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## The Lindbergh Kidnapping: Review of the Autopsy Evidence

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**REFERENCE:** Baden, M. M., "The Lindbergh Kidnapping: Review of the Autopsy Evidence," *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, JFSCA, Vol. 28, No. 4, Oct. 1983, pp. 1071-1075.

**ABSTRACT:** Review of the findings of the autopsy performed on the decomposed remains show the identification as the Lindbergh baby to be valid, but the cause of death as "fractured skull" to be less certain.

**KEYWORDS:** plenary session, Lindbergh kidnapping case, pathology and biology, human identification

The Lindbergh baby was found on 12 May 1932, 73 days after he was kidnapped, in a wooded area near a roadway a few miles from the Lindbergh residence. The remains were markedly decomposed and partially skeletonized.

### Identification as Charles A. Lindbergh, Jr.

Identification was made on the basis of the handmade sleeping garments still on the body, by a peculiar congenital overlapping of toes of the right foot, and by direct viewing by Colonel Lindbergh and the baby's nurse who noted a prominent forehead and dimple in the center of the chin (see Fig. 1). As far as is known, no autopsy photographs or X-rays were taken.

Although the baby was cremated the day after he was found and autopsied—ironically, at the same crematorium in New Jersey that was to receive Bruno Richard Hauptmann's remains almost four years later—some small bones of the hands and feet that were recovered separately from the site where the baby was found are still in the custody of the New Jersey State Police. They are in a remarkably excellent state of preservation. They were not evaluated anthropologically until 1977 when Dr. Wilton Krogman concluded that they were consistent with having derived from a 20-month-old white male.

It is of interest that today when skeletonized remains are found, often the skull and long bones are retrieved and the smaller bones are left at the scene. Small bones are important for identification purposes and for reconstruction of cause and circumstances of death. Of particular importance are the hyoid bone and laryngeal cartilages, examination of which permits evaluation as to the possibility of strangulation; in the Lindbergh autopsy, as often happens, they are not described.

One other identifying feature was the matching of scalp hair removed from the baby dur-

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# WANTED

**INFORMATION AS TO THE  
WHEREABOUTS OF**



## **CHAS. A. LINDBERGH, JR.**

**OF HOPEWELL, N. J.**

## **SON OF COL. CHAS. A. LINDBERGH**

**World-Famous Aviator**

**This child was kidnaped from his home  
in Hopewell, N. J., between 8 and 10 p. m.  
on Tuesday, March 1, 1932.**

### **DESCRIPTION:**

<b>Age, 20 months</b>	<b>Hair, blond, curly</b>
<b>Weight, 27 to 30 lbs.</b>	<b>Eyes, dark blue</b>
<b>Height, 29 inches</b>	<b>Complexion, light</b>
<b>Deep dimple in center of chin</b>	
<b>Dressed in one-piece coverall night suit</b>	

**ADDRESS ALL COMMUNICATIONS TO**

**COL. H. N. SCHWARZKOPF, TRENTON, N. J., or  
COL. CHAS. A. LINDBERGH, HOPEWELL, N. J.**

FIG. 1—Poster widely distributed seeking information about the kidnaped Lindbergh child.

ing life with hair recovered at autopsy, and, subsequently, with hair recovered from the burlap bag found near the body.

### **The Autopsy**

The autopsy was performed by Mercer County Physician Dr. Charles H. Mitchell, at the Swayze Funeral Home in Trenton. According to his trial testimony, Dr. Mitchell found the odor and appearance of the body quite offensive and rapidly completed his examination in "about one hour." He describes in his one-page autopsy report, a white child with overlapping right toes and loss of some extremities and internal viscera postmortem and a degree of decomposition consistent with the length of time the baby was missing (see Fig. 2).

Dr. Mitchell describes "a perforated fracture about a half inch in diameter on the right side of the skull posterior to the right ear"; he initially thought this might have been a bullet hole but concluded that it was caused by someone at the scene who inadvertently poked a hole in the skull while moving the remains with a stick. He also describes a fracture of the skull on the left side with "evidence of a hemorrhage on the inner surface of the left side of the skull at the point of fracture." There is no further characterization or documentation by description, photograph, or microscopic slides of this alleged hemorrhage. No scalp or brain injury is identified or described.

