

Will County Coroner's office identifies man found dead in crate in 1980

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JOLIET, Ill. (CBS) -- Investigators in Will County say DNA findings have helped identify a man found dead nearly 43 years ago.

On July 30, 1980, a man was found dead in a sealed wooden crate at the Lockport locks power plant, on the west side of the Sanitary and Ship Canal. The crate with the body was removed with heavy equipment – along with other debris from a grate set up to prevent debris from flowing from the canal into the power plant, according to the Will County Coroner's office.

The crate measured 4 feet by 4 feet by 2 feet, and was nailed shut with a 1.5-inch hole drilled into it, according to the coroner's office. The crate had broken open at some point during removal and dumping by power plant staff, the coroner's office said.

The man's body was later found by an employee looking for driftwood. He had been shot several times, but the body was too far decomposed to make an identification, the coroner's office said.

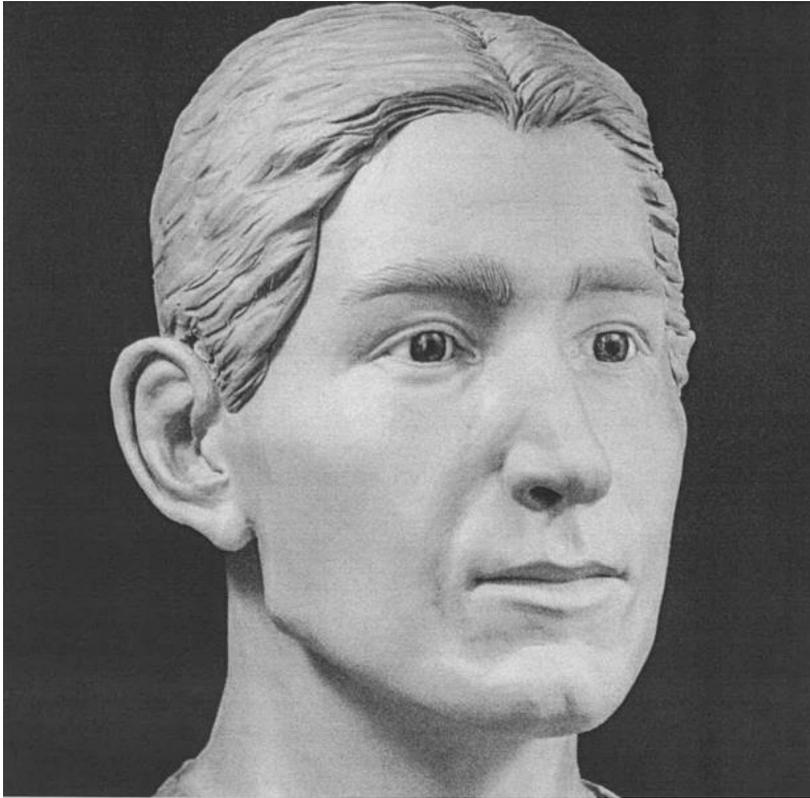
The body had likely been in the water for a couple of weeks, and Will County Sheriff's investigators ran down several leads over the next four years. But the case went cold.

Partial fingerprints were recovered and submitted to state and federal labs – but no matches came up. Dental evidence also did not match any known person.

In November 2008, Will County Coroner Patrick K. O'Neil created a part-time cold case unit composed of two retired police detectives. The following year, these investigators sent hair standards from the man found in the crate to the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification – but a DNA database turned up no match, the coroner's office said.

In 2021, the coroner's office – under new Coroner Laurie Summers – partnered with Othram, a private lab for advanced DNA testing. The victim was disinterred with the help of the University of Illinois Forensic Anthropology Department, and skeletal standards were sent to Othram, the coroner's office said.

On June 27, 2022, Colorado forensic sculptor Beth Buckholtz provided a facial cranial reconstruction of the victim, and on Feb. 16, 2023, Othram found possible relatives of the victim – whom they believed to be a man named Webster Fisher.



WILL COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

Relatives said Webster Fisher was likely the victim, and just on Wednesday of last week, Othram told the coroner's office that Fisher was indeed the unidentified man.



Webster Fisher WILL COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE

Coroner Summers in 2020 approved more funding for cold case investigations and prioritized using both old and new investigative techniques and technologies to solve cold cases.