



DR ALEX HRDLICKA  
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTE

TOP EXCLUSIVE

## REVEALING THE SMITHSONIAN'S 'RACIAL BRAIN COLLECTION'

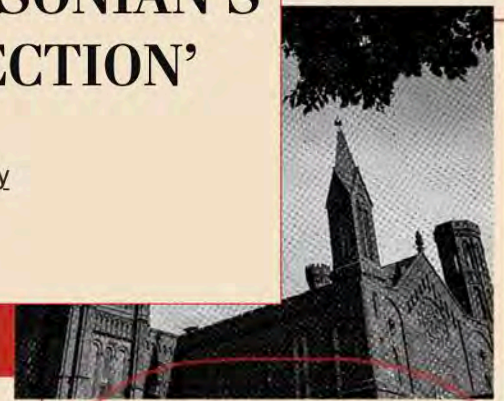
By [Nicole Dungca](#) and [Claire Healy](#)

Updated Aug. 23 at 10:46 a.m.  
Originally published Aug. 14, 2023

Specimen referred  
to Dr. Hrdlicka



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*Sto. Domingo (30)*



ACCESSION  
DR. CHARLES FIRESTONE

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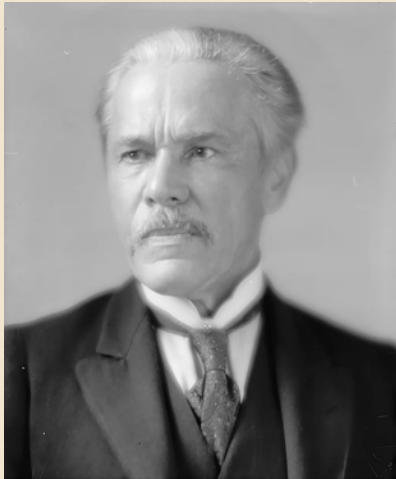
On the day Mary Sara died of tuberculosis in a Seattle sanitarium, the doctor caring for the 18-year-old offered her brain to one of the most revered museums in the world.

The young woman — whose family was Sami, or indigenous to areas that include northern Scandinavia — had traveled with her mother by ship from her Alaska hometown at the invitation of physician Charles Firestone, who had offered to treat the older woman for cataracts. Now,



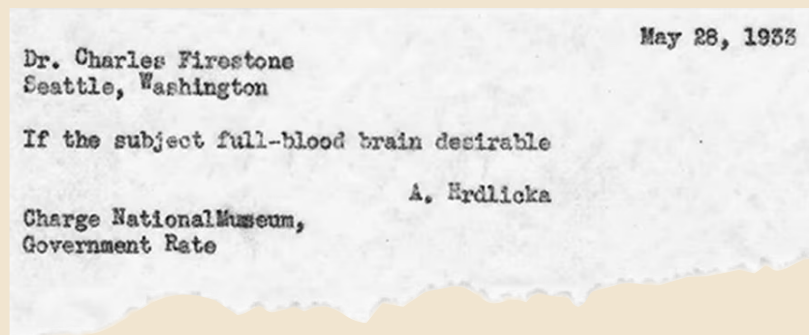
Mary Sara in Seattle in 1933.  
(Seattle Post-Intelligencer,  
Jan. 17, 1933)

Firestone sought to take advantage of Sara's death for a "racial brain collection" at the Smithsonian Institution. He contacted a museum official in May 1933 by telegram.



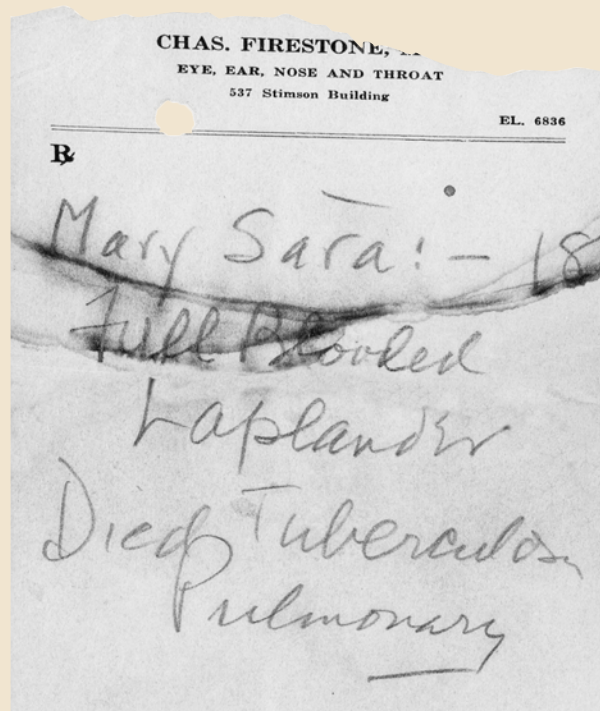
Ales Hrdlicka. (Harris & Ewing Collection/Library of Congress)

Ales Hrdlicka, the 64-year-old curator of the division of physical anthropology at the Smithsonian's U.S. National Museum, was interested in Sara's brain for his collection. But only if she was "full-blood," he noted, using a racist term to question whether her parents were both Sami.



The telegram sent from Ales Hrdlicka to Charles Firestone in 1933. (Smithsonian Institution Archives)

The 35-year-old doctor removed Sara's brain after she died and mailed it to Washington, D.C., where Smithsonian officials tagged it with a reference number and stored it in the museum, now the site of the National Museum of Natural History, alongside scores of other brains taken across the world.



This undated note describing Mary Sara with a derogatory term was probably written in 1933, when Charles Firestone sent her brain to the Smithsonian. (Smithsonian Institution Archives)

Nearly 100 years later, Sara's brain is still housed by the institution, wrapped in muslin and immersed in preservatives in a large metal container. It is stored in a museum facility in Maryland with 254 other brains, amassed mostly in the first half of the 20th century. Almost all of them were gathered at the behest of Hrdlicka, a prominent anthropologist who believed that White people were superior and collected body parts to further now-debunked theories about anatomical differences between races.



The Smithsonian Castle on the National Mall. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

Most of the brains were removed upon death from Black and Indigenous people and other people of color. They are part of a collection of at least 30,700 human bones and other body parts still held by the Natural History Museum, the most-visited museum within the Smithsonian. The collection, one of the largest in the world, includes mummies, skulls, teeth and other body parts, representing an unknown number of people.

The remains are the unreconciled legacy of a grisly practice in which bodies and organs were taken from graveyards, battlefields, morgues and hospitals in more than 80 countries. The decades-long effort was financed and encouraged by the taxpayer-subsidized institution. The collection, which was mostly amassed by the early 1940s, has long been hidden from view. The Washington Post has assembled the most extensive analysis and accounting of the holdings to date.

The vast majority of the remains appear to have been gathered without consent from the individuals or their families, by researchers preying on people who were hospitalized, poor, or lacked immediate relatives to identify or bury them. In other cases, collectors, anthropologists and scientists dug up burial grounds and looted graves.

The Natural History Museum has lagged in its efforts to return the vast majority of the remains in its possession to descendants or cultural heirs, The Post's investigation found. Of at least 268 brains collected by the museum, officials have repatriated only four.

The Smithsonian requires people with a personal interest or legal right to the remains to issue a formal request, a virtual impossibility for many would-be claimants, since they are unaware of the collection's existence. A federal law mandates that the Smithsonian only inform Native American, Alaska Native or Native Hawaiian communities about any remains, leaving an estimated 15,000 body parts in limbo.

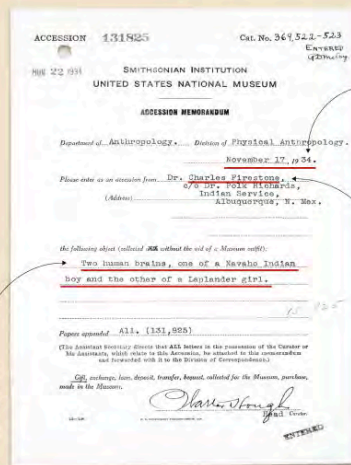


Each batch of remains was identified with a reference number and included multiple documents describing the body parts mailed to Washington.

Mary Sara's brain accession number is 131825.

This document specifies that two brains collected by a Seattle doctor were sent to the Smithsonian.

One of them was from a young Sami woman named Mary Sara.



Sara's brain was entered into the collection on Nov. 17, 1934.

Charles Firestone was the doctor who collected it.

Documents describe the remains, and use an offensive term for Sami people.

The Post tracked down Sara's relatives using Smithsonian documents. When reporters contacted them through the Sami Cultural Center of North America, they had no idea that her brain had been taken. Relatives said they were stunned that the institution never contacted them and are now seeking to have her brain returned.

"It's a violation against our family and against our people," said Fred Jack, the husband to one of Sara's cousins. "It's kind of like

an open wound. ... We want to have peace and we'll have no peace because we know this exists, until it's corrected."



(Dmitry Surnin for The Washington Post)



Martha Sara Jack, first cousin of Mary Sara, and her husband, Fred Jack, at home in Wasilla, Alaska. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)



Mary Sara hides behind her mother, Kristina Ante, left, in Akiak, Alaska, circa 1920. Next to Mary Sara stands her father, Per Nielsen Sara, and her uncle, Per Ante. (Martha Sara Jack)

The Natural History Museum said that in the last three decades it has returned 4,068 sets of human remains and offered to repatriate 2,254 more. Those remains belong to more than 6,900 people, because some sets include the remains of more than one person.

Due to the manner in which body parts have been catalogued, the museum does not know the exact number of body parts or people represented in its overall collection. Museum officials said they have made substantial progress repatriating remains, despite having a small staff devoted to the work.

While The Post's investigation was underway, Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III in April issued a statement apologizing for how the institution collected many of its human remains in the past, and he announced the creation of a task force to determine what to do with the remains. In an interview, Bunch also said it was his goal to promote repatriation.

"I know that so much of this has been based on racist attitudes, that these brains were really people of color to demonstrate the superiority of White brains, so I understand that is just really unconscionable," Bunch said. "And I think it's important for me as a historian to say that all the remains, all the brains, need to be returned if possible, [and] treated in the best possible way."

The Post reviewed thousands of documents, including studies, field notes and correspondence from Hrdlicka's papers, and interviewed more than four dozen experts, Smithsonian officials, and descendants and members of affected communities.

The museum's brain collection was assembled by a network of scientists, U.S. Army surgeons and professors, records show. Officials from prominent institutions in the United States donated human brains to the museum. The Smithsonian still holds the brains of



people from at least 10 foreign countries, including the Philippines, Germany, the Czech Republic and South Africa, records show.

Though top Smithsonian and Natural History Museum officials have long known about the tens of thousands of body parts held by the institution, the full scope of the brain collection has never been publicly disclosed. Even officials within the museum told The Post they were unaware of its magnitude until informed by reporters. Bunch said he knew “absolutely nothing” about the brain collection before he became secretary in 2019. He said he learned about it as the institution adopted a **policy** in 2022 on how to return objects and body parts taken without consent.



Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III has apologized for how the institution collected many of its human remains. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

In addition to Bunch, several senior Smithsonian officials acknowledged in interviews the racism behind Hrdlicka’s work and said the anthropologist left a disturbing legacy that must be addressed.

The Smithsonian is a wide-ranging institution that spans research facilities, 21 museums and the National Zoo. The National Museum of Natural History, one of its premier attractions, holds the vast majority of the institution's human remains. The only other Smithsonian museum with body parts is the National Museum of the American Indian, which said it still has 454 remains and has repatriated 617.

As The Post investigated, the Natural History Museum hired two researchers to look into the stewardship and ethical return of body parts and other objects. It also restricted access to human remains, and shared with The Post plans to relocate the brains. The brains are housed in a building across from a strip mall in Suitland, Md., in a large room with preserved carcasses of animals from the zoo.



The Smithsonian Museum Support Center in Maryland houses the brains collected by the institution. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

Many anthropologists and historians, as well as families, say they want the Smithsonian to do more, including to provide a commit-

ment to contact anyone who may have a family or cultural interest in the remains. For some, the collection of brains — the center of intelligence and personality — is especially sensitive.

“These are deceased human beings,” said Samuel J. Redman, a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, who has written extensively about museum collections of human remains, “and in some cases, this represents the only part of their earthly remains that we know is still around, and an important touchstone to many of these communities.”

## THE ‘RACIAL BRAIN COLLECTION’

The worldwide trade in human body parts was in full swing by 1898 when U.S. Army Surgeon General George Sternberg transferred 2,206 Native American skulls from the Army Medical Museum to the Smithsonian’s department of anthropology at the U.S. National Museum.

Five years later, Hrdlicka (hurd-lich-kuh) took charge of the department’s new subdivision on physical anthropology and made it his mission to vastly expand the Smithsonian’s collection of body parts.

Hrdlicka, who was born in what is now the Czech Republic, received medical training from the Eclectic Medical College of New York City and the New York Homeopathic Medical College in Manhattan before moving into the field of anthropology. He was seen as one of the country’s foremost authorities on race, sought by the government and members of the public to prove that people’s race determined physical characteristics and intelligence.



A newspaper with a story on Hrdlicka is stored at the National Anthropological Archives in the Smithsonian Museum Support Center. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

He was also a longtime member of the American Eugenics Society, an organization dedicated to racist practices designed to control human populations and “improve” the genetic pool, baseless theories that would be widely condemned after the Nazis used them to justify genocide and forced sterilization during the Holocaust. In speeches and personal correspondence, he spoke openly about his belief in the superiority of White people, once lamenting that Black people were “the real problem before the American people.”

“There are differences of importance between the brains of the negro and European, to the general disadvantage of the former,” he wrote in a 1926 letter to a University of Vermont professor. “Brains of individual negroes may come up to or near the standard of some individual whites; but such primitive brains as found in some negroes ... would be hard to duplicate in normal whites.”

In a 1904 Smithsonian manual, Hrdlicka instructed others on how to collect body parts in vivid detail, including how to package a brain for shipment to the museum and conceal the marks of an autopsy. He wrote that the “racial brain collection” was necessary to research the brains of people across the world, especially Indigenous people and Black Americans.

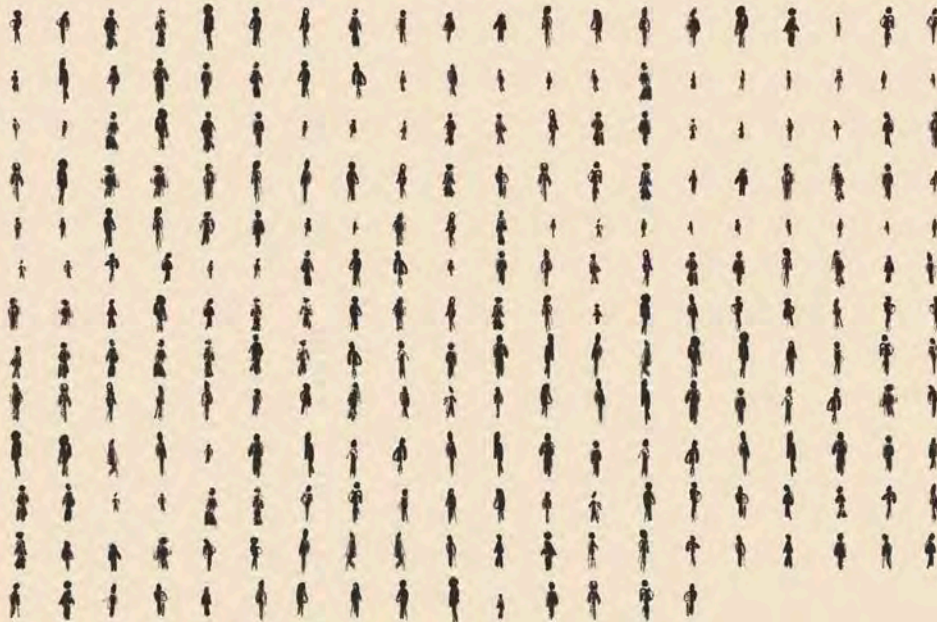
He started collecting in the Smithsonian’s backyard. In a letter, he urged William Henry Holmes, a top Smithsonian official, to introduce him to doctors in charge of hospitals, morgues and medical schools in the Washington area. He also sought help from the D.C. anatomical board, which already furnished local medical schools with “unclaimed bodies” — corpses that had not been identified by family or friends, or came from families unable to afford burials.

His pleas worked: He eventually acquired 74 brains in the Washington area, the largest regional group within the brains still at the Smithsonian, according to records reviewed by The Post. Of those, 50 had race recorded, and 35 of those brains were taken from Black people.

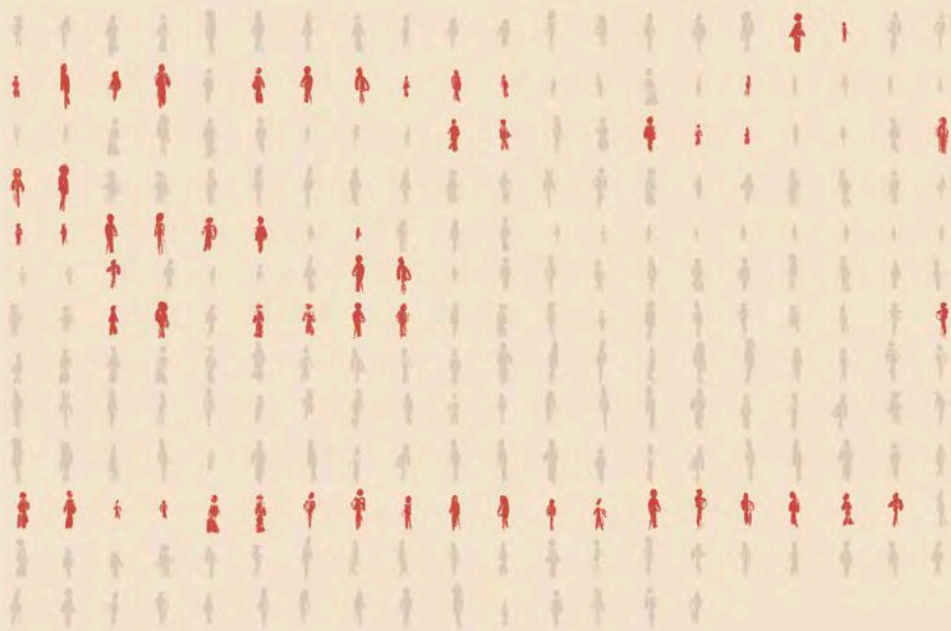
Black people also stood out nationwide: Of the 77 brains taken within the United States that have race recorded, Black people represent the largest racial group, with 57 brains taken.



The Post found 96 accession cards that reference human brains still held by the Smithsonian.



Those cards and other records describe the 255 brains in museum storage.



One group stood out: 57 brains came from **Black people** who died in the United States.

Hrdlicka and other doctors eager to add to the collection often removed the brains from the deceased at institutions including Howard University, Walter Reed General Hospital, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Maryland and Tulane University, according to records.

Representatives for the institutions said they have no record of the brains donated to Hrdlicka or they now have stringent ethical standards for dealing with body parts. “The medical community has thankfully moved far beyond the unethical practices of a century ago involving body and brain donations,” said Deborah Kotz, a spokeswoman for the University of Maryland School of Medicine, but she noted that people still voluntarily donate their own organs for research on Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and ALS.

It is unclear whether Hrdlicka and other doctors took the brains illegally. Doctors may have exploited vague laws that governed

unclaimed bodies. By the early 1900s, some states and D.C. had passed “anatomy acts,” which explicitly allowed students and doctors at medical schools to dissect unclaimed corpses.

Among the 255 brains still in the collection, only four are documented as coming from people or families who willingly donated their organs, according to Smithsonian records. The Post found no other records that indicate consent had been given.

Museum officials said internal records note the identities of 12 people from Washington whose brains were taken, but they declined to make the names public, citing privacy concerns.

In records that The Post reviewed, the names of the people whose brains were probably taken without consent from Washington are not recorded. Instead, their organs were marked with demographic details, such as their sex, age or race, using outdated language. One notation reads: “four negro brains and one lot of fetuses.”

In another case, an anonymous donor in 1914 sent the brains of two Black children from the D.C. morgue. The donor also sent the skeleton of one of the children. Museum documents describe them only as a 7-month-old girl and a biracial boy whose age is not listed.

*the following object (collected with/without the aid of a Museum outfit):*

.....2 brains of American Negro children, obtained from the District of Columbia Morgue, January 28, 1914; one accompanied by skull and skeleton.....

A museum document shows the brains of two Black children were collected from the morgue in Washington. (Smithsonian Institution Archives)

January 8, 1947

The two brains, one accompanied by skull and skeletal parts, described herewith have been in our collections, but uncatalogued, since the date of receipt, January 28, 1914. In the Division record book under this date the following descriptions are recorded:

380301

304. Brain of a male, Negro-white mixblood, age unknown. Brain weight, 430 grams.

A museum document shows the brains of the two children were sent to the Smithsonian in 1914 but were uncatalogued until 1947. (Smithsonian Institution Archives)



The Post compared hundreds of death certificates at the D.C. Archives with the details noted in public Smithsonian records, but could not definitively make any identifications.

Even people who have studied Hrdlicka and the Smithsonian said they were unaware of the extent of the collection or that so many brains were taken from local Black residents.

Anthropologist **Michael Blakey**, who advises the Smithsonian on its National Museum of African American History and Culture, said he first heard about the brain collection from Post reporters. Blakey delved into Hrdlicka's personal papers while working at the Smithsonian as a research associate nearly 40 years ago and is now one of the chairs of the American Anthropological Association's Commission for the Ethical Treatment of Human Remains. In May, he was appointed to the Smithsonian's new human remains task force.

When a historical Black cemetery in Manhattan was unearthed in 1991 amid construction work, Blakey helped ensure the remains were reburied and commemorated with a national monument. He said the Smithsonian could undertake a similar process.

Blakey said the Smithsonian must first identify and contact descendants or communities of the people whose brains were taken for the collection and seek their input. In recent years, Black anthropologists have pushed for federal laws requiring museums to offer repatriation for the remains of Black Americans. Others have advocated for the laws to be expanded to all human remains.

"I think there's no reckoning thus far with African Americans," Blakey said. The Smithsonian has made changes, including initiating repatriation efforts for Native American remains, only "because they had to, because the society caught up with them."

## WAITING FOR PEOPLE TO DIE AT THE WORLD'S FAIR

When the U.S. government brought Indigenous Filipinos to St. Louis to be displayed at the 1904 World's Fair, Hrdlicka saw an opportunity to collect brains from the people who lived in the newly annexed U.S. territory.

