



The unknown man was found dead on an Australian beach in 1948. An autopsy showed his cause of death was inconclusive.

Somerton man mystery 'solved' as DNA points to man's identity, professor claims

By [Hilary Whiteman](#), CNN

Updated 0946 GMT (1746 HKT) July 26, 2022

Brisbane, Australia (CNN) A professor who has dedicated decades to solving one of Australia's most enduring mysteries claims he has discovered the identity of the Somerton man.

Derek Abbott, from the University of Adelaide, says the body of a man found on one of the city's beaches in 1948 belonged to Carl "Charles" Webb, an electrical engineer and instrument maker born in Melbourne in 1905.

South Australia Police and Forensic Science South Australia have not verified the findings of Abbott, who worked with renowned American genealogist Colleen Fitzpatrick to identify Webb as the Somerton man.

Forensic Science SA declined to comment and referred CNN to SA Police, who said there were no updates and that police would provide further comment "when results from the testing are received."

Using DNA sequencing, Abbott says he and Fitzpatrick were able to locate the final piece of a puzzle that has captivated historians, amateur sleuths, and conspiracy theorists for more than 70 years.

Last May, South Australia police responded to Abbott's calls to exhume the Somerton man's body and experts at Forensic Science SA started work to try to find the best way to analyze his DNA.

But in the end, Abbott, a professor in the Adelaide University School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, claims it was strands of the man's hair trapped in a plaster "death" mask made by police in the late 1940s that provided him with what he says is proof of the man's identity.

Police gave Abbott strands of the hair a decade ago as he continued what had become a personal quest to solve the Somerton man mystery. The hair was examined for years by a team of DNA experts at the University of Adelaide, who provided the DNA information that allowed Abbott and Fitzpatrick to further narrow the field.

By March, Abbott said he had already established Webb's name through years of painstaking work with Fitzpatrick to build a complex family tree of around 4,000 names that led to Webb, whose date of death had not been recorded.

"By filling out this tree, we managed to find a first cousin three times removed on his mother's side," said Abbott. And on July 23, they matched DNA obtained from the hair to DNA tests taken by Webb's distant relatives.

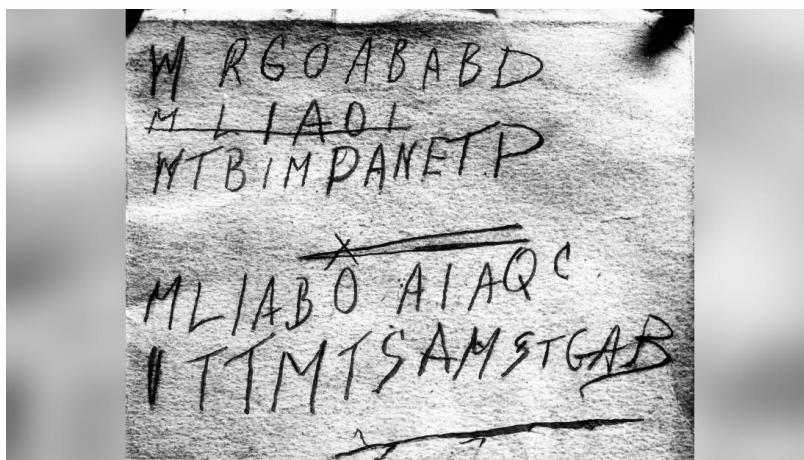
"It's like one of these folklore mysteries that everybody wants to solve and we did it," said Fitzpatrick, who has investigated other cold cases including the disappearance of Amelia Earhart in 1937 and the 1948 crash of Northwest Flight 4422.

"It just felt like I climbed and I was at the top of Mount Everest," said Abbott of the moment they made the apparent DNA match.

While the discovery appears to close the file on the Somerton man mystery, the apparent confirmation of Webb's name raises many more questions about who he was -- and how he died.

If verified, it also creates more questions about the strange clues around the case -- including the final words of a Persian poem found in his fob pocket and what appeared to be wartime code scribbled in a book, that for many years prompted speculation that he was a spy.

Those clues can now be reinterpreted with information from public records, but the full truth may only emerge with time as word of the man's reported identity spreads.



