



Article

The John A. Williams Human Skeletal Collection at Western Carolina University

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Abstract: This manuscript serves to introduce The John A. Williams Human Skeletal (JAW) Collection, which is a donated skeletal collection consisting of individuals from the Body Donation Program at Western Carolina University. Full body donors decompose naturally at the Forensic Osteology Research Station (FOREST) before curation within the JAW Collection. As of 31 December 2021, the JAW Collection has 98 skeletal donors and 16 cremated donors. There are also nearly 40 donors within various stages of the decomposition and curation processes. The importance of a willed-body collection such as the JAW Collection is its ability to be utilized in educational efforts for both students and members of the public. Undergraduate students at Western Carolina University learn from our willed-body donors from the initial intake at FOREST through processing and curation within the Western Carolina Human Identification Lab (WCHIL). The JAW Collection also enables a thriving outreach program through continuing education efforts. Courses are offered throughout the year that would not be possible without a donated skeletal collection. Additionally, the FOREST and JAW Collection serve a larger community purpose by offering environmentally friendly alternatives to traditional burials for community members, demonstrating that these collections have a variety of purposes outside of academic research.

Keywords: willed-body program; donated skeletal collection; forensic anthropology; biological anthropology



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1. Introduction

The origins of modern human skeletal collections date back to the early 1900s, with anatomists collecting mostly unclaimed bodies from morgues for anatomical dissection and permanent retention of human skeletons for research purposes, such as documenting and describing age, sex, and perceived racial differences based on the skeleton [1–3]. Recently, there have been increasing discussions about the ethical nature of these historic collections and the continued use of these skeletal remains without donor or family consent [4]. However, most of today's actively growing human skeletal collections in the United States, many of which are highlighted in the special issue this article is part of, are willed-body collections, where consent is obtained either antemortem from the donor themselves or postmortem from their next of kin.

The first willed-body collection to come from a human decomposition facility was established at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. After years of consulting with law enforcement regarding the status of human remains recovered from various contexts, Dr. William Bass founded a research center to study human decomposition more formally. The Forensic Anthropology Center was opened in 1981 and was the first of its kind in the world [5]. At the time, it was considered a questionable, macabre science. Acceptance has grown, however, into appreciation with human decomposition facilities increasing in number and sought for experiences in education and training to sustainable postmortem deposition options. There are currently nine human decomposition facilities in the United

States, one in Canada, one in the Netherlands, and one in Australia. Despite the distance and institutional differences, the staff at these disparate research centers routinely work together to support the overall mission of studying human decomposition and curation of the resulting skeletal material in a responsible and ethical way.

In 2003, the Forensic Osteology Research Station (FOREST) at Western Carolina University (WCU) was established, making it the second human decomposition facility to be founded in the world. Human remains recovered from the FOREST are processed through the Western Carolina Human Identification Lab (WCHIL) and then accessioned into the John A. Williams Human Skeletal Collection (JAW Collection). As such, the JAW Collection represents the skeletons of known, documented, willed-body donors who have been donated directly to WCU's Forensic Anthropology Program for education and research. The JAW Collection and associated forensic anthropology laboratory facilities, including the FOREST, are incredible resources at WCU that have led to students choosing to attend Western Carolina University and are presented within this manuscript.

2. History and Overview of WCU's FOREST and Forensic Anthropology Facilities

WCU is a regional comprehensive university, meaning its primary goal is to act as an institution of higher learning for the smaller communities of western North Carolina. As such, its student body, which is currently around 11,000 individuals, is predominantly composed of undergraduate students from North Carolina. While WCU's Forensic Anthropology Program draws in several non-resident students, most majors are from North Carolina. WCU's Forensic Anthropology Program is undergraduate only and thus strives to emphasize the development of soft and hard skills in students that will make them competitive for a wide variety of jobs in medicolegal death investigation as well as the workforce in general. Since its inception, WCU's Forensic Anthropology Program has continued to grow and has been highly successful in terms of the recruitment of majors [6].

