

## **The History and Oversight of Human Osteological Collections at Princeton University**

The use of human osteological collections (human remains) by museums and universities in exhibition, teaching, research, and education has been a topic of differing viewpoints over time, and a topic that has been painful for communities whose members have been the subject of these activities. The methods by which collections of human remains were assembled or acquired often involved aspects of colonialism, and the use of human remains in teaching, research, and education rarely involved permission or consent from those individuals, or their lineal descendants. Princeton University was part of this history.

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a deeper understanding of the ethical and legal framework under which human remains were obtained and used developed. Princeton's approach also evolved. The University is committed to the respectful handling and preservation of ancestral remains and materials, and their prompt repatriation. It has strengthened its policies, ethical use and handling protocols, training, and consultation with descendant communities.

Princeton University began acquiring human osteological collections in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as was common among institutions of higher learning. At Princeton, almost all such remains were donated to, or purchased by, the University's museum of natural history, which was originally established in 1874 as the E.M. Museum of Geology and Archaeology and housed in Nassau Hall. The museum was transferred to Guyot Hall in 1909, where it was renamed the Natural History Museum, and remained until 2000.

Some of the ethnographic collections associated with the Natural History Museum were provided by Presbyterian missionaries affiliated with the Princeton Theological Seminary, while other collections were amassed and donated by Princeton faculty, alumni, and others, as well as by Princeton residents. Still other collections came to Princeton through transfer from other institutions, including the Smithsonian Institution and the Field Museum of Chicago.

In 1990, Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which is administered by the US Department of the Interior's National Park Service. The [NAGPRA regulations](#) require certain institutions and museums holding human remains or cultural items of lineal descendants, US

Federally Recognized Tribes, or Native Hawaiian Organizations (NHOs) to establish systematic processes for the disposition or repatriation of Native American human remains and cultural items. Revised NAGPRA regulations became effective on January 12, 2024, to strengthen the role of lineal descendants, Federally Recognized Tribes and NHOs during the consultation and repatriation process, to reaffirm the need to update inventories, to facilitate the determination of cultural affiliation, and to require that museums and federal agencies obtain consent before any exhibit, access, or research occurs on human remains or cultural items covered by the law.

In the 1990s, in order to meet the requirements of the NAGPRA regulations, Princeton established a NAGPRA Committee, composed of University administrators, faculty, staff, an undergraduate student, and non-Princeton consultants. Since that time, Princeton has taken seriously its commitment to comply with NAGPRA, resulting in the repatriation and disposition of many Native American remains and cultural items from our collections. Other collections of the Natural History Museum, not covered by NAGPRA, have also been repatriated or returned to their source country. However, Princeton recognizes that the University can always do better.

In 2021, in response to concerns about the use of human remains for instructional purposes by a visiting professor, the University engaged an outside firm to [perform a fact-finding investigation](#). The remains about which the concerns were raised had originated from the 1985 Philadelphia Police Department bombing of the MOVE organization. The investigators determined that, while the MOVE victim's remains were brought to Princeton University's campus several times for analysis and instructional purposes, they were never stored at Princeton.

The investigation resulted in a [report](#) that made a number of key recommendations. At the time, the University did not have any formal institutional policies or guidance regarding the use of human remains, nor any mechanism to systematically review or approve the ethical use of human remains in teaching or research. The report recommended the establishment of a policy on the usage of human remains, an oversight board, a plan to identify and/or locate other human remains that may be owned or possessed by the University, and proper and secure storage of such remains.

Following that report, the University established the [Human Remains Oversight Board](#) (HROB) in 2022, which functions under the oversight of the Office of the Dean for Research (ODFR). As provided by the *Rules & Procedures of the Faculty*, the HROB is responsible for providing guidance and oversight for research, educational, and training activities involving human remains. All members of the University community, including students, must obtain approval from the HROB before initiating any University activities involving human remains. The HROB reviews proposals and makes recommendations for the University's acquisition, usage, storage, display and deaccession of human remains. It is also charged with maintaining a database of human remains in the possession of the University or used under the auspices of the University.

The University recognizes a moral and ethical responsibility to ensure that human remains in its custody are cared for appropriately and consistent with applicable policies, laws, and regulations, including NAGPRA. To do its important work, the HROB collaborates with multiple units within the University. Since its inception, the HROB has established a charter, issued a policy on the use of human remains, developed guidance documents, and developed an application for the University's faculty and other researchers who wish to use human remains in their teaching or research.

In addition, the HROB is in the process of creating an inventory of human remains that continue to be in the University's possession. In that regard, the University recently located a number of remains that appear to be those identified during the 1990s NAGPRA research processes but had not been repatriated. Additional remains from non-Native and international individuals are also among those recently discovered. These findings are still being assessed, and the HROB is working to reconcile archival records with the findings to understand the collections in our care and their provenance more fully. Out of respect for the lineal descendants, the University will be communicating with these communities prior to making more specific disclosures.

The University recently hired two specialists to help assess and handle these findings. The University also prepared a facility in which to assess the newly identified human remains properly and securely. These activities must be conducted in accordance with applicable laws and, as a result, the University is

ensuring that any such activities comply with the new “duty of care” standards adopted under the revised NAGPRA regulations, which require consultation and consent before certain activities can occur with respect to Native American individuals. Our designated team will also collaborate on developing a comprehensive training program to ensure that faculty, students, and staff adhere to the highest ethical standards when working with human remains in the future. Through these efforts, the University will provide ongoing guidance and oversight for activities involving human remains, in keeping with the University's missions of education, research and service.

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