Code found scribbled in a book added intrigue to the mystery.

Who was the Somerton man?

The Somerton man mystery began in the early hours of December 1, 1948, when beachgoers found a body lying on Somerton beach in Adelaide. The man was well-built, about 40 to 50 years old, 5 feet, 11 inches (1.8 meters) tall, and had gray-blue eyes and gingery-brown hair that was graying at the sides.

He wasn't carrying identification, forcing police to look for other clues, according to an inquest held in the years after his death by investigators keen to close the case.

In his pockets, they found tickets that suggested he had taken the train to Adelaide Railway Station the day before, and checked in a suitcase in the station's luggage room. The suitcase contained clothes with the labels torn off, and police told the inquest that a tailor thought his coat had US origins. Despite those clues, the case didn't supply them with a name either, the inquest heard.



Forensic VR specialist Daniel Voshart created this visual representation of the Somerton man.

The man's fingerprints and photograph were sent around the world, including to the United Kingdom, United States, and English-speaking countries in Africa. A letter dated January 1949, signed by FBI director John Edgar Hoover, confirmed the US had found no match for his fingerprints in its files, the inquest heard.

Perhaps the most baffling clues came several months after the body was found. A pathologist re-examined his clothing and found a hidden fob pocket containing a rolled-up piece of paper printed with the words "Tamam Shud," meaning "the end" or "finished" in Persian.

They are the final words of the poem "The Rubaiyat," by 11th century Iranian polymath Omar Khayyam, and had been torn from a book later handed in to police. An unnamed man said he found it discarded in his car on November 30, the day before the Somerton man's death. The man had no further information, but the book supplied yet more baffling clues.

Police traced a handwritten phone number on its back cover to a woman who lived in the nearby Adelaide suburb of Glenelg. She was reportedly horrified when shown the death

mask, though denied she knew the man. Near the phone number were scribbled letters that some surmised could be a secret wartime code, though all attempts to decipher it have failed.

It now appears the truth is potentially more pedestrian.

Who was Carl 'Charles' Webb?

According to Abbott, Webb was born on November 16, 1905 in Footscray, a suburb of Victoria's state capital Melbourne. He was the youngest of six siblings.

Little is known about his early life, Abbott says, but he later married Dorothy Robertson -- known as Doff Webb.

When Webb emerged as the prime person of interest on the family tree, Abbott and Fitzpatrick set to work, scouring public records for information about him. They checked electoral rolls, police files and legal documents. Unfortunately, there were no photos of him to make a visual match.

"The last known record we have of him is in April 1947 when he left Dorothy," said Fitzpatrick, founder of Identifinders International, a genealogical research agency involved in some of America's most high-profile cold cases.

"He disappeared and she appeared in court, saying that he had disappeared and she wanted to divorce," Fitzpatrick said. They had no known children.

Fitzpatrick and Abbott say Robertson filed for divorce in Melbourne, but 1951 documents revealed she had moved to Bute, South Australia -- 144 kilometers (89 miles) northeast of Adelaide -- establishing a link to the neighboring state, where the body was found.

"It's possible that he came to this state to try and find her," Abbott speculated. "This is just us drawing the dots. We can't say for certain say that this is the reason he came, but it seems logical."

