“MENDO MAN”: A JOURNEY BEYOND THE GRAVE

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Recovered human remains from Mendocino Headlands State Park takes a 27-year long journey back to the grave. State Archaeologist Breck Parkman and Emily Carleton partnered up on the task in 2013 and used the opportunity to spark the interest of archaeology in the local community. The intent to put the young man back to rest proved the perfect time to teach the public the value of archaeology and the respect of remains long after someone is laid to rest.

On April 22, 1986, State Archaeologist E. Breck Parkman was called upon to recover the skeletal remains of a man whose unmarked grave had started to erode out of the cliff face at Mendocino Headlands State Park, within the Town of Mendocino. During the previous year, the popular TV series, “Murder She Wrote,” had been permitted to film an episode just 100 feet away, in which the skeleton of a murder victim from long ago was discovered on a coastal construction site in fictitious Cabot Cove, Maine. Of course, amateur crime sleuth, Jessica Fletcher (Angela Lansbury), came in and solved this very cold case involving one Joshua Peabody, the founder of Cabot Cove and a Revolutionary War hero. When the “Mendo Man” was discovered just months afterwards, it caused quite a stir in the area and was widely reported by the local news media (Figure 1). Usually, the discovery of human remains is kept quiet, but, in this case, a careless law enforcement officer talked about the eroding burial on his radio, which was overheard by a local reporter monitoring a police band radio. Within a matter of hours, the burial was a big story, mostly due to the “Murder She Wrote” angle. Unfortunately, Jessica Fletcher was not available to investigate this newest find, so Parkman was sent instead.

Parkman’s initial analysis of the remains indicated that the man had been quite tall and robust, and that he had drowned in the ocean c. 1860. The man was found to be missing the bones of his hands and feet and the skull was missing as well. A pile of dark beach sand was found beside each of his thighs, suggestive of death by drowning. The dark sand had likely filled the man’s pants pockets as he washed about in the surf. The beach below was characterized by identical dark sand, which contrasted sharply with the yellowish soil of the C Horizon that surrounded the burial. The man had been buried in a simple redwood coffin, of which only a few small bits and pieces remained. The grave was aligned East-West, with the man’s head pointing to the sea.

Following their recovery, the remains were taken to the State’s Archaeology Lab in Sacramento, at the request of Dr. Peter Schulz, a Senior State Archaeologist and trained osteologist. Dr. Schulz had offered to provide a second opinion, prior to the final disposition of the Mendo Man, and to verify Parkman’s preliminary finding that the remains did not come from an indigenous person.

Parkman had promised to return the Mendo Man to the people of Mendocino within a few months of the recovery and to either bury the man’s remains in the town cemetery, or otherwise on the coastal bluff near where they had been found. Unfortunately, it would be 27 years before he could make good on his promise. The Mendo Man’s remains arrived in Sacramento just days before California State Parks began a comprehensive assessment of all the skeletal remains in its possession, a program designed to satisfy the needs of Native American Graves Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Although the Mendo Man was not believed to be of Native American ancestry, his remains were redirected as part of the study, conducted under special security protocols by an outside consultant. The remains were relocated to a special facility that only the consultant had access to. The assessment went well and eventually, many of the remains in the State’s possession were successfully repatriated to their respective tribes. The years went by and when asked, no one in Sacramento could tell Parkman where the Mendo Man’s remains had ended up. Had they been misidentified as Native American and repatriated to a tribe for reburial? Or were they in a box somewhere, overlooked and gathering dust?
Twenty-three years after recovering the remains, Parkman, nearing retirement and thinking he would never see the Mendo Man again, decided to go ahead and write up his old fieldnotes documenting the 1986 recovery (Parkman 2009). The report noted that the remains of the Mendo Man seemed to have vanished in thin air. Two years later, Parkman shared a copy of his report with some of the California State Parks cultural resource staff in Sacramento. Not long afterwards, he received a phone call. To Parkman’s surprise and relief, the remains had been found and were available for their final disposition, whatever that might be. One of the options presented to Parkman was having the remains be curated in a university osteology lab. Parkman reminded others that he had promised to return the remains to Mendocino and work with the community there to provide a proper burial for the Mendo Man.

Emily Carleton, a Seasonal Archaeological Specialist then employed by California State Parks in Sacramento, was tasked in 2012 to conduct the final osteological analysis of the man’s remains. At that time, the State Archaeological Collections Research Facility was in the middle of a big move to a new facility. This seemed like the perfect time to help “clean house” and finally put to rest some remains that had been on the shelf for over 25 years. She was given the files on this case and began an inventory and an examination of the remains to revisit what was already reported about them. Her observations were much like the original results.

Carleton conducted a more detailed investigation of the remains to conclude that the man was a 20-27-year-old, 5’9” to 6’3” tall, robust/strong man, and likely of Northern European heritage (Carleton 2012). The man had strong muscle attachments in his arms and back, leading to the conclusion that he was likely a sailor or perhaps a logger who had gone to sea. Milk glass and brass buttons associated with the remains were looked at by David W. Rickman, Illustrator and Historian, an expert who confirmed a date of the 1860s and determined that the man had worn shirt and trousers when he was buried at the headlands. Small pieces of fabric had been preserved by the buttons.

A likely story surrounding the young man’s death is that he was a drowning victim. He washed upon the darker sand of the shore after meeting an untimely death, his trousers filling with sand. His body must have been exposed in the water for some time to be without hands or feet. When the townspeople found him there on the beach, they laid him in a simple wooden coffin and buried him on the headlands as
quickly as possible with his head facing the setting sun. With the head facing the sea, the skull would have been the first skeletal element to tumble out of the grave and fall to the beach below.