The Forensic Anthropology Program at WCU originated in the early 2000s when a new chancellor, John Bardo, came to the university and chose to focus resources on creating a forensic science program to include forensic biology, forensic chemistry, forensic anthropology, and a human decomposition facility [7,8]. The Forensic Anthropology Program was established in 2003 when Dr. John A. Williams was hired as the program director. The Western Carolina Human Identification Laboratory (WCHIL) was established the following year (2004) in the McKee Building as a retrofitted space that included a primary processing laboratory, a large storage area, and two internal offices. Since then, the WCU Forensic Anthropology Facilities (FAF) have expanded within the McKee Building to include a faunal laboratory, forensic anthropology dry laboratory, bioarcheology laboratory, collections space for the JAW Collection, and a classroom dedicated solely for forensic anthropology courses. Additionally, in 2021, WCU opened Apodaca Hall, a new science building that houses the Forensic Science Neighborhood. While the Neighborhood primarily contains spaces for forensic DNA analyses and biology and chemistry laboratories, it also houses a forensic anthropology processing laboratory with a mobile X-ray machine and secure storage space. The inclusion of forensic anthropology within the Neighborhood facilitates further collaboration across programs. Forensic anthropology personnel have also grown since the establishment of the program from one tenure track forensic anthropologist in 2003 to three tenure track faculty (two forensic anthropologists and one bioarcheologist) and a non-tenure track forensic anthropology instructor/curator.

WCU's FOREST has also expanded over time. Much like its predecessor in Knoxville, its original incarnation was a relatively small footprint [5–9]. At first, the FOREST was a single enclosure of approximately 5000 square feet surrounded by a tall wooden privacy fence and chain-link security fence. In 2015, the second enclosure of approximately 10,000 square feet was established nearby and surrounded only by a chain-link security fence as the sole purpose is for buried donors. WCU's willed-body program became operational in 2005, with the first donor arriving in 2008. That donor was recovered in 2009, officially beginning what is now known as the JAW Collection. The number of donors received has oscillated

over time, in part due to a few temporary stoppages of operations due to faculty leave or turnover, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. The general trend, however, is that the FOREST and WCU's Forensic Anthropology Program have continued to increase in public notoriety, and 2021 resulted in record willied-body donations (Figure 1). The human skeletal collection was officially named in 2021 upon the retirement of John A. Williams in honor of being the first director of WCU's Forensic Anthropology Program and FOREST.

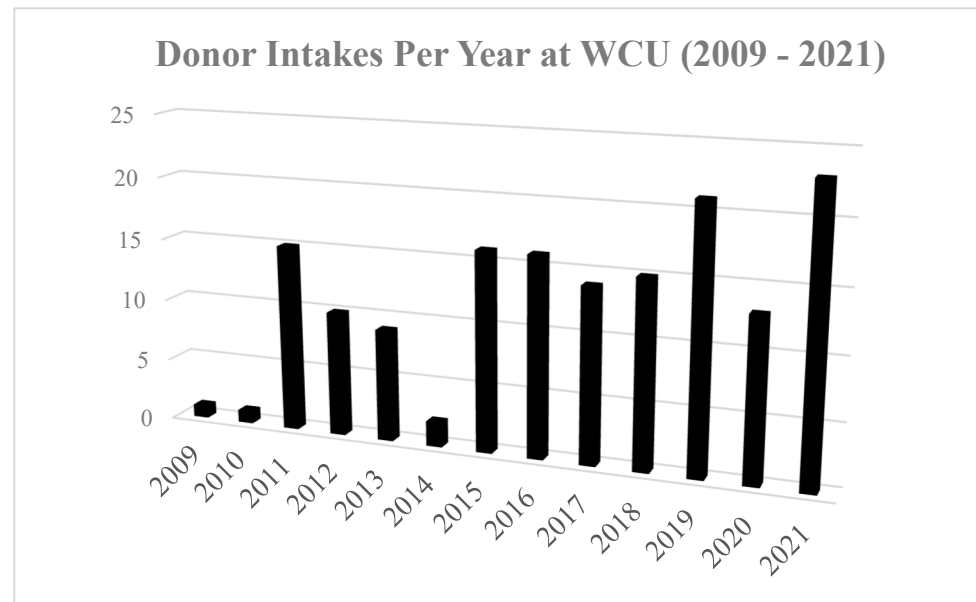


Figure 1. Donor intakes per year beginning with the first donor that arrived in 2008 (but was recovered in 2009) through 31 December 2021, where there was a record number of twenty-three donors.

