



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2011

### H14 The American Board of Forensic Anthropology: Historical Trends in Research and Training

Jonathan D. Bethard, MA\*, Pellissippi State Community College, 10915 Hardin Valley Road, PO Box 22990, Knoxville, TN 37933

After attending this presentation, attendees will learn about historical trends in research and training of Diplomates certified by the American Board of Forensic Anthropology (ABFA).

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing an historical overview of the ABFA and its Diplomates. Moreover, this presentation adds to the growing body of literature describing the development of forensic anthropology in the United States.

While forensic anthropology continues to advance both theoretically and methodologically during the twenty-first century, numerous workers have contributed to the discipline by tracing the historical developments in the field.<sup>1-8</sup> These careful analyses have demonstrated that the craft of forensic anthropology has grown from the peripheral application of physical anthropology in medico-legal contexts to a legitimate, full-time discipline and profession. While numerous scholars indicate that 1972 marked a turning point for the discipline, with the founding of the Physical Anthropology Section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS), 1977 was also a watershed year, as the American Board of Forensic Anthropology, Inc. (ABFA) was founded.<sup>1-8</sup>

The ABFA was originally established by seasoned practitioners interested in creating a board certification process for forensic anthropologists. Since its inception in 1977, 85 individuals have been certified as Diplomates, with 63 active individuals as of 2010. The first two cohorts of Diplomates were automatically granted Diplomate status; however, since 1979 individuals wishing board certification have had to pass a rigorous written examination and laboratory practicum.

This project traces the academic histories of all 85 Diplomates and examines trends in research and training. Dissertation titles were used to decipher broad research patterns and academic institutions were tracked for the purpose of indicating trends in training. In addition, the number of years between graduation and board certification was calculated and each Diplomate's major professor was noted.

All but one of the 85 Diplomates received the PhD degree. Dan Morse (now deceased) graduated from Western Reserve Medical School in 1932 and was certified as a Diplomate 45 years later. Of the remaining Diplomates, dissertation research topics are diverse and variable. Broadly, topical research interests can be classified into six categories:

(1) skeletal biological studies and bioarchaeology; (2) forensic anthropology; (3) zooarchaeology; (4) paleoanthropology; (5) primatology or paleoprimateology; and (6) human biology, human variation, or dermatoglyphics. Of these, 56.4% fall into the skeletal biology or bioarchaeology category with 18.8% of dissertations related to forensic anthropology. These data indicate that board-certified forensic anthropologists have far-reaching interests that are not solely devoted to the profession, as over 80% wrote dissertations outside of the forensic purview.

Regarding institutional training, a total of 36 institutions were attended for the terminal degree. These schools are geographically diverse, are found all over the United States, and include both public and private institutions. Eight Diplomates received their degrees from institutions outside the US (Canada, United Kingdom, and South Africa). The number of Diplomates trained at one institution varies with The University of Tennessee granting the most number of degrees (n=17). The mean year difference between completing requirements for the terminal degree and board-certification is 9.4 years and ranges from 2 to 45 years.

This project has demonstrated that board-certified forensic anthropologists are a broadly trained group of professionals and that the ABFA represents a diverse group of practitioners with far-reaching anthropological interests and expertise. Additionally, this historical analysis has demonstrated that several pioneering individuals have had far-reaching influence on the field of forensic anthropology and the development of successful training programs.

#### References:

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## Physical Anthropology Section – 2011

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### **Forensic Anthropology, American Board of Forensic Anthropology, History**