

Unanswered questions about Epstein's final hours: A 'flash of orange,' a Google search, a makeshift noose

Members of Congress examining Jeffrey Epstein's suicide in a Manhattan jail in 2019 are seeking testimony from the last guard to see him alive.

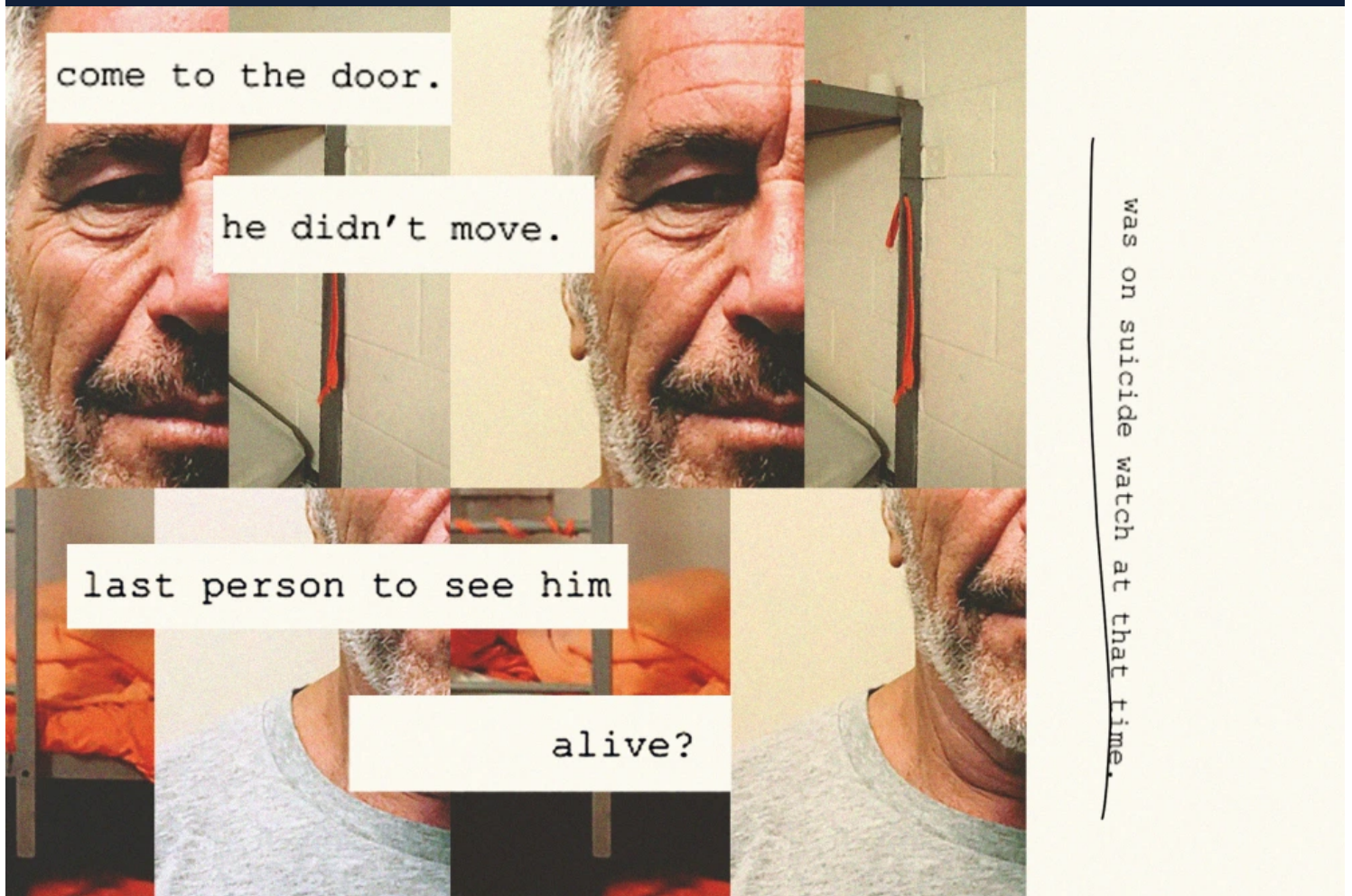


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— Jeffrey Epstein was awaiting trial on federal sex trafficking charges when he died in jail in 2019.

