

Mystery Boy in Iron Coffin Identified

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WASHINGTON -- Researchers have solved the mystery of the boy in the iron coffin. The cast-iron coffin was discovered by utility workers in Washington two years ago. Smithsonian scientists led by forensic anthropologist Doug Owsley set about trying to determine who was buried in it, so the body could be placed in a new, properly marked grave.

The body was that of 15-year-old William Taylor White, who died in 1852 and was buried in the Columbia College cemetery, they announced Thursday.

"The mystery of this young boy's life and a strong sense of responsibility to properly identify him kept me and the entire team focused and determined. This was not a one-person project. It took more than three dozen people nearly two years to make the ID," Deborah Hull-Walski, an anthropologist at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, said in a statement.

The researchers believe that the coffin was inadvertently left behind when the cemetery was later moved.

White, from Accomack, Va., was a descendant of Anthony West, one of the Jamestown settlers, they announced. He was a student in the preparatory school of the college, which later became George Washington University.

White was one of several potential candidates the team focused on after studying census records, obituaries and other public documents.

They then tested the DNA of known living descendants to make the positive identification.

The pathologists and forensic anthropologists reported that White had congenital heart disease, a ventricular septum defect, which is a hole in the heart, that contributed to his death.



In this photograph provided by the Smithsonian Institution, anthropologist Kari Bruwelheide, right, and Doug Owsley, head of physical anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History, center, examine the remains of an iron coffin at the museum in Washington in this Aug. 3, 2005 file photo. The remains have been identified as 15-year-old William Taylor White, who died in 1852 and was buried in the Columbia College cemetery. The college later became The George Washington University. (AP Photo/Smithsonian Institution, File) (AP)

They found an obituary published in the Daily National Intelligencer newspaper of Washington on Jan. 28, 1852, confirming White died Jan. 24, 1852, after a short illness.

Clothing historians were able to determine that he was dressed in a shirt, vest and pants that are consistent with clothing styles of the early to mid-1850s.

"Thus is cut off, in the morning of his days, one in whom many hopes were centred-and who had the fairest prospects of happiness and usefulness in life," the Religious Herald newspaper of Richmond, Va., said in its obituary.

The cast-iron coffin was shaped a bit like an Egyptian mummy case and is of a type called Fisk style patented in 1848. This particular model was popular in the early 1850s among the well-to-do, Owsley said.

Because they are sealed, cast iron coffins tend to yield well-preserved bodies. Indeed, the young person looked not unlike an ancient mummy, even though he had not gone through the Egyptian embalming procedures.