

Morton Cranial Collection FAQs

Note: please direct press-related inquiries to Director of Public Relations Jill DiSanto: jdisanto@upenn.edu.

What is the Morton Cranial Collection?

The Morton Collection is made up of more than 1,300 crania, including skulls from enslaved individuals. About 900 crania were acquired by Philadelphia-based physician and anatomy lecturer Samuel George Morton during the 1830s and 1840s. After his death in 1851, the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia purchased and expanded the collection. It was moved to the Penn Museum in 1966.

Why is the Collection controversial?

Morton's research on these human skulls was cited by some as evidence that Europeans, especially those of German and English ancestry, were intellectually, morally, and physically superior to all other races. Morton's own views were broadly white supremacist: by suggesting hierarchies among different races, Morton's work contributed to racist thought.

Together with the community, the Museum stands in strong opposition to scientific racism that justified slavery and the unethical acquisition of the remains of enslaved people.

How is the Penn Museum taking action?

Racism has no place in our Museum.

We recognize that our institutional history is tied to colonialism and racist narratives, and we are continuously working to change these narratives going forward. Regarding the Morton Collection, we are listening to the community and taking action in the following ways:

- In July 2020, the Penn Museum relocated to storage the part of the Morton Collection that was inside a private classroom within its Center for the Analysis of Archaeological Materials (CAAM Classroom 190).
- In August 2020, we formed a committee to evaluate the next steps towards repatriation or reburial of the crania of enslaved individuals within this Collection. The committee brings together representatives from our curatorial sections, NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) Committee, and Diversity Committee, joined by Penn Anthropology graduate students.

Who was Samuel George Morton?

Samuel George Morton (1799–1851) was a Philadelphia-based physician and anatomy lecturer. He worked at the Academy of Natural Sciences, where he conducted research into

paleontology and on a large collection of human skulls, which later came to be known as the Morton Cranial Collection. However, leading scholars such as Charles Darwin regarded Morton as a second-rate scholar, who poorly documented information presented in his publications, made arbitrary assumptions, and came to false conclusions.

Where is the Morton Collection in the Museum?

The Collection is housed in storage in the Museum's Physical Anthropology Section. Some of the crania had previously been stored in custom-made glass-fronted cabinets in CAAM Classroom 190. This was originally intended to be a dedicated Physical Anthropology classroom; however, with CAAM's growth, 190 has become a multi-use classroom, and the Museum determined that having these skulls on view was not appropriate.

How has the Morton Collection been used for research?

The Morton Collection includes more than 1,300 crania. From 2004 to 2011, the Museum was awarded a National Science Foundation grant to CT scan the Morton Collection. As of March 2020, more than 17,500 CT scans have been distributed to scholars around the world; often, researchers use both the actual crania with the CT scans in their research. Researchers have included colleagues from Penn Medicine, Penn Dental, and Penn Law; topics have included worldwide variation in the functional morphology (shape) of the cranium, patterns of growth and development of the cranium and dentition, the analysis of traumatic injury, shape changes in dentition and palate, health and disease patterns of peoples in past human populations, and more.

The Collection prompts important discussions of race and science for audiences from students to the general public; it played a primary role in the Penn Museum's 2016 [*Public Classroom* public series on *Science and Race: History, Use, and Abuse*](#).