When questioned at trial, Dr. Mitchell said he excluded choking as the cause of death by inserting his fingers into the mouth and throat and noting no obstruction. He issued the death certificate the same day listing the cause of death as "Fractured skull due to External Violence" (see Fig. 3).

On the basis of these findings and a broken rung on the ladder found at the scene, the prosecution concluded that the baby died inadvertently during the kidnapping attempt when a ladder rung broke as Hauptmann was descending, causing him to drop the burlap bag containing the child which caused the skull fracture. Hauptmann then disposed of the dead body in the wooded area.

### **Discussion**

It is pertinent to note that it is difficult to remove a sleeping baby from its crib, place it in a burlap bag, and climb out of a window and down a ladder without the child crying out, struggling, and alerting someone in the household. There were many people in the house that evening and in adjacent rooms; Colonel Lindbergh was seated reading in the room directly beneath. A kidnapper could not rely upon the baby not crying out. Therefore, the possibility of immediate suffocation or strangulation must be considered. Unfortunately, the autopsy report is silent in this area and trial testimony that choking was excluded by insertion of the fingers in the throat is not valid. Defense counsel apparently did not consult with a qualified physician to evaluate the autopsy findings and trial testimony as to cause of death—this uncritical acceptance of autopsy findings and interpretations is still today the usual practice: should the autopsy physician be in error both the prosecution and the defense who rely upon him are misled.

The stated cause of death as "Fractured skull" is of concern. If Dr. Mitchell concludes that the half inch "perforated fracture" of the right side of the skull was caused postmortem, then the fracture on the left side of the skull also could have been caused postmortem: perhaps when the body was thrown into the woods? Perhaps from animal activity? Perhaps in subsequent moving of the body? In addition, when bodies of children decompose and skeletonize, natural suture lines may separate and give the appearance of fracture lines, especially to those without special training.

Further, skull fractures in themselves do not cause death. They are indicators of trauma but the significant injury would be to the brain. The brain is not described at all at autopsy; at trial, Dr. Mitchell characterized it as decomposed, but without injury demonstrated. The

WALTER H. SWAYZE  
TRENTON, NEW JERSEY  
May 12, 1932

Report on Unknown baby

Sex Undetermined due to marked decomposition of body.  
General appearance badly decomposed  
Left leg from knee down missing  
Left hand missing  
Right forearm missing  
Abdominal organs except liver missing  
Thoracic organs except heart missing  
Eyes softened & decomposed  
Skin of head, face, portion of chest & right Foot  
discolored & decomposed  
Body shows evidence of prolonged exposure & usual decomposition  
that would occur in the course of approximately two to three  
months time depending on climatic and other conditions that  
might produce such results.  
Special characteristics -  
Unusually high & prominent forehead & cranium apparently  
greater in circumference than would be found in a child this  
age, The first toe of the right foot completely overlaps  
the large toe and the second toe of the right foot partially over  
overlaps the large toe,  
there are eight upper and eight lower teeth, the upper  
incisors are well formed rather prominent but do not protrude,  
the two lower canines tend to divert towards <sup>and are</sup> below the  
line of the adjacent teeth.  
Height Thirty three and one half inches, light curly hair  
about three inches in length, and a section of skin on the  
right foot which had not become discolored indicated a child  
of the white race  
The facial muscles the only ones of the body that had not  
deteriorated would indicate a well developed child.  
Autopsy findings-  
General decomposition of the muscle of the entire body  
and other soft tissues except the face, But marked  
discoloration and some disfigurement of this part of the body  
existed due to softening of the eyeballs and a swollen  
condition of the lips and tongue.  
there was also a fracture of the skull extending from the  
fontanel down the left side of the skull to a point posterior  
to the left ear where it bifurcated into two distinct fractures.  
there was also a perforated fracture about a half inch in dia-  
meter on the right side of the skull posterior to the right  
ear, There was evidence of a hemorrhage on the inner surface  
of the left side of the skull at the point of fracture, the  
scalp was so badly decomposed that it was impossible to find  
any contusions or hemorrhagic <sup>conditions</sup> external to the skull, The  
fontanel was not closed the opening in the skull at this point  
being about one inch in diameter.  
Diagnosis of the cause of death is a fractured skull due to  
external violence

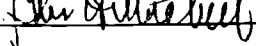
Signed 

FIG. 2—The complete one-page autopsy report.

