

The Life and Career of William R. Maples, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT: The objective of this paper is to develop an overview of William R. Maples' distinguished career in forensic anthropology. Influences central to his career choice and the historical development of his professional life are described. A discussion of his key contributions to the fields of primatology and forensic anthropology are then summarized. Included in this discussion is a chronological survey of citations of Maples' works derived from the Social Sciences Citation Index. Integral to this summary of Maples' life are his varied and intriguing case studies.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, William R. Maples, forensic anthropology

While many eulogies have honored the life and career of Dr. William Ross Maples (1937–1997), the encomium we prefer reads “William R. Maples, Ph.D. world renowned forensic anthropologist and quintessential gentleman” (Plaque presented October 1, 1997 by the New York State Police, Williams Associates). This single phrase neatly, eloquently, and aptly characterizes Bill Maples as both the consummate professional and the humane person, a man whose intelligence and knowledge were indisputable and whose integrity and moral fiber were without question.

The senior author enjoyed a long collegial relationship with Bill Maples. He was always available for forensic queries and we enjoyed reviewing cases when I was in residence at the Florida Museum of Natural History, viewing Chicago winters from afar. I knew Bill as a highly ethical scholar, a professional whose conscience led him to purchase separate, identical program disks for each computer in his laboratory, rather than simply uploading from a single set. Anyone acquainted with Bill, however, quickly grew to appreciate that there was another, keenly important aspect of his persona—the strong professional partnership he shared with his wife, Margaret Kelley Maples. Bill's 1994 acknowledgments from *Dead Men Do Tell Tales* opens with a heartfelt and revealing passage. “This book could not have been written and the life it describes could not have been lived, were it not for my wife, Margaret Kelley. . . We married in 1958 and through all these years she has been the spark that has galvanized me to greater effort. . . Without her I might have been a mere, dull measurer of bones” (1:281). While it is difficult to imagine Bill being “dull” in any profession he might have chosen, these phrases underscore the fact that any consideration of Bill's life and career must recognize the partner-

ship Bill and Margaret shared. It is their story that we tell here. To paraphrase Bill, this paper could not have been written without Margaret's input. It might otherwise have been a dull thing indeed.

Born in Dallas, Texas on August 7, 1937, Bill showed an early fascination with medico-legal events (Fig. 1a). At the youthful age of only ten or eleven years, he viewed the autopsy photographs of Bonnie Parker (1:4). Rather than being repulsed, he was enthralled.

During a high school Spanish class, Bill met Margaret Kelley. A picture taken during their first date, the Military Ball, is illustrated in Fig. 1b. He was a senior, she a junior. The North Dallas High School Yearbook for 1954, Bill's senior year, indicated that he had been active in ROTC, Science Club, Pan American Club, and was consistently on the honor roll. That year Bill also inscribed Margaret's yearbook: “I wish you lots of luck,” he said. “I really think that you are tops. Don't change because you are a real cute gal now. Love always, Bill Maples.”

Bill Maples entered the University of Texas in January, 1955, staying there for three semesters. Serendipity accounted for his freshman enrollment in a physical anthropology course, all the introductory biology classes were filled (1:6). During the fall semester of 1957, he received an appointment to West Point (Fig. 1c), based on state-wide competition. There he remained for only one term, afterwards claiming it was truly more difficult to get out of the military academy than to get in. While there may have been other extenuating circumstances, such as Margaret's presence in Austin, Bill believed that the quality of education at the University of Texas was superior to that of West Point during the 1950s.

Following his brief enrollment at West Point, Bill returned to the University of Texas in January of 1958. At the end of that year, he and Margaret Kelley were married, thus formalizing a partnership that lasted nearly 40 years.

Bill worked his way through the University of Texas (UT), holding down a series of positions that he characterized as “a succession of odd jobs, very odd jobs” (1:7). Among these was employment at the Hytlin-Manor funeral home, where he did whatever was required, including painting flagpoles. More common, however, were the high speed ambulance chases to chaotic accident scenes where Bill witnessed death and dying first hand. He saw his first corpse during his first night on the job, and he attended autopsies, beginning when he was 18 years old (1:8).

