

MORTON COLLECTION COMMITTEE

Report on Evaluation Phase

April 8, 2021

Morton Collection Committee Report on Evaluation Phase

Executive Summary

In the summer of 2020, the Penn Museum (the Museum) established the Morton Collection Committee to examine ongoing issues pertaining to its Morton Cranial Collection and make recommendations for the appropriate treatment of portions of the Collection. Through a series of meetings held between August 2020 and April 2021, it carried out the first stage of a three-step process of evaluation, assessment, and action. In April 2021, it issued a Report of its recommendations.

The Morton Collection Committee (MCC) recommends:

- that the Penn Museum acknowledge that its collections contain human remains and cultural items which were collected unethically.
- the Museum should return ancestors to their descendants and communities of origin whenever possible as a step towards atoning for the racist, unethical, and colonial practices which were integral to the formation of these collections.
- the Museum should apologize for its possession and treatment of unethically acquired and held ancestors. In connection with the actions carried out in response to each phase of assessment it should apologize to each community as part of the process of healing carried forward by repatriation.
- the Museum should reassess its practices of collecting, storing, displaying, and researching human remains, and should include a visitation location for human remains that provides a quiet, contemplative space for reconnections and consultation visits in its future plans for rehousing the collections.
- the Museum should institute and develop a process which is transparent, repeatable, and lasting in order to handle the evolving scope of assessment of repatriation and reburial requests.
- the Museum should ensure that Community consultation is integrated into the processes of assessment and action at every step. Consultation will be required in order to identify the appropriate stakeholder groups, to understand their wishes and objectives, and to achieve a mutually satisfactory outcome.
- the Museum should form a repatriation committee, under BIPOC leadership, which would be responsible for all repatriations which do not fall under NAGPRA.
- the Museum should collaborate with Penn leadership, the School of Arts and Sciences, and the Department of Anthropology, to address the expressed need for augmenting the Anthropology faculty with a new faculty hire, a BIPOC bioanthropologist, who would combine expertise in analysis of human remains with a track record of advocacy for Black and Indigenous matters in repatriation requests.

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Introduction

In 2020, the police killing of George Floyd led to renewed calls for racial justice demonstrated by Black Lives Matter protests held across the country throughout the summer and fall. This movement underscored the urgent need for institutions like the Penn Museum to critically examine our histories which are intertwined with the histories of colonialism and racism in America, and to reevaluate and deconstruct our contemporary practices that maintain colonialist and racist ideologies. Equally, members of our own community such as West Philadelphia activists and University students helped to shape the urgency with which radical change at the Museum must take place. As part of its response to this need, the Penn Museum formed the Morton Collection Committee to carry out the first step of an envisioned three-stage process consisting of evaluation, assessment, and action. The Committee's work, the evaluation stage, has consisted of a series of meetings and discussions held between August 2020 and April 2021. The Committee has identified approaches and needs for assessment of the appropriate actions to take in respect of, initially, the Morton Collection housed in the Penn Museum. Action steps are expected to result in repatriation and reburial. The assessment and action steps will need to be carried out multiple times as the Museum assesses the appropriate treatment of a portion of the collection and acts accordingly based on that assessment.

The Morton Collection Committee (MCC) recommends that the Penn Museum acknowledge that its collections contain human remains and cultural items which were collected unethically. The MCC recommends that the Museum should return ancestors to their descendants and communities of origin whenever possible as a step towards atoning for the racist, unethical, and colonial practices which were integral to the formation of these collections. The Museum should apologize for its possession and treatment of unethically acquired and held ancestors. In connection with the actions carried out in response to each phase of assessment it should apologize to each community as part of the process of healing carried forward by repatriation. The MCC also recommends that the Museum should reassess its practices of collecting, storing, displaying, and researching human remains, and should include a visitation location for human remains that provides a quiet, contemplative space for reconnections and consultation visits in its future plans for rehousing the collections.

The Morton Collection

The Morton Collection consists of over 1300 crania which were collected by Samuel Morton and others in the mid-19th century. The crania come from all parts of the world and range in date from ancient Egyptian times to the 19th century. They were collected both directly by Morton and

indirectly by other individuals from wide range of places, and as a result the Morton Collection needs to be treated as multiple smaller groupings not as a single unit.