Most individuals within the willied-body program begin their postmortem experience as whole-body donors that are brought to the FOREST shortly after death. If someone does not meet the university-established criteria for safe, whole-body donation (e.g., they have a communicable disease or weigh more than 250 pounds at the time of death), they may arrive at WCU as cremated remains. Additionally, with permission of the individual responsible for donation (either the donor themselves or their next of kin), a donor may participate in destructive research, as outlined below, and/or DNA testing. For those opting in, genetic materials are collected at the time of placement within FOREST and are analyzed by WCU's Forensic Science Program exclusively for WCU-based research projects; genetic information is not submitted to any publicly accessible databases. Following the completion, or near completion, of soft tissue decomposition, donors are recovered and taken to the WCHIL for processing. Processing entails cleaning any sediment or remaining soft tissue from the skeletal remains. Donors are then inventoried and labeled for curation within the JAW Collection [10]. All stages of these processes are executed by WCU forensic anthropology faculty and student volunteers. The Forensic Anthropology Facilities (FAF) Curator is primarily responsible for managing daily operations of these various facilities, including communication with pre-donors and donor next of kin, coordinating transportation of donors from funeral homes, and managing recovery, processing, and curation of donors in conjunction with the management of the volunteer program. The FAF Director oversees the safety and security of these facilities and works with upper administration to provide for the long-term success of the FAF and willied-body donation program.

3. The JAW Collection

As of 31 December 2021, the JAW Collection is comprised of 98 skeletonized donors and 16 cremated donors. The skeletal collection is composed of adult donors ranging in age from 28 to 96 years, with a mean age of 66.2 years (standard deviation = 14.6 years) and a

median age of 69 years. There is also one donor who died at birth (Figure 2). There is a near equal sex distribution with 50 males and 48 females, and the vast majority of donors have a reported social race of “White”. The cremated donors range in age from 31 to 86 years, with a mean age of 70 years (standard deviation = 15.3 years) and a median of 72 years (Figure 3); there are nine males and six females. While some donors may at first be dismayed that they are ineligible for whole body donation due to various pre-existing conditions, we emphasize that the cremated remains collection provides a unique and invaluable resource, not only for training law enforcement and other investigators on what human remains that have been through high-temperature fires, such as wildfires, look like but also for exemplars and teaching specimens for the analysis of cremated remains.

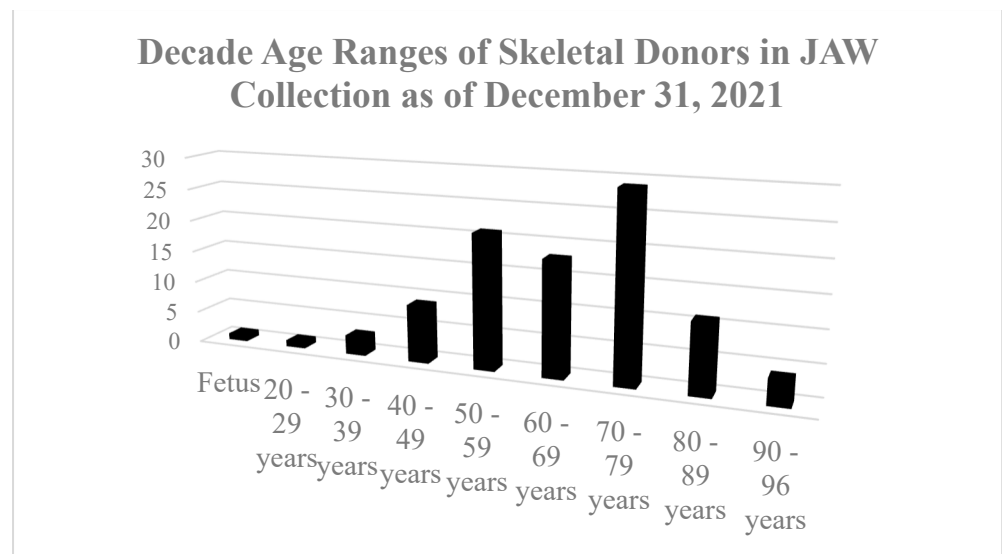


Figure 2. Age breakdown by decade for donors within the JAW Collection as of 31 December 2021.