An enduring force in Bill Maples' academic formation was Dr. Tom McKern. McKern had just arrived at the University of Texas in 1958, following the termination of Operation Glory, the identification of WW II dead from the Pacific Front. Meanwhile, Bill had precipitously abandoned his English major and switched to anthropology a semester before graduating. It was the required advanced physical anthropology course with Tom McKern that served to focus Bill's attention on what would later become his career. Bill describes McKern as “unique, a born teacher, a brilliant lecturer and a very charismatic personality. . . McKern had seen extraordinary

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FIG. 1a—William Maples as a child.

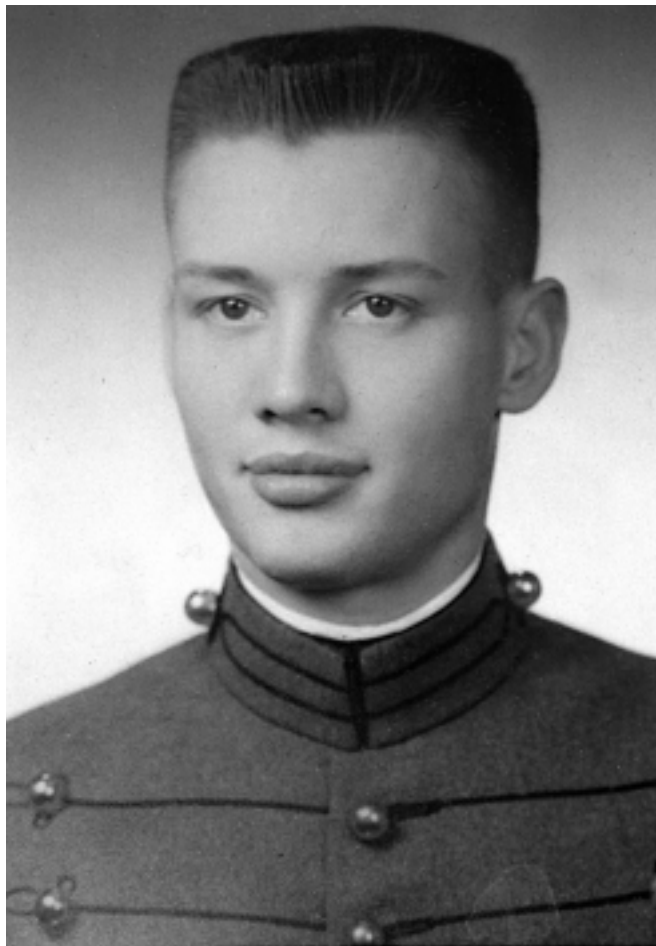


FIG. 1c—Bill Maples at West Point.



FIG. 1b—Bill and Margaret Maples at the North Dallas High School Military Ball (1954).

things, and there was a kind of glow about him" (1:6). It was this glow, along with certain financial considerations, that led Maples to enroll in the UT Master's Program, which he left briefly for a sojourn as an insurance adjuster. Miserable in this "real world" employment, Bill longed to return to the ivory tower. He wrote his old

teacher, Tom McKern, wondering if McKern thought Bill had the potential to become a forensic anthropologist. McKern beckoned, and Bill returned to the University of Texas, where he quickly completed a Master's thesis on archaeologically recovered human skeletal remains. He then found himself on his way to Africa (1:10–11).

Funding at universities was tight during that period, and there were few opportunities for graduate students to earn money as anthropologists. In 1962, however, the Southwest Foundation for Research and Education established a Field Site at Darajani in Kenya for trapping baboons. The Southwest Foundation needed a manager, and Margaret had always wanted to visit Africa. So Bill and Margaret, who was five months pregnant at the time, traveled to East Africa. They spent a year in East Africa, June 1962–May 1963. Wanting to maximize the opportunities afforded by the African context, Bill determined to focus his dissertation research on baboon taxonomy. He came back to UT for the 1963–1964 academic year, served as teaching assistant, completed all his degree requirements except the dissertation, and then returned for two further years of employment by the Southwest Foundation. At this point, the Foundation's Center had moved to Nairobi and trapping was done on safari. During this period, Bill also collected baboon skeletons sufficient for his dissertation project. Margaret numbered these materials on their kitchen table.

The three years in Africa left a lasting impression on the Maples family, which by now included two daughters: Lisa and Cynthia.

