

# Missing person cases solved with DNA genetic profiles from San Juan County

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Submitted by the San Juan County Coroner's office

Three men discovered along the water over the course of several years in San Juan County have been identified using DNA genetic profiles developed with the assistance of the Snohomish County Medical Examiner's office.

The success in each case occurred after the DNA of the unidentified person was submitted to a database in Canada and matched against DNA from the relative of a missing person. The identity was then confirmed through circumstances that enhanced each identification.

San Juan County Coroner Randall Gaylord expressed great relief and thanks for the assistance of all of those who worked on these cases and especially to Jane Jorgensen at the Snohomish County Medical Examiner's Office.

"Ms. Jorgensen picked up these cold cases and her fresh look matched up with improvements made in Canada's missing persons database," Gaylord said.

The result was "hits" that were confirmed after follow up.

According to Gaylord, many methods are used to identify human remains including fingerprints, basic characteristics, circumstances, medical devices and dental charting. Dozens of people in local and federal agencies were involved in putting together a profile of information that was shared widely through computer databases.

Gaylord added that every case presents a puzzle to be solved, and the family members are looking for comfort and some answers. For those people who make their way to the County's shores, they may have traveled a long distance in the water and across international boundaries making the task of coordination even more important.

The three cases are summarized as follows.

In March 2007, skeletal remains were found near Pt. Lawrence, Orcas Island. Nearby was an argyle sock from Harrod's, a clothing store in London, England. In 2019, the remains were matched to those of Ronald Keith Gentry, born in 1941.

Gentry was last seen on the Lion's Gate Bridge in Vancouver, British Columbia, on Dec. 21, 2006, as he jumped into Burrard Inlet. In 2018, Canadian authorities asked Gentry's brother, who lives in London, to provide a DNA sample which was profiled and uploaded to the Canadian database in 2019 resulting in a match.

In May 2009, a boater found partially decomposed remains floating near Parker Reef, Orcas Island. The man was pulled from the water by the United States Coast Guard and recently identified through familial DNA to be James (Jim) David Neufeld, born in 1953.

Neufeld was last seen in Penticton, British Columbia, in January 2009 and is believed to have entered the Fraser River in the turbulent waters of Fraser Canyon near Alexandra Provincial Park, a distance of about 180 miles from Orcas Island. While Gaylord was confident he would be identified, the dental records, physical descriptors and a metal surgical plate did not work. A fresh look with DNA evidence found a match with a daughter's DNA in a missing person database in Canada.

In December 2019, human remains were found by a beach walker in Echo Bay on Sucia Island. The remains were suspected to be a Canadian because he was wearing long johns with a label called "Stanfield's," which is a brand sold exclusively in Canada. Through familial DNA and genetic ancestry tracing, he has been identified as Robert A. Holmes, born in 1941. His car was found near the Fraser River in Delta, British Columbia, at the Highway 99 tunnel.

A detective from the San Juan County Sheriff's Office followed each case, and there has been good coordination and information sharing with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and British Columbia Coroners Service. None of these cases involve circumstances that are considered suspicious and the identification of the remains brings closure.

Gaylord said he was pleased that all cases in San Juan County involving unidentified remains have been solved. He expressed gratitude on behalf of the families for the work done by Jane Jorgenson and all of those at the Snohomish County Medical Examiner's Office and our colleagues throughout the state and at the federal level and especially the RCMP and B.C. Coroners Service.

RCMP press release

Human remains discovered on May 23, 2009, by U.S. officials in Washington State San Juan County have now been positively identified as James Neufeld

who disappeared in January 2009, last seen leaving his home in Penticton British Columbia.

55-year-old Jim (James) Neufeld was last seen leaving his Penticton home on Jan. 21, 2009. He was traveling in his green 1997 Plymouth Voyager passenger van, which was located under the Alexandria Bridge near the Fraser River on Feb. 3, 2009, by Hope RCMP. His vehicle was examined by RCMP forensic specialists.

On May 23, 2009, the remains of a deceased man were pulled from the waters of the Salish Sea off of Parker Reef, about one-half mile north of Orcas Island in San Juan County in Washington. The San Juan County Coroner took the remains to Snohomish County Medical Examiner for anthropologic and forensic studies. The remains were unidentified, despite efforts by U.S. officials to trace a number on a metal plate to hospitals, pull a DNA profile from the deceased, and develop and sketch what he might have looked like.