Leila Register / NBC News; Justice Department

By Erik Ortiz

Around 6:30 a.m. Aug. 10, 2019, two guards were making the breakfast rounds in a locked and isolated unit of the federal jail in lower Manhattan when one of them knocked on the metal door of [Jeffrey Epstein](#)'s cell.

"Come to the door," officer Michael Thomas said. "Come to the door."

Epstein did not stir. When Thomas entered the cell, which was unusually cluttered with extra blankets and linens, he discovered Epstein alone and unresponsive, hanging by a strip of orange cloth tied to the top of a bunk bed. Thomas yelled to the other guard, Tova Noel, to call for help, and tried to resuscitate Epstein, according to transcripts of their interviews with federal investigators.

"He kept saying, 'Breathe, Epstein, breathe,'" Noel, who was the last person to see the convicted sex offender alive the night before, told investigators. Thomas "was like, 'We're going to be in so much trouble.'"

House committee in Epstein case calls for testimony of prison guard working night of his death

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The events that unfolded at the now-shuttered Metropolitan Correctional Center, and the [cascade of staff failures](#) that precipitated Epstein's suicide, are documented in interview

transcripts and other investigatory files, videos and photos that the Justice Department recently made public under the [Epstein Files Transparency Act](#). Epstein, a wealthy New York financier who cultivated influence with politicians, royalty, academics and other powerful elites, was [awaiting trial on federal sex trafficking charges](#) related to the sexual abuse of girls [as young as 14](#).

Within a week of his death, the city's medical examiner determined Epstein, 66, [died by suicide](#) from hanging, and the official who performed the autopsy later told authorities that she had no doubt about this conclusion.

But the official finding did not stop [conspiracy theories](#) from spreading suggesting Epstein was murdered because of his high-profile connections and potential for implicating others. The release this year of millions of pages of the Epstein files – some previously unseen, [some heavily redacted](#) and many already made public through lawsuits and court filings – has only renewed speculation by highlighting inconsistencies in the official account and uncovering new questions.

Members of Congress are scrutinizing Epstein's death and have [called Noel to testify](#) before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, which is reviewing the federal government's investigation into Epstein. A committee spokesperson said Wednesday that Noel would not appear this week as anticipated, but that the panel is continuing to communicate with her attorney.

Rep. James Comer, R-Ky., the chair of the committee, has also said that he [could subpoena Noel](#).

The committee is examining Noel's actions ahead of Epstein's death and wants to ask her about whether she searched online about Epstein shortly before he was discovered in his cell and why she deposited \$5,000 in cash into her bank account days before he was found dead.



— Tova Noel, center in yellow blouse, leaves federal court in New York on Nov. 25, 2019.

Craig Ruttle / AP

Neither Noel nor her lawyer returned NBC News' requests for comment.

“That’s a mystery there, and that’s something that, according to the DOJ documents, they never looked into, never asked her about,” Comer [said on Fox News](#) in reference to Noel’s bank deposit.

“No one is accusing this prison guard of any wrongdoing,” he added, “but we have a lot of questions about Epstein.”

The Justice Department did not respond to a request for comment.

Dave Aronberg, a former Palm Beach County, Florida, state attorney who took office years after Epstein was convicted there in 2008 for soliciting a minor for prostitution, said it’s easy to see why new information uncovered in the latest documents has revived questions about his death. Some details – like a strange orange-colored figure seen in jail surveillance video on the night before Epstein was found unconscious in his cell – are new to him.

“In his final hours, I still believe Epstein killed himself,” Aronberg said. “But as with a lot of investigations, there are gaps and holes that have not been fully answered.”

Many facets of Epstein’s life, such as how he evaded accountability, where his money flowed to and from and how many victims he exploited, remain murky despite the heap of documents tied to his case. Also uncertain is who else in his orbit knew about, enabled or participated in the abuse.