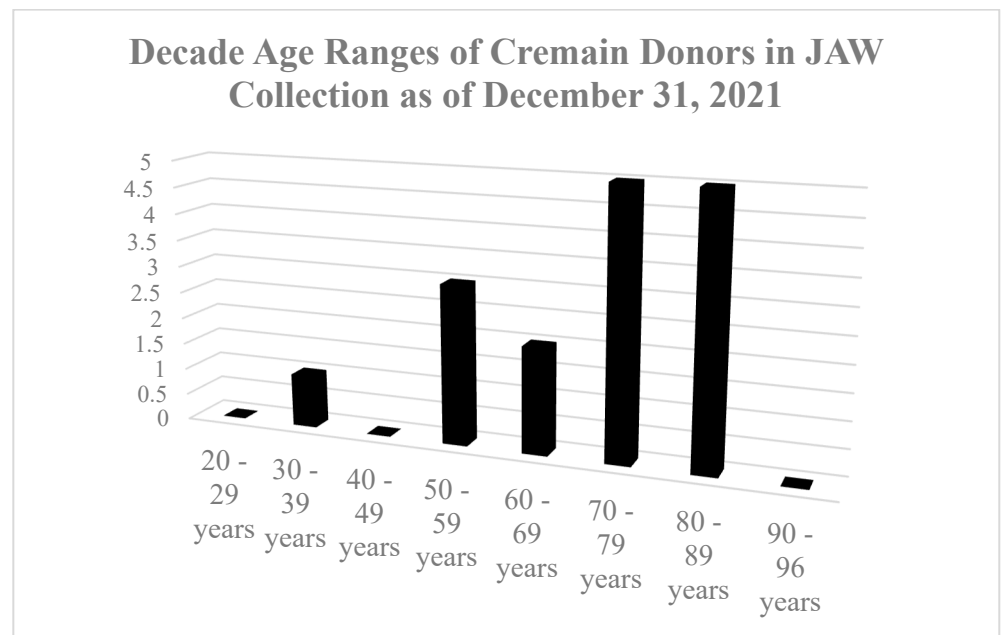


Figure 3. Age breakdown by decades for cremated donors within the JAW Collection as of 31 December 2021.

There are also nearly 40 other donors presently in the FOREST in various stages of the decomposition process. While the majority of donors within the JAW Collection and at

FOREST came to WCU through familial donation, thirty-four of the donors both within JAW and at FOREST were registered pre-donors. In addition to the donors already present within FOREST and the JAW Collection, there are nearly 230 registered pre-donors. These individuals will continue to contribute to scientific research and educational opportunities through their generous donations. Since 2017, pre-donor paperwork has included a biological questionnaire to glean insights into the life history of our donors by providing information critical for current and future research endeavors. The biological questionnaire collects reported data concerning demographics, medical history, and lifestyle choices (e.g., smoking, occupation, etc.).

The JAW Collection can be accessed via successful submission of a research request form (available online: <https://www.wcu.edu/learn/departments-schools-colleges/cas/social-sciences/anthsoc/foranth/JAWCollection.aspx>, accessed on 13 March 2022) to the WCU FAF Director. In addition to supporting visiting researchers, the JAW Collection is also available for preparation and/or study for certification by the American Board of Forensic Anthropology (ABFA). Individuals interested in applying for certification by the ABFA may use donors as mock forensic cases, and individuals with accepted applications may visit the collection to study for the ABFA certification practical exam.

4. Importance of FOREST and the JAW Collection

4.1. As a Pedagogical Resource

In line with WCU's focus on education over research, the primary use of the JAW Collection is in support of WCU's Forensic Anthropology Program. Students in upper-level forensic anthropology courses routinely use donors from the JAW Collection for class projects in courses such as Human Osteology, Forensic Anthropology Methods and Theory, Paleopathology, Forensic Archaeology, Bone Trauma and Modification, and Taphonomy. During the fall 2021 semester, the Forensic Anthropology Program even hosted an introductory drawing class out at FOREST for them to explore drawing varying stages of decomposition.