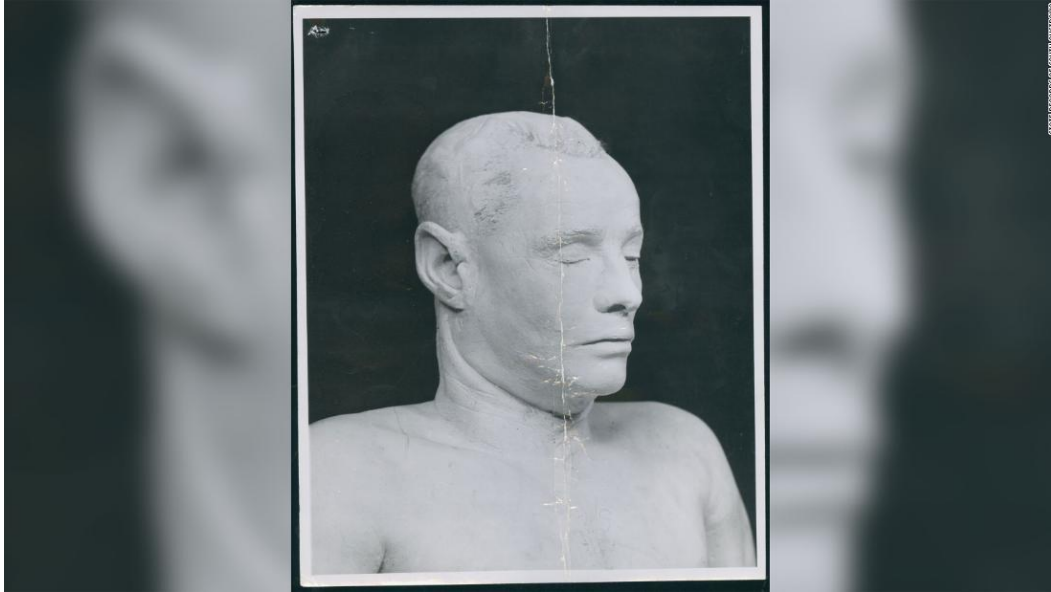
The information on public record about Webb sheds some light on the mysteries that have surrounded the case. They reveal he liked betting on horses, which may explain the "code" found in the book, said Abbott, who had long speculated that the letters could correspond to horses' names.

And the "Tamam Shud" poem? Webb liked poetry and even wrote his own, Abbott said, based on his research.

What evidence is there?

Back in 1949, when no one came forward to identify the body, it was embalmed and a plaster cast was made of the man's face, as a physical reminder of who he was. Some hair inadvertently became trapped in the plaster preserving some DNA, while the rest of his body was buried.

Decades later, in 1995, Abbott heard about the case and set about trying to unravel it.



A plaster cast was made of the Somerton man's face when efforts to discover his identity failed.

In 2011, SA Police gave Abbott access to 50 hairs found embedded in the Somerton man's mask, so scientists at the University of Adelaide could attempt to extract the DNA. Around 20 people at the university worked on the project over the years, Abbott said.

CNN has reached out to the University of Adelaide for comment on Abbott's findings.

In 2012, the university team extracted DNA from the hair showing the Somerton Man's maternal group. Then several years later they made a "major breakthrough" to refine the halogroup further to H4a1a1a, Abbott said.

By that time, Abbott and Fitzpatrick had been working for years to re-examine clues from his body and the suitcase -- anything that might shed more light on the case.

They said they used forensic genealogy to mine DNA databases to build the family tree that led to Webb, confirmed by the work on the pieces of hair.

"This is probably one of the older cases that had been solved using this methodology," said Fitzpatrick. "This hair is not only 70 years old, but it's been in a plaster cast for 70 years."



Adelaide Cemetery Authority pall bearers carry the body of the exhumed Somerton man, May 19, 2021.

Abbott said he had not taken his findings to SA Police, as they were conducting a "parallel investigation."

"Their protocol is not to talk about a case until their part is done," he said. "They will most likely approach us (University of Adelaide) after our announcement. The DNA findings are incontrovertible. "

For Fitzpatrick, there are now more questions to answer.

"I'm really very interested in helping solve the mystery of how he died," she said. "I would like to see the toxicology done. And I would like to find out what happened to Dorothy."

Abbott says they're convinced they've found their man. "In anything like this, you can only be 99.999% sure that it's right," he said. "Strange things can happen. There can be a twist."

"Just say, hypothetically, what if this guy had a brother that was adopted out of birth that we don't know about and it's really his brother?" But he says that's probably unlikely.

DNA has also definitively put to rest speculation that the Somerton man was the grandfather of Abbott's wife Rachel Egan, Abbott said. The couple met when his search for answers led him to her father, Robin Thomson, who seemed to share some of the same physical attributes. Abbott says finding out there was no link was "a great relief."

"It was just the tension of not knowing either way," he said. "So it's a relief just to know the truth."

Abbott now hopes their findings will be publicly verified, and others will build on the information to create a fuller picture of the Somerton man -- now thought to be Carl "Charles" Webb -- not a spy but a Victorian man who died one day alone on a beach.