Joseph Uscinski, a political science professor at the University of Miami who studies conspiracy theories [and their prevalence](#), said the continued interest in Epstein and doubts over his death could “potentially supplant the Kennedy assassination as the new American conspiracy theory.”

“There’s an interest in the Epstein files because there are a lot of high-profile people mentioned,” he said. “So there’s intrigue involved on top of the fact that the crimes were heinous.”

These are some of the biggest unanswered questions fueling speculation about Epstein’s death:

The moving orange flash

Just before 10:40 p.m. Aug. 9, 2019, several hours before Epstein was discovered hanging in his cell, [surveillance video](#) in his unit captured something peculiar: a blur of orange moving up a staircase that led to a hallway of cells behind metal doors. One of those cells was Epstein’s.

Due to the angle of the camera, the staircase is mostly obscured in the video’s background, and it’s impossible to tell what, or who, the orange blur is. The video does not appear to show anyone moving back down the stairs but it is possible that happens out of view.

— An orange blur is seen moving up the stairs in the background of a surveillance video recording in the hours before Epstein was found unresponsive in his cell. Justice Department

In a video analysis included in the Epstein files, an FBI agent noted the “flash” of orange ascending the stairs “could possibly be an inmate escorted up to that Tier.”

In that same document, the Justice Department’s Office of the Inspector General also noted a “flash of orange.” But its analysis said inmates were locked in for the night and raised a different theory: “it is possible someone is carrying inmate linen or bedding up the stairs.”

An inspector general’s report in 2023 that [detailed various staffing failures](#) ahead of Epstein’s death concluded that a correctional officer, “believed to be Noel,” had carried linen or clothing to an inmate around that time.

But in her interview with the inspector general’s office in 2021, Noel said she did not know why Epstein had extra linen and clothing in his cell on the morning he died. “I never gave out linen. Ever. Because that’s done on the shift prior,” she said.

She also said she performed inmate counts around 10 p.m. and presumed no one else saw Epstein after that.

“The last person to see him alive?” she said. “I would guess me.”

The FBI made the surveillance video from Epstein’s unit public last July, [stating](#) that its “independent review of this footage” confirmed that Epstein was locked in his cell around 10:40 p.m., and that “nobody entered any of the tiers” until around 6:30 a.m. the next day.

Other video from key hours around Epstein’s death, which would have shown the tier with his cell, was not available because the jail’s video recording system malfunctioned.

[FBI officials have repeatedly said](#) that evidence supports Epstein’s death by suicide.

Someone searches Google

At 5:42 a.m. Aug. 10, an analysis of Noel’s work desktop computer showed, someone did a Google search: “latest on Epstein in jail.”

Records included in the Epstein files revealed the same search 10 minutes later, among other internet activity on her desktop throughout the morning.

Noel was asked by the inspector general’s office in 2021 about those searches. She said she could not recall reading news reports about Epstein that morning or searching his name. She also said it “surprised” her that Google searches on Epstein were performed on her computer.

Her version of events has drawn interest from the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. Comer, its chairman, said the committee intends to question her this week about 12 cash deposits made to her bank account from April 2018 to July 30, 2019. The final deposit was \$5,000, her bank records show. In November 2019, her bank reported the 12 deposits to the FBI as “suspicious activity”; the significance and purpose of the payments are unclear.

The [same month](#) that her bank reported to the FBI, [federal prosecutors charged](#) Noel along with Thomas, the other guard who found Epstein, with falsifying time records. The indictment accused them of appearing to browse the internet and fall asleep instead of conducting mandatory inmate counts, including checking on Epstein every half hour.

Investigating Epstein

- How [Epstein lured girls](#) to his Zorro Ranch and kept authorities away
- Influencers flock to [Epstein's former island](#) to record viral videos

- [Epstein's longtime accountant](#) gives closed-door testimony to House Oversight Committee
- Clintons tangle with House Republicans in deposition [videos from Epstein probe](#)

In late 2021, the [charges were dropped](#) after Noel and Thomas cooperated in meeting with federal investigators about the critical hours surrounding Epstein's death.

