



Florida Department of Law Enforcement

OFFICE OF EXECUTIVE INVESTIGATIONS

EXHUMATION OF THOMAS CURRY

INVESTIGATIVE SUMMARY

INVESTIGATIVE PREDICATE

In October 2014, University of South Florida (USF) Forensic Anthropologist Dr. Erin Kimmerle and her team exhumed the casket of Thomas Curry, a former student of the Florida Industrial School for Boys (Dozier) in Marianna, Florida. The exhumation occurred at the Old Cathedral Cemetery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Upon exhuming Curry's casket, it was discovered that his remains were missing from the casket. Following Curry's exhumation, several media sources to include, CNN, CBS News, Tampa Bay Times, and WUSF News reported that in place of Curry's remains were layers of wood. CNN quoted Dr. Kimmerle as stating that Curry's casket was "completely filled with wooden planks."

In January 2015, Dr. Kimmerle co-authored an updated summary of USF's research into the deaths and burials at Dozier. Contained in the summary, which was presented to members of the Florida Cabinet, was information regarding the exhumation of Curry's casket. The whereabouts of Curry's remains was still an open question. Dr. Kimmerle requested that the matter be investigated.

BACKGROUND OF THOMAS CURRY

Curry's birth certificate showed the he was born on March 15, 1908, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was the son of Thomas M. Curry and Alma O'Connell. Multiple sources revealed that on New Year's Day 1916, Curry's father shot and killed Curry's mother, and then he (Curry's father) committed suicide. After the murder-suicide of Curry's parents, Curry was believed to have lived with his mother's relatives.

On November 3, 1925, a Dade County, Florida Judge charged Curry with "delinquency" and sent him to Dozier "Until Further Notice by Court." The information regarding Curry's arrest was limited; however, it was suggested in USF's updated summary that it was common at the time (1925) for travelers, especially boys or men looking for work, to get arrested under vagrancy laws.

On December 10, 1925, twenty-nine days after Curry's arrival at Dozier, Curry absconded from Dozier. On December 11, 1925, Curry purportedly fell off of a railroad trestle near River

Junction, Florida. Curry was taken to the Florida State Hospital in Chattahoochee, Florida (located 1 ¾ miles north of the former River Junction Post Office) where he died as a result of a head injury sustained from the fall.

Dr. Kimmerle and her team of researchers questioned the cause of Curry's death and believed that Curry's death was possibly the result of criminal acts. In a typed letter, dated March 30, 2014, addressed to Pennsylvania State Police, Criminal Investigations Assessment Unit, Corporal Thomas C. McAndrew, Dr. Kimmerle advised that a "skeletal autopsy could clarify questions about the nature of the trauma such as the mechanism of injury and/or whether it was inflicted or accidental."

On August 27, 2014, Dr. Kimmerle secured a signed court order from the First Judicial District Court of Pennsylvania for the exhumation of Curry's remains.

On October 7, 2014, Curry's casket was disinterred from the Old Cathedral Cemetery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and was found to be without his remains.

REVIEW OF INFORMATION

The OEI reviewed the Dozier student ledger, Volume 2, page 35, row 17, register # 1516, which showed that Curry was admitted to Dozier on November 12, 1925, and listed him as being fifteen years old. It should be noted that Curry's birth certificate reflected that his age on that date was eighteen. The student ledger listed Curry's grandmother, Susan O'Connell, as his parent/guardian. The ledger showed that Curry absconded from Dozier on December 10, 1925. The ledger contained a column where school officials were to document the date of the student's "re-capture." "Killed on RR bridge on Chattahoochee, Fla. Dec. 11, 1925" was written next to Curry's name in the "re-capture" column.

According to Curry's death certificate, Curry died on December 11, 1925, after being in River Junction for "about thirty minutes." The death certificate did not appear to indicate whether or not Curry was dead upon arrival at the State Hospital. The death certificate documented Curry's cause of death as "verdict of coroner's jury: came to his death from [REDACTED]" The coroner, L.H. Sanders, signed Curry's death certificate on December 12, 1925. Dr. B.F. Barnes, a member of the medical staff of the State Hospital in Chattahoochee, signed Curry's death certificate on December 13, 1925. P.L. Laing signed the death certificate as the undertaker, and listed Curry's date of removal as December 26, 1925, and showed that his Curry's body was set for removal to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

A Gadsden Times newspaper article dated December 24, 1925, advised that Dr. B.F. Barnes, provided additional details regarding Curry's death. According to the article, Curry died from the effects of a fall through the railroad trestle on the eastern approach to the bridge across the Apalachicola River near River Junction. The article noted that Curry absconded from the Marianna reform school (Dozier), and was later found under the railroad trestle. Curry was then

taken to the State Hospital, where he died from the effect of a crushing blow on the forehead received when he hit the ground or a timber.

According to the news article, after Curry's death, Dozier received a letter from Curry's grandmother in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The letter, which was addressed to Curry, contained words of advice for Curry and contained a "small sum of money." Using the return address from the letter, Dr. Barnes reportedly contacted Curry's grandmother and informed her of her grandson's death. The article further reported that Dr. Barnes was going to comply with Curry's grandmother's request to have Curry's remains shipped to Philadelphia. The article quoted Dr. Barnes as stating that Curry's body was embalmed.

The OEI reviewed a report authored by Pennsylvania State Police Corporal Thomas McAndrew regarding details surrounding Curry's exhumation. The report advised that Curry's funeral was held in the old St. Bridget's Catholic Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania which has since been demolished and rebuilt at an adjacent location. Death records from December of 1925 were missing from the church archives.