Morton used the crania in support of theories of racial superiority which the Penn Museum and many others now vigorously reject. The collection came to the Penn Museum on loan from the Academy of Natural Sciences in 1966 and legal ownership was transferred to the Penn Museum in 1997. Further information on Morton and the Collection are available on the Penn Museum website at <https://www.penn.museum/sites/morton>.

Scope

The initial remit of the Morton Collection Committee (MCC) was a group of 51 crania of enslaved individuals exhumed by a Havana-based Cuban doctor named Cisneros. The Committee discussed the fact that additional individuals in the Morton Collection and other parts of the Penn Museum's collections also need to be considered in ongoing processes of reparation through assessment and action and recommends that the Museum actively assess and act on the repatriation of human remains in a larger context than the initial remit of the MCC.

Process

The Committee recommends that the Museum should institute and develop a process which is transparent, repeatable, and lasting in order to handle the evolving scope of assessment of repatriation and reburial requests.

The Committee further recommends that the Museum should ensure that Community consultation is integrated into the processes of assessment and action at every step. Consultation will be required in order to identify the appropriate stakeholder groups, to understand their wishes and objectives, and to achieve a mutually satisfactory outcome.

Valuable lessons can be learned from the Museum's thirty-years of experience in NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990) compliance and activity. This consists of a committee, chaired by a Museum staff member, which proactively informs and consults with tribes about relevant materials under the Museum's stewardship; works with internal and external experts to establish evidence for the basis for claims; consults and collaborates actively with descendant and stakeholder communities in order to determine their desired outcomes; consults with Penn's Office of General Counsel to ensure that each case has the proper legal basis; and acts on behalf of the University to carry out the course of action that has been mutually arrived at by community representatives and the Museum.

Following the NAGPRA model, requests for repatriation should be assessed by taking into account all available and relevant data in combination with community consultation. Requests for assessment may be based on research into the collection, from internal Museum review of the collection, or from government agencies or recognized self-governing groups.

Archival data concerning the collection should be examined: this can require extensive research and may not be conclusive because of gaps in the evidence and because the published catalogs are known to be sometimes unreliable. As a result, in some cases other scientific methods, including DNA testing, may be an option for improving understanding of the origin and dating of human remains. This should be carefully evaluated in each case and, where possible, in conjunction with the preferences of possible descendant communities.

Administration

In view of the importance of carrying out the proper degree of due diligence in assessing repatriation claims, and given the likelihood that requests for the repatriation of human remains outside of NAGPRA will continue in years to come, the Committee recommends that Museum create an institutional infrastructure for dealing with these matters in a consistent manner.

The Committee therefore recommends that the Museum should form a repatriation committee, under BIPOC leadership, which would be responsible for all repatriations which do not fall under NAGPRA. The Museum's existing NAGPRA committee would continue unchanged in order to ensure that its workload is not negatively impacted by the creation of the new committee.

This non-NAGPRA repatriation committee should report directly to the Williams Director who would serve as Chair. This new committee, which would work in a broadly consultative manner, should consist of a small group of core members with BIPOC leadership and membership drawn primarily from Museum staff and faculty, and invited to serve on the committee by the Director. The committee should have one or more full-time staff members responsible for staffing the committee, responding to repatriation requests, liaising with relevant communities, coordinating the work of Museum curators and staff, convening meetings with relevant expert advisors, and carrying out collections-related tasks associated with repatriation.

In addition to the formation of the non-NAGPRA repatriation committee, the MCC also recommends that the Museum should collaborate with Penn leadership, the School of Arts and Sciences, and the Department of Anthropology, to address the expressed need for augmenting the Anthropology faculty with a new faculty hire, a BIPOC bioanthropologist, who would combine expertise in analysis of human remains with a track record of advocacy for Black and Indigenous matters in repatriation requests. This appointment should be made jointly as a Curator in the Museum and as a Faculty member in the Department of Anthropology.