



## Pathology/Biology Section - 2015

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### H149 Gone and Forgotten: A Medical Examiner's Nightmare

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the importance of integrating forensic anthropology into a state medical examiner's office. The focus of this presentation will be on the vast progress made with the accumulation of unmanaged skeletal remains at the Mississippi State Medical Examiner's office due to collaboration with the Mississippi State University's Department of Anthropology and Middle Eastern Cultures (AMEC).

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by influencing protocol for skeletal remains in state medical examiners' offices so individuals do not remain unidentified and unanalyzed for numerous years.

In 2010, the state of Mississippi abandoned its policy of nearly 30 years of contract medical examiner services, consisting primarily of non-board certified pathologists and minimal anthropological consultation. Human remains were recovered by coroners and law enforcement agencies with limited to no training. There was no consistent relationship established with a forensic anthropology program, resulting in an accumulation of unidentified and unmanaged skeletal remains.

Many of the remains had limited to no documentation, were lost or never returned by the private consultant, and lacked chain of custody and documentation of follow-up communication between the attending pathologist and the anthropologist to establish a cause and manner of death. In 2011, Mississippi established a State Medical Examiner's office consisting of five board-certified forensic pathologists performing approximately 1,400 autopsies per year. A relationship was established with AMEC to provide professional consultation and a graduate anthropology internship within the State Medical Examiner's Office.

The primary goals of the internship were to address 28 skeletal cases that had accumulated at the Mississippi State Medical Examiner's office, obtain data for the Forensic Osteology (FOROST) trauma metabase, update entries in National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), and assist with autopsy examinations. After the initial inventory, the lack of documentation was clear and investigative agencies were contacted to obtain available case histories. Within two months, all remains were inventoried, examined, photographed, and radiographically imaged when necessary. Eight skeletal cases have been identified and released or will be held at the medical examiner's office until directed otherwise, two autopsy reports were generated with cause and manner of death, three cases were entered and one was closed in NamUs, two cases were sent for DNA analysis, and six cases have been documented for entry into FOROST. Additionally, a partially mummified individual, recovered in 2002, was processed for analysis. Examples of these cases, displaying the importance of protocol and anthropological assistance when dealing with human skeletal remains in a medical examiner's office, will be presented.

The Mississippi State Medical Examiner's office seeks to obtain funding for a State Forensic Anthropologist within the State Medical Examiner's office, maintain the Forensic Anthropology internship program, develop a human remains recovery team, train coroners and law enforcement agencies for field recovery, and establish standards within the state to properly search, document, and recover human remains. In conclusion, it is necessary for a medical examiner's office to establish and maintain a structured relationship with a reliable and experienced forensic anthropology program.

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#### Medical Examiner, Skeletal Remains, Anthropological Consultation