The United States had recently acquired the Philippines from Spain for \$20 million, and War Secretary William Howard Taft sought to use the exposition to justify the occupation. For seven months, about 1,200 Filipinos lived in a 47-acre artificial village alongside Arrowhead Lake in St. Louis County. There, spectators who were mostly White gawked at the Filipinos, whom fair officials described as “primitive.”



An illustrated map of the 1904 World's Fair, viewed from south to north. (Library of Congress)



A man and woman in the Philippine Exposition at the 1904 World's Fair. (Jessie Tarbox Beals/Louisiana Purchase Exhibition/Schlesinger Library/Harvard Radcliffe Institute)



People weaving at the Philippine Exposition. (Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute)

That summer, Hrdlicka headed to St. Louis, hoping to take brains from Filipinos who died. There, he performed autopsies on a person from Suyoc and another from Bontoc. They were both Igorot, a term used to broadly describe Indigenous peoples from the Cordillera mountains of Luzon.

According to Smithsonian records, Hrdlicka returned to Washington with the brain of the Bontoc man but kept only the Suyoc Igorot's cerebellum, the part of the brain at the back of the head responsible for balance, coordination and fine motor skills. Months later, documents show, fair physicians sent Hrdlicka the complete brains of two other Filipinos: a Tagalog person and a Muslim Filipino.

In spring 2021, Janna Añonuevo Langholz, a 34-year-old Filipino American activist and interdisciplinary artist in Clayton, Mo., learned of the brains while searching for the graves of Filipinos who died at the fair. Looking online for answers, she stumbled upon a Smithsonian record detailing Hrdlicka's acquisition of a Suyoc

Igorot cerebellum. She concluded it was from a woman named Maura, the only person from the Suyoc group whose death had been reported in the local press.

Maura was a Kankanaey Igorot woman who had traveled more than a month from her hometown of Suyoc to St. Louis in 1904. Pneumonia killed her shortly before the exhibition began on April 30. After the St. Louis Riverfront Times **wrote about** Langholz's work in 2021, a curator at another Smithsonian facility, the National Museum of American History, contacted her to learn more.

With the hope of burying the cerebellum in either St. Louis or the Philippines, Langholz asked the curator to put her in touch with the Natural History Museum. Officials there, however, told her that the brain had probably been cremated. Smithsonian officials later told The Post that it was "likely incinerated" between 1908 and the 1950s, and said that officials had no evidence to conclusively identify the person whose cerebellum was taken.

Records show that the museum has cremated at least nine brains, with several of them listed as "desiccated," meaning the brain was dried up. Laurie Burgess, who recently retired as the co-chair of the museum's anthropology department, said cremating remains is a "long-outdated" practice and is not used anymore.

"It's one of the most traumatic things I've learned," said Langholz, whose work prompted The Post to investigate the brain collection. "I just spent so much time looking for her, I don't think [the Smithsonian] understands how much this means to me."



Janna Añonuevo Langholz, a Filipino American interdisciplinary artist, is working to commemorate the site of the Philippine Exposition during the 1904 World's Fair and the lives of the Filipinos who died in St. Louis. (Whitney Curtis for The Washington Post)



Langholz holds a map of the Philippine Exposition. (Whitney Curtis for The Washington Post)



Langholz with a brochure. (Whitney Curtis for The Washington Post)

Smithsonian officials told The Post that, in addition to the four brains from the fair, the museum had collected the brains of 23 other Filipinos.

Some of those brains were taken from patients at the Philippine Medical School, and others by U.S. Army officials who worked with

the Smithsonian to collect skeletal remains and objects around the Philippines, records show. Officials with the medical school, now known as the University of the Philippines Manila College of Medicine, said human remains are accepted only with consent.

Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, who is Kankanaey Igorot Filipino and a former U.N. special rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples, said the remains at the Smithsonian must be returned so that Igorot communities can perform rituals for their dead.

When those practices are not performed, she said, the deceased are not at rest. “For Indigenous people, it’s not just an issue, of course, of a violation of their rights,” she said. “It’s also an issue of spiritual consideration.”

Leonardo Padcayan Buyayao, a designated Indigenous representative from Maura’s hometown, said the museum disrespected her community twice: by taking the brain without permission and by cremating the remains, which is discouraged in their culture.

He and other Kankanaey leaders in Suyoc, many of whom are relatives of Filipinos who went to the 1904 World’s Fair, said they hope to build a memorial for Maura. “What happened to our sister hurts our hearts,” Buyayao said.

After The Post began reporting, the Smithsonian contacted the Philippine Embassy in D.C. with information on the human remains in the museum’s possession. Embassy officials said they have met with Smithsonian staff to discuss the remains.

The brains from the Philippines represent the second largest group outside of the United States, after Germany. There, a pathologist named David Paul von Hansemann sent the Smithsonian the brains of 49 impoverished people whose bodies were unclaimed between 1908 and 1912, records show.

Unlike many of Hrdlicka's procurers, von Hansemann included the names of the people whose brains he had taken. Despite having the details, the Smithsonian has not returned any of those brains.

## **OPEN FOR RESEARCH, THEN LARGELY FORGOTTEN**

As Hrdlicka built his collection, the brains were advertised in newspapers and magazines as available to researchers. In one case, he lent three to another scientist, according to an anthropology journal that Hrdlicka founded in 1918.

The extent of Hrdlicka's own research on the brains is unclear. When a professor wrote to him and asked about the differences he found between the brains of people of different races, he replied that research studies showed the superiority of White brains, without citing any studies of his own. He published a 1906 study on brain preservatives, recording the weight of human and animal brains and comparing how they fared in a chemical solution. But The Post found no other research on the brains by Hrdlicka.

While skulls and other bones were sometimes displayed at World's Fairs or traveling exhibits, The Post found no evidence that the Smithsonian's brain collection was ever publicly exhibited. Hrdlicka drafted proposals for the collection of brains to be included in Smithsonian exhibits on race, but the institution never agreed to fund them, according to Redman, the historian.

Redman found one instance in which casts of the brains were put on display: For the 1921 Second International Exhibition of Eugenics hosted at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Hrdlicka showcased three casts alongside the brains of primates. A report on the exhibit described the human brains as "racial brains, showing extremes of variation."

Hrdlicka managed the Smithsonian’s brain collection until he died at age 74 in 1943, in the midst of World War II and the Holocaust. By then, most researchers had started to abandon the baseless theories behind eugenics and race science, and interest in the collection dwindled. The Smithsonian acquired only four brains after Hrdlicka’s death, three of which were donated by the individuals or their families.

### Body parts collected by the Smithsonian by decade



For years, the brains lingered in storage, largely forgotten, until tribes and other activists in the 1990s forced the Smithsonian and other museums to begin to repatriate Native American remains. In 2010, the collection was moved from the Natural History Museum to the Maryland storage facility. Asked about the current condition of the brains, Burgess and Bunch both said they had not seen them. Burgess said they are stored in a temperature-regulated room under “the highest museum conservation standards.”



The Smithsonian said the brain collection is no longer studied. Other than a 1999 assessment by an expert to verify the identity of one brain, there are no records of any research after Hrdlicka's death, officials said.

Researchers, however, sometimes still make use of other human remains in the museum's possession. Douglas Owsley, a curator in the museum's biological anthropology division, said he uses the collections for studies on historical communities and populations, and the skeletal remains as references to help identify human remains for law enforcement in criminal cases.

The Smithsonian announced **temporary restrictions** on the use and collection of any human remains this January. Officials said research today must be approved by two top Smithsonian officials. Almost all of the human remains are in storage, but the Natural History Museum has a few human skeletons on display, including those of people who donated their own remains and Egyptian mummies.

Officials declined to allow reporters to view the space in which the brains are stored, saying they were doing so out of respect for the deceased. The institution says it now allows only descendants or members of related communities to view the brains.

Five people told The Post they were granted access in the past. Patricia Afable, a Filipino anthropologist who once worked at the Smithsonian, had been studying the Filipinos at the 1904 World's Fair in the 1990s when she learned about the brains taken at the exhibition and went to see them. Horrified, Afable began speaking to them in her grandmother's language, Ibaloy, she said. "You're here," she recalled saying.

## SLOW REPATRIATION

The Smithsonian largely has its own set of rules as a nonprofit, taxpayer-subsidized entity. Created by Congress in 1846, the institution receives more than \$1 billion in federal money annually — two-thirds of its total budget — and is staffed mostly by federal employees. But it is not a government agency.

In 1989, Congress passed legislation creating the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, requiring the institution to inventory its Native American remains and send those lists to relevant tribes. About half of the remains held by the Smithsonian are Native American, officials said.

The following year, a more extensive repatriation law for Native American remains was passed for all museums that received federal funding, except the Smithsonian's. That law also required those museums to notify tribes about their Native American holdings, and that those notices be published by the secretary of the interior. The law also created a committee to report progress on repatriations to Congress.

For about two decades, the Smithsonian did not publicize its progress on repatriating Native American holdings. In 2012, the Smithsonian began providing Congress with the information at the recommendation of the Government Accountability Office.

The Smithsonian has no obligation to offer repatriation for what it refers to as "culturally unaffiliated remains," which are Native American remains that were not determined by the museum to be from a specific federally recognized tribe or Native Hawaiian community. In 2020, however, it adopted a policy to review repatriation requests for those remains.

The Smithsonian is not subject to federal open records law, but has a policy that it says “follows the spirit” of such rules. The Natural History Museum released an inventory of all of its human remains to The Post that included the states or countries where remains originated but declined to disclose cities or specific addresses. Burgess, formerly with the museum’s anthropology department, said the institution wants to protect graves from being looted.



The National Museum of Natural History.  
(Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)



The National Museum of the American Indian.  
(Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

Bunch said that he is open to increasing transparency at the institution, and that he welcomed scrutiny if it helped improve the Smithsonian. “If there are steps we need to take, we will,” Bunch said. “I am very confident that I am less interested in secrecy and more interested in openness.”

The Natural History Museum said its leadership has taken steps to repatriate remains outside of Native American communities. In 2015, the museum created an international repatriation policy for human remains under its director, Kirk Johnson, according to Burgess.

The next year, the Natural History Museum conducted its first international repatriation of human remains, returning the remains

of 54 Indigenous people, including the heads of four Maori people, to New Zealand. The only international repatriations have been to New Zealand, Australia and Canada.

Like the Smithsonian, museums across the world are grappling with their collections of human remains. In Philadelphia, community protests recently pushed the Penn Museum to take steps to bury the skulls of likely enslaved Black Philadelphians that were part of collections by Samuel George Morton, a world-renowned scientist from the University of Pennsylvania.



The bones of several hundred Native Alaskans are reburied in Larsen Bay in 1991 after local residents sought to have the remains returned by the Smithsonian Institution for years. (Marion Stirrup/AP)

Bill Billeck, the former program manager of the Natural History Museum's domestic repatriation office, said the office's workload and limited staffing often prevent it from initiating contact with

families and other groups. The office, which has an annual budget of about \$1.5 million, is handling 13 repatriation claims that include about **2,000 sets of human remains**.

“Sometimes we can be proactive in our assessments,” said Billeck, who recently retired. “Other times, we’re just reactive because there’s enough work for us to do. We don’t have enough staff.” He commended the institution’s progress on repatriation, saying that the Smithsonian has some of the “largest responsibilities” worldwide. “I don’t think any other museum in the country comes close to how much we’ve done,” he said.

A **ProPublica investigation** published in January found that at least three institutions with far fewer human remains than the Smithsonian — the Interior Department, the University of Alabama and the Tennessee Valley Authority — have returned or made available for return over 10,000 remains each, more than the 6,322 sets of remains the Natural History Museum said it has returned or offered for repatriation.

Smithsonian officials noted that in some cases, descendants or cultural heirs want remains to stay in museum custody, often because of religious considerations. Bunch, the Smithsonian secretary, said the institution may need to find ways to commemorate the remains that cannot be identified, such as an honorary mass grave in Arlington National Cemetery.

Some tribes and other families believe the institution needs to move faster. Dyan Youpee, the director of the cultural resources department for the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes in Montana, said she contacted the institution to ask about tribal objects and remains in its possession, including the skull of a child.

“If I put in a request, it’s still going to take 10-plus years because of the board, because of their policy ... because of their excuses for

being undermanaged,” she said. “The majority of tribal institutions can say the same, that we’re understaffed, but we’re making waves in our management. There’s no excuse.”

Smithsonian officials said they gave her no timetable. They have said that research required for repatriation is challenging and complex, and that they have worked hard to strengthen the relationship between Native American communities and the museum.

AlexAnna Salmon, the president of the Igiugig Village Council in southwestern Alaska, said that in 2015 the tribal council requested the repatriation of remains that were taken by Hrdlicka in the 1930s. When the Natural History Museum sent the remains back to Alaska in 2017, Johnson, the museum director, traveled to the remote village for the reburial. “They never questioned my authority,” said Salmon, who joined the museum’s advisory board in 2020. “It was done with the utmost respect.”

Even when remains are repatriated, some people are still haunted by the harm done to their ancestors. In 2007, the Smithsonian returned the brain of a 10-year-old boy to a Tlingit family from Sitka, Alaska. The youngest of six children, George Grant had died in 1928 of tuberculosis in a government hospital in Juneau, where Firestone then removed his brain.

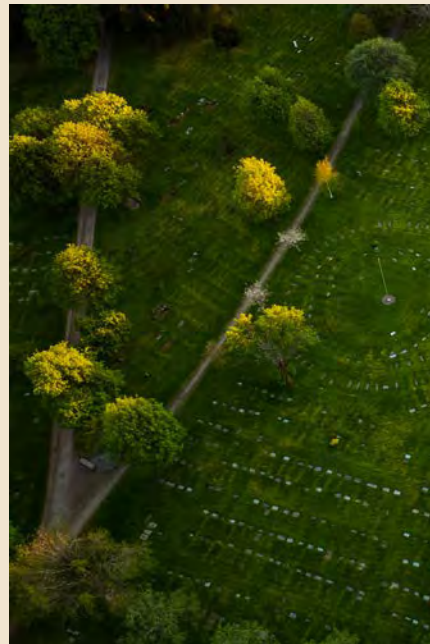
Grant’s brain is now buried in a family cemetery in Sitka, but his body is in an unmarked grave 90 miles away in Juneau. Lena Lauth, the granddaughter of Grant’s late sister, said she cannot forgive the Smithsonian. “How could they hold a child’s brain for 70 years, and know who he is?” she said. “It was my grandma’s pain, and now that she’s gone, it’s my pain.”



Lena Lauth places a cross above where the brain of George Grant, a relative, is buried in Sitka, Alaska. Firestone took his brain after he died in 1928 and sent it to Hrdlicka without permission. The brain was returned to the family in 2007. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)



A newspaper article about Hrdlicka on a research visit to Alaska. (Daily Alaska Empire, Nov. 5, 1933)



Grant's body is buried in an unmarked grave at a cemetery in Juneau, Alaska, while his brain is buried in a family burial site in Sitka. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

## BURIED WITHOUT HER BRAIN

As Mary Sara and her mother explored Seattle, reporters followed them with intense curiosity. Newspapers published photographs of the pair wearing thick, reindeer-skin coats called parkys and described the women in captions using a term offensive to many Sami people. “I think automobile riding is a lot of fun,” Sara told reporters. “At home I always ride in dog sleds and on reindeer.”

They had come to Seattle from Akiak, Alaska, in January 1933 at Firestone’s invitation so that he could perform cataract surgery on Sara’s mother, Kristina Ante, who was blind. Firestone had once run the hospital for Alaska Natives in their hometown and was waiting for them at the dock when they arrived, according to a newspaper article.

After only a week in Seattle, Sara fell ill with tuberculosis and was sent to a sanitarium. She stayed about four months, spending her 18th birthday there. And in May, as her mother started the voyage back to Alaska alone after regaining her sight, Sara’s health continued to decline. While her mother was on the ship, Sara died.

Documents do not say when Firestone removed her brain and sent it to the Smithsonian, but a newspaper reported that a funeral was held for Sara shortly after she died. The rest of her body was buried in a Lutheran cemetery in Seattle. The Post found no record that her parents allowed Firestone to take her brain.

Twelve years later, her cousin Martha Sara Jack was born in Alaska. Jack’s mother told stories about how Sara, her niece and best friend, had gone to Seattle and had plans to marry when she returned. Her mother described Sara as the “angel” who had left their family too soon.



Over time, Jack inherited mementos from her cousin: child-sized reindeer-skin boots that Sara had made, Christmas ornaments, and one of the newspaper photographs from Sara's first days in Seattle, showing her smiling on a hotel rooftop.



A photo of Sara at the home of a first cousin, Martha Sara Jack, in Wasilla, Alaska. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

After the family learned from The Post about Sara's brain, they emailed the Natural History Museum's repatriation office and asked for the institution to release the organ so they could bury it with her body in Seattle. Jack, a 77-year-old retired nurse and social worker, said she believed Sara's parents never knew that Firestone had taken her brain and sent it to the Smithsonian.

"That's a violation of anybody's trust or humanity," she said. "It's inhumane. It's not science anymore. It's like barbarism or ghoulish harvesting."

Asked about the family's concerns that they weren't notified about the brain by the museum, officials said they have worked primarily

on repatriation for Native American tribes and only recently begun to focus on other communities, such as Sara's.

In Seattle, a distant cousin of Sara's, Justin McCarthy, did not know about her existence until contacted by reporters. When The Post told him where she was buried, McCarthy realized that he drives by her grave every day on his way to work at the University of Washington's Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture. As a doctoral student in archaeology, he has long dreamed of working for the Smithsonian. He has been to the institution's research facility in Maryland and stood unknowingly in the same building as the remains of his relative.

One day in March, his mother, Rachel Twitchell-Justiss, flew in from Spokane so they could visit the Lutheran cemetery together, probably the first time relatives have visited Sara's grave. As they walked through the Seattle wind, they used information from the cemetery's office to find her burial plot.



(Jovelle Tamayo for The Washington Post)



Left: A newspaper article on Sara's death. The doctor who treated her mother for cataracts offered her brain to the Smithsonian. (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, May 29, 1933)

Above: Justin McCarthy, Sara's distant cousin, shows Sami clothing at the Burke Museum in Seattle. He did not know about her existence until reporters contacted him. (Jovelle Tamayo for The Washington Post)

McCarthy bent down to inspect the moss that blanketed her unmarked grave and compared it to the lichen her family would have used in Alaska to feed reindeer, commonly called reindeer moss. The two stood briefly in silence before McCarthy pulled out his phone to play a traditional Sami song called a joik.

Standing over her grave, they resolved to get her a headstone. The next month, the Smithsonian's board approved giving Sara's brain to the family. But officials rejected their request to pay for the burial and a headstone, which could cost an estimated \$6,400. Billeck, the former program manager of the repatriation office, said in an email to the family that "all past returns of human remains" have excluded burial expenses.

The family does not know how they will fund it, but they plan to bury Sara's brain with her body in Seattle. "We can't change what happened," Twitchell-Justiss said. "But we can change how she's honored and respected."

### **CORRECTION**

A previous version of this article incorrectly said that George Sternberg was the U.S. surgeon general. He was the U.S. Army surgeon general. The article has been corrected.

### **About The Collection**

A Washington Post investigative series on human brains and other body parts held by the Smithsonian.

Have a tip or story idea about the collection? Email our team at [thecollection@washingtonpost.com](mailto:thecollection@washingtonpost.com).

### **Methodology**

To accurately reflect the racism that was common at the time in newspaper articles and official documents, The Post chose to show original records that contain language considered offensive by modern standards.

To analyze the Smithsonian's collection, The Post requested and obtained inventories of human remains from the National Museum of Natural History. Those inventories included location, year, and an accession or catalogue number. Reporters obtained demographic data from public accession files at the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

By comparing inventories with accession files, The Post determined that at least 268 brains had been collected to date. That includes 255 brains the museum still has in its holdings, four brains that have been repatriated, and nine brains that have been cremated, records show. The Post found records indicating that additional brains were sent to the museum but are no longer in its possession. The Smithsonian declined to research the status of some of those brains and said it would be unable to account for all brains because of prior collecting and documentation practices.

### **About this story**

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the following object  
(collected with/without  
the aid of a Museum outfit):

THE COLLECTION

## THE SMITHSONIAN'S 'BONE DOCTOR' SCAVENGED THOUSANDS OF BODY PARTS

By Nicole Dungca, Claire Healy and Andrew Ba Tran

Aug. 15 at 1:00 a.m.

<https://wapo.st/44ji5Nv>

Click on the above URL or copy into your web browser to view online

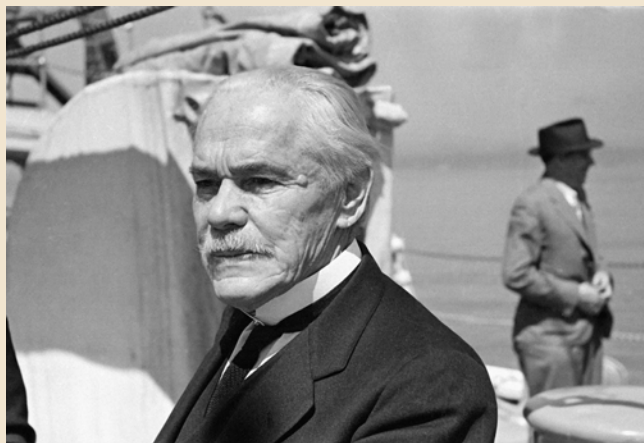
Word spread among the Alutiiq children in Larsen Bay, Alaska: An anthropologist from Washington, D.C., would pay them 10 cents to find him human bones.

Ales Hrdlicka, a Smithsonian anthropologist, repeatedly traveled to this small community on Kodiak Island in the 1930s to exhume Indigenous graves. In what amounted to industrial-scale pillaging, he and a small team disinterred the remains of about 1,000 people and shipped them back to the Smithsonian's U.S. National Museum, the precursor to the National Museum of Natural History.



