

ANNUAL REPORT: UNIDENTIFIED PERSONS PROJECT – SAN BERNARDINO CA 2014 FIELD SCHOOL

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Students excavating burials of John & Jane Does

This forensics field school in San Bernardino, California, took place between Sunday July 13th and Sunday August 10th, 2014. A total of twenty-three students from three countries took part in the program, which was conducted on campus at California State University, San Bernardino, and at a cemetery located in San Bernardino County.

For the first week of the program, intensive training took place at classes on the CSU San Bernardino campus. Students were taught the fundamentals of field archaeology, applications of anthropological and archaeological methods in forensic contexts, and basic osteological analysis. Students were also taught about the role law enforcement plays in forensic anthropology and archaeology. Guest lectures were given by Captain Kevin Lacy (San Bernardino County Sheriff, Coroner's Division), Deputy Bob Hunter (Investigator, San Bernardino County Sheriff, Coroner's Division), Deputy Robert "Rocky" Shaw (Lead Supervising Deputy Coroner, San Bernardino County Sheriff, Coroner's Division), Deputy Edward "Bud" Harter (Deputy Director, San Bernardino County Sheriff, Coroner's Division), Dr. Frank Sheridan (Chief Medical Examiner, San Bernardino County) and Michelle Halsing (Senior Criminalist, Missing Persons DNA Program, California Department of Justice)

The field excavation portion of the class began on the second week of the program. Students worked daily at a cemetery in San Bernardino County, where over 7,000 individuals are buried. Among this large group are 700 individuals who were buried as John Doe, Jane Doe, or Unidentified Doe because forensic science at the time of their burial was unable to identify them. Working from a list of burials provided by the San Bernardino County Sheriff Department, Coroner's Division, students began exhuming some of these individuals.

Our goal was to first find the specific grave from the "target list" in the cemetery, then excavate until a coffin or remains were found, then conduct a forensic analysis to make sure the individual in that grave was the one identified on the list. Once corroborated, the excavation

team carefully examined and documented the remains to ensure modern forensic standards are applied and that no evidence of foul play not previously noticed is present. Finally, samples for DNA analysis were taken. Once sampled, any DNA profiles drawn from the sample would be checked against state-wide and national DNA databases in an attempt to match these new profiles with those of family members of missing persons.

Working in groups of six students, teams were assigned a specific burial within the cemetery associated with an individual whose remains had the potential to yield a DNA profile. Students excavated to levels where remains were encountered, then exposed the individual for analysis and documentation. Once analyzed and positively identified, a tissue or bone sample was taken for submission to the California Department of Justice. The individual was then re-interred, and the location was marked for future reference.

A total of thirty-eight individuals were documented and examined for DNA sampling during the 2014 field season. The primary goal of collecting bone and tissue samples for the extraction of DNA was reached. We hope that in the coming weeks and months, DNA profiles are successfully drawn from these samples by the California Department of Justice Missing Persons DNA Program and identifications are made.

In addition to identification, we were able to focus on other research goals. We were able to identify trends in the rate of decomposition for individuals in the cemetery, which will help us refine our process for selecting individuals for exhumation in the future and better understand taphonomic process both in this cemetery and in general. We were also able to better understand how cemetery workers organized their burials in the past, which will lead to more excavations that result in the intended individual being found.

Although students found the field school to be both physically and emotionally challenging, many appreciated the chance to contribute to the identification of people who until now had lost their identities and potentially provide closure to the loved ones of these individuals who until now have been largely forgotten by society.