

A Brief History of Forensic Anthropology in the U.S.

Forensic anthropology is a subfield of physical anthropology that applies anthropological theories and methods to a combination of medical and legal matters.¹ They are trained to identify human remains, and often work with medical examiners, law enforcement, and family organizations to search for, recover, and analyze skeletal fragments and bones.² Today, forensic anthropologists play critical roles in investigations relating to local and federal criminal cases, catastrophes and natural disasters resulting in mass casualties, and global humanitarian or human rights issues.³

Forensic anthropologists rely on methods such as anthropometry, or the science of recording human measurements.⁴ For example, measurements of the pelvic bone, skull size, and nasal cavity can provide insight into the subject's gender, age, and ancestry, respectively. The first documented use of forensic anthropology is attributed to the work of anatomists Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. and Jeffries Wyman, whose expertise led to the identification of George Parkman as a murder victim in an 1849 criminal investigation.⁵ However, many anthropologists today regard Thomas Dwight as the "Father of Forensic Anthropology in the United States" for his contributions pertaining to age, height, and biological sex estimations of skeletal remains in the latter part of the 19th century.⁶

¹ Katharine E. Kolpan, "Introduction: Celebrating Fifty Years of Awareness, Change, and Progress in Forensic Anthropology," *Forensic Anthropology* 7, no. 4 (2024): 215, <https://doi.org/10.5744/fa.2024.0003>.

² Phoebe Stubblefield and Leslie M. Rankin-Hill, "History Uncovered: Skeletal Remains as a Vehicle to the Past," Tulsa Reparations Coalition, accessed on February 19, 2026, <https://tulsareparations.z19.web.core.windows.net/Skeletons.htm>.

³ Stubblefield and Rankin-Hill, "A History of Forensic Anthropology"; Douglas H. Ubelaker, "A History of Forensic Anthropology," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 165, no. 4 (2018): 920, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.23306>.

⁴ H. James Birx, "Forensic Anthropology," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 12, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/science/forensic-anthropology>.

⁵ Kolpan, "Introduction," 216.

⁶ Kolpan, "Introduction," 216.

The discipline gained recognition during and after World War II, when the American Graves Registration Service began employing, full-time physical anthropologists to aid in efforts to recover, identify, and repatriate the over 400,000 American servicemembers killed during the War.⁷ In 1972, a “physical anthropology” section was incorporated within the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS); five years later, in 1977, the AAFS, among other institutions, would help form the American Board of Forensic Anthropology (ABFA).⁸ Setting proficiency standards and administering the annual certification exam, the ABFA remains the governing institution for forensic anthropologists in the United States. Throughout the history of the ABFA, 187 forensic anthropologists have been certified.⁹

Through their work, forensic anthropologists reconstruct the “social identity” of subjects. In addition to the anthropometric “excavation and reconstruction techniques” that are used to estimate a person’s height, age, biological sex, ancestry, and cause of death, advancements in technologies like DNA profiling and finger printing are also applied to exact positive identifications of subjects.¹⁰

Ancestry estimation can predict the “racial categories that may correspond to [what] a person likely identified as when alive,” though it only employs five ‘racial’ designations: white, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American.¹¹ However, a new standard called “population affinity estimates” is being considered by some members of the AAFS as a way to move beyond

⁷ Kolpan, “Introduction,” 219.

⁸ Kolpan, “Introduction,” 217.

⁹ “Historical List of All Diplomats,” The American Board of Forensic Anthropology, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.theabfa.org/historical-list>.

¹⁰ Birx, “Forensic Anthropology”; Lizzie Wade, “Anthropologists Grapple with Identifying Remains by Race,” *Science (American Association for the Advancement of Science)* 374, no. 6566 (2021): 386, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.acx9392>.

¹¹ Wade, “Anthropologists Grapple with Identifying Remains by Race,” 386.

the five racial categories towards a more precise determination of ethnic ancestry.¹² While some anthropologists view any ancestry estimation as problematic and “tangled up in the ‘race science’ of the 19th and 20th centuries,” others acknowledge its value.¹³ For much of American history, the stories and lives of African American and Black people have been unrecorded—ignored, obscured, and erased. The recovery of African American/Black “skeletal populations” offer forensic anthropologists the chance to “add to the historical record and document the lives of the individuals and their community.”¹⁴ Thanks to the work of forensic anthropologists like Dr. Phoebe Stubblefield, their subjects are once again “given a voice.”¹⁵

¹² Wade, “Anthropologists Grapple with Identifying Remains by Race,” 386.

¹³ Wade, “Anthropologists Grapple with Identifying Remains by Race,” 386.

¹⁴ Stubblefield and Rankin-Hill, “A History of Forensic Anthropology.”

¹⁵ Stubblefield and Rankin-Hill, “A History of Forensic Anthropology.”

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