According to the *Daily Alta California* of Nov. 22, 1860, 12 sailors were drowned in Mendocino Bay on November 15, 1860. The brig, *J.S. Cabot*, while trying to enter the bay during a fierce storm, struck a rock and capsized. Seven sailors aboard the *Cabot* were lost, as were five men from the schooner, *Kaluna*, who had rowed out from shore in a failed attempt to rescue the drowning men. It is conceivable that the Mendo Man was one of those lost in this tragedy.

Upon concluding her analysis, Carleton, and Parkman discussed the possibility of burying the Mendo Man in the town cemetery. Carleton contacted the Mendocino Historical Society, who put her in contact with Laurie Hill, the manager of the Mendocino-Little River Cemetery District. Hill was extremely enthusiastic and with the support of her board of directors, provided at no cost a grave plot in the town’s historic Evergreen Cemetery. She also commissioned a local stone mason and sculptor, Robert Milhollin, to carve a headstone for the Mendo Man’s grave. Milhollin chose a slab of fine Italian marble, on which he carved these words: “Unknown, A Casualty of the Sea, c.1860” (Figure 2). Additionally, Milhollin carved a wave and star on the headstone, to commemorate the likelihood that the Mendo Man had been a sailor.

On April 23, 2013, a reburial ceremony was held at Evergreen Cemetery, at the edge of town (Appendix 1). About forty people attended the event, which had been advertised in the local paper. Parkman, an ordained minister with the Universal Life Church, served as the officiate. The remains were interred in a small wooden coffin constructed by Chris Carleton, Emily Carleton’s father. The gravesite was adorned with flags and flowers and a local Scottish bagpiper, Peter Kapp, performed at certain intervals. The story of how the Mendo Man was found and what was learned from him was described by Parkman and Carleton to those gathered there. They encouraged those attending to look upon his remains (open casket style) to help illustrate what Carleton had concluded in her analysis. The attendees were told that by their presence, they represented the “family” of this unknown man. They each took turns shoveling dirt into the grave (Figure 3). Near the conclusion of the ceremony, Parkman read the poem, “Requiem,” by Robert Louis Stevenson. As the poem ended, Kapp began to play Amazing Grace and then slowly departed the cemetery, with the sound of his bagpipes drifting away as he disappeared (Figure 4). It had taken almost three decades for California State Parks to return the Mendo Man to his community, but the promise to do so was never forgotten. In the end, the honor that was shown this man as he was finally laid to rest was a fitting end to his long journey.

This case shows the comradery of archaeologists and a community that brought to rest a man’s 27-year journey from grave to discovery and back to the grave. We all know that the public is very interested in archaeology, and this has proven again that they are very willing to learn and help in any way they can. It was an exciting project with an ideal ending. We need to continue to expand this kind of outreach to the public. Projects like the one we have described can help gain the respect of communities across the state and be used as a teaching opportunity to instill respect of what archaeology is, of the dead, the forgotten, and all the knowledge that we can learn from past life on this earth.

REFERENCES CITED

Carleton, Emily A.


Parkman, E. Breck

Figure 2. Headstone for Mendo Man (Jenny Donovan, 4-23-13).

Figure 3. Robert Milhollin and Emily Carleton shoveling first dirt into grave (Jenny Donovan, 4-23-13).
Figure 4. Peter Kapp performing at graveside (Jenny Donovan, 4-23-13).
APPENDIX 1. PROGRAM FOR REBURIAL OF MENDO MAN

EVERRGREEN CEMETERY
MENDOCINO, CALIFORNIA
APRIL 23, 2013

1:55PM: Peter Kapp (bagpiper) begins playing in order to attract people to the proper location.
2:00PM: Breck Parkman welcomes everyone and gives a brief introduction to what we are doing here. He then describes how we came to have the Mendo Man’s remains.
2:05PM: Breck introduces Emily Carleton, who tells the audience what we know about the man based on her analysis of his remains.
2:09PM: Breck introduces Laurie Hill, who tells the audience why she and the Mendocino-Little River Cemetery District became involved in the reburial project, shares future plans for interpreting the story of the Mendo Man and/or others in the cemetery, and anything else she wants to share at this time.
2:13PM: Breck introduces Roberts Milhollin, of Albion, who describes the headstone, his work to fashion an appropriate marker, and his vision of the star and wave.
2:17PM: Breck reads a passage from “Sea Fever,” a poem by John Masefield, as Emily and her father, Chris Carleton, bring the coffin he constructed to the gravesite and slowly place it in the excavated pit.
2:20PM: While the bagpiper plays in the background (his choice of song), everyone takes a turn shoveling dirt into the open grave.
2:25PM: Breck concludes the service with a few words and then reads “Requiem,” a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson. As Breck completes the poem, the bagpiper begins to play Amazing Grace at graveside, and, after a few seconds, slowly walks away while still playing. The bagpiper will walk south along the road leading through the center of the cemetery, all the time playing, exit the distant gate, and then disappear along the sidewalk, disappearing from our sight at about the same time the sound of Amazing Grace disappears. At that point, we will all disperse.

I must go down to the sea again,
    To the lonely sea and the sky;
  And all I ask is a tall ship
    And a star to steer her by.

--From “Sea Fever,” by John Masefield (1878-1967)

Under the wide and starry sky,
    Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
    And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:
    Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
    And the hunter home from the hill.

--“Requiem,” by Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)