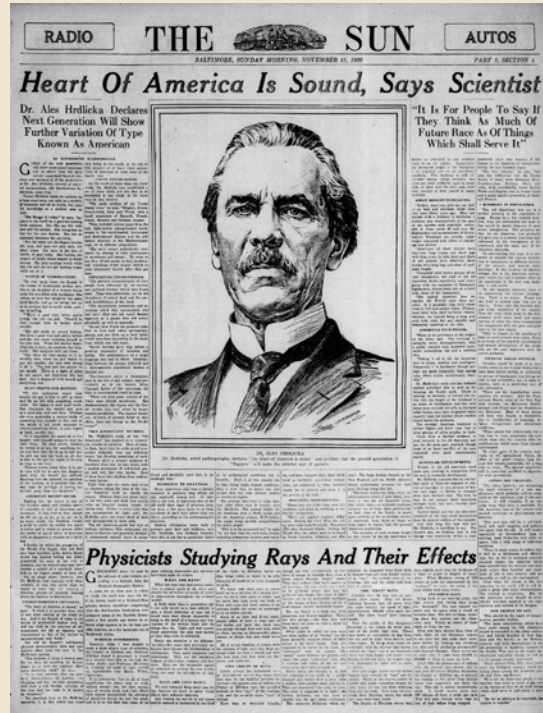
The Smithsonian National Museum in 1910. It is now the Museum of Natural History. (Library of Congress)

“He’s thought of, kind of like, as a ghoul,” said April Laktonen Counciller, whose Alutiiq grandfather grew up in Larsen Bay and told her stories about Hrdlicka’s excavations and the offer to pay dimes for skeletal remains. “They called him ‘the bone doctor.’”



Anthropologist Ales Hrdlicka aboard a Coast Guard ship on his way to Alaska for a research expedition in 1938. (AP)

But elsewhere, his reputation at the time was storied.



Hrdlicka was featured in newspapers frequently. (Baltimore Sun, Nov. 21, 1926)

Hrdlicka (hurd-lich-kuh) was one of the world's leading anthropologists, and he ran the Smithsonian's division of physical anthropology for about 40 years. He amassed an enormous collection of body parts and used his research in Alaska to propagate the theory that the first people to populate North America crossed a land bridge at the Bering Strait. For years he dominated the still hotly contested debate over when these people first traversed the Pacific.

He considered people who were not White to be inferior and collected their brains and other body parts, convinced that he could decipher race primarily through physical characteristics, according to his writings and speeches. He was celebrated in his time, testifying before Congress and as an expert witness in court, and sought out by the FBI to help with cases.



Since his death in 1943 at age 74, Hrdlicka's name and the human remains that he methodically amassed over 40 years from Alaska and elsewhere have faded from public view. But his macabre legacy endures: The Smithsonian has in storage at least 30,700 body parts, including 255 brains, most of which were collected by Hrdlicka or at his direction.

He preyed on Indigenous populations, willing to go to extreme, sometimes brutal, lengths to acquire remains. In Mexico, he cut the heads from the bodies of Indigenous people who had been massacred by the government. In St. Louis, he expected that some of the Indigenous Filipino people on display at the 1904 World's Fair would die, so he made plans to take their brains. On one trip to Peru, he collected more than 2,000 skulls.

At the Smithsonian, he recruited an international network of anthropologists and doctors to help him scavenge for body parts, advising them on how to do so without attracting notice. Researchers sent him human remains from the Philippines, South Africa, Malaysia, Germany and across the United States, collected from hospitals, morgues and graveyards. He took at least 57 brains from Black people who died in the United States.



Hrdlicka at an excavation in an unspecified country in Africa in 1925. (Sueddeutsche Zeitung/Alamy Stock Photo)

He was widely viewed as an expert on race and human variation, and believed that collecting body parts would help with the discovery of the origins of people in the Americas. He was featured in newspapers frequently, and his beliefs influenced U.S. government policies on race. Some of the body parts he amassed were for the Smithsonian's "racial brain collection" and "racial collection of pelvises," which he attempted to use to compare races.

Decades after his death, public sentiment on his racist beliefs and his methods began to turn. By 1991, residents in Larsen Bay had forced the museum to return the bones of about 1,000 individuals he disinterred. But within the Smithsonian at the time, some lamented the loss of the collection and continued to celebrate his legacy.

Rachel Watkins, a biocultural anthropologist, worked at the Natural History Museum in the early 2000s after the Smithsonian had reckoned with what he had done in Larsen Bay. She recalled when employees at the museum gathered around a cake to commemorate the anthropologist's birthday more than 50 years after his death.

"He was ... deified," said Watkins, now an associate professor and department chair of anthropology at American University. "It's like Thomas Jefferson at [the University of Virginia]."

Over the past year, The Washington Post examined thousands of documents, including Hrdlicka's personal letters, publications and field notes, and interviewed dozens of Smithsonian officials, experts, descendants and members of affected communities to piece together one of the most extensive looks at his work and collections to date.

As The Post investigated, Lonnie G. Bunch III, the secretary of the Smithsonian, apologized publicly for the way the museum had collected many human remains in the past and created a task force that will decide on the proper way to treat the bodies and body parts in the institution's possession. In an interview, he said that the institution must do more to acknowledge Hrdlicka's racism.

"Let us be clear that this is not acceptable and that we need to find ways to make amends," said Bunch, who took on his role in 2019. "We need to figure out how we make clear who he was, but also that whole field of scientific racism, what its impact was."

Natural History Museum officials also said the Smithsonian apologized for the pain caused by Hrdlicka and "anyone else at the Institution who acted unethically in the name of science, regardless of the era in which their actions occurred."



Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III has apologized on behalf of the institution for bodies and body parts that were collected without consent. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

In 1987, the Larsen Bay Tribal Council passed a resolution asking the Smithsonian to return the remains Hrdlicka took. The ensuing battle helped lead to federal laws in 1989 and 1990 that required museums nationwide to take steps to repatriate remains with ties to Native American, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian communities.

Natural History Museum officials said that since then, they have returned or offered to return more than 6,000 sets of remains. No laws require the Smithsonian to inventory or return the remains taken from other communities.

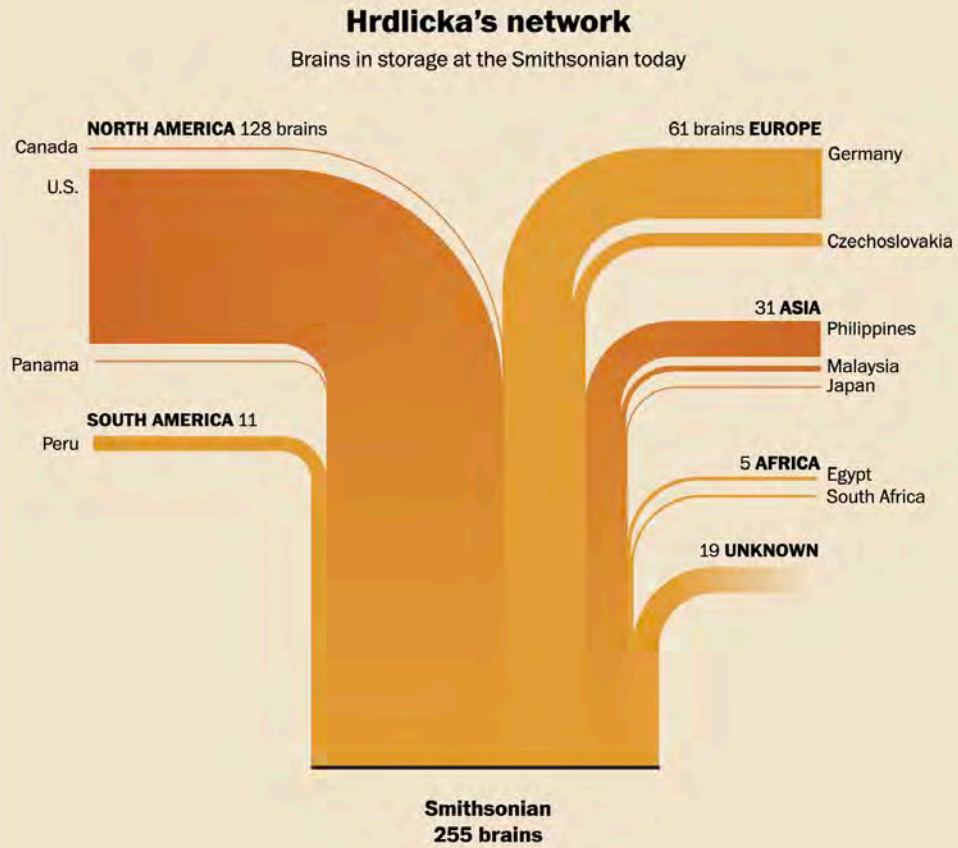
Nationwide, museums are struggling with how to reconcile collections gathered under circumstances that critics contend were little more than theft. Brandie Macdonald, the executive director of the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, said the field is changing for the better. But the communities that were preyed upon need to have a hand in deciding how to move forward, she said.

“Museums have so much power within the community and they’re given so much power because of our place in the community. Right? We’re seen as the experts,” said Macdonald, a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation. “Museums need to humble their egos and realize that they’re not the experts, that the communities are the experts.”

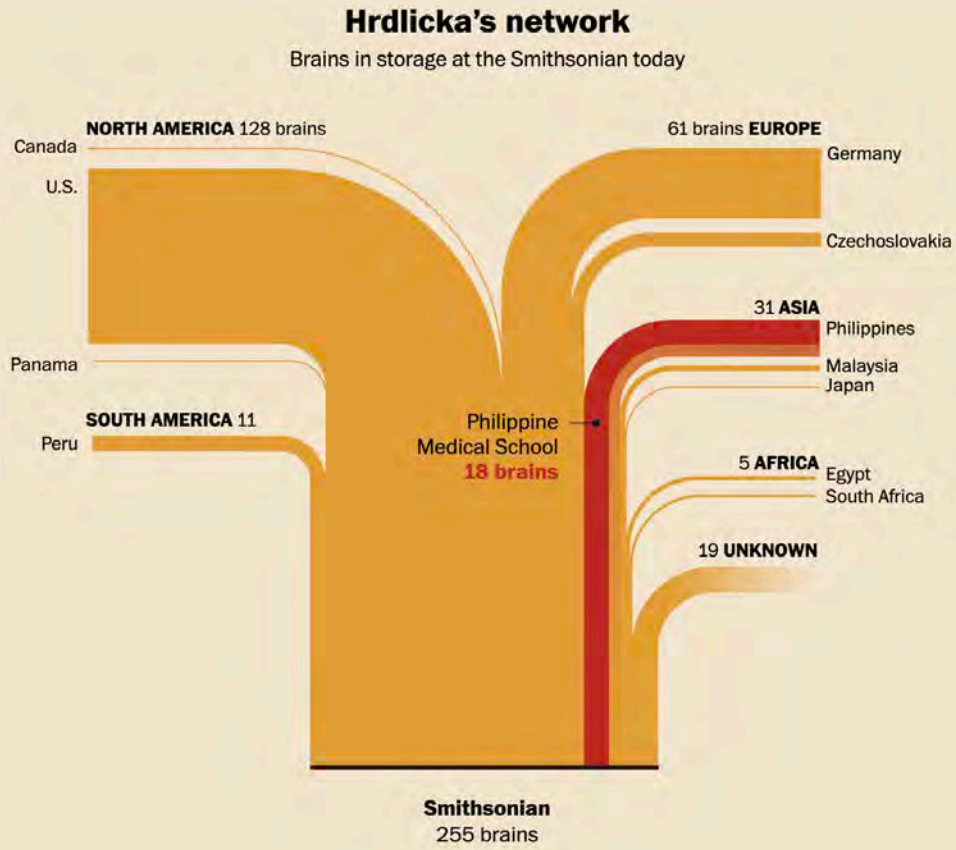
Hrdlicka’s fixation on race began early in his career.

As a child, he emigrated with his parents from what is now the Czech Republic to New York. A bout with typhoid fever at age 19 inspired him to pursue medicine at the Eclectic Medical College of New York City in the 1890s, and shortly afterward he worked as a physician and attended the New York Homeopathic Medical College in Manhattan.

During an internship at the New York Middletown State Homeopathic Hospital, he developed an obsession with measuring the human body, convinced that his interest would yield important scientific discoveries about human variation. At the time, other anthropologists, scientists and doctors scoured the world for body parts, eager to research human origins and compare races.



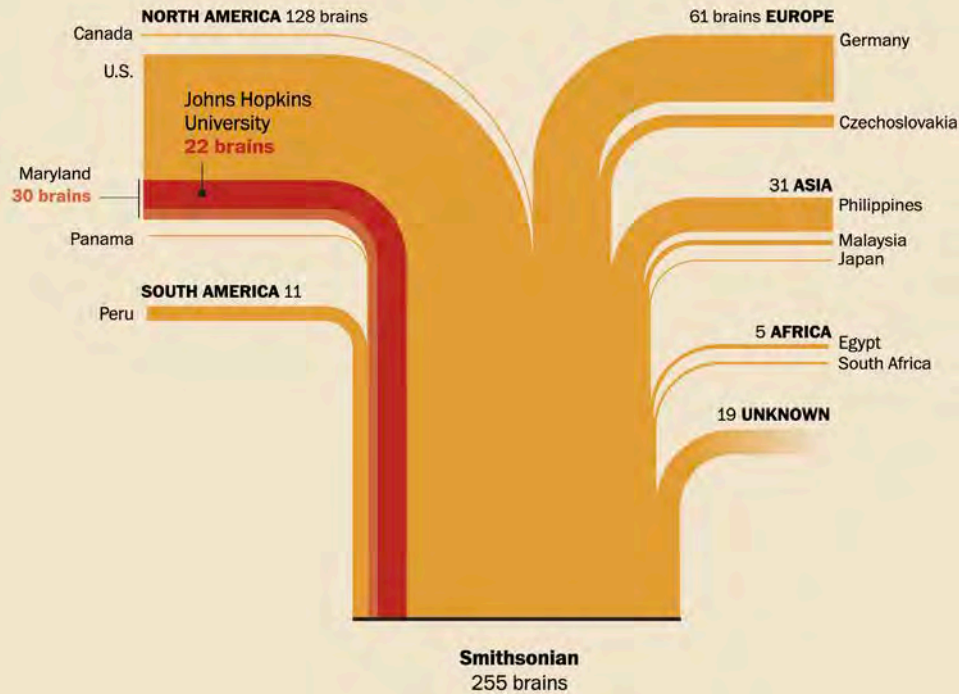
The 255 brains in Smithsonian storage came from five continents.



In Asia, doctors at the **Philippine Medical School** sent 18 brains.

### Hrdlicka's network

Brains in storage at the Smithsonian today



In Maryland, doctors at **Johns Hopkins University** sent 22 brains. Doctors at the University of Maryland sent eight brains to the Smithsonian.

In 1898, Hrdlicka published a study of 908 White children and 192 Black children at the New York Juvenile Asylum and the Colored Orphan Asylum in New York. He measured and compared their body parts, including genitals. He wrote that “inferiorities” in the children were probably the result of neglect or malnutrition, not hereditary. But he noted “remarkable” physical differences based on race.

To collect body parts as an anthropologist for the Pathological Institute of the New York State Hospitals, he sought out locations where the poor and vulnerable would die. He publicly urged policymakers to adopt laws allowing anthropologists to take unclaimed bodies — those that had not been identified by relatives or came from



families who could not afford to bury them — from hospitals and graveyards.

While working for the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan in 1902, Hrdlicka traveled to Sonora, Mexico, where the army had slaughtered an estimated 124 men, women and children from the Yaqui tribe. Hrdlicka cut off the heads of Yaqui men killed in the Sierra Mazatán massacre and brought 12 skulls back to the museum to incorporate them into his studies on race, according to his publications and investigations by anthropologists, including Ventura Perez. Hrdlicka also took the 13th skull of a Yaqui man who was hanged from a tree. The remains were later returned to a consortium of Yaqui groups.

Hrdlicka's publications on creating a collection of human remains for scientists inspired the Smithsonian to start its division of physical anthropology at the National Museum of Natural History, according to one newspaper account read into the congressional record.

Hired in 1903 as an assistant curator at the Smithsonian, he quickly built a network of people who would collect body parts on his behalf: researchers in South Africa and the Philippines, and doctors and professors at universities around the United States. He told them the Smithsonian would reimburse them for the work.

“He was single-mindedly obsessed with collecting bodies and body parts for the Smithsonian Institution,” said Samuel J. Redman, a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, who has written extensively about museum collections of human remains.

While setting up exhibits for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition, Hrdlicka sent anthropologist Adalbert Schück across Africa to mea-



Samuel J. Redman, a historian at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, who has written about human remains collections, said Hrdlicka “was single-mindedly obsessed with collecting bodies and body parts for the Smithsonian Institution.” (Josh Reynolds for The Washington Post)

sure children and collect human remains. The Smithsonian received more than 1,000 sets of remains from the exposition, including two brains of Zulu people.

“Do not go away until after you have made as big a collection of skeletal material as possible,” Schüick, who was in Zanzibar, was directed in a 1914 letter that was unsigned but appeared to be written by Hrdlicka. “The natives must not, of course, be taken into confidence, in fact, they should know nothing about such collecting. If you will need help get some good white man.”

Of the more than 30,700 human remains that the Natural History Museum still holds in storage, more than 19,000 — or about 62 percent — were collected while Hrdlicka was head of the Smithsonian’s physical anthropology division, according to a Post analysis.

Nearly 23,000 of the human remains came from North America. Another 5,000 were collected from South America, almost entirely from Peru. During a 1910 trip to Peru, Hrdlicka collected thousands of skulls and bones from graves in Pachacamac, an ancient settlement outside Lima that predates the Incan empire, and the valley of Chicama, located outside the northern city of Trujillo. The Smithsonian paid \$120 to ship them in boxes to the United States via Panama.

As he was getting ready to return to the United States, Hrdlicka wrote a letter to William Henry Holmes, a top Smithsonian official, to brag about the remains he had scavenged “for the most part, with my own hands.”

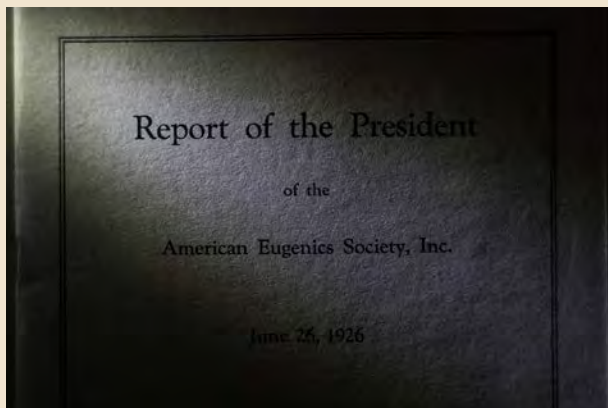
Hrdlicka’s own racist beliefs were featured in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, which was affiliated with the American Association of Physical Anthropologists. He helped found both organizations and they remain pioneering forces in the field of anthropology. The journal and association have since changed their names, replacing “physical anthropology” with “biological anthropology” to move away from the field’s early ties to debunked racial science.

“Much of Hrdlicka’s work has been discredited and his views are not the views of the association or the journal now,” said Trudy R. Turner, the editor in chief of the journal. “While it is important to know our history, it is not who we are now.”

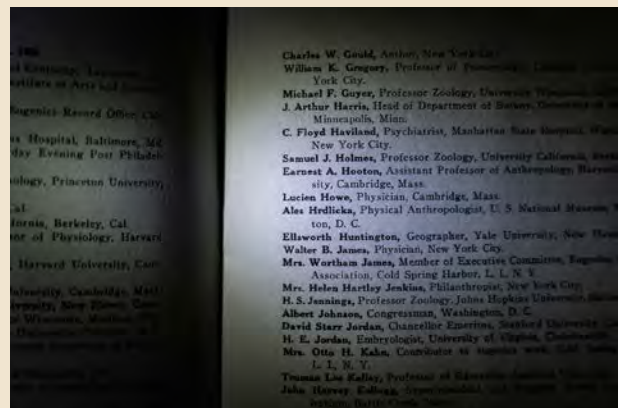
Hrdlicka believed that White people were superior to other races, followed by Asians and Native Americans. He ranked Black people at the bottom, proclaiming them to be a problem for America. When Bishop John William Hamilton wrote Hrdlicka in 1930 and asked about interracial relationships and whether Black people would become a large part of the American population, Hrdlicka



Documents collected by Hrdlicka are stored at the National Anthropological Archives in the Smithsonian Museum Support Center in Maryland. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)



A report from the American Eugenics Society is among the documents stored at the National Anthropological Archives. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)



A 1926 report from the American Eugenics Society that is stored at the archives shows that Hrdlicka was an advisory member of the group. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

wrote that mixed-race people “shall never dominate or control, for he has not the brain and other qualities that would be needed.”

“The only danger that needs to be apprehended as a result of this admixture with the American whites is that of a drag on the

progress of the whites,” he wrote. “It is by this that the future generations in this country will pay for the sins of their fathers who imported the negro into this country.”

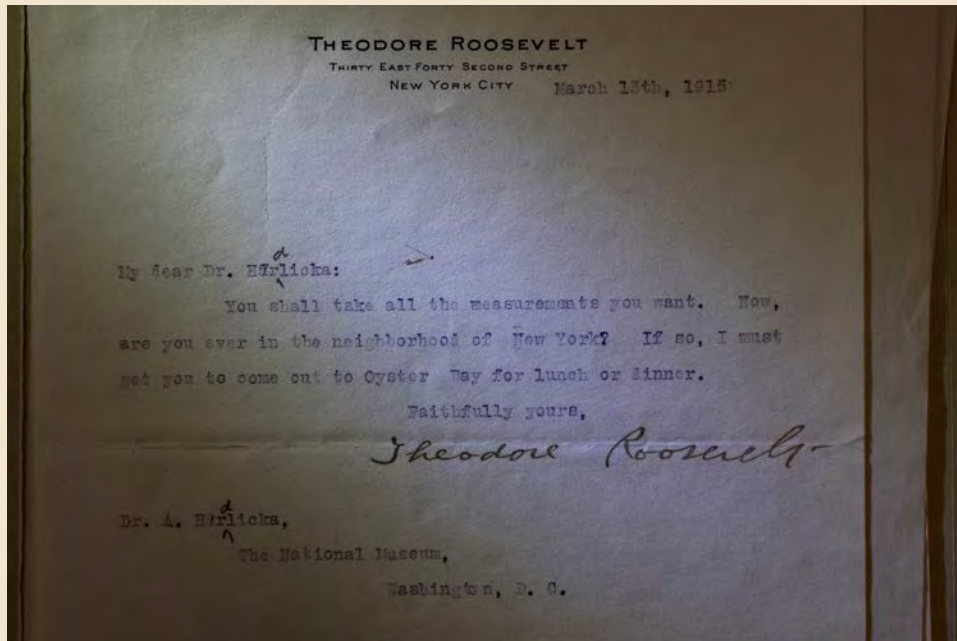
For years, Hrdlicka supported eugenics, the now-discredited theory that selective breeding could improve the human gene pool. It was often used to target people of color and those with disabilities, and later embraced in Nazi Germany. A 1926 pamphlet showed he was an advisory member of the American Eugenics Society.