In separate interviews with the inspector general's office, they both agreed Epstein died by suicide. "I don't believe the conspiracy that somebody snuck into the jail," Thomas said.

Noose unknown

Two questions have lingered in the years since Epstein's death: How long was he alone in his cell before he hanged himself and what exactly did he use to make a noose?

Thomas told investigators in 2021 that while he remembered finding Epstein hanging and immediately starting chest compressions, he didn't know if the noose was made from clothing or bedding. Both were orange.

"I don't recall taking the thing from around his neck," Thomas said. He did not respond to a request for comment.

Noel said Epstein's neck was bare by the time she arrived at his cell, according to a transcript.

The inspector general's office report in 2023 noted the unusual accumulation of linens and clothing in his cell, which was not typically allowed because they could be used as a ligature or to escape. Epstein had previously been placed under suicide watch after he [was found semiconscious](#) in his cell with a noose around his neck more than two weeks earlier. In the days before his death, he denied being suicidal and insisted he could not recall details of what had happened.

— Epstein's cell was strewn with extra linens and clothing, some tied into nooses, when he was found unresponsive. New York City Chief Medical Examiner's Office via Justice Department

Upon his death, multiple scraps of cloth were found in his cell ripped and “tied like a noose,” the inspector general’s office report said. The report also said the extra bedding was left behind when Epstein’s cellmate was transferred the day before his death; Epstein was not immediately given a new cellmate, despite being at risk of suicide.

Kristin Roman, the New York City medical examiner who performed Epstein’s autopsy, spoke with the inspector general’s office in 2022 about his injuries. She expressed skepticism that the noose that came to the morgue with his body was the one he actually used, based on the inspector general’s description that Thomas had “used all his might” to pull the noose from Epstein’s neck.

“This thing that they gave me isn’t ripped at all like it would be ripped off of something,” Roman said in a transcribed interview made public in the Epstein files. Despite her belief that she hadn’t seen the actual noose, she said she did not doubt Epstein died by hanging.

Investigators asked her why she didn’t immediately rule his manner of death as a suicide, instead allowing her boss to do so several days later. That hesitancy drove some of the conspiracy theories about Epstein’s death.

“If he had been a less high-profile person who there weren’t people wanting to kill, I would have probably called it a hanging on the day of autopsy,” Roman replied. “But this was thoroughness that made me look for these things before I called it a suicide.”

The conclusion of the medical examiner’s office was challenged by forensic pathologist Michael Baden, a former medical examiner in New York City who was hired by Epstein’s estate and his brother to review his death. He observed the autopsy conducted by Roman.

Baden [said at the time](#) that the fractures in Epstein’s neck were unusual for suicide and more indicative of homicidal strangulation. Roman disagreed, telling investigators the “pattern of his fractures was that of a hanging.”

Baden, Roman and the medical examiner’s office did not respond to requests for comment.

Among those satisfied with the official conclusion is Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche. He batted down internet conspiracies that [Epstein had a body double](#) or was swapped on his way to the hospital, telling conservative commentator Katie Miller [on her podcast last week](#) that he reviewed all the “available evidence.”

When asked about the defective cameras in the jail and the lack of a clear timeline explaining how Epstein was able to take his own life, Blanche acknowledged mistakes.

“That’s a good question,” he said. “And it’s one of the failures, right? What happened with Epstein leads to these type of fair questions about what happened that night.”

But he has no doubt about the central question. “Now, was I there? Were you there? Nope,” Blanche said, “but the evidence that has been accumulated and reviewed since that time says yes, he did commit suicide.”

If you or someone you know has been sexually assaulted, call the [National Sexual Assault Hotline](#) at 1-800-656-4673. The hotline, run by the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), can put you in contact with your local rape crisis center. You can also access RAINN’s online chat service at <https://www.rainn.org/get-help>.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text 988 or go to 988lifeline.org to reach the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, or visit [SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources](https://speakingofsuicide.com/resources). 



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