



A68 Historical and Cultural Complications of Repatriating Forensic “Cases” in the Southeastern United States

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand some of the challenges facing the identification of historic Native American remains in the southeastern United States that have been submitted as forensic cases to a medical examiner’s office.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showcasing how a historical and cultural understanding of a region is vital to the appropriate classification of historic Native American remains in a medicolegal setting.

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) houses the skeletal remains of unidentified individuals ($N=272$) dating back to the 1960s. The GBI serves 153 of the 159 counties in the state, resulting in a wide and varied collection of remains that have since become cold cases. Legislation was passed in 2016 to allow for the burial of these cases. Prior to interment, it was decided that a thorough examination of every case was necessary to create a robust case file in the event that a lead on identification arises. Of these cold cases, anthropological analyses were used to determine that a small number ($n=7$) were individuals of Native American descent whose deaths likely occurred before the present day. Each set of remains was photographed, inventoried, and analyzed using gross morphological techniques. Craniometric data was collected using a MicroScribe[®] digitizer and 3Skull analytical software. Each individual was compared to the Forensic Databank and Howell’s Dataset using FORDISC[®] 3.1. Four individuals were classified as “American Indian” with an F-typicality greater than 0.7. The remaining three individuals could not be reliably grouped with those in either dataset.

In addition to craniometrics analyses, the identification of historic Native remains in a forensic context requires a knowledge of the geomorphology and taphonomy unique to the various regions of Georgia. Georgia has a large piedmont region, coastal plain, and ridge and valley system. These taphonomic signatures, including red clay staining and increased friability from highly acidic soils, have yet to be documented in a medicolegal context.

Further, it is argued through this study that the historical and cultural environment in Georgia has increased the difficulty in identifying and repatriating these types of remains. While Georgia was one of the most highly occupied regions in the United States during the Mississippian Period (AD 800–1600), native Georgia Indians are not currently recognized as independent nations. In 1992, the Georgia Council on American Indian Concerns was created to mitigate and protect Native sites and help repatriate remains. The Council serves as the governing body for decisions concerning Native burials found in archaeological contexts; however, Native remains recovered in a medicolegal investigation are rarely brought to the attention of the Council.

In response to these issues, the GBI Office of the Medical Examiner has made it a priority to work in concert with the Native Council and develop a plan for transferring custody of these remains and establishing a concrete pipeline for future “cases.” Further, an educational program has been implemented to teach local law enforcement officers about the likelihood of recovering Native remains and appropriate protocols for reporting.

While all cases in the GBI’s unidentified collection will receive a thorough examination, it is suggested that the taphonomic signatures of this region are unique and should be documented to decrease misclassification of Native remains and expedite their repatriation through available channels.

Unidentified, Native American, Craniometrics