

# The Arch Street Project: Understanding the Past Through the Body

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Studies

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## The Project

In 1860 the human remains interred at the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia's cemetery were supposed to have been moved. But in 2017 during construction at 218 Arch Street it became apparent that many of the burials had not been moved. Thus, the Arch Street Project was born. The bioarchaeology and archaeology components of the Arch Street Project are the combined efforts of Kimberlee Moran, the Director of the Forensics Program at Rutgers University Camden, Anna Dhody, the Director of the Mütter Research Institute, Jared Beatrice and George Leader, professors in the Anthropology Department at The College of New Jersey among others. Because of the lack of local laws governing what should be done when this type of discovery is made at first all Kimberlee and Anna could do was monitor the backhoes at the construction site to prevent human remains from accidentally being discarded in piles of dirt. The human remains that were collected during this first phase of the project are kept at Rutgers's University Camden, which is where I worked. Later the project personnel and historic preservation advocates were able to get the construction company to halt construction so the burials could be properly excavated. These burials were more complete because they were able to remove whole coffins and further excavate the remains in the lab. These remains are at The College of New Jersey. All the remains will be reinterred at the cemetery they were supposed to have been moved to in 1860 in the fall of 2023

## The Work

My job on the project was to analyze the human remains and enter metadata about the remains into the research data base. The first thing I would do when I started working on a new individual would be to try and establish a biological profile by estimating biological sex, age at death, and ancestry. Then I would individually enter the bones associated with that individual including what bone it was, what side of the body it was from, and if there were any signs of disease, trauma, or damage to the human remains while they were interred.

## Why Study Human Remains?

The reason that the human skeletal remains recovered at the first Baptist Church are being studied rather than just being reburied is for a few reasons. The first, and the most important for me personally is that doing archaeology and bioarchaeology in historical periods is an essential aspect of complicating narratives about the past. History is written down by powerful people. Studying human remains allows us to better understand people who weren't powerful and might not have left any written records behind. In that same vein studying human remains allows us to understand the lived experiences of everyday people.

By understanding the lives of everyday people, we can better understand the dynamics of social inequality in the past, which continue to effect people today, especially social inequality around health and nutrition.

## Ethical Considerations

Working with human remains requires very specific training. Not just in human anatomy, but also in ethics and standards of how human remains should be treated.

## I Learned

- How I can contribute to the discussions researchers and museum professionals are having about the ethics of studying, collecting, and displaying human remains
- How to communicate the value of this research to the public, while also conveying current conversations about ethics in the field



OLD CITY PHILADELPHIA CONSTRUCTION NEWS PHILADELPHIA DEVELOPMENT NEWS

## Report: More than 400 human skeletons unearthed at Old City construction site

407 is the official tally

By Melissa Romero | Oct 31, 2017, 9:00am EDT