In addition to these courses, the volunteer program managed by the FAF Curator averages 50 students per semester from within the forensic anthropology concentration. The volunteers apply for positions on various teams, which aid in the daily functioning of the facilities. There is a processing team, recovery team, photography team, and an on-call team (which primarily assists with donor placements). The processing teams work within the WCHIL to clean sediment and any adhering soft tissues from donor skeletal remains, as well as inventorying and labeling; this is where the largest number of volunteers are utilized. The recovery team is comprised of upper-level students with experience in osteology; these students document and excavate donor remains from FOREST to be brought into the WCHIL for processing. The photography team is responsible for regular photography to capture decompositional changes of the donors at FOREST and to manage the game cameras placed on donors for the purposes of observing scavenging and other taphonomic activities. Photographs are taken daily on new donors for the first three weeks while initial stages of decomposition are generally occurring, then on a weekly basis until they have been at FOREST for six months, and then monthly until they are recovered. The on-call team usually assists with donor placement at the FOREST but has also been helpful with classroom presentations to school groups. The curator's goal is to rotate students through these opportunities so they can graduate with as much experience as possible.

The resources of the JAW Collection and the FOREST have also been instrumental in training the public and law enforcement officials through continuing education courses. Annually, WCU's Forensic Anthropology Program has been offering a continuing education course for law enforcement and other investigators to train them on the recovery and analysis of burned human remains. Additionally, the FOREST is routinely utilized for continuing education courses for human remains detection (HRD) dogs and their handlers. WCU also offers a human versus non-human osteology continuing education course that is open to members of the public, as well as forensic archeology continuing education course

to train forensic anthropology students and other professionals on proper excavation and documentation techniques. These courses would not be possible without the generosity of our pre-donors and donors that are become part of the JAW Collection.

4.2. As a Scholarly Resource

Presently, no studies surveying the JAW Collection have been published; however, the JAW Collection, as well as FOREST, enables visiting researchers to come to WCU to collect various types of data. We typically host five graduate students and/or professional researchers per year, in addition to our internal undergraduate student research projects. Research projects that have utilized the JAW Collection have primarily taken three forms: (1) collection and analysis of metric or morphoscopic data from the skeletal remains for creating and/or validating a method, (2) collection and analysis of DNA from the skeletal remains to investigate the effects of taphonomic processes on DNA yields, and (3) examination of taphonomic modifications to the remains, primarily to investigate scavenging activity.

Additionally, as discussed above, student volunteers routinely collect photos of donors throughout the decomposition process. These photos are stored on a secure drive, which essentially acts as a large reference database of decomposition changes to donors, which can be correlated to known postmortem intervals and environmental data. The FOREST has also participated in research collaborations, both external and internal, on projects ranging from testing subsurface pedestrian survey equipment to microbiome postmortem interval estimation to forensic entomological analysis.

4.3. As a Community Resource

There is a clear utility to human decomposition facilities and their associated collections in terms of research. However, as a facility housed at a regional comprehensive institution located in a small, rural community, research is not enough. It is important that the FOREST serves the community in a variety of ways.

At WCU, we approach our human decomposition facility and willed-body program as an extension of the Green Burial and Death Positive movements [8]. Briefly, the Death Positive Movement is about (re)establishing societal relationships with the acceptance of death and dying, from changing the contemporary Western view of death from an isolating event to be feared to embracing death as a natural part of life [11]. Similarly, the Green Burial Movement is about moving away from the traditional, capitalist funeral industry towards more environmentally conscious funerary alternatives [12,13].