A 1930 letter among Hrdlicka’s personal papers advised an official in the eugenics society how to gain support from doctors for forced sterilization, which the Supreme Court had legalized in 1927. The letter, which was unsigned but probably written by Hrdlicka, instructed the official to focus on sterilization of those who are “beyond restoration to the normal in mentality,” apparently a reference to people with mental illness.

“With such individuals the scientific sterilization of every individual will be a distinct and undeniable service to humankind,” he wrote. “If only this could be achieved it would be a great step forward in the right direction.”

In 1930, a newspaper article described Hrdlicka as saying that all humans share a common origin, and that physiological differences of race are only “skin-deep.” But he also continued to insist that evolution had made it so “all races are not equal” and that it was unlikely that certain races would “catch up.”

From his Smithsonian post, Hrdlicka corresponded with Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Both entertained his theories on war and immigration, according to correspondence. The FBI sometimes turned to Hrdlicka when it wanted to identify a person’s remains.



Hrdlicka corresponded with Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt from his Smithsonian post. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

In 1922, the chairman of the House Committee on Territories called Hrdlicka before Congress to testify on the “assimilability” of Japanese people, who were a large part of the population of Hawaii, then a U.S. territory. He told Congress that Japanese people assimilate with “difficulty” and are not as intelligent as White people.

In another case, the Justice Department hired Hrdlicka in 1915 to study Chippewa people on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota and determine who was a “full-blood” Native American based on their appearance for purposes of land rights. He examined 696 people, concluding each individual’s “blood status” based on their hair texture, skin, eyes, teeth, gums and other physical features, according to a Smithsonian report in 1916.

When Hrdlicka died, newspapers lamented the loss, heralding him as one of the country’s foremost anthropologists. An Associated Press obituary called him “one of the world’s most noted authorities on mankind’s history and development.”



Hrdlicka is buried at Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington. The Smithsonian is taking steps to reckon with his legacy. (Salwan Georges/ The Washington Post)

But he also faced increasing scrutiny: Some anthropologists from his time took issue with sloppy field methods that prioritized amassing as many specimens as possible, and chafed at his brusque and rude manner, according to Redman, the historian. Hrdlicka's attitude toward Indigenous communities and other races gained notoriety, especially as Native American communities organized to retrieve human remains from museums in the 1960s and 1970s.

In a 1983 letter preserved in the National Anthropological Archives, anthropologist Sherwood Washburn told a colleague he believed Hrdlicka "very nearly killed physical anthropology." "By the time I was in college, he was regarded as an old, disagreeable fool," wrote Washburn, who died in 2000.

More than four decades after Hrdlicka's death, the Larsen Bay Tribal Council kicked off a process that represented a sea change in how museums repatriated human remains to tribes, and that would affect Hrdlicka's collections for years to come.

In 1987, the council passed the resolution that asked the National Museum of Natural History to return human remains and artifacts from Hrdlicka's excavations. At that point, the Smithsonian's policy had generally allowed the return of human remains to descendants if the individual whose body parts had been taken was identified by name. But with the Larsen Bay repatriation request, the council was largely seeking ancient remains from unidentified individuals.

The Smithsonian argued that Hrdlicka's field notes showed that some local workers had assisted him in his excavations. Smithsonian anthropologists said that the scientific community would lose invaluable resources if the bones were returned, and that the remains had little connection to modern-day tribes. Some residents, however, disputed that Hrdlicka had permission to exhume the remains and wanted the Smithsonian to broaden its policy on who could seek repatriation for body parts.

In 1991, the secretary of the Smithsonian concluded that the remains should be returned to Larsen Bay community members. By then, battles between tribes and major museums had influenced Congress to pass repatriation laws. The Larsen Bay case would be one of the most consequential repatriation efforts in the Smithsonian's history.

At the time, some employees in the Smithsonian's physical anthropology division worried that they were going to lose access to the collections Hrdlicka had assembled, according to Stephen Loring, an anthropologist and archaeologist who works in another division. In 1994, Loring and Miroslav Prokopec, a Czech anthropologist who died in 2014, wrote about Hrdlicka's life in a book about the repatriation of remains to Larsen Bay.

"The collection ... was Hrdlicka's pride, a great scientific assemblage salvaged from the ravages of time," **they wrote**. "This unassailable



scientific monument to one man's collecting zeal is under attack. The future of the collection, which took the 'bone doctor' some 40 years to amass and involved travels to remote parts of the world, along with much energy, expense, diplomacy, and effort, seems uncertain."



Hrdlicka photographs residents of Nikolski during a trip to the Aleutian Islands in Alaska in 1938. (Alan G. May papers, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage)

Loring said that he has long supported the repatriation of such remains, but that some anthropologists felt the Smithsonian collections would be "threatened" by cases like Larsen Bay and other repatriation laws.

Some said Hrdlicka helped legitimize the field of physical anthropology, and the American Association of Biological Anthropologists gave a prize in his honor — the Ales Hrdlicka Prize — until 2020, when the organization stopped giving awards named after anthropologists.

The association, which Hrdlicka helped found, has grappled with his legacy in recent years. “Even though Hrdlicka was instrumental in forming the association, and we continue to acknowledge his role in this, his academic research has long been discredited,” Leslea Hlusko, the president of the association, wrote in an email. “If you ask around, you will find that most biological anthropologists do not ignore past scholars such as Hrdlicka; to ignore them is to forget the harm that was caused by them.”

Publicly, the Smithsonian notes Hrdlicka’s contributions in a few paragraphs scattered across its website, **calling** him “one of the world’s most prominent anthropologists” and crediting him with **starting** the institution’s forensic anthropology work and **leading** its physical anthropology division for 40 years.

In Alaska, Counciller is now the executive director of the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository on Kodiak Island. Decades after she first heard about Hrdlicka from her grandfather, she assists other tribes with repatriation efforts.

In Larsen Bay, she said, people rarely speak of Hrdlicka. The years-long fight to repatriate her ancestors’ remains brings her a sense of pride. And to her, the way for the Smithsonian to properly reckon with Hrdlicka’s legacy is simple.

“Return the human remains to their home communities and help make sure that they can be reburied or whatever the tribal community wants to see done,” she said. “That’s what they can do.”



Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository Executive Director April Laktonen Counciller stands at an archway with metal fish representing individual ancestors who have been repatriated to Alaskan tribes for reburial. (Mary Alexandra Painter/Alutiiq Museum)

Since Hrdlicka's death in 1943, the museum has acquired about 7,500 human remains, with one set of human remains being entered into the collection as recently as this January, according to museum documents.

The Smithsonian this year announced restrictions on accepting human remains and who can access them for research, but anthropologists and scientists have long studied the collections. A curator

in the Natural History Museum's biological anthropology division, Douglas Owsley, said he uses human remains in the museum's possession to research historical communities and populations and help identify human remains for law enforcement.

Bunch, the Smithsonian secretary, said that his goal is to return "as many human remains as possible," but that he wants the new task force to provide guidance on how best to do so. He said that also includes looking at new policies on research and acquisition of remains.

For decades, Smithsonian employees from the repatriation office have worked on returning tribal remains to their communities from an office in the Natural History Museum, the building where Hrdlicka once worked. And the institution still holds Hrdlicka's papers in nearly 300 boxes at the archives in its Museum Support Center across from a strip mall in Suitland, Md., where tens of thousands of body parts still sit in storage.

### **About The Collection**

A Washington Post investigative series on human brains and other body parts held by the Smithsonian.

Have a tip or story idea about the collection? Email our team at [thecollection@washpost.com](mailto:thecollection@washpost.com).

### **Methodology**

To accurately reflect the racism that was common at the time in newspaper articles and official documents, The Post chose to show original records that contain language considered offensive by modern standards.

### **About this story**

Regine Cabato, Alice Crites, Magda Jean-Louis, Monika Mathur and Nate Jones of The Washington Post contributed to this report.

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THE COLLECTION

## SEARCHING FOR MAURA

Maura came to St. Louis from the Philippines to be put on display at the 1904 World's Fair. Records suggest that, after her death, a Smithsonian anthropologist took part of her brain.

**By Claire Healy, Nicole Dungca and Ren Galeno**

<https://wapo.st/45z7bUT>

*Click on the above URL or copy into your web browser to view online*



It would have been her first time seeing snow.



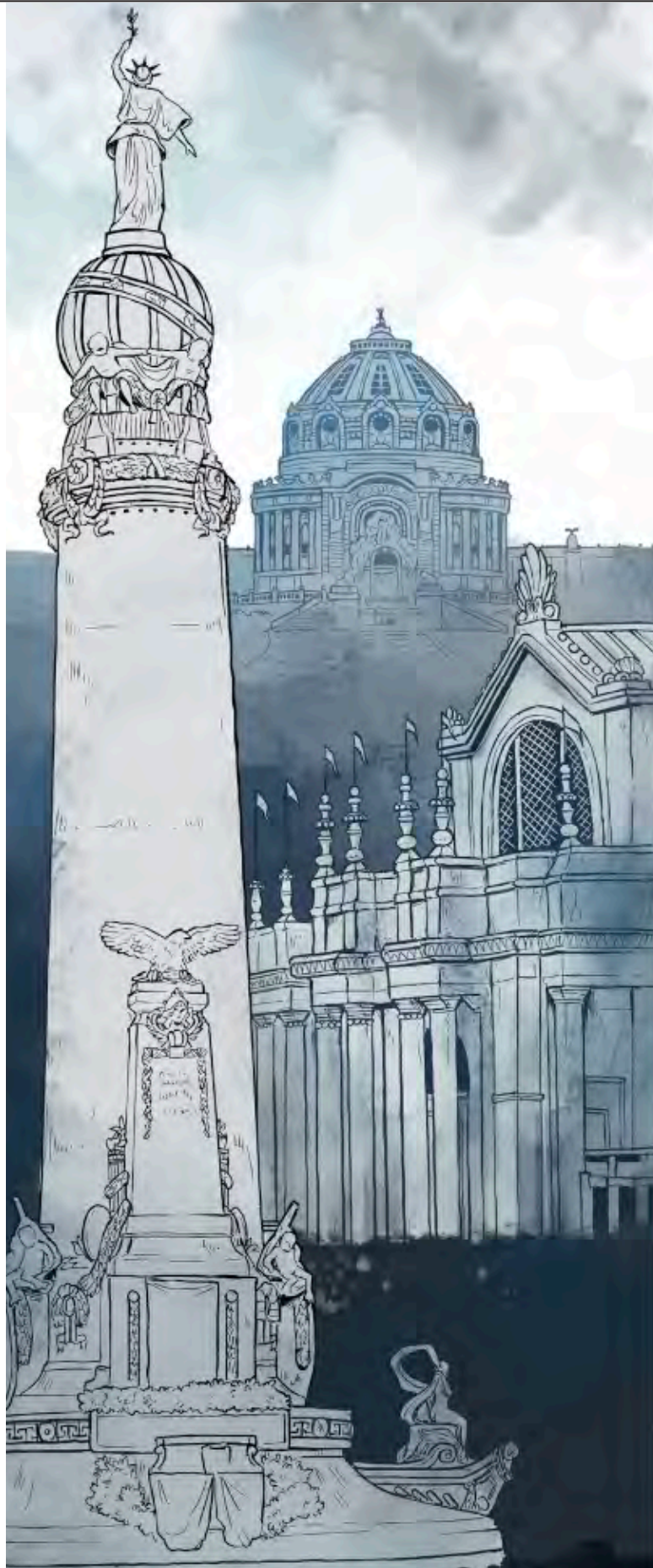


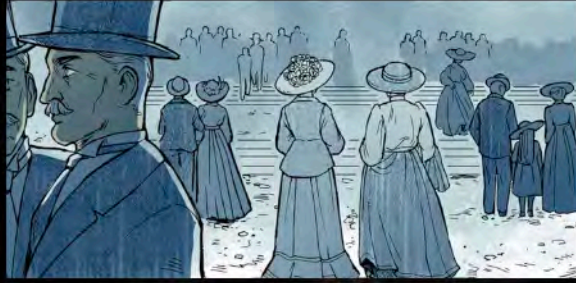


Nearly one month before, Maura had arrived in St. Louis, Missouri, from the Philippines.

She had come for the 1904 World's Fair, a historic exhibition of U.S. expansionism and innovation.



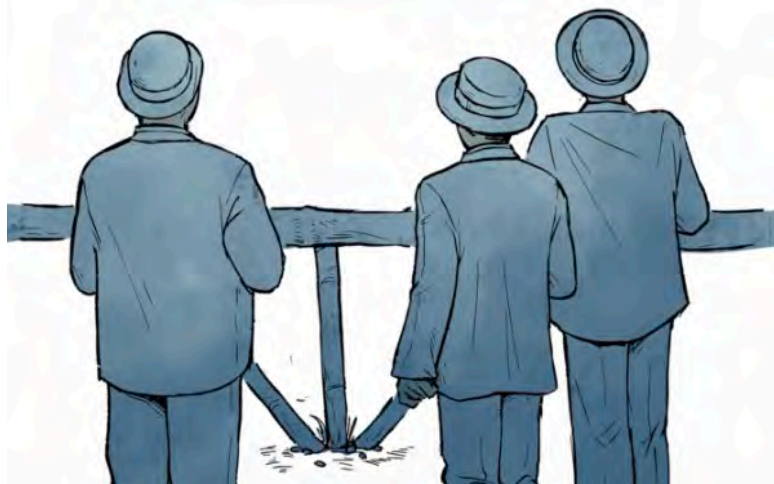




But Maura wasn't attending the fair.



She and her fellow Filipinos were there to be put on display.



# January 1904

There's a lot we don't know about Maura.



We couldn't find any photos of her.

We don't know who her family was. But here's what we have learned:



She was born around 1886.

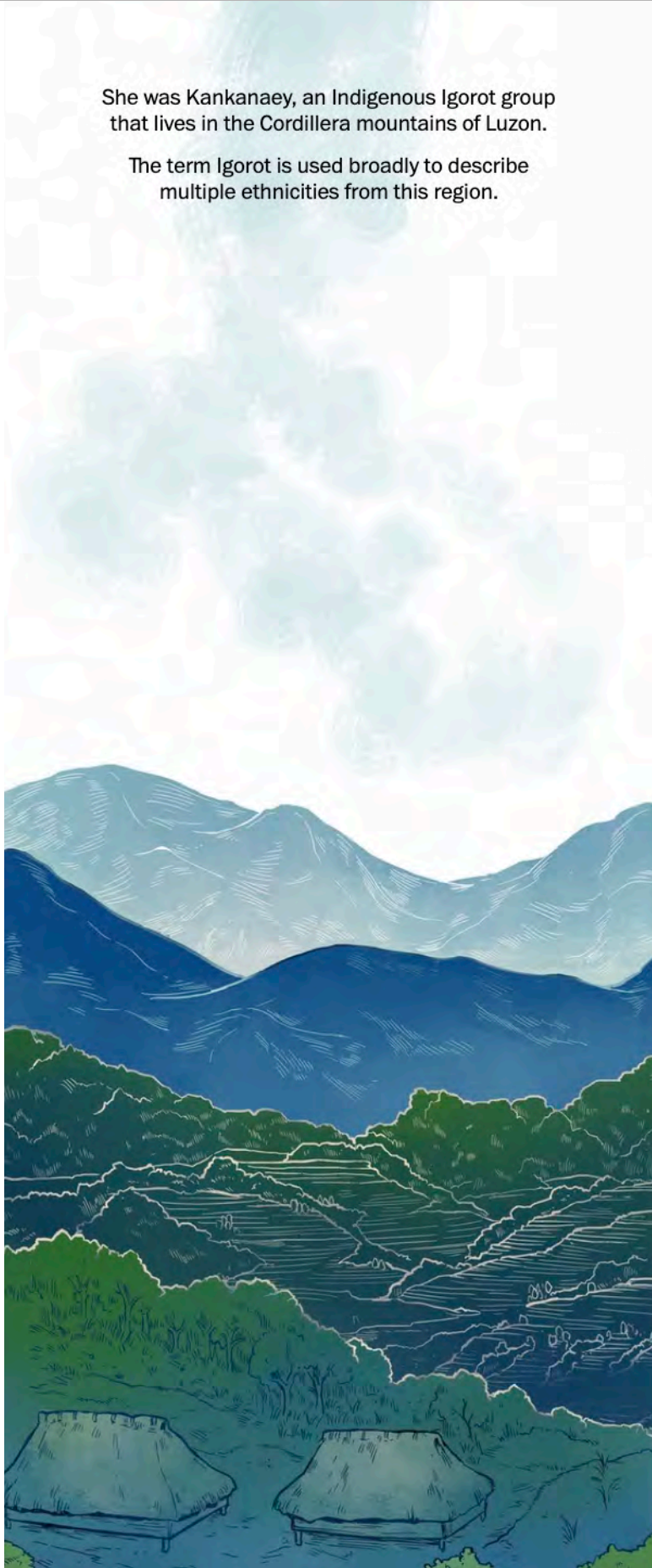
Based on her tattoos, an article in the St. Louis Republic said she was probably from a high-status family.

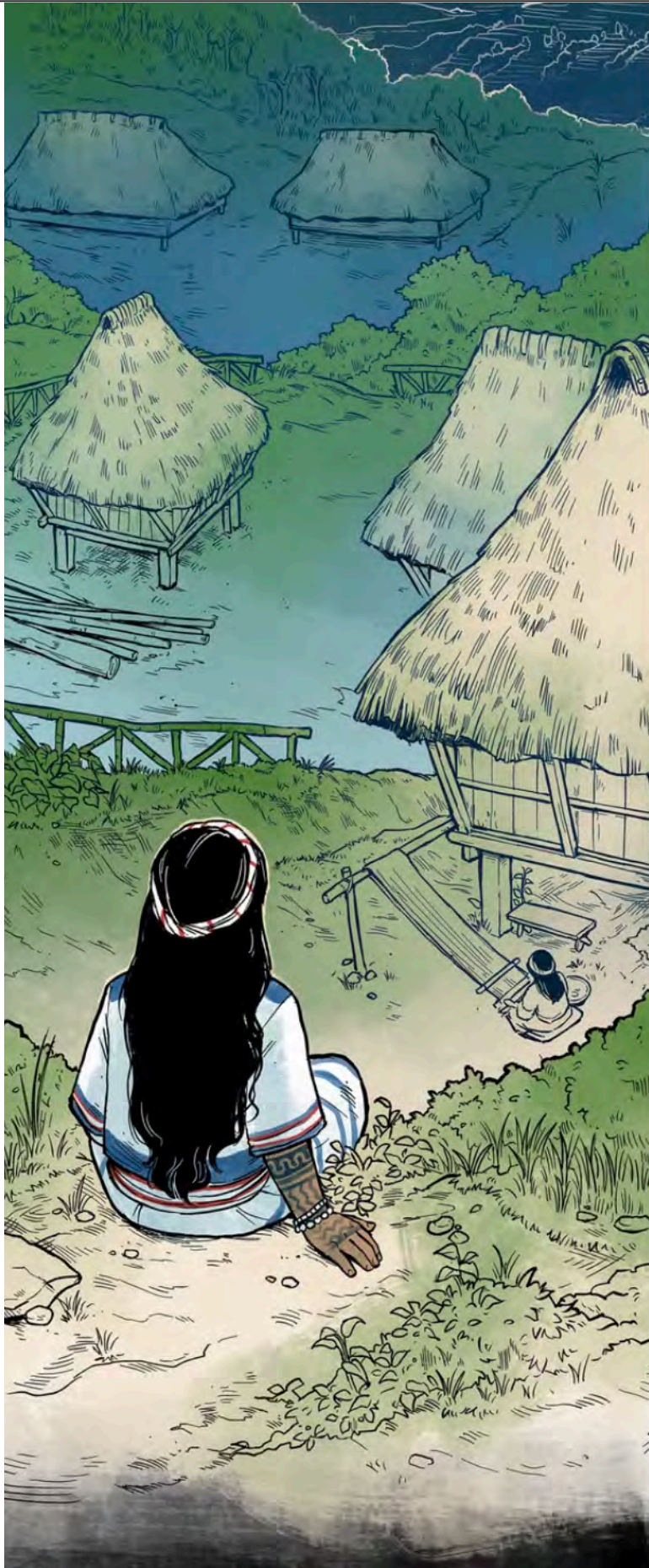


And we know she was from Suyoc, a mining community 200 miles north of Manila.

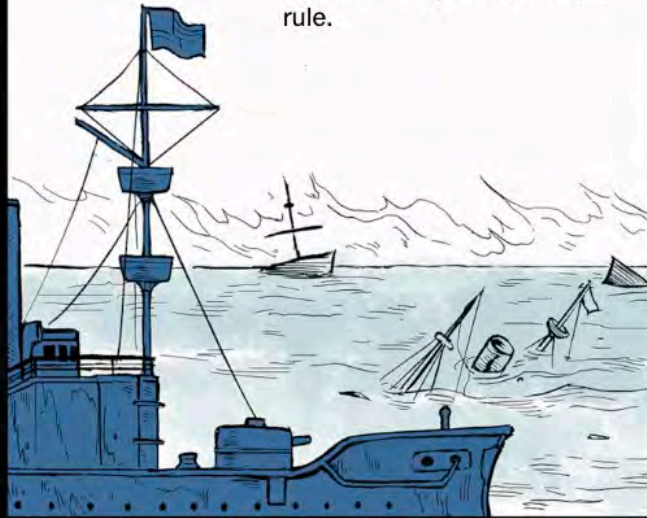
She was Kankanaey, an Indigenous Igorot group that lives in the Cordillera mountains of Luzon.

The term Igorot is used broadly to describe multiple ethnicities from this region.





When Maura was around 13, the Philippines became a U.S. territory after more than three centuries of Spanish colonial rule.



A three-year war for Philippine independence followed.





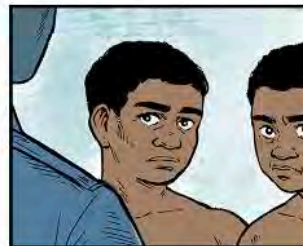


At least 220,000 Filipinos died.

After the United States claimed victory in 1902, William Howard Taft, then governor of the Philippines, was eager to use the World's Fair to show off the new territory and justify the occupation.