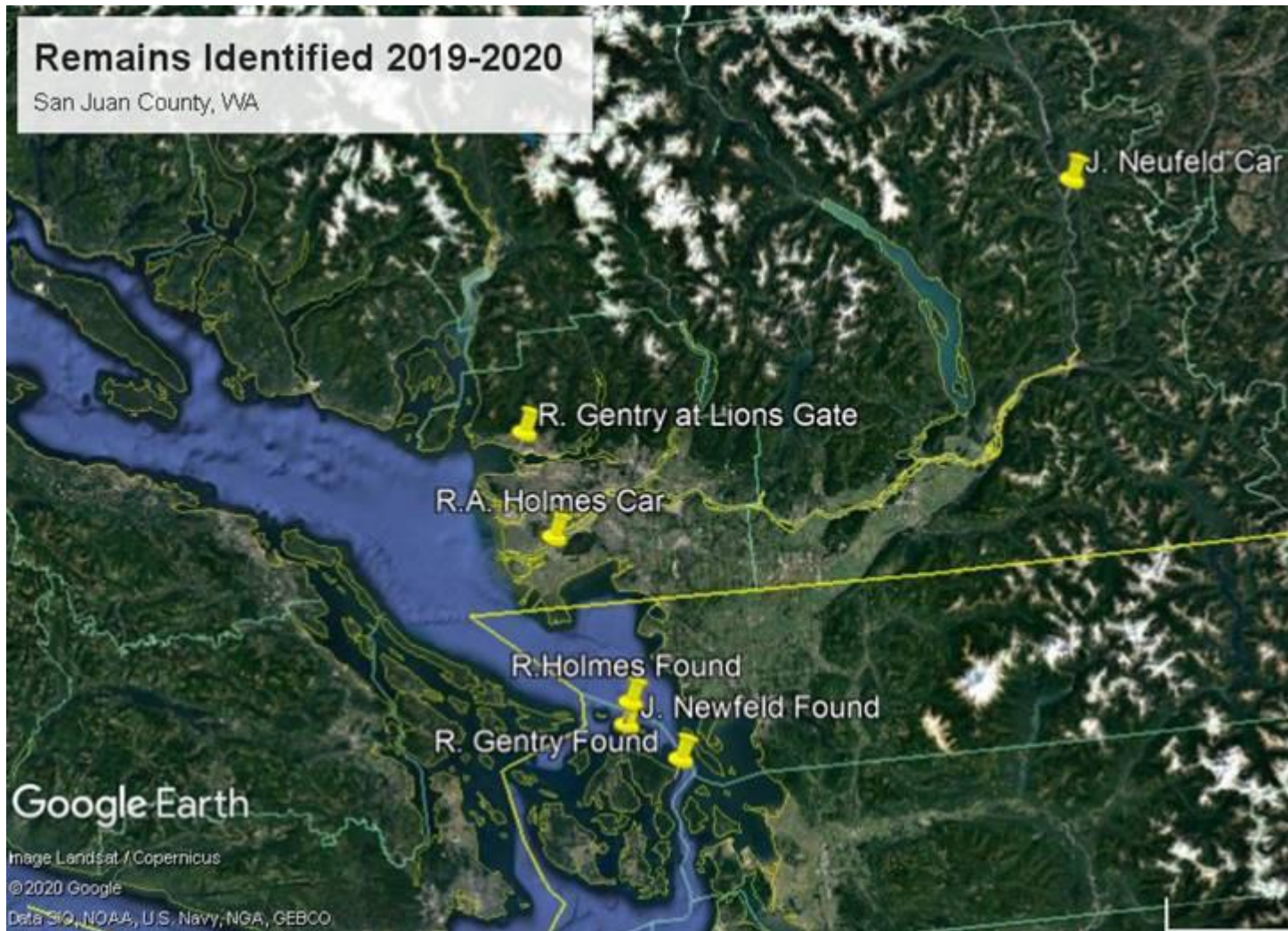
In September 2020, another attempt to establish a DNA profile was successful. In partnership with the B.C. Coroners Service Special Identifications Unit, the Snohomish County Medical Examiner's Office was able to positively identify the remains as those belonging to Neufeld.

“At first I was confident we would find his identity and family right away,” said Gaylord. He said his office was frustrated when the case went cold, but thankful that a fresh look by Jane Jorgensen at the Snohomish County Medical Examiner's Office was successful. Ms. Jorgensen recognized that DNA record-keeping has improved and it would be worthwhile to renew our search in Canada, said Gaylord. He added, The Salish Sea crosses political borders and when people are found near the boundary we enjoy the cooperation with the BC Coroners Service and RCMP.

The B.C. Coroners Special Investigations Unit, in working with our partners, both in B.C. and south of the border is pleased to have been able to help bring closure to the family, helping them get answers to questions they have been seeking for more than a decade, said Eric Petit, director of the Special Investigations Unit of the B.C. Coroners Service.

This case highlights not only the international, multi-agency cooperation that takes place between Canadian and U.S. officials daily for cross border matters but showcases the sheer dedication of our investigators in bringing answers to Neufeld's loved ones. We were comforted and humbled by Nuefeld' family, when we delivered the news in person, who believe this will bring hope to other families who continue to search for a loved one, stated Superintendent Ray

Carfantan, executive assistant district officer for the BC RCMP Southeast District.



Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Contributed photo Map of locations where the men were found and from which they disappeared.