

Estimated 7,000 bodies may be buried at former asylum

May 23 2018, by Sarah Mearhoff



In this May 9, 2018 photo taken in Starkville, Miss., Mississippi State University anthropologist Molly Zuckerman holds a portion of a mandible extracted from one of the graves unearthed at what was the graveyard of the Mississippi State Asylum in Jackson, Miss. The jaw at left, is from another dig and is used for scale. Officials in Mississippi believe the remains of as many as 7,000 former patients at the asylum could be lying in an empty, grassy field on the university campus. In May 2016, university officials established a consortium to exhume the remains and study them. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

Some of the boxes stacked inside anthropologist Molly Zuckerman's laboratory contain full bones—a skull, a jaw, or a leg. Others contain only plastic bags of bone fragments that Zuckerman describes as "grit."

These humble remains are among as many as 7,000 bodies that were buried at Mississippi's former insane asylum, a site that's now on the grounds of the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson. Researchers are planning to exhume the bodies, create a memorial and study them for insight on how mentally ill people and other marginalized populations should be treated today.

"The individuals present this amazing snapshot of life and health and human biology in Mississippi during a really tumultuous time spanning from before the Civil War into Reconstruction and into Jim Crow," said Zuckerman, who operates her lab at Mississippi State University in Starkville. "This can provide a very rich, contextualized, detailed and personal understanding of how health changed throughout time and how people's health was influenced by structural factors such as poverty and racism and marginalization."

The Mississippi State Lunatic Asylum—later renamed the Mississippi State Insane Hospital—operated from 1855 to 1935 and housed up to 35,000 patients from across the state. Patients who died while institutionalized were buried there if relatives didn't claim their bodies.



In this May 9, 2018 photo taken in Starkville, Miss., Mississippi State University anthropologist Molly Zuckerman holds in her right hand a portion of a mandible extracted from one of the graves unearthed at what was the graveyard of the Mississippi State Asylum in Jackson, Miss. In the left hand are bone fragments, that have crumbled after decades buried in Mississippi's clay and humid climate, making it difficult to provide any information. Officials in Mississippi believe the remains of as many as 7,000 former patients at the asylum could be lying in an empty, grassy field on the university campus. In May 2016, university officials established a consortium to exhume the remains and study them. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

While researchers have limited information on those buried at the site, Zuckerman said many suffered from syphilis and associated mental symptoms at a time before antibiotics were known as an effective cure. Others' conditions ranged from schizophrenia to postpartum depression in an era when mental health wasn't well understood. Racial and economic backgrounds appear to have varied.

Pockets of remains had been found on the university's campus since the 1990s. But during a 2012 survey for planned road construction, archaeologists made the startling discovery that there are at least 3,000 buried bodies—and possibly as many as 7,000.

A group of seven universities in Mississippi and Texas has created a consortium to memorialize and analyze the remains.

