol on sale to the public was never .222-compatible, but that statement

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<sup>7</sup> <<http://dperry1943.com/final.html>>

<sup>8</sup> <<https://www.americanhunter.org/articles/2014/6/4/the-singles-scene/>>

doesn't address the fact that prototypes were indeed .222-compatible. And in any event it would not be difficult to replace the barrel on a .221 with a barrel to fit .222 ammunition.<sup>9</sup> Given the possibility of a customised weapon, the debate doesn't settle much either way.<sup>10</sup>

If the firearms debate is a stark reminder of why the mainstream news media tend to shy away from JFK research, with all its bewildering sub-debates and apocrypha, the ammunition itself seems far more promising. As already stated, the two spent shells were found by John Rademacher in 1987. Since then they have been extensively analysed in great detail by a researcher called Allan Eaglesham, who hunted down every scrap of relevant information that he could identify. This produced a convincing argument that the shells' design proves they were not manufactured until the early 1970s. If Mr Eaglesham is right – and no counter-argument has appeared – then Files' tale is dramatically weakened.<sup>11</sup>

However (and of course there is a significant 'however' to all this), Mr Eaglesham's 'Exhibit A' has a conspicuously less than impeccable pedigree. It consists of a scan of a document that was supposedly rescued several decades ago from company trash by a Remington employee. He then gave it to an anonymous correspondent on an Internet discussion forum, who kindly sent it to Mr Eaglesham. (How fortunate that Mr Eaglesham happened to join the one discussion group frequented by the person who held this crucial document, which no-one else has ever seen.) This chain of evidence makes 'hearsay' seem like a signed confession by comparison and simply cannot be relied upon.

But even if the firearms and ballistics evidence are frustratingly inconclusive, they do point us directly to the question that turns out to reveal the solution to the whole James Files enigma: how did the XP-100 ever appear in the debate to begin with?

Assassination eyewitness Malcolm Summers was standing in Dealey Plaza, very near the presidential limousine when the shooting took place. He can be seen 'hitting the dirt' in the background of the famous Zapruder film of the killing. He witnessed crowds rushing to the 'grassy knoll' and followed them, thinking that they had a gunman cornered there. According to statements made by Mr Summers in his later years, he encountered a shady-

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<sup>9</sup> A gun enthusiast's minutely-detailed account of precisely this customising endeavour can be read at <<http://www.bergerbullets.com/articles/norman-johnson-remington-xp.pdf>>.

<sup>10</sup> Along the way, Files has said he re-bored the XP-100 from .221 to .222, which is a whole new debate in itself.

<sup>11</sup> <<http://www.manuscriptservice.com/Headstamp/>>

looking character carrying a strange-looking weapon, who warned him off the scene with ominous remarks.<sup>12</sup>

John Rademacher found his way to Malcolm Summers and put to him a series of photographs of firearms which used .222 calibre ammunition, (including the XP-100, even though only the early prototypes fired .222) asking him to pick out the one he thought he saw brandished on the knoll. Mr Summers eventually chose the XP-100. We don't know which other weapons Summers was shown but the XP-100 (shown below) was then and still is a very unusual looking pistol and it is hardly a surprise that, in a nice demonstration of confirmation bias, Summers picked it out.<sup>13</sup>



But armed with his new 'information', Mr Rademacher approached investigator Joe West – whom we met at the start of this story – and told him what he had found. Since Mr West communicated extensively with Files in unrecorded conversations, the simplest explanation has to be that Mr West amateurishly revealed this evidence to Files. Once Mr West was dead, Files had information he could use to his own advantage and began talking of using the XP-100.

## **Game over**

**T**he proof that Files has been lying through his teeth all along is pathetically simple and obvious.

In his notarised statement to the Dallas Sheriff's Office, dated 23 November 1963, Malcolm Summers gave no indication whatsoever that he saw any suspicious character on the knoll when he witnessed the assassination the

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<sup>12</sup> A brief summary of his story, given in person and evidently recorded at some point in the 1980s, can be seen on YouTube at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVi1qBl8dR8>>. A detailed version of Mr Summers' eyewitness account was recorded in 2002, and can be heard in this oral history, after the ten-minute mark at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WrkGCDQubhQ>>.

<sup>13</sup> Malcolm Summers also stated in his 2002 testimony (as seen in the second YouTube clip from footnote 12) that he encountered a man on the grassy knoll who had a jacket draped over his arm. Summers said that the barrel of a gun – just the barrel, note – could be seen poking out from under the jacket. How good an identification from a full picture of a gun Summers could give, having only seen the barrel, is highly debatable.

preceding day (and of course, no other knoll witness saw one either). Mr Summers' original statement focused instead on a vehicle seen speeding through Dealey Plaza some 20 minutes after the assassination, the relevance of which is hard to fathom. And on 30 October 1978 Mr Summers signed a statement for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which was reinvestigating the JFK murder. On that date, Mr Summers put his signature to a document verifying that his 1963 statements were '*accurate and complete*'. This is definitive. Mr Summers did not see the mystery gunman he later claimed to have seen.<sup>14</sup>

Eyewitness testimony is notoriously prone to fading and embellishment over the course of years, but why Mr Summers' story underwent such a drastic metamorphosis is a question that can never be answered properly, since he died on 8 October 2004, aged 80. With Mr Summers' fantasy of a knoll gunman dispelled, the identification of the Remington XP-100 goes with it, and the whole James Files hoax dissolves like a wisp of, well, gunsmoke.

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<sup>14</sup> HSCA vol. 12, p. 14 at <<http://tinyurl.com/ycpfjavf>> or <[http://www.history-matters.com/archive/jfk/hasca/reportvols/vol12/pdf/HSCA\\_Vol12\\_DealeyPlaza.pdf](http://www.history-matters.com/archive/jfk/hasca/reportvols/vol12/pdf/HSCA_Vol12_DealeyPlaza.pdf)>.