Bill learned to fly a plane, both for trapping and also to explore vistas over the Great Rift Valley. During this period, the Maples had lunch with Louis Leakey at Olduvai Gorge, and they also met the MacDonald family, who were African hunters and safari leaders. Robin MacDonald is the African hunter mentioned in Richard Preston's ominous nonfiction thriller *The Hot Zone* (2). Bill, long familiar with firearms from his Texas youth, shot such animals as the fierce Cape Buffalo while on safari. He also developed dexterity in administering a new sedative, whose street name became angel dust, to the baboons. While some of these primates left lasting scars on Bill's physique, the African experience inspired a long-lasting love for the country. In Bill's words, "My years in Kenya confirmed me in the path I had chosen. Africa poured forth gifts that I have always treasured, made me a better teacher, and gave me a perspective that broadened and deepened my research" (1:13–14).

Bill's dissertation research used osteometric data to evaluate the level of taxonomic distinction appropriate to *Papio anubis* and *Papio cynocephalus*, which were then considered separate species. Bill was particularly impressed with the fact that baboons from a location intermediate between the home ranges for the two "species" showed intermediate morphologies. He interpreted this to mean that there was regular inter-breeding between the species, and that the appropriate taxonomic distinction should be at the sub-specific rather than at the specific level (3). This taxonomic revision was also being championed at the time by famous physical anthropologist John Buettner-Janusch (4). Apparently both Bill and Buettner-Janusch were right, *Papio* is considered a single polytypic species today (5, 6).

Bill's first academic job was as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Western Michigan University, a position he held for two years. During the first year, 1966–67, he completed his Ph.D. degree. By that time, Tom McKern had left UT, so Chad Oliver, an anthropologist and science fiction writer, served as Bill's dissertation advisor of record. A year later, in 1968, Bill left Western Michigan for the University of Florida, where there were enhanced research opportunities, a medical school, and a graduate program in anthropology, not to mention a climate much closer to that of Texas.

Bill's initial research projects at the University of Florida focused upon primate behavior. His first Ph.D. student, Mary Walek, observed primates in East Africa (7). Bill had noticed what he initially interpreted as rather sophisticated diversionary tactics among crop-raiding baboons during his earlier employment with the Southwest Foundation. He now sought and received additional funding to examine crop-raiding and other adaptive behaviors of East African primates (8). At this time, he also observed two troops of rhesus macaques at Silver Spring, Florida (9) and even analyzed the occasional archaeological specimen.

Following a positive tenure decision in 1972, Bill became Chair of the Department of Social Sciences at the Florida State Museum, later the Florida Museum of Natural History. In April, 1972, he was also called to his first forensic case, in Washington County, Florida. In 1973, he gave his initial professional presentation on forensic anthropology, an invited lecture entitled "The Excavation and Identification of Human Skeletal Remains." Beginning at this time and extending over more than two decades, he and his carefully selected forensic students conducted basic research on subjects ranging from dental and skeletal aging to facial superimposition (10–15).

The impact of his research can be measured in a number of ways, including counts of citations in the Social Science Citation Index (16). As illustrated in Fig. 2, Bill's primate studies enjoyed early

popularity, with occasional interest in the 1980s and again in 1991. By contrast, even his earliest forensic papers continue to be cited, a signal of his prominence in this rapidly expanding field.

The most visible monument to Bill's successes as a forensic anthropologist at the University of Florida, is the C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory (Fig. 3). Named for the laboratory's benefactor and his parents, the laboratory was built to Bill's specifications in 1991. In fact, he actually created the blueprints! The facility abounds in state-of-the-art equipment, and continues to be a model for others in the United States and abroad.

Bill joined the American Academy of Forensic Sciences in 1974, and has been extremely influential in the course taken by the Physical Anthropology Section, as well as the Board of Forensic Anthropology, where he had been certified since 1978. He has held all the Section's major offices and has also served the Academy as a member of the Board of Directors, Member of the Strategic Planning Committee, Member of the Program Committee, and Member of the Oversight Task Force Committee. Among Bill's many honors was the T. Dale Stewart Award, presented at the 1996 annual meeting of the Academy.