The Pennsylvania State Police obtained cemetery records from the Old Cathedral Cemetery in Philadelphia, where Curry was allegedly buried, which showed Curry's date of interment as, Wednesday, December 20, 1925. It is to be noted that December 20, 1925, was actually a Sunday. According to a cemetery record dated December 29, 1925, Curry was "killed by train" on December 11, 1925, and was eighteen years old at the time of his death. The information found in the cemetery records also showed that Curry was buried in the same grave where Patrick and Margaret Rice (Curry's great grandparents) were buried.

The Pennsylvania State Police were advised by the owners of a funeral home located next to St. Bridget's Church that even by today's standards, if a person dies in another state and their body is prepared and/or shipped by a funeral home to Pennsylvania, a sealed casket would not be opened upon arrival in Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania funeral home would rely on the records from the shipping funeral home and bury the casket without further inspection.

In continuance of OEI's search and review of records, a "Casket Account Ledger" for the time period of January 3, 1925 to April 30, 1927, was located at the State Hospital in Chattahoochee, FL. The ledger showed an entry was made on December 26, 1925, showing that a casket and robe were purchased for Curry from "S&G" in the amount of \$42.50, and was paid for in cash. "S&G" was believed to be the abbreviation for Scarborough and Gholson, a furniture and/or general merchandise store that was operational in Chattahoochee/ River Junction in the 1920's.

The ledger also denoted if a decedent was embalmed. Based on other entries made in the ledger, it was surmised that the cost for embalment was \$20. Curry's ledger entry did not indicate that he was embalmed nor that payment was remitted for his embalment.

Additionally, the ledger showed a payment in cash of \$71.68 for the shipping of Curry's casket to Philadelphia. In an attempt to locate shipping records, OEI contacted the President of the CSX Transportation Historical Society, Charles Bogart, who is a published author and historian. Mr. Bogart advised that train manifestos and shipping records from the 1920's are very rare and difficult to locate. According to Mr. Bogart, during the 1920's, a body and/or casket shipped via

train was transported via passenger car. Mr. Bogart advised that the Railroad Express Agency was the handler responsible for ensuring the body/casket arrived at its destination. Mr. Bogart stated that a body would not have been shipped without first being embalmed.

Mr. Bogart advised that he came across several cases through his research, in which empty caskets were shipped to relatives of the deceased. This usually occurred after the relative of a deceased requested the remains be shipped to them after burial had occurred. Mr. Bogart advised that this was especially the case in warmer climates, such as Florida, where there was an accelerated rate of decomposition which required the remains to be buried a short time after death.

TESTING OF WOOD SAMPLE FROM THE CASKET

OEI Inspectors met with Dr. Kimmerle at USF. During the meeting, Dr. Kimmerle clarified that Curry's casket was not filled with wood as previously reported by the media. Dr. Kimmerle explained that Curry's casket was encased inside of a wooden shipping container. According to Dr. Kimmerle, on the day of the exhumation, after the shipping container lid was removed, it appeared to everyone present (including the media) that the casket was filled with wood. Dr. Kimmerle believed that over time the casket contained within the shipping container caved inward.

Dr. Kimmerle provided the OEI Inspectors with a small (1 inch) piece of wood that was collected from within the burial. Dr. Kimmerle advised that she was unsure of the location of the wood within the burial, and advised that the sample "was collected at the end of the day and that her team was interested in the sample from the perspective of preservation." OEI then provided the wood sample to University of West Florida (UWF) Archaeologist Dr. Amy Mitchell-Cook for testing and identification.

Dr. Mitchell-Cook identified the wood sample as being "American Chestnut, *Castanae dentate*." Dr. Mitchell-Cook advised that most of the chestnut were killed from fungal infection in the early twentieth century, but until that time were commonly used for a variety of purposes. Dr. Mitchell-Cook consulted with a colleague, UWF Archaeologist Margo Stringfield, who was experienced in the subject area of caskets. Ms. Stringfield advised that chestnut was an expensive material, but was commonly used to construct caskets in the early twentieth century.

FINDINGS

The following findings are based on the evidence, and information obtained during the investigation:

- On December 10, 1925, Curry absconded from Dozier.
- On December 11, 1925, Curry died after he purportedly fell off of a railroad trestle near River Junction, Florida.
- Curry's death certificate documented the cause of death as "verdict of coroner's jury: came to his death from [REDACTED]"

- A Gadsden Times newspaper article notes that Curry's grandmother's requested to have Curry's remains shipped to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- Records from the State Hospital in Chattahoochee, Florida did not indicate that Curry's body was embalmed.
- Records from the State Hospital in Chattahoochee, Florida show that a casket and robe were purchased for Curry (from S&G) in the amount of \$42.50, and was paid for in cash.
- Records from the State Hospital in Chattahoochee, Florida noted a payment in cash of \$71.68 for the shipping of Curry's casket to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- Curry's death certificate notes that his body was set for removal to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on December 26, 1925.
- Records from the Old Cathedral Cemetery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania indicated that Curry was interred on their grounds on December 20, 1925.
- On October 7, 2014, Curry's casket was disinterred from the Old Cathedral Cemetery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and was found to be without his remains.
- Per Dr. Kimmerle, the casket enclosed within the shipping container caved inward over time, creating the appearance that the casket was filled with pieces of wood.
- The location of Curry's remains was unable to be determined.

STATE ATTORNEY REVIEW

On April 22, 2016, Second Judicial Circuit, State Attorney Glenn Hess was provided with this Executive Summary for review and any action deemed appropriate.