



Physical Anthropology Section – 2008

H9 Archival Matters: The William R. Maples Collection at Florida Gulf Coast University

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After attending this presentation, attendees will know how to identify special collections within the medical examiner/coroner's offices and law enforcement agencies and the steps necessary to curate the documents.

This poster presentation will help the forensic community by providing the techniques involved in archiving materials related to the life's work of senior forensic scientists which will facilitate access to past research and data that will inevitably help to close current and future forensic cases and answer forthcoming research questions.

All too often, the unpublished notes, slides, data, and live-action footage relative to the forensic research, casework, and experiences of retired or deceased forensic scientists have been stored in locations that were not easily located or accessible (e.g., familial closets, garages, and attics). As such, information that had the potential to flesh-out current research endeavors or solve existing or future forensic cases was lost. The special collections ware-housed in universities, libraries, or digital archives, such as the National Clearinghouse for Science Technology and the Law (NCSTL), have become conduits for accessing this critical information. As a case in point, the William R. Maples Special Collection serves to highlight those data that would have been otherwise unavailable to the forensic science community and how the materials within were subsequently archived.

In summer 2006, the William R. Maples Special Collection was donated to Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) in Fort Myers, Florida by his widow, Margaret Maples-Gilliland. Thankfully, Ms. Maples-Gilliland recognized the importance of ensuring that her late husband's work was accessible to myriad interested forensic practitioners, rather than restricting access to family members as has been the case for the works of countless scientists over the years. The William R. Maples collection contained records that documented the various forensic cases and historic research Dr. Maples had conducted during his 28 year career as a forensic anthropologist and 35 years as a physical anthropologist. It comprised nearly 40 cardboard boxes—most of which contained, in meticulous detail, the date, location, and relevance of each document, photo, cast, bone, and videotape. Before the formal donation was completed, the collection had to be inventoried and appraised.

The inventory required 120 volunteer hours and was beyond the capabilities of the Maples-Gilliland family. Importantly, volunteers were recruited from FGCU upper division undergraduate students who were criminal forensics majors and well-versed in Maples' work. The process began with a rough sort and inventory which pinpointed the (1) quantity of items, (2) material integrity (e.g., could the object be fumigated and digitized?), and (3) subject matter of the collection. Once the collection was considered to be of sufficient size, stable and of forensic importance, it was fumigated. Then, all of the materials were organized by subject matter. For example, subject categories included titles such as "Czar Nicholas Romanov Investigation," "Elephant Man Joseph Merrick," "Francisco Pizarro Expedition," "Medgar Evers Disinterment," "Panama Human Rights Work," "President Zachary Taylor Disinterment," and so on. Surprisingly, the collection also contained Maples' life history documents, including high school report cards, prom photos, West Point transcripts, copies of his children's birth certificates, and other personal correspondences between Maples and his family, friends, and peers. These latter non-scientific materials were included in order for future researchers to understand the implicit, unavoidable, and often subconscious biases that may have shaped Maples' data interpretations.

Once the materials were organized by subject, each document, photo, cast, 8mm film, videotape and artifact was assigned a unique identification number (UIN). Quite simply, the numerical system began with number 1 and ended with entry 3500. Each item was labeled with its UIN. An excel spreadsheet was used to catalog each UIN with a corresponding description of the item. The accuracy of the UIN assignments and corresponding item description and location was tested by checking 85 entries selected by a random number generator.

All paper documents, slides, and live-action footage was digitized by using a flatbed scanner, slide scanner, and converted to DVD, respectively. Each artifact, cast, and skeleton was digitally photographed and added to the database. Then, the original materials and specimens were transferred to acid free containers and stored within the temperature and humidity controlled special collections room within the Florida Gulf Coast University Special Collections room. Additionally, all of the digitized data will be transferred to the National Clearinghouse for Science Technology and the Law for immediate web based access.

William R. Maples, Special Collections, Skeletal Remains