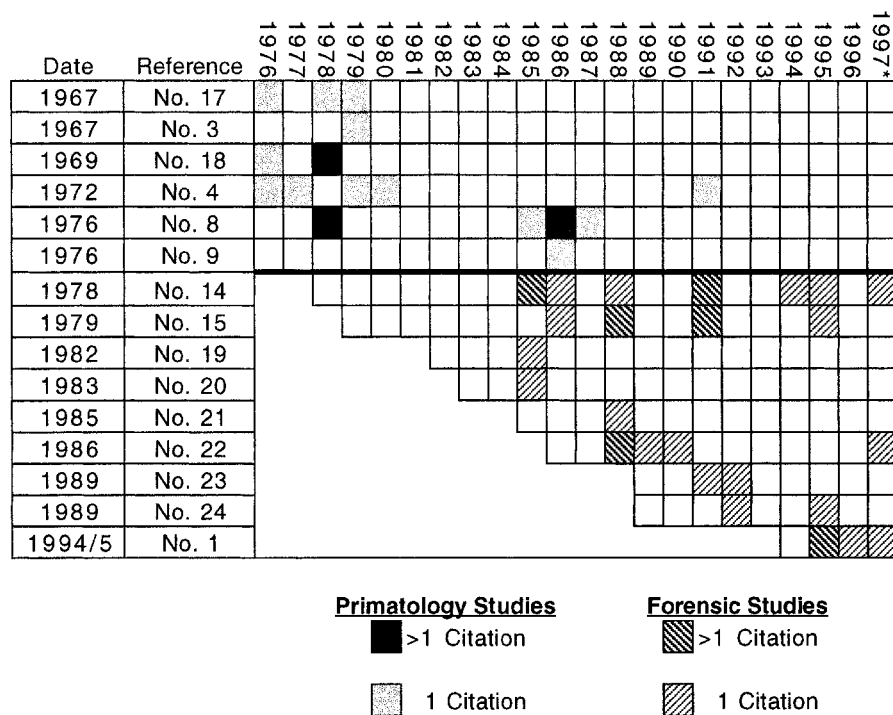
Another of Bill's significant professional contributions has been his consultancy with the US Army's Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii. His expertise, his unyielding belief in scientific truth, and his high ethical standards have been central to the current forensic excellence of that facility.

Bill Maple's career in forensic anthropology was built slowly and carefully, in parallel with increased professionalism and visibility for this very young field. By the end of his career, Bill's forensic consultancies had ranged across the United States, extending from New York and New Hampshire to Alaska and Hawaii. His files at the C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory, in fact, include over a thousand cases!

In recent years, he had also applied his well-honed skills to certain historic contexts where identity or cause of death were in dispute. In 1984, at the invitation of the Peruvian government, he helped resolve confusion concerning the remains of Francisco Pizarro (24). His 1988 superimposition of hard and soft tissue evidence from Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man, clarified the degree to which Merrick's deformities were the result of soft tissue—as opposed to bone—pathology. His 1991 examination of Zachary Taylor discovered that our 12th President had *not* died of arsenic poisoning. And in 1992, his forensic team traveled to Russia, where they demonstrated that remains recovered from a swampy pit near Ekaterinburg were indeed those of the Russian Royal Family, executed in 1918 (1).

All these and other forensic cases are central to Bill's popular book, *Dead Men Do Tell Tales*, written in collaboration with Michael Browning and published in 1994. This project, as well as several of Bill's more visible cases, were initiated at Margaret's urging. The Maples' many successes, which include an ever-enlarging international audience for forensic anthropology (25–27), are a product of their partnership.

Dead Men Do Tell Tales' popularity is due in no small part to Bill's several complementary skills. He possessed a ready and acerbic wit. "For me, every Day is Halloween," he quipped in the first chapter (1). And of course, his key forensic contributions, including crucial evidence in the grisly Gainesville murder case, excites admiration from us all. There is another strong theme within the volume, however, and that is Bill's deep commitment to and respect for the people whose remains he studied. Following the Joseph Merrick investigation, he reported that this skeleton spoke to him "in very simple, powerful human terms. It transfers emo-



* for January through August, 1997

FIG. 2—Citations of Bill Maples from 1976 to 1997.



FIG. 3—Bill Maples at the C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory.

tions to you in a physical sense, with a directness and immediacy unequaled by any other skeleton I have ever seen" (1:116). In reflecting upon his famous cases, he remarked that he did "not seek out the illustrious dead to pay them court . . . To me, the human skeleton unnamed and unflashed is matter enough for marvel" (1:3). And it is this mix of scientific curiosity and profound respect for humanity that poignantly symbolizes the life of William R. Maples, Ph.D.

"That's how I feel about the skeletons here in my laboratory. These have tales to tell us, even though they are dead. It is up to me, the forensic anthropologist, to catch their mute cries and whispers, and to interpret them for the living, as long as I am able" (1:280).

Acknowledgment

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