We don't know what the Americans promised.





But they began recruiting Indigenous people from all over the Philippine Islands to travel to St. Louis.



Maura, now about 18, was one of them.

## February 1904



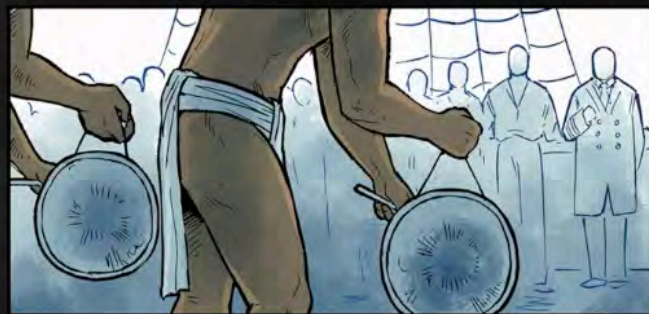
In Manila, Maura and more than 230 other Filipinos from across the islands boarded the Shawmut, a commercial ship.

For more than a month, they crossed the Pacific Ocean, packed together in the steerage quarters, seeing nothing but water on the horizon.





*"In the ship we slept at night in different compartments." — Kario, a man who was on the voyage, in a personal account he wrote sometime in the 1930s*



*"In the morning the Igorots danced on the deck to the outside of the ship with gongs." — Kario*

Some of the passengers were taking the journey for a new experience.

But others didn't know why they were on a boat to the United States.

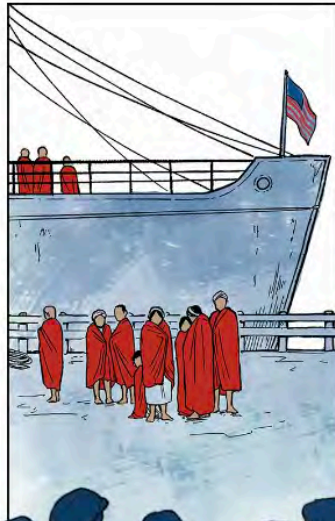


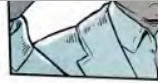
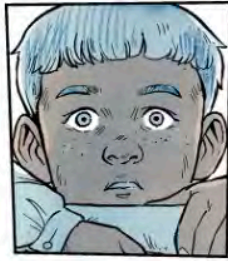
“On the interior of the ship we had nothing to do except to stay. None of us knew why we were carried to America.” — *Kario*

## March 1904



When the ship arrived in Tacoma, Washington, they were greeted by hundreds of curious locals.





They traveled by train from Tacoma to St. Louis for five days.





First it was unbearably hot.







The train operators sent a telegram:

"Chief of Igorrotes has just thrown his suit out the window. What shall we do?"

... ..

"Why did you not shut the windows?" officials responded.

... ..



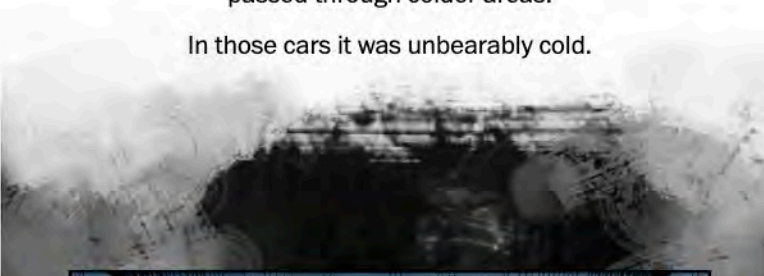
Using a derogatory term, the train workers replied:

“Did shut window, but they broke out the glass. Head hunters are getting uneasy with the heat ...”

... ..

Some of the train cars didn't have heat as they passed through colder areas.

In those cars it was unbearably cold.



“In America the cold was so great that my body could not stand it.” — *Kario*



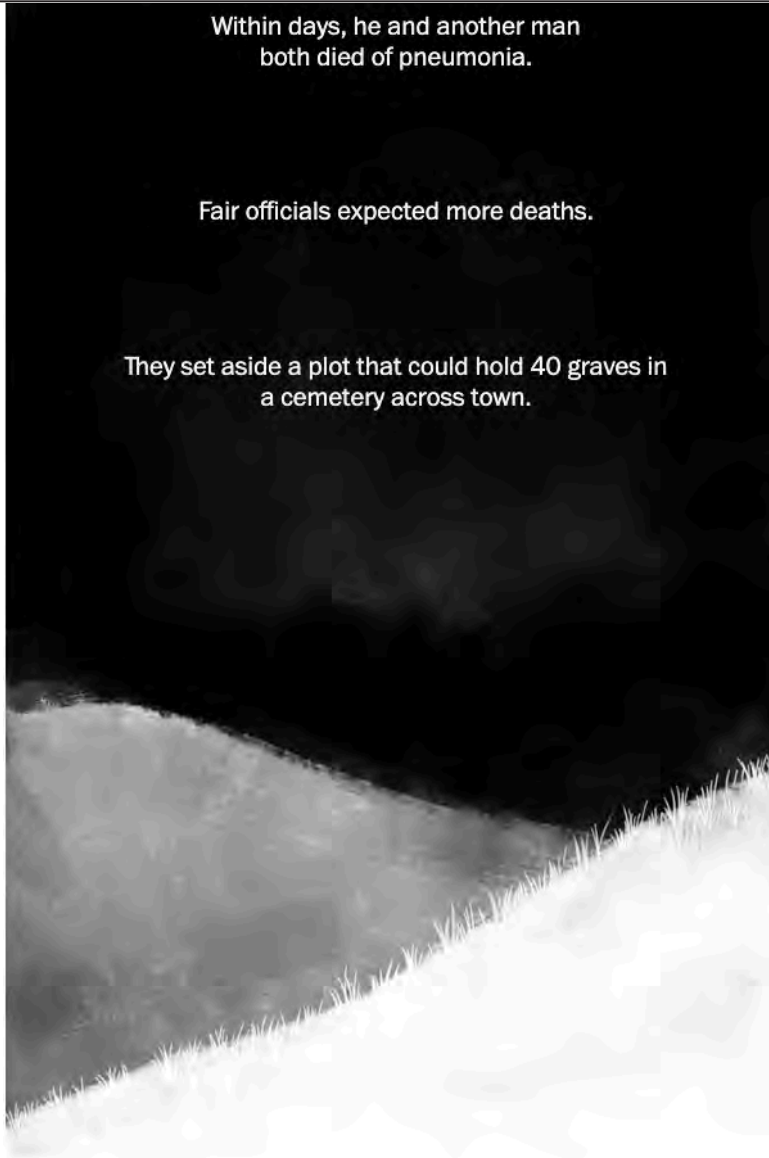
Upon arrival in St. Louis, a man named Ibag was rushed to nearby Mullanphy Hospital.



Within days, he and another man  
both died of pneumonia.

Fair officials expected more deaths.

They set aside a plot that could hold 40 graves in  
a cemetery across town.



The Suyoc group slept in bunk beds as the  
exhibits grew around them, a staged version of  
their own lives back in the Philippines.







**April 1904**

Pneumonia soon took hold of Maura too, and she was admitted to Mullanphy Hospital.





We can only speculate about her time there.





But we know it began to snow, a rarity for April in St. Louis.





The St. Louis Republic newspaper later reported that she shared her wish that her body be returned to the Philippines for burial.



Maura died a few days before the fair began.



Truman Hunt, the American assigned to the Igorot group, broke the news.





They mourned in a circle for hours.



Newspapers fixated on their funerary customs.

*St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat,*  
*Friday Morning, April 22, 1904.*

**PAGAN FUNERAL IN  
ST. LOUIS TO-MORROW**

WEIRD CEREMONIES OVER RE-  
MAINS OF FILIPINO WOMAN  
WHO DIED OF PNEU-  
MONIA.

The burial, death in the Filipino colony at



People from Maura's community went to view her body at the funeral home.



A member of the Suyoc group said a blessing. But they weren't allowed to carry out their traditional customs of preparing the body before burial.



Hunt promised that her body would be returned to the Philippines.

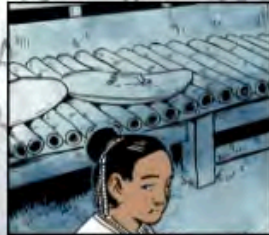
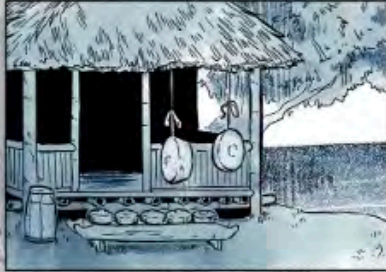




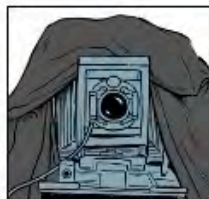
Down the street, the fair opened to the public.



The 47-acre Philippine Exposition became one of its most popular exhibits,



particularly the Igorot Village.





Their daily chores became entertainment for the fairgoers.



The men from Suyoc demonstrated how they checked the quality of ore, first by licking it.



Visitors thought they could taste the metal's qualities.

They were just removing the dirt to see it better.

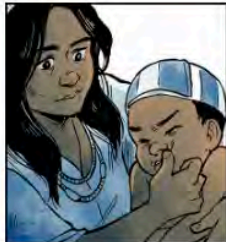
Fair officials pressured the Igorots to eat dogs several times a week for the crowds, even though they only did so on rare occasions back home.



That fueled a stereotype about Filipinos that lingers to this day.



They were called "savages" by fair officials and newspapers.



Some Filipinos grew tired of it.



Two Visayan women refused to attend the English school inside the fair, protesting how some Filipinos were showcased.



"All the Filipinos in our village are very angry to be called savages." — *Teresa Ramirez, in a letter printed in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.*





Meanwhile, the head of physical anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution's U.S. National Museum, Ales Hrdlicka, had been closely monitoring the fair.



Hrdlicka ranked people by race, believing White people to be superior.





He collected human body parts to research his now-debunked theories about the anatomical differences between races. He began what he called a "racial brain collection" for the Smithsonian.

He hoped he could take the brains of Indigenous people who died at the fair.



## July 1904

Hrdlicka traveled to St. Louis and autopsied two Filipinos who had died.

We know from official Smithsonian documents that he took the cerebellum of a Suyoc Igorot, likely Maura, since she was the only known person from Suyoc who died while in St. Louis for the World's Fair.



We don't know what happened to the rest of the brain or why he only took the cerebellum.

He also took the brain of an Igorot from Bontoc.



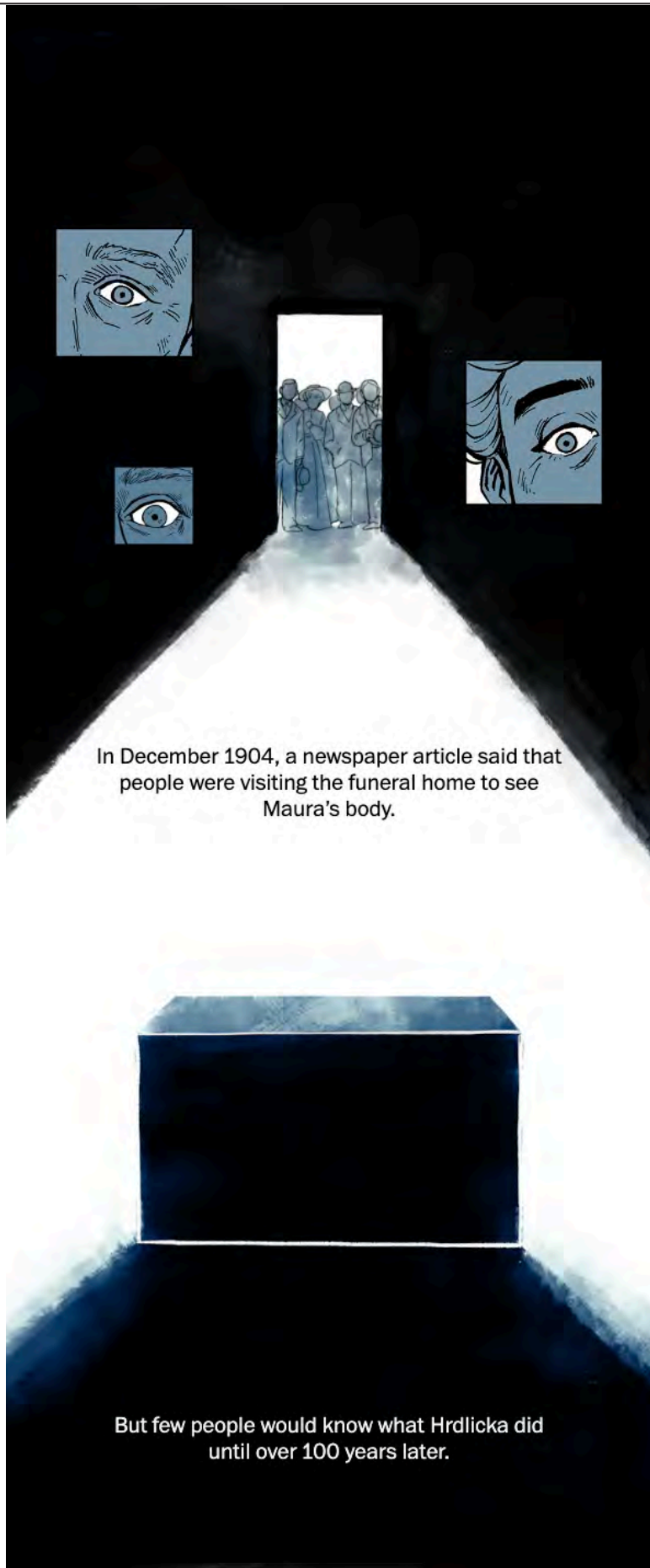
In September, fair officials mailed the museum the brains of two more Filipino people who had died.

The collection Hrdlicka started would grow to at least 268 brains, including 27 from Filipino people, some of which were collected by the U.S. Army stationed in the Philippines.



A global network of professors, researchers, doctors and Army surgeons collected the brains in autopsies and sent them to the National Museum.

Four of the brains were willingly donated to the collection by the donors themselves or their families. The others appeared to be taken without consent.



In December 1904, a newspaper article said that people were visiting the funeral home to see Maura's body.

But few people would know what Hrdlicka did until over 100 years later.

# April 2021

Janna Añonuevo Langholz found Maura's story during a rare April snowstorm in St. Louis.





On the news, she heard that one of the last times  
St. Louis had seen snow that late was in 1904.

Her mind flashed to the World's Fair.

As a Filipino American activist and artist born in 1988 on the historical site of the World's Fair, she had always known the history of the Philippine Exposition.



But she wondered what the Filipinos back then had thought of the snow.



Looking through newspaper archives, she realized it had been 117 years since Maura died.



Inspired by Maura's story, she began to document life in the villages on a website: "1,200 Lives and Deaths at the World's Fair."

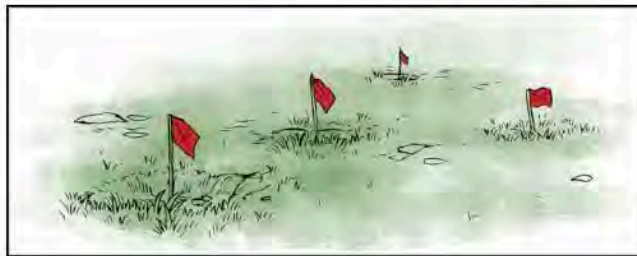


She started leading tours of the neighborhood that was once the site of the Philippine villages.





And she raised money to put headstones on the unmarked graves of the Filipinos.



She searched for Maura's burial place.



Janna found an old Smithsonian report that showed Hrdlicka had taken the cerebellum of a Suyoc Igorot's brain to the Smithsonian.

Her heart sank.



Documents from the Smithsonian never listed Maura's name. The autopsy date differs in two records and a note said the cerebellum came from a male. But Janna was sure.

*"Since Maura was the only person from Suyoc that died, I know that's her." — Janna Añonuevo Langholz, in an interview with The Washington Post*

Most available records supported her conclusion.

Outraged, and hoping to see it returned, she began discussions with the Smithsonian. The brain collection was now managed by the National Museum of Natural History.



An official eventually told her that the cerebellum had probably been cremated sometime between 1908 and the 1950s.

Smithsonian documents listed at least eight other brains as “Condemned & Destroyed.” Most were marked as “desiccated,” or dried up.

Janna asked where the cerebellum was cremated so she could visit the site, but the Smithsonian couldn’t provide a location.

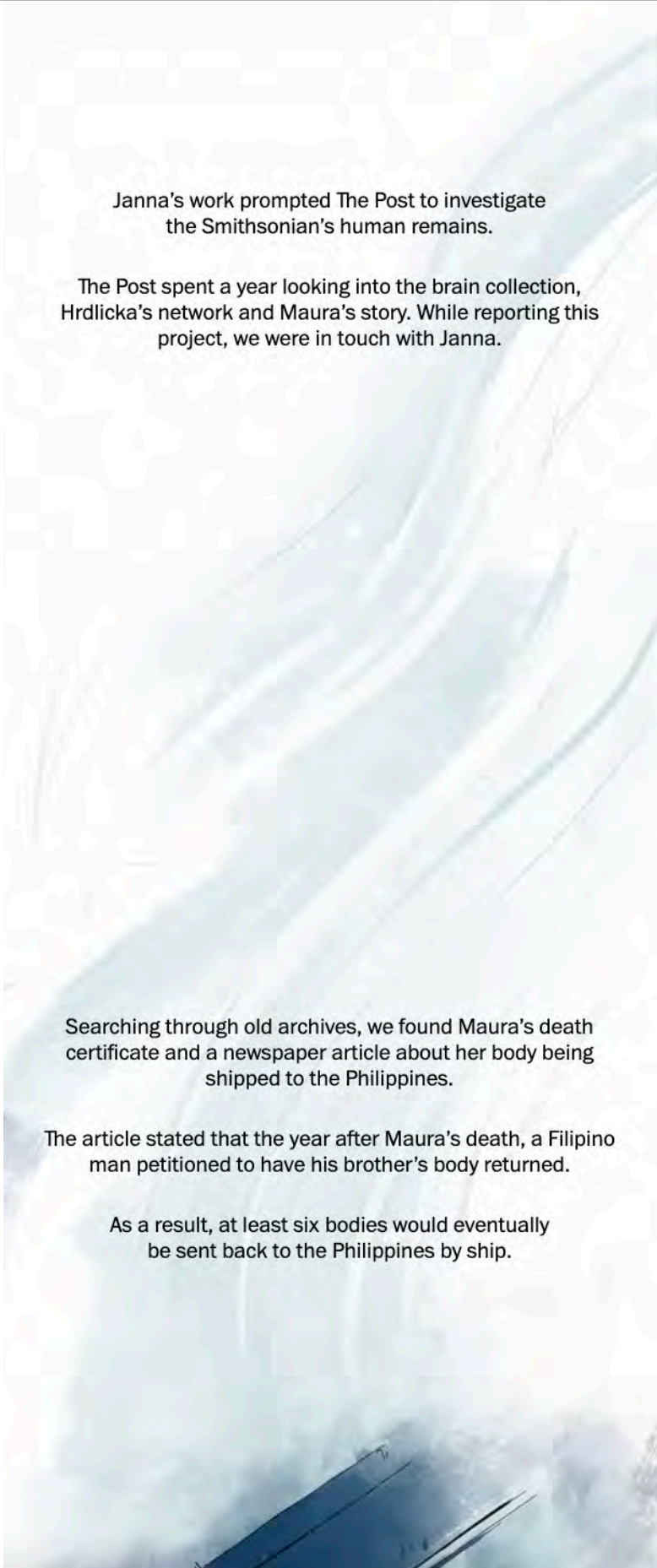
The Smithsonian later told The Post that it could not verify the identity of the person whose cerebellum was taken.



Exhausted, she traveled to the Philippines to visit family in January 2023.



This time, Maura found her.



Janna's work prompted The Post to investigate the Smithsonian's human remains.

The Post spent a year looking into the brain collection, Hrdlicka's network and Maura's story. While reporting this project, we were in touch with Janna.

Searching through old archives, we found Maura's death certificate and a newspaper article about her body being shipped to the Philippines.

The article stated that the year after Maura's death, a Filipino man petitioned to have his brother's body returned.

As a result, at least six bodies would eventually be sent back to the Philippines by ship.



One was Maura's.



## March 2023

We emailed Janna to tell her the news.

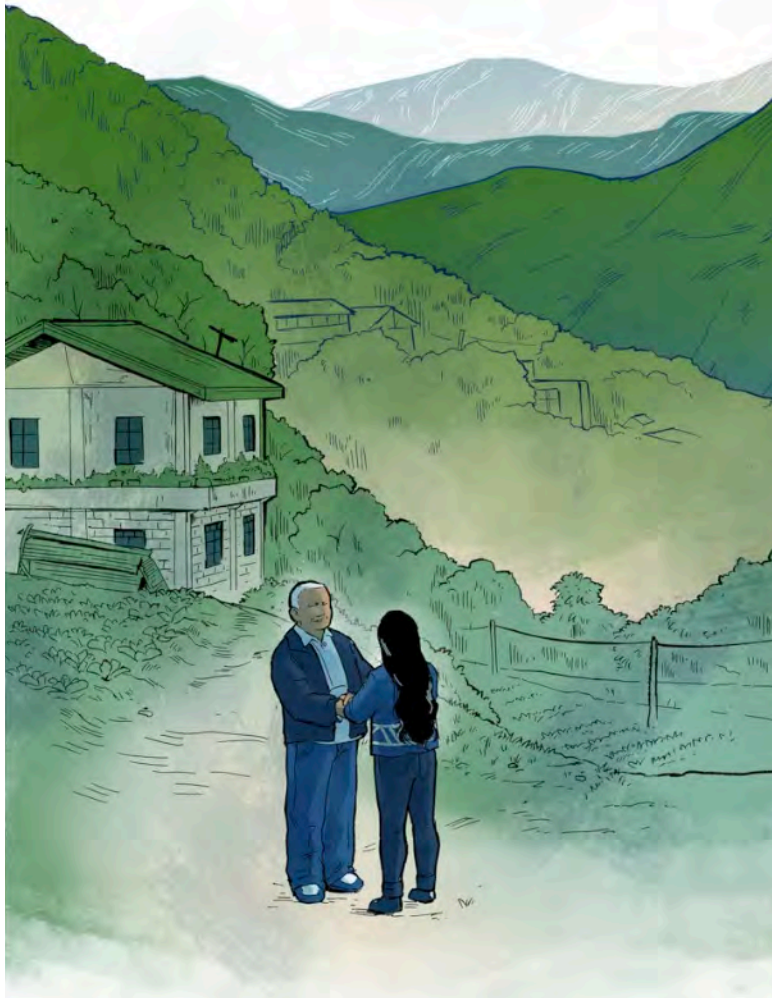


Janna happened to be traveling to Maura's home province that morning.



