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## Forensic Archeology A Humanistic Science



*A decorative 18th-century coffin lid from Cornwall, CT, is carefully uncovered. Brass tacks were commonly employed to indicate the initials and the age at death of the deceased. Photo by William Keegan.*

**A**rcheologists have often been harshly, and perhaps justifiably, criticized by the nation's Native Americans as "grave robbers" for the discipline's callous treatment of their ancestors. Fortunately, the last decade has witnessed a significant transformation of attitude and approach within the archeological community regarding osteological remains. The majority of today's professional archeologists do not focus scientific inquiry upon the explicit discovery and examination of human remains. In concert with the spirit and intent of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, most archeologists acknowledge the critical importance of working in partnership with the descendants of the cultures whose archeological remains they study.

Nevertheless, construction and other land modification activities continue to result in the unforeseen and accidental disturbance of unmarked burials and cemeteries. With increasing frequency, such discoveries date from the 18th and 19th centuries and are abandoned rural family burial grounds or forgotten institutional cemeteries. In most states, legislative mandates provide archeologists with the critical responsibility for the identification of the deceased, coordination with descendants and other interested parties, and the respectful treatment of the remains.

Rarely do archeologists encounter a disinterested public in these cases. Public reaction often ranges from emotional distress to vocal hostility. These unfortunate and sensitive situations demand diplomacy, extreme professionalism, and humanistic compassion. Forensic archeologists serve to provide an important bridge between past and present populations.

On-site and laboratory analysis of the osteological evidence, associated funerary remains, burial accouterments, archival records, family histories, and comparative databases often sheds important light on the identification of the deceased, causes of death, and familial or group relationships. Equally paramount, forensic archeologists can offer emotional closure for descendants, concerned neighbors, related ethnic or

cultural groups, and the religious community through their respectful and professional handling of these difficult situations. In this regard, it is imperative that forensic archeologists establish a forthright, face-to-face dialogue with all interested parties. A diversity of spiritual, social, cultural, emotional, and political considerations needs to be explicitly recognized and professionally handled. Archeologists must facilitate the recognition of mutual goals, articulate the unique perspective of forensic archeology, and restore the sanctity of the grave.

Forensic archeologists also are scientific partners within the medico-legal system. From cemetery desecration to horrific crime investigations to natural disasters, the technical training and expertise of the forensic specialist offers significant insights concerning the identification of human remains, interpretation of past cultural actions, and the recognition of taphonomic alterations. Archeological methods and techniques often enhance and complement the data gathering investigations of local, state, and federal police agencies. Remote sensing is frequently employed to locate buried murder victims; interpretations of soil and stratigraphic data provide reliable information on the relative sequence of events. Forensic archeological analysis also may yield important contributions regarding the age, sex, and race of the deceased, and the time of burial as well as the interrelationship between osteological remains, the surrounding natural environment, and pertinent cultural material (i.e., "physical evidence").

Forensic anthropology brings a specialized training in the osteological identification of human remains developed out of studies of archeological samples from mortuary complexes, human growth and development, and evolutionary specimens, to assist modern criminal investigations. Comparative skeletal materials representing various biological populations, pathological conditions, and traumatic injuries provide the necessary

dataset that permits scientific analyses of forensic cases that reflect the best interest of the public.

With increased federal and state legislation providing for the reburial and repatriation of human skeletal collections to their appropriate descendants, archeologists and anthropologists have struggled with the ethical questions of balancing the respect for traditional belief systems of specific peoples toward their dead and the interests of humanity through science. These issues raise emotional and complex questions that have been discussed in the anthropological and native communities for over a decade. As scientists, we recognize the importance of comparative collections and appropriate methodologies for analysis. As anthropologists, we recognize the humanistic nature of our studies—not amoebas under a microscope, or stars throughout a galaxy—but humans analyzing the remains of other humans. We are not callous individuals holding on to the interest of our scientific method at the expense of human emotional feelings toward the dead. Reburial and repatriation are appropriate healing measures in the correction of past insensitivities. However, our science is not merely an esoteric, intellectual investigation of the past, but provides a practical scientific application in dealing with some of the most sensitive human issues in modern societies: identification and recovery of victims of war, mass disasters, criminal activities, and missing persons. As forensic anthropological scientists, we seek to strike a sensitive balance between the importance of research regarding human remains and the application of that research for the recovery and emotional closure of distressful situations.

Forensic scientists contribute their unique training and experience to both the day-to-day osteological-related inquiries that occur in their local communities and state, as well as horrific crimes or large scale disasters which affect the national psyche. Most importantly, forensic archeologists must seek answers to sensitive questions: who is represented by the recovered skeletal remains, what was the probable cause of death, and what is the appropriate post-analysis treatment of these remains. Scientific analysis provides forensic archeologists with a pertinent framework for both rigorous medico-legal testimony and the humanistic comforting of family members and other concerned parties.

Cultural resource managers are only infrequently called upon to assist with forensic archeological investigations as part of site development or project-related mitigation and indeed, may never partake in a criminal or disaster investigation. However, an increasing number of cultural resource management projects involve the professional removal and recording of human burials. As a result, physical anthropologists and osteoarcheologists often provide technical guidance for those sensitive projects which deal with human remains. All cultural resource managers should familiarize themselves with the appropriate state and federal laws that pertain to the professional treatment of unmarked burials and forensic inquiries. Government officials, who are mandated with responsibilities for cemetery protection, should be identified and state-specific procedures for notification understood before a crisis-related situation occurs. State Historic Preservation Offices and Offices of State Archeologists are obvious sources of such information. Cultural resource managers may be asked to participate as part of coordinated teams for investigative purposes. Familiarization with laws and officials can expedite procedures during emergency situations. This thematic issue of *CRM* provides important information concerning those federal agencies with the appropriate expertise in forensic studies, and examines projects where forensic archeological and anthropological techniques have contributed to the respectful treatment of historic burial grounds as well as the investigative processes used for criminal activities and disaster relief.

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