

Recovery and Analysis of Human Remains Derived from the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre



Phoebe R. Stubblefield, Ph.D. CA Pound Human Identification Lab, University of Florida

From May 31 to June 1 1921, White Tulsans engaged in rioting and arson affecting the Black residents of the adjacent unincorporated neighborhood of Greenwood. In 2021 the City of Tulsa initiated recovery and identification of the victims buried in the Colored Potter's Field of Tulsa's Oaklawn Cemetery. The search reopened in October 2022. In October 2022 the Physical Investigation Committee of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Investigation re-opened its previous excavations in the Tulsa Oaklawn Cemetery. An Humanitarian and Human Rights Resource Center award supported the travel of Dr. Phoebe R. Stubblefield, one of her graduate students, and colleagues Sydney Garcia, Arion Mayes, and Aaron Young to perform the osteological examinations for the individuals exhumed during this field season. Our excavation targeted individuals buried in plain caskets, as those specifications were indicated in newspaper accounts of the victim burials. Eight (8) individuals were exhumed during the field season, one having observable cranial gunshot trauma. Death certificate data indicate that fifteen gunshot victims are sought, as well as four burn victims. Osteological analyses of the 2022 individuals is ongoing. The demographics and idiosyncratic features of these individuals, in combination with those recovered in 2021, indicate further search of the cemetery is required.



DATE	TIME	BURIAL	OV#	CAT#	FORM	SEX	FEATURES	DNA	bagged
11/02/22	01600	#40	20	411			g. tooth	Yes	Yes
11/03/22	01755	#42A	21				Shoe Lengra-pathology pen	Yes	Yes
11/03/22	01822	#39	22				Yes tooth Lengra	Yes	Yes
11/11/22	01737	#41	23				left hand ring	Yes	Yes
11/15/22	01734	#45	24				gold tooth	Yes	Yes
11/17/22	01021	#36	25				subadult	Yes	Yes
11/17/22	01613	#67	26				gold bridge	Yes	Yes
11/17/22	01709	#65	27				Femur fr?	Yes	Yes

Funding by the Humanitarian and Human Rights Resource Center supported Dr. Stubblefield's travel expenses during the season running October 26 to November 22, 2022, and allowed her to include graduate student Sheridan Lea as an assistant in lab and field activities. Analytical contribution from the following colleagues was also supported by HHRRC funding, as it covered their travel expenses in Tulsa:

- Arion Mayes, associate professor San Diego State University
- Aaron Young, graduate student, University of Arizona
- Sydney Garcia, forensic anthropologist, SNA International

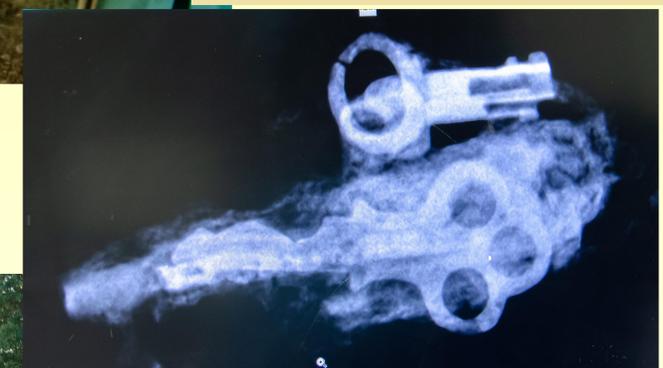
Although not supported by HHRRC funding, the contributions of the following colleagues were valued and are not overlooked, as they and their employers invested time and effort into the Tulsa Race Massacre Investigation:

- Angela Berg, forensic anthropologist State of Oklahoma
- Carlos Zambrano, forensic anthropologist State of Oklahoma
- Sara Getz, forensic anthropologist



Eight (8) individuals, seven adults and one subadult, each buried in a plain casket, were recovered. Preservation was generally fair to poor quality, with generous cortical flaking and comprehensive loss of epiphyses and thoracic structures. Cranial vaults and dentition tended to preserve fairly well. When preserved, skeletal indicators of sex, age, ancestry, antemortem and postmortem conditions were recorded and analyzed for each individual. One individual, Burial 42, was recovered with evidence of a perimortem cranial gunshot wound and personal effects including keys. Personal effects are atypical for the Oaklawn burials to date.

Burial 42 was the only individual recovered this season fitting our search parameters; clearly our search is ongoing. Production of the biological profile for those recovered this season is in progress.



There were 13 other negroes, eight of whom were identified, buried in potter's field of Oaklawn cemetery yesterday. Those who were identified were: Curly Walker, Henry Walker, Ed Adams, Joe Muller, George Lewis, Sam Ree and Ed Howard. The 13 blacks were buried separately and in plain caskets. Some trouble was experienced in getting graves dug, but finally several blacks volunteered for the work.

In a coordinated effort by the City of Tulsa, Oklahoma State Archaeologist Kary Stackelbeck, University of Oklahoma archaeologists and geologists, Cardno, Inc. (now Stantec) contract archaeologists, and University of Florida forensic anthropologist Phoebe R. Stubblefield and colleagues, exhumations began on October 26, 2022 in a two-step process.

Step one was to re-expose burials from the 2021 excavation season in order to extract additional samples for DNA analysis. Step two began on October 27th as new burials were exposed in trenches extending from the 2021 excavation area. Remains were excavated in block and transported by hand to the onsite osteology lab. Tulsa community members, many who are descendants of race massacre survivors, personally escorted the remains to the laboratory.



I thank the descendants of the race massacre survivors for keeping the mission of recovery of the victims alive. I also thank the City of Tulsa, especially Mayor G.T. Bynum, for his courage and support for pursuing recovery of these victims of one of the most thorough civil rights violations in America.