Her family urged her to visit the Suyoc community.

She looked for the descendants of the people she had come to know from her research.



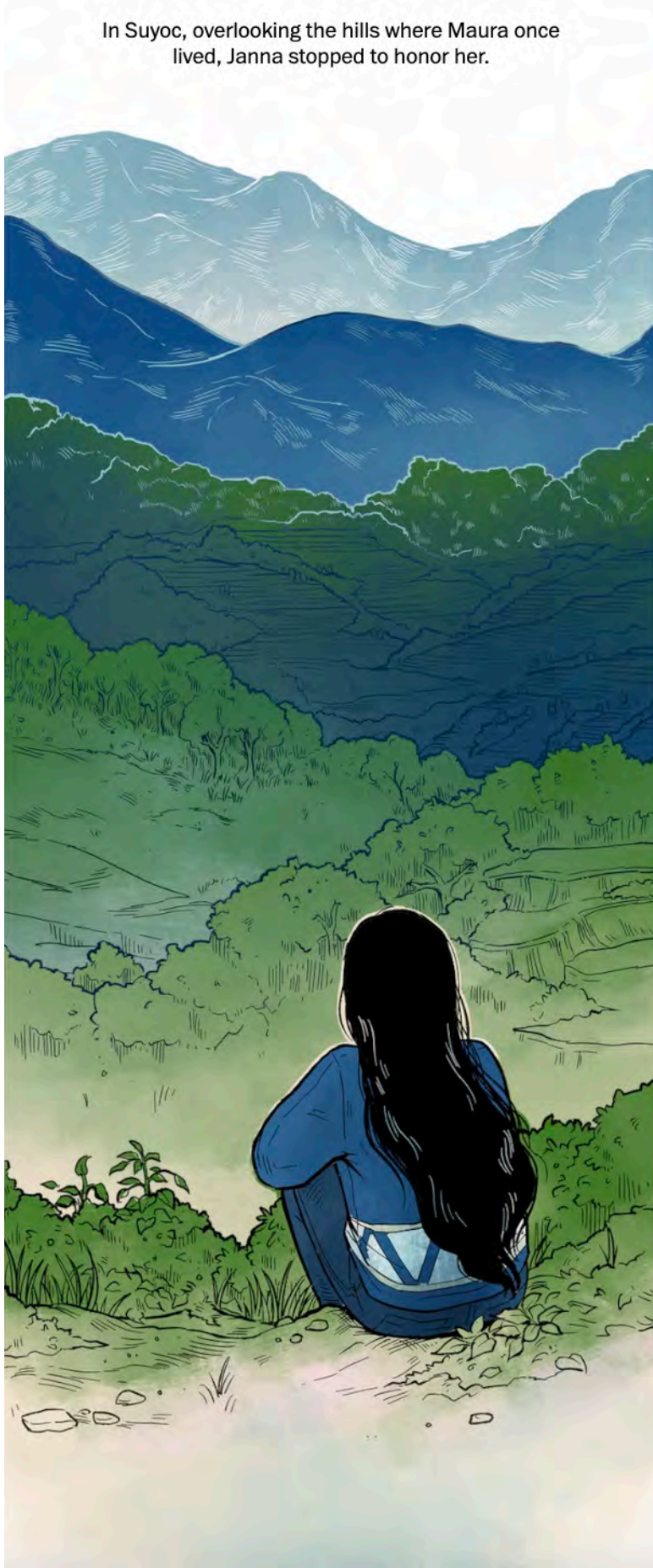
They talked about Maura, speaking a mix of Tagalog, Ilocano and Kankanaey.

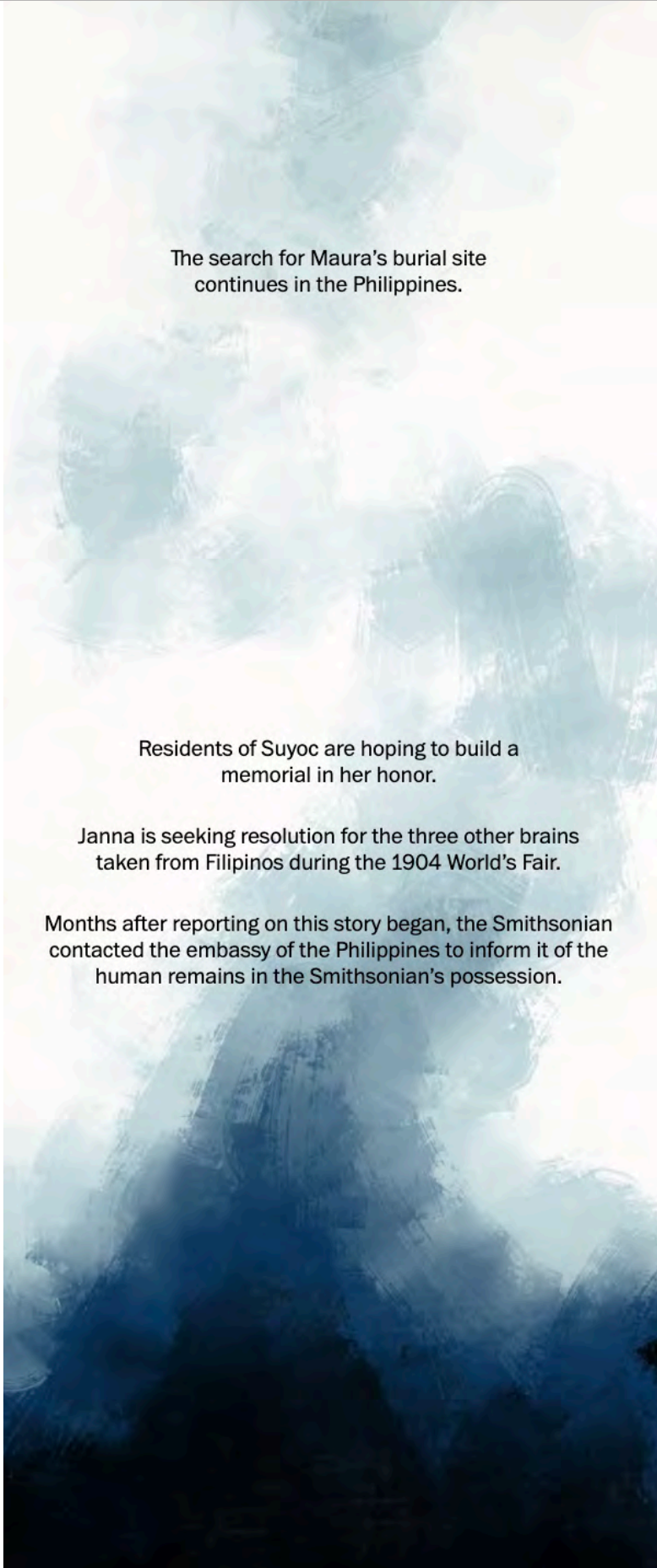






In Suyoc, overlooking the hills where Maura once lived, Janna stopped to honor her.





The search for Maura's burial site continues in the Philippines.

Residents of Suyoc are hoping to build a memorial in her honor.

Janna is seeking resolution for the three other brains taken from Filipinos during the 1904 World's Fair.

Months after reporting on this story began, the Smithsonian contacted the embassy of the Philippines to inform it of the human remains in the Smithsonian's possession.

The secretary of the Smithsonian, Lonnie G. Bunch III, apologized for the way the institution collected many of its human remains in the past, and said it was his goal to return as many as possible.

As of August 2023, the Smithsonian has repatriated a total of four brains from what Hrdlicka called his "racial brain collection."

The other 255 brains remain in museum storage.





## About The Collection

A Washington Post investigative series on human brains and other body parts held by the Smithsonian.

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## Methodology

To accurately reflect the racism that was common at the time in newspaper articles and official documents, The Post chose to show original records that contain language considered offensive by modern standards.

Kario and Teresa Ramirez's accounts were originally published in English, and the telegram exchanges were most likely communicated in American Morse code.

## How to order the books

Washington Post print subscribers will receive this story in the Aug. 20, 2023 edition of the newspaper.

"Searching for Maura" is a book available for purchase in English and Filipino. To order, go to [wapo.st/maurabooks](http://wapo.st/maurabooks).

## About this story

To see photographs, newspaper clippings and other source material that informed this story, read [How The Post reported Maura's story](#).

Illustrations by Ren Galeno, a visual artist from Davao City, Philippines.

Andrew Ba Tran, Nate Jones and Regine Cabato contributed to this report.

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Filipino translation and editing by KC Schaper, Regine Cabato, Hannah Dormido and Christian Jil Benitez.

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Gross, Greg Manifold, Grace Moon, Sofia Diogo Mateus, Matt Clough at Meredith Craig.

Video editing and sound design for “Searching for Maura” by Lindsey Sitz. Animation by Sarah Hashemi. Narration by Claire Healy and Nicole Dungca. Additional narration by Angel Mendoza, David Fallis, Arjun Singh and Anne Branigin. Additional graphics by Artur Galocha. Additional sound recording by Justin Sculetta. Additional photo and design support by Robert Miller, Troy Witcher and Audrey Valbuena.

“Pagan Funeral in St. Louis To-Morrow” was published in the St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat on April 22, 1904. “Called ‘Savages,’ Now Visayan Girls Won’t Go to School” was published in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch on Aug. 20, 1904.

THE COLLECTION

## Smithsonian returns woman's brain to family 90 years after it was taken

By Nicole Dungca and Claire Healy

<https://wapo.st/3Rh1yqF>

Click on the above URL or copy into your web browser to view online



Family members of Mary Sara gather with local community members for the burial of her brain at Evergreen Washelli, a cemetery in Seattle, on Aug. 29. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

SEATTLE — Ninety years after a physician took a young Alaska woman's brain for a "racial brain collection" at the Smithsonian Institution, a museum official delivered her brain to her family for burial near the rest of her remains in Seattle.

When Mary Sara, an 18-year-old Sami woman, died of tuberculosis in a Seattle sanitarium in 1933, the doctor treating her removed her brain and mailed it to the curator of the division of physical anthropology at the Smithsonian, Ales Hrdlicka.

For decades, the National Museum of Natural History held her brain in storage, until The Washington Post learned of it earlier this year as part of its investigation into human remains held by the Smithsonian and informed Sara's living relatives that it had been taken.

On Aug. 28, a Smithsonian employee flew from the D.C. area to Seattle with Sara's brain, which was immersed in preservatives within a sealed container. The brain was later transferred to a cushioned wooden box.

During an overcast afternoon the next day, a small group of relatives and community members gathered at Evergreen Washelli, the northern Seattle cemetery where Sara's body had been buried, to lower the box with her brain into a new spot near the top of her existing grave, which has no headstone.

Before the ceremony, Rachel Twitchell-Justiss, a distant cousin of Sara's, knelt down to the burial plot. With tears in her eyes, she kissed her hand, held it to the ground and whispered a message. "I said, 'I'm so sorry this happened to you and we're going to take care of you now,'" said Twitchell-Justiss, who traveled from Spokane, Wash., for the ceremony.

Sara's family petitioned the National Museum of Natural History for the return of her brain shortly after being informed about it by reporters in February. The Post found no documents indicating that Sara or her family had given consent for its removal at the time.





A newspaper article reports on Sara’s tuberculosis death. (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, May 29, 1933)

The Post investigation published last month revealed that the Natural History Museum held 255 brains, including Sara’s, in a Maryland storage facility. The vast majority were collected in the early 20th century at the behest of Hrdlicka, a prominent anthropologist who believed in the superiority of White people. The 254 brains that remain are just a fraction of at least 30,700 human remains still kept by the museum, the majority of which appear to have been taken without consent.

Smithsonian officials said they have returned or offered to return over 6,300 sets of remains over the last three decades. Sara’s is the fifth brain from the collection to be returned to families or tribes. The other four brains were repatriated to Native American families or communities, because federal law requires the Smithsonian to notify Native American tribes of the remains in its possession. The last brain to be returned was sent to a Tlingit family in Sitka, Alaska, in 2007.

Following the investigation, Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III wrote an opinion piece published in The Post in which he apologized for the way the institution collected many of its human remains, calling it the Smithsonian’s “darkest history.”

“It was abhorrent and dehumanizing work, and it was carried out under the Smithsonian’s name,” wrote Bunch, who took charge of the institution in 2019. “I condemn these past actions and apologize for the pain caused by Hrdlicka and others at the institution who

acted unethically in the name of science, regardless of the era in which their actions occurred.”

The museum had approved the return of Sara’s brain earlier this year, and shortly after The Post published its investigation in August, the director of the Natural History Museum, Kirk Johnson, called Sara’s cousin, Martha Sara Jack, to help arrange the burial. Johnson declined to comment through a spokesman.

Sara had traveled to Washington state in January 1933 from her Alaska hometown to accompany her mother for cataract surgery. Charles Firestone, the doctor who would later restore her mother’s eyesight, had invited the two women, who were Sami, or Indigenous people from areas including northern Scandinavia.



The Smithsonian took Mary Sara’s brain in 1933. In August, the Natural History Museum returned Mary’s brain to her relatives, who buried it in Seattle. (Video: Joy Yi/The Washington Post, Photo: Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

Sara became sick with tuberculosis and was sent to a nearby sanitarium, where she would spend her 18th birthday. She died in May while her mother was on a ship back to Alaska, and Firestone

offered Sara's brain to Hrdlicka on the same day. Hrdlicka told Firestone he was interested but only, he said, if she was "full-blood," using a racist term to question whether both her parents were Sami. Firestone sent her brain to the museum.

At the ceremony for Sara last week, cemetery officials set up a small green table and two rows of chairs in front of the grave. On the table, Sara's brain sat inside a wooden box placed atop a blue suede bag that Carol Butler, the Smithsonian employee who transported the remains, had sewn for the occasion. On behalf of the Natural History Museum, Butler attended the service as well as a breakfast with the family at a hotel that Sara once visited.

Jack's husband, Fred, played recordings of Christian hymns on an iPad, and Julie Whitehorn, a local Sami community member, used her phone to play traditional Sami songs known as joiks. Jack, who was born 12 years after Sara died, told the small crowd that she had heard about her cousin through stories that were passed down to her. Sara had been close friends with Jack's mother and planned to marry a childhood sweetheart when she returned from Seattle.

"Without the knowledge or consent from her family, Dr. Firestone maliciously desecrated Mary's young body," said Jack, who had traveled from Wasilla, Alaska. "Now, 90 years later, Mary's body will be made whole and laid to rest until the Resurrection."

Toward the end of the ceremony, a cemetery worker began to place the bag into the ground before Jack stopped him. "Can Rachel and I do that?" she asked. Jack and Twitchell-Justiss each took hold of one handle of the bag and lowered Sara's remains into the small hole. The family then gathered around as Jack's husband said a prayer to dedicate the site.



The Evergreen Washelli cemetery in Seattle. Sara's brain is buried in a new spot near the top of her grave there. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

Twitchell-Justiss said she was hopeful the return of Sara's brain could help the Smithsonian move faster in repatriating remains for other families and communities. "I hope the museum makes great strides to fulfill their promises to do better," she said. "If they can do that in Mary's honor, then all the better."

In 2022, the Smithsonian, which includes 21 museums and the National Zoo, adopted a policy that formally authorized all of its museums to return items or remains in its collections that were collected without consent.

After The Post began reporting on the brain collection, Bunch issued a public apology this April in which he announced the creation of a task force to determine the next steps for the human remains still in Smithsonian custody. In his opinion piece, Bunch also said the institution was in talks with the government of the

Philippines to determine what to do with the remains of Filipinos that had been collected by the institution.

As part of the investigation, The Post told the story of Maura, an Indigenous Filipino woman who died after she came to St. Louis to be put on display during the 1904 World's Fair. Records suggest that her cerebellum was taken by Hrdlicka in an autopsy for his collection of human brains at the Smithsonian.

Museum officials said the cerebellum appeared to be cremated by the institution years later, and they could not confirm whether it belonged to Maura. Overall, there were at least 27 brains, including the cerebellum, taken from Filipinos.

Officials from the National Museum of the Philippines recently issued a statement in support of the repatriation of the Filipino remains. They said the museum was working with the Smithsonian to ensure the remains would be given to direct descendants or communities related to those whose organs were taken for the collection.

The museum "accepts and supports this effort of the Smithsonian [National Museum of Natural History] to do the right thing and facilitate the return of these Filipino remains home as a way of rectifying this unfortunate situation," officials wrote.

Federal law requires the Smithsonian to notify only Native American, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian communities about the remains in its possession so those communities can start the process of repatriation. An estimated 15,000 sets of remains held by the institution today are from these communities.



Rachel Twitchell-Justiss, left, and Martha Sara Jack, both cousins of Sara's, lower into the ground a suede bag containing a wooden box holding her brain. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

Sara's brain and the 26 Filipino brains fall outside of current notification rules, which leave about another 15,000 sets of remains from more than 80 countries in limbo. Since creating a 2015 policy for the repatriation of human remains from other countries, the Natural History Museum has returned remains to New Zealand, Australia and Canada.

Officials have said the museum focused primarily on returning Native American remains in accordance with federal law, but it has more recently begun to focus on remains from other communities. In a statement, Jim Wood, a spokesman for the Natural History Museum, said the institution was honored to give Sara's brain to her family.

"Our museum community remains committed to addressing the historical legacy bestowed upon us and will continue to work with

descendants and descendant communities to return or appropriately honor the individuals now under our care,” Wood wrote.

When Sara and her mother went to Seattle in 1933, journalists followed the two Sami women around, taking a picture of Sara on top of the Roosevelt Hotel. The hotel, which is now called the Hotel Theodore, provided the family with free lodging for the burial, and Twitchell-Justiss visited the roof where Sara once stood.



Twitchell-Justiss visits the roof of the Hotel Theodore, where her relative was photographed 90 years earlier. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

Family members had asked the Natural History Museum to provide money for a burial and a headstone, but officials rejected the request, saying that prior repatriations had not covered such costs. The family started a GoFundMe to help raise money for a headstone for Sara and raised about a third of the overall cost.

The community stepped in: In Alaska, members of the Knik Tribal Council contacted the Jacks and said they would cover the funeral



*Left:* Twitchell-Justiss on the roof Aug. 29. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post) *Above:* Sara on the roof of what was then the Roosevelt Hotel. (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Jan. 17, 1933)

costs. After the service, an official with the cemetery approached Jack to tell her it would contribute a headstone to the family at no cost.

Jack's mouth dropped open in surprise, and she called over Twitchell-Justiss to share the news. As the family began to leave the gravesite, a cemetery worker waited nearby to fill the hole and cover it with a patch of grass. After the family exchanged hugs, a soft rain began to fall.

"It's a great burden lifted off," Jack said. "There's no loose end on this part now."

## About this story

*This story is part of "The Collection," a Washington Post investigative series on human brains and other body parts held by the Smithsonian.*

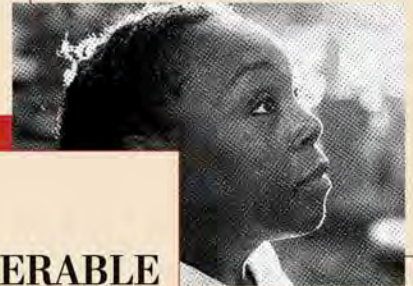
*Have a tip or story idea about the collection? Email our team at [the-collection@washpost.com](mailto:the-collection@washpost.com).*







Birthplace  
of Deceased DC



THE COLLECTION

## SMITHSONIAN TARGETED D.C.'S VULNERABLE TO BUILD BRAIN COLLECTION

By [Nicole Dungca](#) and [Claire Healy](#)

Dec. 14 at 6:00 a.m.



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**CERTIFICATE  
OF DEATH.**  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



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A 59-year-old Black woman died of epilepsy in October 1903 at the Washington Asylum Hospital, an institution that housed the District's indigent. Almost five months later, tuberculosis killed a 21-month-old Black toddler at Children's Hospital in D.C. The next month, an 11-year-old White boy died of a lung condition at Children's.

Upon their deaths, one of the Smithsonian Institution's top anthropologists, Ales Hrdlicka, enlisted the local institutions and doctors to help him remove their brains to build a "racial brain collection." Hrdlicka, who sought brains and other body parts to prove now-debunked theories on racial differences, was taking advantage of the District's most vulnerable residents, records show.

The Smithsonian would eventually acquire more than 280 brains from around the world. More than a quarter — 74 — of the brains still held by the Smithsonian were from local people, according to documents reviewed by The Washington Post. Of those, 48 were Black.

At least 19 of the brains are described in documents as having been removed from fetuses, including one following an abortion. Seventeen came from children. Three were taken from people who died in the hospital that served the city's almshouse. One was taken from a deaf and mute man.

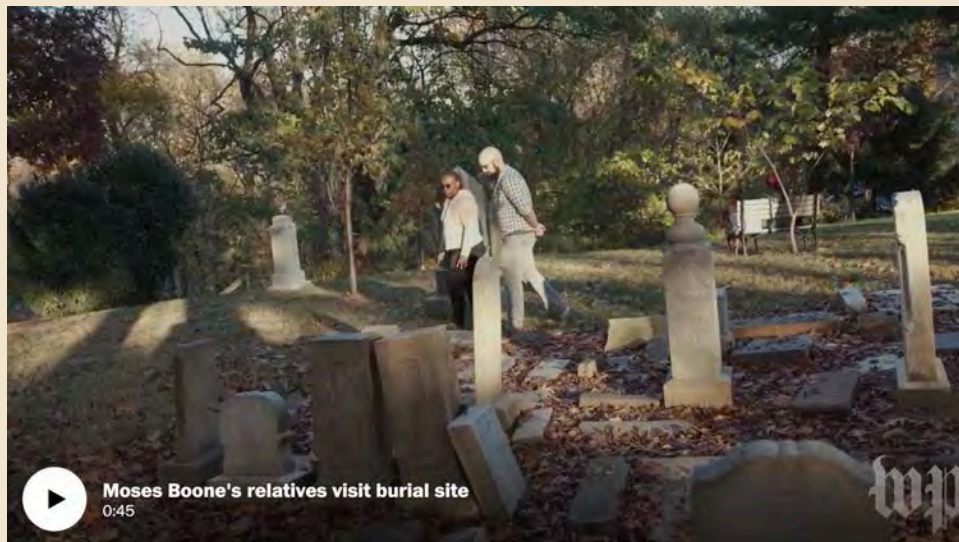


To build a “racial brain collection,” anthropologist Ales Hrdlicka took brains from children who died at Children’s Hospital in Washington, pictured above in 1910. (National Photo Co. Collection/Library of Congress)

Hrdlicka himself performed the autopsy on the 21-month-old who died at Children’s, Moses Boone, and removed his brain. Michelle Farris, a distant relative of Moses’s who lives nearby in Glen Burnie, Md., had no idea a family member’s remains were in the Smithsonian until informed by The Post.

