Chapter 5
Anthropological Investigations of the Tri-State Crematorium Incident

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On February 15, 2002, a woman was walking her dog in the woods of the small, unincorporated town of Noble in Walker County, Georgia, and discovered a human skull. She called the authorities, who confirmed the skull was human and launched a pedestrian survey of the area. Unfortunately, the skull was just a portent of the macabre scenes awaiting investigators as they walked onto the 16 acres of property owned by the Marsh family, who were, at that time, one of the most prominent African-American families in the county. Three houses, including two inhabited by the Marshes, a spring-fed lake, a crematorium, an adjacent large metal building, and a large storage shed filled a 6-acre section of the property. The rest of the property was wooded (Fig. 5.1). The Marsh family business was the Tri-State Crematorium, which served dozens of funeral homes in Georgia, Tennessee, and Alabama.

An incredible stench drew in investigators to the crematorium and adjacent structures, where they found bodies littering the floors. While some were in body bags or cremation boxes, many were uncontained and in various stages of decomposition. As the investigators expanded their search outside the buildings, more bodies were found in abandoned vehicles, open vaults, and coffins scattered across the landscape. Human skeletal remains seemed to be everywhere. The great number of human remains as well as the tremendous variation in decomposition indicated that the process of abandoning bodies on the property had been going on for some time, but for how long and why?

While little of this surreal scene made any sense, it was quite clear that the medicolegal infrastructure in this very rural part of northwestern Georgia was about to be overrun by unidentified human remains, international press, and hundreds of betrayed families demanding to know the disposition of their loved ones. The recovery and identification process would require a multidisciplinary team of criminal investigators, identification specialists, and forensic anthropologists.

The Investigation

Four goals were defined as the investigation began: (1) Recover every body, body part, and bone that could be located on the property; (2) identify as many of the
Fig. 5.1 Aerial photo of Marsh property. Most of the bodies were found around the crematorium and storage buildings in the lower right portion of the photo

recovered remains as possible; (3) return the identified remains to families for final disposition; and (4) document all findings for potential legal proceedings.

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) was the primary investigative body and requested that the Federal Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT) provide assistance with body recovery and processing. There are 10 regional DMORTs around the country; each consists of identification specialists, including forensic pathologists, odontologists, anthropologists, X-ray technicians and radiologists, as well as funeral directors who work with the families concerning the final disposition of identified remains (Sledzik and Wilcox 2003). Local X-ray technicians, fingerprint experts, and law enforcement officers, as well as personnel from the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL), joined the effort. The anthropologists were divided into three investigative areas—scene recovery, processing and identification of bodies in the morgue, and assessment of urn contents that had been returned to families but may not contain human remains.

**Processing the Scene**

Forensic anthropologists worked alongside GBI investigators and Walker County Sheriff’s deputies in locating and documenting human remains around the property. The crematorium housed the retort, a very small anteroom, and an apparent waiting room or office that had obviously not been used for years, as it was covered with dust and suffered water damage from a leaky roof. The concrete floor in front of the