

Sandoval County Unsolved Cases's Post

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PRESS RELEASE: SANDOVAL COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE ANNOUNCES THAT IT HAS CLOSED A 23-YEAR-OLD UNSOLVED CASE OF UNIDENTIFIED HUMAN REMAINS

These remains are now determined to be of a male who lived approximately 1,000 Years Ago

June 5, 2026, Bernalillo, NM—The Sandoval County Sheriff's Office announced that the Unidentified Human Remains discovered 23 years ago near Cochiti, NM, are now known to be the remains of a male who lived approximately 1,000 years ago. According to Detective Don Chewning, Forensic Family Genealogy Testing, funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), was conducted in 2025 by Othram Labs, The Woodlands, Texas. The family genealogy suggests that this male may have family members from the Laguna Pueblo and the Navajo Nation.

The Sandoval County Sheriff's Office recently closed this case because forensic analysis determined that the unidentified male was not a modern missing person, and a maize-heavy dietary signature supported this conclusion. Where and to whom the remains will be repatriated is the responsibility of the office of The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

THE DISCOVERY AND THE SCIENCE

On February 6, 2003, two hikers found the top of a human skull and tibia protruding from the dirt bank of an arroyo approximately two miles east of Cochiti Highway and Dome Road (FR289), near the Rio Chiquito Stream, Sandoval County. The Sheriff's Office reports that at the time of the discovery, the New Mexico Office of the Medical Investigator excavated most of the skeletal remains. The initial autopsy results suggested that the male was either Hispanic or Native American and approximately 40-45 years of age.

However, no Missing Person Report was ever filed for someone matching the autopsy's description. Also, this male was buried in a seated position without

clothing or artifacts. This posture reflects the practice of several Native American and indigenous cultures. Historically, this burial pose (seated or upright) may symbolize readiness for the afterlife, continued watchful presence, or respect for warriors. Considering these details, the case was reopened in 2025, and the Forensic Family Genealogy Testing was initiated.

Given the test results and the circumstances, the Sandoval County Sheriff's Office requested that the skeletal remains be re-examined. Dr. Cortney N. Hulse, Forensic Anthropologist at the New Mexico Office of the Medical Investigator, performed a second evaluation in 2026. She concluded that these remains were likely ancestral/ancient remains. Further assessments by the University of New Mexico, including Radiocarbon (C-14) and isotopic tests, revealed that the remains were, in fact, of ancestral/ancient origin.