“It feels like my family was robbed of something,” Farris said. “A child — especially of that age — can’t speak up for themselves.”

She and her husband recently visited Mount Zion Cemetery, the historically Black burial ground in Georgetown where the young boy’s body is buried in an unknown location, for the first time. A mother of three, Farris said she was particularly struck by Moses’s age. She told The Post she plans to request that the Smithsonian return his brain so it can be buried in Mount Zion.



Michelle Farris and her husband visited the burial place of Moses Boone after learning that their relative’s brain was taken by the Smithsonian. (Joy Yi/The Washington Post)

In August, The Post published the most extensive accounting to date of the brains and more than 30,000 other body parts gath-

ered largely at Hrdlicka's direction, revealing that the institution's National Museum of Natural History has not returned the vast majority of the remains in its possession, even though most appear to have been taken without consent.

Of more than 280 brains gathered, only five have been returned to families or cultural heirs, The Post found. This includes the brain of a Sami Alaska woman, Mary Sara. Her family requested its return this year after learning from The Post that her brain was at the Smithsonian. The museum has not returned the brains of any local residents, records show.



Relatives of Mary Sara pray at a Seattle cemetery in August after her brain, which had been returned by the Smithsonian, was buried near her existing grave. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

Most of the brains were acquired by the institution by the 1940s. While some of the brains have been cremated or transferred to other institutions, the 254 still held by the Natural History Museum in a Suitland, Md., storage facility represent Hrdlicka's grim legacy.

Presented with The Post's findings, museum officials offered a slightly different accounting: Where The Post found 74 brains from people in Washington and 36 brains from children and fetuses, the Smithsonian found 72 and 37.

Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III told The Post earlier this year that it was his goal to repatriate as many human remains as possible and denounced the institution's prior practices. Bunch declined a request for another interview through a spokeswoman, but recently said in a column that a Smithsonian task force focused on human remains will soon make recommendations. He said the new policy will "steward the return of all remains" in the Smithsonian's possession, the vast majority of which are held by the Natural History Museum.

"It's a collection that should have never been amassed," Bunch wrote, "and we're committed to dismantling as much of it as possible in a way that recognizes and honors the people affected."

In a statement Wednesday, Smithsonian officials said that returning human remains and other objects taken unethically is a top priority, and that an effort to "expand and accelerate the work is well underway."

"We condemn these past actions and apologize for the pain caused by those who acted unethically in the name of science, regardless of the era in which their actions occurred," officials said. They said that last month they returned the remains of 14 individuals to their descendant communities in Australia.

Officials have returned or offered to return more than 6,300 sets of human remains, or about a fifth of the body parts that were gathered. Most of those remains belonged to Native Americans, in accordance with a law requiring that the museum contact federally

recognized Native American, Native Hawaiian and Alaska Native tribes and communities and offer those remains for return. But no law mandates the same for the remains of Black people or any other group.

The Smithsonian requires descendants and community members to file a formal petition to have body parts returned. But many descendants have no inkling that the institution has their relatives' remains: Other than alerting tribes to Native American remains, the museum has not published an extensive list of names or identifying details related to brains and other body parts in its possession. Records show it has the names of nearly 100 people whose brains are in the collection.

Officials confirmed that the museum has the names of 16 local people whose brains were taken, mostly in the early 1900s. Earlier this year, museum officials declined to provide names to The Post, citing privacy concerns.

The Post learned the names of the local people whose brains were in the collection after being contacted by Karen Mudar, a case officer at the Natural History Museum's repatriation office from 1993 to 1999. She contacted reporters this summer and offered to share the hundreds of pages of research she had prepared in the 1990s.

Her records included additional demographic data and information about a dozen brains that The Post had not previously verified. Museum officials confirmed information she provided about the brains of some D.C. residents, and reporters used census records and obituaries to find some of their family members.

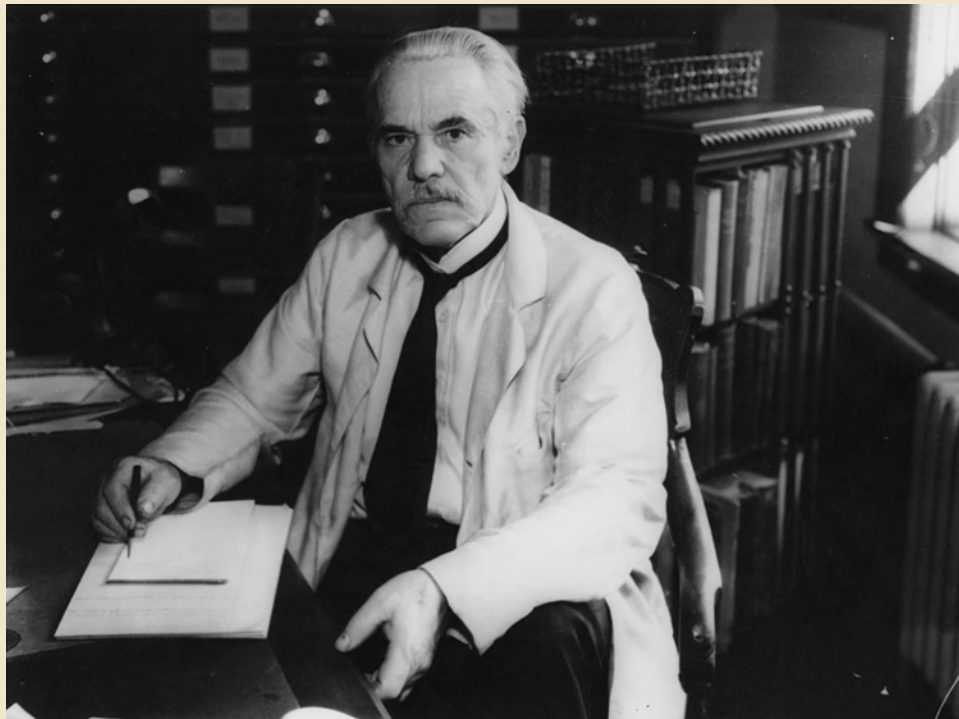
Mudar, who helped with research for the return of two Native American brains, said she believes all the brains should be returned to either families or descendant communities, especially since the

institution took them from marginalized communities in the Smithsonian's own backyard.

"There were powerless people at that time who were being targeted," she said. "It was very distressing. It felt like there was an injustice that had been done to people in the Washington, D.C., and Baltimore area of African American ancestry."

## TARGETING D.C.'S MOST VULNERABLE RESIDENTS

Hrdlicka, an immigrant from what is now the Czech Republic, grew up in New York and joined the Smithsonian in 1903 to run its new division of physical anthropology. At what was then called the U.S. National Museum, Hrdlicka began assembling what would become one of the largest collections of human remains in the world.



Ales Hrdlicka was a curator of physical anthropology at the U.S. National Museum, now the Natural History Museum, for nearly four decades in the early 20th century. (Smithsonian Institution Archives)



The anthropologist, who was active in the later-discredited field of eugenics, started gathering brains almost immediately, eager to create a collection that would allow him to compare anatomical differences among races.

In 1904, Hrdlicka wrote a guide for donating brains and other human remains to the museum and noted that laws sometimes required permission in cases of a premature or stillborn infant, but that “smaller specimens” such as fetuses and embryos could be “sent directly to the Museum.”

Two years earlier, D.C. officials had outlawed removing bodies from graves without a permit, but allowed medical schools to secure unclaimed or unburied bodies through the D.C. Health Department’s Anatomical Board.

To obtain remains, Hrdlicka enlisted help from the Anatomical Board and individual doctors in the Medical Society of the District of Columbia. Working with Hrdlicka, the doctors — often prominent members of D.C. society — took organs from Black people, children and people at institutions such as the city’s almshouse.

Museum records show Hrdlicka performed most of the autopsies of the local residents himself, though doctors also removed and sent brains to him.

In 1909, Daniel S. Lamb, a pathologist at the Army Medical Museum who would send more than 20 brains to Hrdlicka over nine years, performed a postmortem examination on a deaf and mute man and offered the brain to Hrdlicka. At the time, deaf people across the country had been targeted by eugenicists who wanted to establish sterilization laws to prevent them from having children.

“If you care to have it I will turn it over to you; and if you should find anything interesting in it I trust that you will let me know,”

Lamb wrote in a letter to Hrdlicka, who eventually added the brain to his collection.

Lamb lamented how new laws and policies prevented access to human remains. During a 1903 speech to the medical society, Lamb said doctors could previously conduct postmortem examinations without consent.

“That time has passed,” he said. “The consent of relatives or friends must now be first obtained. ... It is especially difficult now to obtain permission to examine the brain.”

In the Smithsonian’s files on the 74 local brains, The Post found correspondence indicating that only three brains had been donated by the person or their family.

Records from other D.C. agencies show that Hrdlicka sought consent from a handful of other families, but it is unclear whether the families knew what he planned to do with the remains. In the D.C. Archives, The Post located five death certificates for stillborn infants or fetuses that showed their bodies were obtained by Hrdlicka.

### Local residents whose brains are in the collection

The Washington Post used Smithsonian records and death certificates to identify people who had their brains taken in D.C. Throughout this story, we’ll introduce those whom we’ve been able to identify.

Anthropologist Ales Hrdlicka took the brains of four children who died at Children’s Hospital in D.C. (now known as Children’s National Hospital):

**Moses Boone**, 21 months, died of tuberculosis on Feb. 27, 1904. Moses was Black and buried in Georgetown’s Mount Zion Cemetery, a Black burial ground.

**Francis Joseph Sullivan**, 11, died of empyema on March 25, 1904. Francis, the son of Irish immigrants, was White and buried in Mount Olivet Cemetery, a Catholic cemetery in Northeast Washington.

**Daisy Washington** probably died in 1903. Smithsonian records describe her in separate documents as 10 years old and 20 months old. The Post found a death certificate for a 10-year-old Daisy Washington. She died on Dec. 18, 1903, and was buried in Moore’s Cemetery, a Black burial ground in Southeast Washington that is now the location of the Douglass Community Center and an apartment building.

**Cora Gray**, 6, died of tubercular meningitis on April 6, 1904. Cora was White and buried in Prospect Hill, a German American cemetery on North Capitol Street NE.

On the back of each certificate, the mother signed a statement that gave Hrdlicka permission to dispose of the “remains as he sees proper, only in accordance, however, with the laws of the District of Columbia.”

### D.C. institutions listed in museum files for the brain collection



An official at Howard University’s health sciences library told The Washington Post it has no records of the brains sent by Ales Hrdlicka. Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and Children’s National Hospital said they now have strict standards in place regarding consent. Washington Asylum Hospital, Columbia Hospital and Garfield Hospital no longer exist or were merged with other hospitals. The Army Medical Museum is now the National Museum of Health and Medicine.

Around the turn of the 20th century, the law allowed government museums to acquire bodies for exhibits, but Hrdlicka’s actions appeared to be illegal under other local statutes, according to Tanya

Marsh, a senior associate dean at the Wake Forest University School of Law who studies laws governing human remains. Even if bodies were donated to science, she said, the law required the bodies to be buried or cremated within a certain amount of time, not held indefinitely.

“I don’t think that the folks who are doing this collecting believed that the laws applied to them,” she said.

Like other scientists and anthropologists at the time, Hrdlicka was preoccupied with race. In his 1904 guide, he wrote of the “abundant opportunities” to obtain brains from White people in the United States, but also “American negroes, which will be of increasing interest on account of the intellectual progress and mixture of this element in the American population.”

Black people were disproportionately represented in his brain collection. Though less than one-third of the D.C. population was Black in the early 1900s, more than 60 percent of the brains of local residents were taken from Black people.

By searching through the D.C. Archives, The Post obtained the death certificates of 10 of the 74

### Local residents whose brains are in the collection

Anthropologist Ales Hrdlicka took the brains of four people who died at Garfield Hospital and Freedmen’s Hospital:

**George H. Webster**, 51, died on July 14, 1903, of ulcerative colitis at Garfield Hospital. Webster was White, married and worked as a carpenter. The Anatomical Board buried him in the city’s potter’s field.

**Joseph Anderson**, 47, died on July 30, 1904, of meningitis at Freedmen’s Hospital. Anderson was Black, married and a laborer who was buried in Mount Zion Cemetery.

**John Browner**, 65, died at Garfield Hospital. Browner was Black and worked as a laborer in D.C. The Post could not locate his death certificate, but the museum logged his brain into its collection on Aug. 10, 1903.

**Clagett Dyson**, 34, died on Dec. 10, 1903, of tuberculosis at Garfield Hospital. Smithsonian records identify a brain in the collection as coming from a “J. Dyson,” but a death certificate suggests Clagett Dyson’s brain was taken. He was Black and lived with his wife and daughter, and he was buried in the potter’s field by the Anatomical Board.

local people whose brains are in the collection, revealing additional details of their lives and deaths.

Smithsonian records and death certificates show that among the adults whose brains were obtained by Hrdlicka were domestic workers, laborers and a carpenter. They included widows, spouses and parents, some with large families in the area.

All 10 died in area hospitals. In some cases, records suggest that Hrdlicka removed their brains at the hospitals before the bodies were moved to funeral homes. The bodies of four were sent to the Anatomical Board, three of which were buried in the local potter's field, but Hrdlicka kept the skeleton of the fourth, a 60-year-old Irish man. The others were buried in local cemeteries.

The Post was able to identify four children whose brains were taken after they died at what is now called Children's National Hospital, one of the first pediatric hospitals in the country.

Children's spokeswoman Diana Troese said the institution "regrets any role our doctors may have played in the Smithsonian collection over a century ago." She said in a statement that such practices would be "inconceivable" now. "Today, such situations are prevented by the stringent standards, policies and ethics of medicine and research," the statement read.

One of the four children identified by The Post was Moses, who had died of tuberculosis.

(Form 197. 10 M. 7-24-'03.) (272-04.)

## CERTIFICATE OF DEATH.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

No. of BURIAL PERMIT. 153764 No. of RECORD. 153556

FULL INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE GUIDANCE OF THOSE USING THIS BLANK, AND SPACE FOR REMARKS MAY BE FOUND ON THE OTHER SIDE.

1. Date of this Death February 27 1904

2. Full Name of Deceased Moses Boone  
If an unnamed infant, insert full names of both parents.

3. Sex: MALE 4. Age: 21 5. Color: WHITE 6. Conjugal Conditions: SINGLE

FEMALE YEARS \_\_\_\_\_ MONTHS 21 DAYS \_\_\_\_\_ COLORED MARRIED

CHINESE WIDOWED

JAPANESE DIVORCED

Under sex, color and conjugal condition, strike out the words not applicable.  
 Under color, the term "colored" includes all of African descent, whether of pure or mixed blood.

7. Occupation None

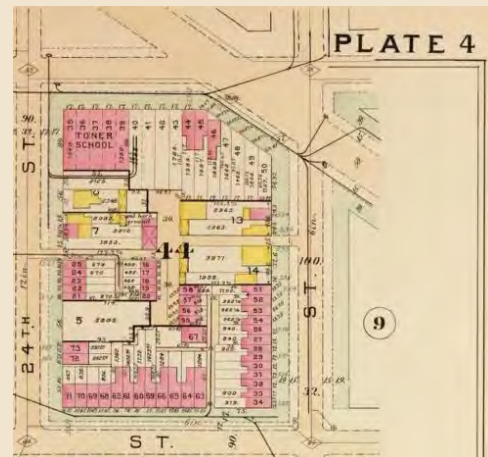
If born in the United States, give State, Territory, or Possession.

The death certificate of Moses Boone indicates that he was 21 months old and African American. (D.C. Archives/The Washington Post)

Smithsonian records on Moses are sparse. He was described in one document as a White child and in another as "more than 1/2" Black and "mulatto," a derogatory term for a person with Black and White ancestry.

His mother appears to have been a 35-year-old Black woman named Estella Boone, who died weeks earlier of tuberculosis at the same address listed on the toddler's death certificate. They had lived together in a crowded tenement in one of the alleyways where many Black Washingtonians resided at the time.

The next year, Estella's widower, Victor Emanuel Boone, took his own life. The Post reported at the time that loneliness



Moses lived with Estella Boone, who is believed to be his mother, in a crowded tenement on Ricketts Court NW. This map from 1903 shows the alleyway in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood where many Black Washingtonians resided at the time. Estella died of tuberculosis weeks before Moses did in 1904. (Library of Congress)

and a recent illness that prevented him from working had “preyed heavily upon his mind.”

Eighteen years after Estella died, the Washington Evening Star published an obituary commemorating her death with a short hymn. It was signed by her four surviving children, including Priscilla Edmonds, the great-great-grandmother of Michelle Farris.

Farris, a 40-year-old career counselor, knew her great-grandmother — Priscilla’s daughter-in-law, June Edmonds — but had little knowledge about relatives from prior generations. Farris was raised by her grandmother, Jean Jackson, and grew up in the D.C. area surrounded by her siblings and cousins.

After Farris learned about Moses from The Post, she said, her 13-year-old son and 9-year-old twins peppered her with questions: Why would somebody do that to a baby? Why didn’t anybody stop them?



Michelle Farris and her husband, Tim Farris, look at gravestones in Mount Zion Cemetery in D.C. Moses, her distant relative, is buried there in an unknown location. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

“It doesn’t belong to the Smithsonian,” she recalled them saying. “It’s the baby’s brain. So it should go back to the baby.”

Farris said she wasn’t surprised by what happened to Moses because of the country’s history of discrimination against and medical experimentation on Black people. Her grandfather, who was born in Virginia, had grown up suspicious of doctors, she said.

“He would say, ‘I don’t trust doctors because they do bad things to Black men and Black people in general,’” she said. “So to hear something like this, it’s sad, but sad ... that it’s not shocking.”

Farris said the Smithsonian should take steps to return the local remains to families and pay for their burial. Above all, she feels personally motivated to advocate for Moses. “It’s like, okay, ‘I’ll be your voice since your voice is gone, and those that could have been your voice, they’re gone. Let me be your voice,’” she said. “I just want to give him his peace.”



Michelle and Tim Farris with their children, Abigail, 9, Seth, 13, and Owen, 9, at home in Glen Burnie, Md. (Carolyn Van Houton/The Washington Post)



Margaret “Molly” Ricou Randall, 92, said she had similar feelings after The Post discovered that her uncle, Francis Sullivan, had his brain taken by Hrdlicka following his death at Children’s Hospital at age 11, according to Smithsonian records. Francis had died of empyema, a condition of the lungs that is often associated with pneumonia.

(Form 197, 10 M. 7-24-'03.) 114 (272-64.)

### CERTIFICATE OF DEATH.

No. of BURIAL PERMIT: 157268      No. of Record: 102615

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

FULL INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE GUIDANCE OF THOSE USING THIS BLANK, AND SPACE FOR REMARKS MAY BE FOUND ON THE OTHER SIDE.

1. Date of this Death: March 25 1904

2. Full Name of Deceased: Francis Joseph Sullivan  
If an unnamed infant, insert full names of both parents.

3. Sex: Male      Age: 11      5. Color: White      6. Conjugal Conditions: Single

Parent      YEARS      MONTHS      DAYS      Widowed

**HEALTH DEPARTMENT**  
**MAR 28 1904**  
**DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

Under sex, color and conjugal condition, strike out the words not applicable.  
 Under color, the term "colored" includes all of African descent, whether of pure or mixed blood.

7. Occupation: None

8. Birthplace of Deceased: D.C.

9. Birthplace of Father: Ireland      If born in the United States, give State, Territory or District; otherwise, give country.

10. Birthplace of Mother: Ireland

11. Duration of Residence in this District: Life

12. Place of Death: Children's Hospital DC

13. Cause of Death: Empyema      DURATION: 14  
PRIMARY      94

The death certificate of Francis Sullivan, who had his brain taken by Ales Hrdlicka after he died at Children’s Hospital at age 11, according to Smithsonian records. (D.C. Archives/The Washington Post)

The child’s parents, both Irish immigrants, placed an obituary for their son in the Evening Star announcing a funeral at their home and a Mass at the local St. Aloysius Church. When they buried their son in Mount Olivet Cemetery in Northeast Washington in March 1904, they had already lost several children. As with Moses, there are no records indicating whether the family was aware that Hrdlicka took Francis’s brain.

Francis's father eventually left the family, according to Randall. Not long after Francis's death, his mother died after breaking her neck in a fall, and his sister was briefly placed in an orphanage, she said. She was eventually sent to Fort Pierce, Fla., to live with an uncle.

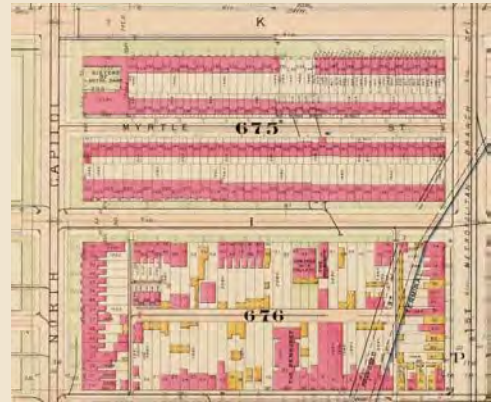
Francis's sister, Margaret, married Ernest Ricou and raised seven children in the area. Randall, the youngest and only surviving child, became a nun and a teacher.

When The Post contacted Randall about her uncle, she said her mother had never told her about Francis. But Randall said she wants to help bury his brain in the same grave as the rest of his remains.

## LOCAL GRAVEYARDS IN STORAGE

To address all the remains taken from the District, Maryland and Virginia, the repatriation office will have to grapple with far more than the brains, records show.

