

Knoxville Police Department, Knox County Regional Forensic Center, and Tennessee Bureau of Investigation Team with Othram to Identify a 1988 Homicide Victim

After 37 years, the remains of a homicide victim found in Knoxville, Tennessee have been identified as **James Benson**, born in 1965.

Solved



Summary

In August 1988, the skeletal remains of an unidentified man were found in the Coster Rail Yard area in Knoxville, Tennessee. The Knoxville Police Department and Knox County Regional Forensic Center responded and began collecting evidence and investigating. The man's body had been buried under railroad tracks and his death was ruled a homicide. Investigators determined the remains belonged to a White adult man, likely between 21 to 30 years old. It was estimated that he was 5' 6" to 5' 11" tall. The man was found with a red knit pullover t-shirt with a logo and the words "The Best Italian Restaurant."

Investigators worked to identify the man and a traditional STR DNA profile was developed and entered into CODIS for comparison purposes, but no matches were returned. Despite a lengthy investigation, the man could not be identified and

became known as Knoxville John Doe (1988). Details of the case were entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) as UP1562.

In 2023, investigators teamed with Othram to leverage identity inference, a process that enables investigators to identify individuals from DNA evidence, even when there is no known reference sample to initially compare against. The [Tennessee Bureau of Investigation Cold Case and Unidentified Human Remains Initiative](#) along with the Knox County Regional Forensic Center and Knoxville Police Department worked together to submit forensic evidence to Othram's laboratory headquartered in The Woodlands, Texas.

At Othram, scientists worked to develop a DNA extract from the provided skeletal remains, and used Forensic-Grade Genome Sequencing® to build a comprehensive SNP profile for the John Doe. This SNP profile powered a forensic search led by Othram's in-house forensic genetic genealogy team, resulting in new investigative leads about the man's identity.

A follow-up investigation was conducted leading investigators to potential relatives of the man. Reference DNA samples were collected from a relative and compared to the DNA profile of the unidentified man. This investigation led to the man's positive identification as James Benson born on September 11, 1965. Benson was last seen near the end of March 1988 when he was 22 years old.

An investigation into what happened to James Benson is ongoing. Anyone with information about Benson or what happened to him is asked to contact the Knoxville Police Department Homicide Unit at 865-215-7275.

Read more about TBI's Unidentified Human Remains DNA Initiative [here](#).

This is the 31st publicly announced case in the State of Tennessee where officials leveraged Othram's identity inference pipeline. Explore other cases on [Othram's website](#).