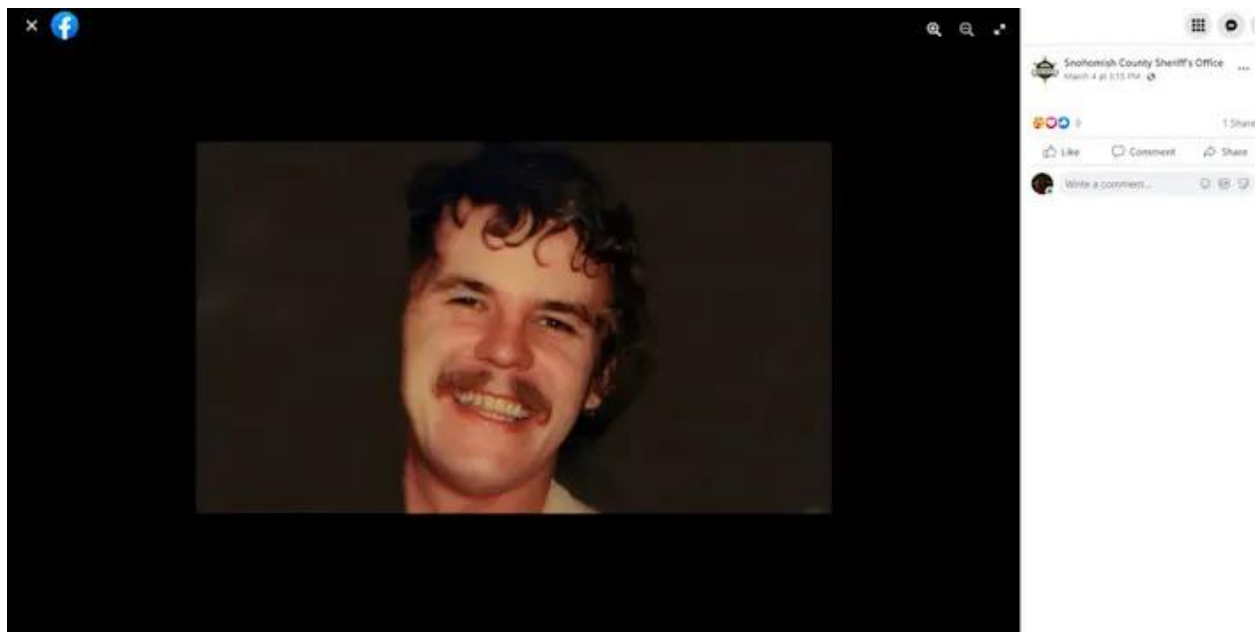


# Georgia man vanished before Christmas 43 years ago. His body was just identified in WA

Screengrab from The Snohomish County Sheriff's Office Facebook post.

**Cassandra Coyer**

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Days before Christmas 1978, a Georgia woman saw her husband off as he drove away from a motel they were staying at in SeaTac, Washington.

This was the last time she would see him — and for more than 40 years, no one knew what happened to him.

On March 4, 2022, the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office in Washington announced that they finally identified the remains of a body they found 41 years ago as the man who went missing: [Ronald David Chambers](#).

“After nine attempts, from four different labs, to obtain a usable DNA sample, the remains were positively identified,” the sheriff’s office said in a news release on Facebook.

- ADVERTISEMENT -

Chambers, a 28-year-old from Rome, Georgia, was reported missing by his family in King County, Washington, in 1979. His wife saw him last on Dec. 17, 1978, when he left their motel in a rental car, the sheriff’s office said.

According to authorities, a suspect, Robert Helberg, was seen later that day driving Chambers’ rental car back to the motel.

“While foul play was suspected at the time and the suspect was identified,” the sheriff’s office said, “without a body it could not be proved.”

On Aug. 3, 1980, a landowner in Snohomish County, about 60 miles north of Seattle, contacted authorities after he discovered human skeletal remains on his property.

According to the Snohomish County Medical Examiner, the remains were photographed and collected that day, “including a skull which showed [evidence of a gunshot wound](#).”

“No clothing, jewelry, or any other items that could have been used to aid in identification of the remains were found,” the medical examiner said in a news release.

After confirming that the trauma on the skull was a gunshot wound, the case was classified as a homicide on Aug. 4, 1980, according to the coroner’s office.

Multiple attempts to identify the remains were conducted, including a dental exam of the skull and jawbone and a clay facial reconstruction released to the public, the medical examiner said — with no success.

The unidentified remains, classified as John Doe 3, were buried in the Arlington Municipal Cemetery on May 26, 1981, the medical examiner said in the release.

“While it was common practice at the time to bury unidentified remains, skeletal remains that are discovered today are kept at the Snohomish County Medical Examiner’s Office until they are identified,” the coroner’s office said.

Over the next decades, the case eventually went cold, the sheriff's office said.

In 2008, cold case Detective Jim Scharf and retired Judge Ken Cowser decided to give the case another shot, authorities said. The case was entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System and into the FBI's National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database.

Dental records can be uploaded to the database and compared with known missing persons across the U.S. who have had their dental records uploaded, according to the coroner's office.

But again, no match was found, and the case remained unsolved.

In 2011, the remains were exhumed to obtain a DNA sample, authorities said.

Dr. Katherine Taylor, the Washington State forensic anthropologist, was able to estimate that the remains belonged to "a male with European ancestry," who was "18-50 years in age" and was "between 5'3" and 5'11" in height," according to the coroner's office.

The remains were kept at the medical examiner's office in the "hopes that they could be reexamined in the future for possible DNA analysis as advances in technology improved extraction techniques," the medical examiner's office said.

After multiple X-rays, a new facial reconstruction sketch and multiple bone samples, the case was finally solved in 2021.

In 2020, the sheriff's office obtained funding to have Othram, a private laboratory 30 miles north of Houston, Texas, obtain usable DNA from the remains, authorities said.

Othram's scientists are "experts at recovery, enrichment, and [analysis of human DNA](#)," according to its website.

"On Nov. 16, 2021, Othram's genetic genealogists were able to provide the medical examiner's office with the name of a possible match, Ronald David Chambers," the sheriff's office said.

Othram said in a statement to McClatchy News that it's "enjoyed a long-standing collaboration" with investigators on the case.

"Their investigative work paired with our technology, Forensic-Grade Genome Sequencing, showcase what is possible for the future investigations," it said. "There is always someone waiting for answers so it means the world to us to be able to assist law enforcement."

On Dec. 29, 2021, the remains were officially identified as Chambers and on Feb. 22, 2022, dental records from Chambers' military files also confirmed the identity, authorities said.

More than 40 years later, the case was solved.

Helberg, the suspect in Chambers' homicide, died in prison in 1993, the sheriff's office said, and no arrest was ever made in the case.

"Great job and an extra pat on the back for never giving up. With the prime suspect dead we may never know for 100% sure what happened," a commenter on the sheriff's post said. "Is it any comfort to know that he died in prison? Perhaps."