Also in the Smithsonian's possession are about 250 sets of other remains, mostly bones, gathered in the District by Hrdlicka and his successors. The Smithsonian has classified about another 4,000 sets of remains as being collected in Maryland and Virginia. Some came from universities, others came from graveyards for Black and Native American communities. Many of those cemeteries are unmarked, forgotten or have been redeveloped.



Francis lived with his Irish immigrant parents on Myrtle Street in Northeast Washington near what would later become Union Station, an area shown on this map from 1903. There are no records indicating whether his family was aware that Hrdlicka took his brain after he died of a lung condition in 1904. (Library of Congress)

Between 1938 and 1940, for example, Hrdlicka's successor, Thomas Dale Stewart, took skeletal remains from the ancestral village of the Patawomeck Indian Tribe of Virginia, located in Stafford County.

Brad Hatch, an anthropologist and archaeologist who serves as the head of the Patawomeck history, culture and education committee, said tribal members have long known about what the Smithsonian had collected from the site. Hatch said the group is waiting to formally request the remains until it develops a plan to rebury them.

"To me, it's very upsetting," said Hatch, who grew up about five miles from the village. "They essentially pulled our ancestors out of the ground, discarded who knows how many of them, and then the large pieces that they could identify, they took back and they're holding them, essentially in storage where they can't really be given the respect they deserve."

In other cases, the bones are probably from enslaved people. In 1924, the museum took possession of remains that were marked as a "Negro skeleton from old slave graveyard" on a farm near Cedar Run in Virginia.

### Local residents whose brains are in the collection

Anthropologist Ales Hrdlicka collected the brains of three people who died at the Washington Asylum Hospital:

**Sarah Coleman**, 59, died on Oct. 5, 1903, of epilepsy. Coleman, who was Black, was widowed and living in the city's institution for the indigent. She was buried in the city's potter's field in Southeast Washington.

**Nettie Perry**, 43, died on Oct. 14, 1903, of a cerebral hemorrhage. Perry was a Black domestic worker, and she was later buried in Columbian Harmony Cemetery, a Black cemetery that is now the location of the Rhode Island Avenue Metro station. Museum documents listed her name as "Nellie."

**Charles Carney**, 60, died on Oct. 20, 1909, of tuberculosis. Carney was White and an immigrant from Ireland. He was a widower, and he worked as a laborer. His skeleton was also kept by the Smithsonian. Museum documents note his age as "45-50."

After The Post published its series, Mary Belcher, a resident of D.C.'s Adams Morgan neighborhood who worked for years to restore and commemorate a historically Black cemetery there, told reporters that the Smithsonian had collected the remains of at least 14 individuals from the former burial ground, which is now the site of Walter Pierce Park.



Volunteers remove plants and bushes at Walter Pierce Park in Adams Morgan in 2013 to help determine the layout of the African American cemetery buried below. The Smithsonian had collected the remains of at least 14 individuals from the burial ground, according to Mary Belcher, a neighborhood resident who has worked to restore the cemetery. (Astrid Riecken for The Washington Post)

Mount Pleasant Plains Cemetery was founded in 1870 by an African American civic group called the Colored Union Benevolent Association. More than 8,000 people — mostly Black — were buried there, making it one of the area's largest Black burial grounds at the time.

In 1890, the cemetery owners reluctantly sold 1.7 acres of the land to the Smithsonian's National Zoo. Over the next 50 years, they sold

the remainder of the property to developers. An unknown number of graves were disinterred, while other graves lay forgotten.

In 1959, as workers began preparing for the construction of an apartment building, they unearthed skeletal remains. The bones were taken to the city coroner's office, which donated some of them to the Smithsonian, according to museum documents. Thirty years later, a study identified the remains as the bodies of eight Black men, five Black women and one White man — and found that some of the older Black people had probably been enslaved.

Belcher shared news of the remains with people whose relatives were or may have been buried in the cemetery. One of them, Joanne M. Braxton, said the Smithsonian could allow the descendant communities to decide what happens to the remains, including whether they want to request DNA testing.

“Here is an opportunity to address harms caused in the past and to heal those harms or to make them worse by re-traumatizing the living,” Braxton, who owns a home near the site of the cemetery, wrote in an email. “This is also a great opportunity for the Smithsonian to show its true face. If it should err, I hope it will err on the side of generosity, humility, and the understanding that those who have been harmed are the ones who know what remedy is required and whose leadership is needed.”

### **About The Collection**

A Washington Post investigative series on human brains and other body parts held by the Smithsonian.

Have a tip or story idea about the collection? Email our team at [thecollection@washingtonpost.com](mailto:thecollection@washingtonpost.com).

### **About this story**

Andrew Ba Tran of The Washington Post and Cameron Adams of the American University-Washington Post practicum program contributed to this report.

Editing by David Fallis, Sarah Childress and Aaron Wiener. Copy editing by Anjelica Tan and Kim Chapman.

Project editing by KC Schaper.

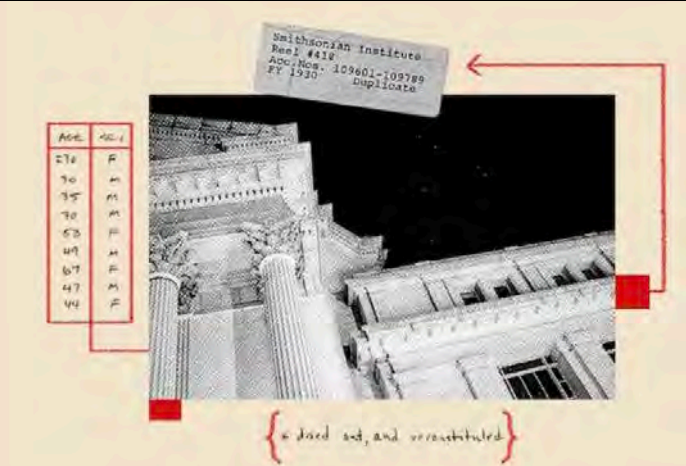
Design and development by Audrey Valbuena with support from Tara McCarty. Print design by Jennifer Reed. Additional design by Laura Padilla Castellanos. Design editing by Christian Font.

Photos by Carolyn Van Houten and Salwan Georges. Photo editing by Robert Miller.

Graphic by Adrian Blanco Ramos. Graphic editing by Manuel Canales.

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Additional editing, production and support by Jeff Leen, Jenna Lief, Matt Callahan, Junne Alcantara and Matt Clough.



## THE COLLECTION

# FORMER EMPLOYEES SAY SMITHSONIAN RESISTED ACTION ON HUMAN REMAINS

By [Nicole Dungca](#) and [Claire Healy](#)

Dec. 15 at 6:00 a.m.

<https://wapo.st/3GJEV7L>

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In 1998, Karen Mudar was told by her boss at the Smithsonian Institution to inventory the human brains that one of its anthropologists had amassed in the early 20th century.

Mudar, whose job at the National Museum of Natural History entailed returning human remains to Native American tribes, was stunned by what she discovered. She had long known the Smithsonian had thousands of skulls and other bones but did not know how many brains the institution still held.

She found the Smithsonian had collected more than 280 brains, and in a memo to the chair of the anthropology department, Mudar

warned that absent scientific research, the collection could alienate visitors and become “an object of morbid curiosity.”

But for the next two decades, the Smithsonian did virtually nothing to address her concerns.

“They could have been proactive in informing the community,” Mudar said. “The decision-makers ... had no interest. They just wanted to go back to their own research.”



Former Smithsonian repatriation office employee Karen Mudar raised concerns about the Natural History Museum’s collection of human brains in a report in 1999. (Joy Yi/The Washington Post)

Mudar’s warning came at time when she and other workers in the repatriation office found themselves battling colleagues as they sought to repatriate tens of thousands of human remains in storage. Five former employees who worked in the office in its early years told The Washington Post they encountered resistance from physical anthropologists at the Natural History Museum who wanted to keep some of the skeletal remains so they could continue conducting research on them.



“It was sort of like working in an area of an institution where no one else in the institution supports what we do,” said Chuck Smythe, who was a case officer in the repatriation office from 1994 to 2000.

Interviews with former employees offer a behind-the-scenes look at the institution’s failure to grapple with all the body parts in its collection and help to explain the challenge the staff still faces more than 30 years later. The Smithsonian acquired one of the largest collections of body parts in the world, largely under the direction of Ales Hrdlicka, a once-renowned Smithsonian anthropologist who believed in White superiority and was active in the field of eugenics.

Today, a federal law mandates that the Smithsonian offer to return the Native American remains in its possession. Of nearly 35,000 sets of body parts collected largely in the first half of the 20th century, only 6,300 have been returned or made available to descendants or cultural heirs, as reported by The Post in August.

Smithsonian officials declined to comment on allegations made by former employees. In a statement Wednesday, the officials said that the museum’s repatriation office has long met its legal obligations under federal repatriation law but that more must be done.

“Repatriating human remains and unethically obtained cultural items in our collections have been among our top priorities,” the statement read.

Earlier this year, the secretary of the Smithsonian, Lonnie G. Bunch III, apologized for the way the institution had collected remains in the past. He told The Post that it was his goal to return as many human remains as possible, and later wrote an op-ed that outlined how the institution will go forward with repatriation.

Bunch, who declined a request for an interview for this article, wrote in his op-ed that he recognized the Smithsonian “is responsible both for the original work of Hrdlicka and others who subscribed to his beliefs, and for the failure to return the remains he collected to descendant communities in the decades since.”

## ‘AT ODDS’ WITH HISTORY

The Smithsonian established the repatriation office in 1991 to help carry out a new federal law that required the institution to inventory and return human remains in its possession to federally recognized Native American, Native Hawaiian and Alaska Native tribes. Two years before, Native American communities had successfully lobbied for the legislation.

Anthropologist Tom Killion was one of the office’s first hires. Working out of a wing of the Natural History Museum, he and other employees undertook their unprecedented mission: inventorying the provenance of tens of thousands of sets of human remains — most of them skeletons and other bone fragments — and contacting tribes to offer them for repatriation.

“Literally, we did not have protocols,” said Killion, who was promoted to lead the office in 1993. “We had the law and we had ourselves to hammer out ways of doing this.”

The group worked frequently with the museum’s physical anthropology division, whose employees used the remains for their research that included human evolution and the migration patterns and characteristics of historical communities.

Killion said he and his staff were generally welcomed by the physical anthropologists, now known as biological anthropologists. But he said the office sometimes felt pressure to retain certain remains so that anthropologists could continue their research.

“We were doing something that was at odds with the then-150-year history of the museum, which was to collect scientific specimens for the increase in diffusion of knowledge,” Killion said. “And so that was a very touchy and difficult relationship at times.”

Another former repatriation office employee, Phil Cash Cash, said anthropologists at the Smithsonian were eager to collect as much data as possible on remains, even after tribes had requested their repatriation. Museum protocol requires all remains to be measured and documented before return, which officials said provides tribes with estimates on how many individuals’ remains are being sent back. But some Native Americans see the additional data collection as invasive or insulting.



Phil Cash Cash, a former repatriation office employee at the Natural History Museum. (Phil Cash Cash)

Cash Cash, a member of the Cayuse and Nez Percé tribes, said he once stored human remains associated with one of the tribes in his office so anthropologists could not use them for research while he waited for the tribe to request their return.

In another instance, he said he had carefully prepared and boxed up remains for repatriation one night in 1996, only to find the next morning that the boxes in his office had been opened and inspected.

“I was heartbroken, of course, and I understand how close the spirit can be with the remains of the body,” said Cash Cash, who worked in the office from 1992 to 1997. “To me, it was a desecration, and it was difficult to reconcile for quite a while after.”

Vernelda Grant, the director of the San Carlos Apache Tribe’s historic preservation and archaeology department, was assigned to

work with the repatriation office when she interned at the Smithsonian in 1996. She said she tried to avoid walking by boxes of human remains that lined some of the museum hallways. She recalled seeing people work with remains on their desks as they ate lunch.

“I thought, that is not how you do lab work,” said Grant, who is working to secure repatriation for items sacred and holy to Apache tribes. “That’s not how we do conservation.”

Mudar, who worked from 1993 to 1999 in the museum’s repatriation office, frequently went to Alaska to consult with tribes about human remains in the Smithsonian’s possession.

Sometimes, she said, she was told by colleagues to try to persuade Native American tribes to allow the Natural History Museum to hold on to their remains for research.

She said that after one trip to Alaska, she told Douglas Owsley, a curator in the division of biological anthropology, that the tribes still wanted the remains. In response, Owsley told her she had not tried hard enough, she said.

“It was really mortifying because I did what they told me to do, which was try to convince these people that they should leave the remains in the museum,” she said. The tribes “were offended, and they told me they were offended and insulted.”

Owsley, who is still a curator in the division, declined through a museum spokesman to be interviewed for this article.

In October 2022, Owsley told The Post that he and his fellow anthropologists treated human remains in their custody with great care and respect, and that their research was essential to understanding histories.



Karen Mudar, left, was told by her boss at the Smithsonian in 1998 to inventory more than 200 human brains. Paula Molloy, right, who started working as a case officer at the Natural History Museum in 1994, said she was troubled that so many brains were taken from Black people in the District. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

“I do feel that if we can tell that person’s story, if we can learn from them and talk about them, I do feel that that’s not something that they would be — if they were alive today — that they’d be opposed to,” Owsley said.

Other employees who worked with the repatriation office in the 1990s said they did not see resistance to repatriation. Gayle Yiotis, an archivist who helped with research, said she heard complaints that the museum was taking too long to return remains, but she believed the time was necessary.

“We had to make sure that the remains that a tribe was claiming or a nation was claiming actually belonged to that nation or that tribe, so it involved a lot of research,” she said.

Mudar said she encountered little resistance to returning remains of those identified by name, like some of the brains taken from Native American people.

She first turned her attention to the brains in the collection in 1998, when the family of a 60-year-old Tlingit man from Hoonah, Alaska, requested the return of his brain.

That same year, researchers discovered that the Natural History Museum had been storing the brain of Ishi, thought to be the last survivor of the Yahi group of the Yana people in Northern California. The case drew worldwide attention, and the brain was eventually transferred to two California tribes. In both cases, the museum supported the repatriation of the brains.

Mudar was also tasked with looking at the entire collection of brains and prepared the lengthy report on the demographics and history of the collection.

She wrote a memo to Dennis Stanford, then the chair of the anthropology department, warning leaders that the “sensitive nature of this collection jeopardizes relationships with visitors.”

At the time, Mudar said, she did not believe the brains had been collected unethically and concluded they should be available for study or catalogued in a national journal. The Post only found a 1906 study on the brains, in which Hrdlicka compared the effectiveness of preservatives for storage, and a 1999 assessment of the condition of several brains.

“Scientific study of the remains is the only justification for the maintenance of this collection,” she wrote to Stanford. “If the collection is not available for research, it becomes an object of morbid curiosity.”

## MEMORANDUM

Repatriation Office, E525B, MRC-138, NHB

TO: Dennis Stanford

FROM: Karen Mudar, Case Officer, 786-2958, through Tom Killion

SUBJECT: Department of Anthropology Brain Collection

DATE: June 25, 1999

Attached please find a report on the collection history and composition of the human brain collection at the NMNH. This report was compiled as part of the research associated with the repatriation claim by the family for the return of the brain of a Native American man. It was intended as accompanying documentation to the repatriation report, as requested by Anthropology Department staff. Believing, however, that the report contained information of a sensitive nature, we did not release it to the public. We hope, however, that concerned members of the Anthropology Department will read this document, and seriously consider the recommendations made in the accompanying memorandum.

While it is not the contention of this report that the existence of the Human brain  
Collection is in any way unethical, it is appropriate for the Smithsonian Institution to consider the  
recommendations of the report. The Smithsonian Institution should

A portion of Mudar's memo on the brain collection. (Karen Mudar/The Washington Post)

Mudar said there was no response from Stanford, who died in 2019. She also said she now believes the brains must go back to families and communities rather than be used for research.

Paula Molloy, who started working as a case officer at the Natural History Museum in 1994, said she was disturbed when Mudar first showed her the report.

Molloy said it was an "astonishing failure of leadership" that Bunch, the Smithsonian secretary, had to learn about specifics of the collection from The Post. She insisted that the Smithsonian must be proactive about reaching out to local descendant communities.

"In my view, retaining that collection was antithetical to the mission of the Smithsonian," said Molloy, who left in 2000. "It was morally wrong. And when you add the historical element and the injustice on top of that, it really angered me. It still angers me."

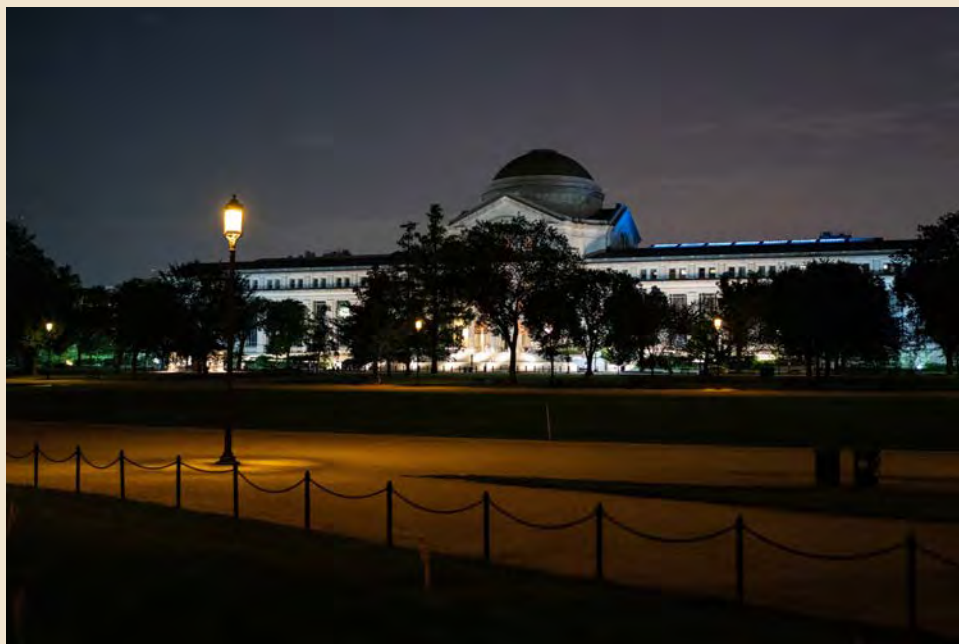
## ‘TOO PROACTIVE’

In 2000, museum officials made the repatriation office, which had been largely staffed by employees on fixed-term contracts, a permanent part of the institution. In doing so, the museum eliminated some of those jobs for budgetary reasons and did not hire certain employees for the new full-time positions, including Killion, the head of the office; Mudar; and Smythe.

Mudar said she believed their dismissal was “intentional, to slow the work down.”

Stephen Loring, an archaeologist and anthropologist who worked in another division at the museum, agreed. “They were just seen as too proactive,” he said.

In the years after Mudar and others left, the repatriation office came under scrutiny for its lack of progress. In 2011, a Government



The Smithsonian announced in April the creation of a task force to write new policies on human remains in the Natural History Museum’s possession. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)



Accountability Office report found that the museum would need “several more decades” to inventory and repatriate all of its Native American remains at its current pace. The program manager at the time said the “limited” number of employees — 11 — contributed to the delay, according to the report.

By 2011, the museum had returned or made available about 5,000 sets of remains to Native American tribes, according to the report.

Since then, the repatriation office, which has 10 employees and two more starting soon, has returned or made available about another 1,300 sets of remains, the majority of them to Native American tribes.

In the statement, Smithsonian officials said they “recognize that there is more to be done,” particularly for remains that are not mandated to be returned under federal law.

In 2015, the museum created policies that would facilitate repatriation of human remains to foreign countries, and in 2020 to tribes that are not federally recognized.

Officials at the Smithsonian and other museums across the country described a sea change with regard to repatriation in recent years.

Anthropologist Rosita Kaaháni Worl, who has worked at the Natural History Museum and served on the review committee for a federal repatriation law, said many anthropologists were once reluctant to return human remains but that attitudes have begun to shift.

“I’ve seen changes among the younger anthropologists and museum professionals,” said Worl, who is Tlingit. “I see the younger generation as much more open to it.”

Smithsonian employees said relationships between the institution and Native communities are stronger as a result of the repatriation office's work. They also said they have made significant progress repatriating body parts given their large workload and limited staff.

This year, Dorothy Lippert, an archaeologist and citizen of the Choctaw Nation, became the first Native American and first woman to hold the role of program manager of the repatriation office.

"The work that we do does allow people to begin that process of healing," said Lippert, who joined the office as a case officer in 2001. "It's a challenging process to work on, but I think in the end, what we're doing is trying to make things better than they were."

As The Post investigated, the Smithsonian in April announced the creation of a task force to write new policies on human remains in the museum's possession.

During a House Administration Committee hearing this week, Rep. Joseph Morelle (D-N.Y.) questioned Bunch about the task force's progress and plans to return brains to families, calling the collection a "revolting historic wrong."

Bunch told Morelle he expected to receive a report from the task force in the next few weeks.

Michael Blakey, an anthropologist and member of the task force, has been critical of the museum's progress on repatriation in the past. He said that he is encouraged by the task force meetings but that change will be "a continuing effort."

"I'm a scientist," he said. "What does the empirical evidence ... tell us? It tells us that there will be resistance."

**CORRECTION**

An earlier version of this article incorrectly said that the Smithsonian repatriation office has 14 employees. The Smithsonian said the correct number is 10, with two more starting soon. The article has been corrected.

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## THE COLLECTION

# SEARCH THE SMITHSONIAN'S RECORDS ON HUMAN REMAINS

By [Andrew Ba Tran](#), [Claire Healy](#) and [Nicole Dungca](#)

<https://wapo.st/3NLWMyQ>

Click on the above URL or copy into your web browser to view online



## Explore the accession files of the Smithsonian's collection of human remains

Though a selection of keywords from all available pages will be searchable, only the first memo page will be published by The Post. The Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History declined to provide all of their files after 1958.

To obtain the whole file, please contact the Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 305 with the accession number.

Search in table

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YEAR	COUNTRY	REGION	DONOR	DONOR ORGANIZATION	HUMAN REMAINS	ACCESSION NUMBER	PAGES	FIRST PAGE OF FILE
1868	United States	Kentucky	Lyon, Sydney S.		1	001299	5	
1869	United States	Wisconsin	Hoy, Philo Romaine		1	001527	10	
1871	United States	Georgia	McKinley, William Mckinley, Andrew		1	002094	4	
1872	Chile, Peru	Tarapaca Province	Meiggs, Henry		3	002130	1	
			Chase,					