"evidence of a hemorrhage" beneath the fracture is not described as large or thick at trial and is not further confirmed to be hemorrhage.

**Conclusion**

It is reasonable to conclude that the identification of the remains as being the Lindbergh baby is valid and would withstand court challenge today. The precise cause of death is not as

State of New Jersey

1 PLACE OF DEATH STATE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH—BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS  
 County Mercer State NEW JERSEY Registered No. 498  
 Township Hopewell or Borough  
 City No. Found near Hopewell on Hopewell-Princeton Road.

If a veteran, what war? .....

2 FULL NAME Charles A. Lindbergh, Jr.  
 3 Residence No. R. F. D. Hopewell, East Amwell Twp., Haverdon Co., N. J.  
 Length of residence in city or town where death occurred (?) yr. mos. days. How long in U. S., if of foreign birth? yr. mos. days

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

4 SEX Male 5 COLOR OR RACE White 6 Single, Married, Widowed or Divorced Single  
 7 If married, widowed or divorced HUSBAND OF  
 8 DATE OF BIRTH June 22, 1930  
 9 AGE Years 1 Months 8 Days 9 If Less Than One Day Hra. -- Min. --

OCCUPATION Child  
 Trade, profession, or particular kind of work done, as spinner, sawyer, bookkeeper, etc.  
 Industry or business in which work was done, as silk mill, saw mill, bank, etc.  
 Date deceased last worked at this occupation (month and year) ----- Total time (years) spent in this occupation -----

11 BIRTHPLACE Englewood, N. J.  
 12 NAME Charles A. Lindbergh  
 13 BIRTHPLACE Detroit, Michigan  
 14 MARRIAGE NAME Anne S. Morrow  
 15 BIRTHPLACE Englewood, N. J.

15 SIGNATURE OF INFORMANT Charles A. Lindbergh  
 (Address) R. F. D. Hopewell East Amwell Haverdon County, N. J.  
 20 PLACE OF BURIAL Rosehill Crematory  
 (Location) Linden, N. J.  
 DATE May 13, 1932

21 PERSONAL DIRECTOR (Address) Frank W. Swayze N. J. License No. 723  
415 Greenwood Ave., Trenton

16 RECEIVED 5-13-32 Howard H. Ely Local Registrar.

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

17 DATE OF DEATH About Mar. 1, 1932  
 18 I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I examined deceased ON  
May 12, 1932 Examined  
 Body found 5-12-32 Unknown  
 Date of death is -----  
 said to have occurred on the date stated above, at -----

The principal cause of death and related causes of importance in order of onset were as follows:  
Fractured Skull due to  
External Violence.

Contributory causes of importance not related to principal cause: -----

Name of operation ----- Date of -----  
 What test confirmed diagnosis? Investigation  
 Was there an autopsy? Yes  
 If death was due to external causes (violence) fill in also the following: ----- Date of -----  
Accident—suicide—homicide? Yes Injury About  
Mar. 1, 1932

Where did injury occur? Unknown  
 Specify whether injury occurred in industry, in home, or in public place.  
Probably near Hopewell, N. J.  
 Nature of injury Fractured Skull  
 Nature of injury Due to Homicide

Was disease or injury in any way related to occupation of deceased? No  
 If so, specify -----  
 (Signed) Walter H. Swayze, Coroner N. J.  
 (Address) Trenton, N. J.

FIG. 3—The death certificate.

well established. The circumstances of death and the autopsy description are consistent with the baby having died from cranio-cerebral trauma, perhaps in a fall. However, the possibility that the child was intentionally murdered by suffocation or strangulation while still in his crib cannot be excluded.

Address requests for reprints or additional information to  
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