Individuals seeking an alternative to burial and cremation are occasionally drawn to facilities such as the FOREST, despite these facilities currently being on the periphery of mainstream human mortuary options. The WCU Forensic Anthropology Program has tried to network with the local postmortem community, especially those that participate in green burial options, in an attempt at having a more active role in the movement as well as letting people know that donation is a cost-effective alternative in a region with not many alternatives. The FAF are community-oriented and emphasize that willed-body donation to our program is not just an anatomical gift supporting education and scholarship but also a sustainable method of body disposal [8] (p. 191). Natural outdoor decomposition eliminates the need for the environmental cost of constructing coffins or mausoleums, altering landscapes for cemeteries and burials (which often include concrete vaults), modifying bodies with chemical preservatives (which are then put into the ground), or using fuels to cremate a body [14]. Furthermore, unlike medical school donations, donors to the FAF are not cremated when decomposition is complete; rather, they are curated in perpetuity resulting in a unique legacy donation that will potentially impact generations of scholars and students.

Additionally, the FOREST functions as a low-cost funerary alternative, where the only associated cost for donation is transportation to our facilities. This is especially important for rural, economically depressed communities such as the areas surrounding

the university [15,16]. As noted by Jordan and Sullivan [17], 1–3% of the bodies from all deaths in the United States go unclaimed every year, and the COVID-19 pandemic may have increased that percentage. Mortuary costs can range from USD ~1000.00 to USD 10,000.00, and many families cannot afford those expenses and/or do not have strong enough connections to the deceased to justify the cost. In cases where the remains of identified individuals go unclaimed, the remains are disposed of via cremation, hydrolysis, or burial. The process is paid for by the decedent's county of residence or county of death, depending on various circumstances [18]. The result of state-directed disposition is that the remains are permanently lost. Willed body donation to WCU's forensic anthropology program provides an alternative in the sense that the skeletal remains are curated and cared for, so if there emerges a desire by the next of kin to have the remains, they can be returned.

Many pre-donors and donor families have noted that they appreciate the personal approach we take in our willed-body program, such as how promptly phone calls and emails are answered by a faculty member. We have found that maintaining this engaged approach to our willed-body program is important for not only next of kin feeling comfortable donating their loved ones to us but also for the community viewing us as a resource in end-of-life decisions. Finally, unlike medical school body donation programs, which have strict requirements about the condition of the body and time from death to donation, WCU's willed-body program will accept donations of remains in any condition, as long as they do not pose any safety hazards. It is not uncommon for a donor to arrive at the FOREST following an autopsy, a tissue donation, or after days or weeks of decomposition due to the circumstances of their death and discovery.

5. Conclusions

The JAW Collection represents a willed-body donation program in support of WCU's Forensic Anthropology Program. The primary beneficiaries of the JAW Collection are WCU's forensic anthropology students, as the FOREST and this collection are routinely used in support of educational opportunities; however, its contributions to research and service as a community resource are also paramount.

As anthropologists, we must appreciate the interconnectedness of all things. Additionally, we must appreciate that the skeletons upon which we work are the remains of humans and represent more than just biological tissues. The unofficial motto of the WCU FAF is: "the living serve the dead and the dead serve the living" [19]. We argue that this humanist approach is crucial to the contemporary practice of biological anthropology. As curators, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of the deceased, we must treat them, their next of kin, and their communities with reverence. As fellow humans, we must respect the wishes of the deceased, as well as those of their descendants. Without support from our donors and their families, there would be no willed-body donations, no documented skeletal collections, and limited, if any, biological teaching materials to support our forensic anthropology program.

Recently, Weiss argued that the remains of Native Americans should be retained rather than repatriated, in part because: "I think they can be used to train forensic anthropologists. I think that they are a key resource for young anthropologists, for archaeologists, forensic anthropologists, and I think that we still have a lot to learn from skeletal remains" [20]. Not only does the statement demonstrate a lack of knowledge about education in forensic anthropology [21], but as practicing forensic anthropologists and bioarchaeologists, as well as educators, we adamantly reject the notion that human remains should be retained or used for education or research purposes without consent [4,22]. Such statements feed into negative public ideas of anthropologists as colonialists and hoarders of artifacts and remains to which they have no right to claim. Rather, we as anthropologists must be *advocates* for the *humans* we work with and examine, including their living kin and descendant communities; without their participation and support, anthropology simply cannot function. If, as Weiss suggests, the practice of anthropology requires disregard for our fellow humans, then we argue that there is no point in practicing anthropology at all.

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