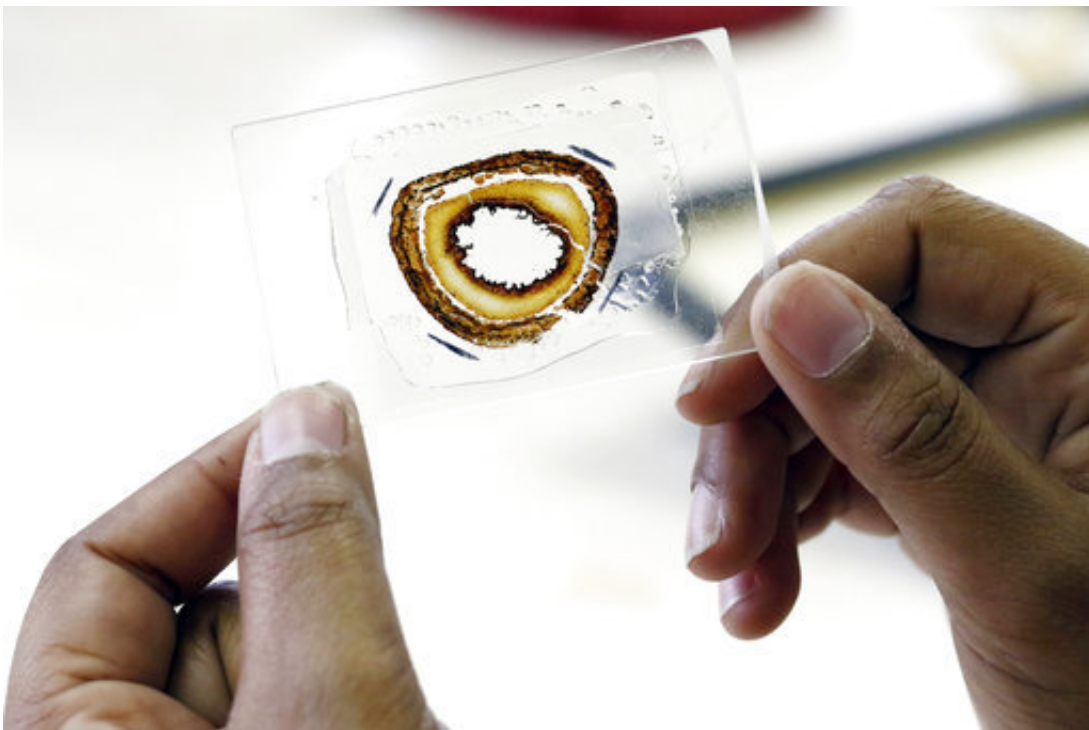


In this May 9, 2018 photo taken in Starkville, Miss., Mississippi State University anthropologist Molly Zuckerman holds a portion of a pine casket from one of the graves unearthed at what was the graveyard of the Mississippi State Asylum in Jackson, Miss. By studying the tree rings in the wood, researchers can determine an approximate date when the casket was made and put into use. The University of Mississippi Medical Center has established a consortium to study the remains of what could be as many as 7,000 former patients buried on the university's campus. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

Ralph Didlake, the director of UMMC's Center for Bioethics and Medical Humanities, said the consortium aims "to respectfully manage the remains in a way that leverages their cultural value, honors their legacy and history and scientific value." Didlake hopes to receive about \$2 million from Mississippi legislators for the project, after which he believes private donations will sustain it.

So far the exhumed remains of 66 people are housed at Zuckerman's lab. Zuckerman said the patients were laid to rest with respect in individual coffins. Their unmarked graves and lack of personal effects were common burial practices for the time, she said.

In one box is a nearly full human skull from a young female patient, said Assistant Professor Anna Osterholtz, pointing to three dents in the skull that came from traumatic impacts. One is so severe that Osterholtz said the blow could have caused permanent brain damage. It's not clear whether the blow came before or after the patient was institutionalized.



In this May 9, 2018 photo taken in Starkville, Miss., Mississippi State University anthropology major Adara Rutherford, holds a transverse cut of a femur, taken from one of the occupants in the 66 graves unearthed at what was the graveyard of the Mississippi State Asylum in Jackson, Miss. Officials in Mississippi believe the remains of as many as 7,000 former patients at an asylum could be buried on what is now the University of Mississippi Medical Center's property. By studying the remains anthropologists can see how marginalized populations' health was directly affected by structural factors like poverty and racism. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

One of Zuckerman's graduate students inspected cross-sections of bones to find evidence of pellagra, or vitamin B deficiency. Likely a result of a diet of corn, fatback and molasses, the condition can cause dementia-like symptoms.

Skeletal remains can also show evidence of chronic disease. Syphilis in its late stages, for instance, can cause small brain tumors that result in moth hole-like craters in the skull.

From teeth, anthropologists can gather information on people's diets and even discern what county they're from.



In this May 9, 2018 photo taken in Starkville, Miss., Mississippi State University anthropologist Molly Zuckerman, stands amid boxes containing the remains of 66 patients unearthed at the University of Mississippi Medical Center's property in Jackson, Miss. Officials in Mississippi believe the remains of as many as 7,000 former patients at the asylum could be lying in an empty, grassy field on the university campus. "The individuals present this amazing snapshot of life and health and human biology in Mississippi during a really tumultuous time spanning from before the Civil War into Reconstruction and into Jim Crow," said Zuckerman. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

Identifying the patients, though, is difficult. The coffins are not marked. Anthropologists have recovered patient records, but there is no map to match records to gravesites. DNA analysis is costly, and DNA strands can degrade beyond recognition after decades underground.

Karen Clark, who has studied state records and her family's genealogy,

said her great-great-great-grandfather Isham Earnest is buried at the site. She has no problem with the university digging up the graves, and she hopes DNA testing could point her to her ancestor's remains.

"Why not use the latest technology if it exists?" she asked.



In this May 9, 2018 photo taken in Starkville, Miss., Mississippi State University anthropologist Anna Osterholtz holds a map outlining the 66 unearthed graves at what was the graveyard of the Mississippi State Asylum in Jackson, Miss. Officials in Mississippi believe the remains of as many as 7,000 former patients at the asylum could be lying in an empty, grassy field on the university campus. By studying the remains anthropologists can see how marginalized populations' health was directly affected by structural factors like poverty and racism. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

Zuckerman said studying how the mentally ill were treated in the [asylum](#)

's era will help researchers understand how to improve treatment for marginalized populations of today, whether they're affected by mental illness, racism, sexism or poverty.

"The only way you can really justify doing work on human remains—because of how ethically loaded the question of human remains is—is if you generate information from them that is useful and beneficial to modern and future populations," Zuckerman said.



In this May 9, 2018 photo shot in Starkville, Mississippi State University anthropologist Anna Osterholtz holds a portion of a pine casket from one of the graves unearthed at what was the graveyard of the Mississippi State Asylum in Jackson, Miss. By studying the tree rings in the wood, researchers can determine an approximate date when the casket was made and put into use. The University of Mississippi Medical Center has established a consortium to study the remains of what could be as many as 7,000 former patients buried on the university's campus. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

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