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#SecretsDeadPBS

## ***Secrets of the Dead: The Woman in the Iron Coffin***

*Premieres Wednesday, October 3 at 10 p.m. on PBS (check local listings)*

*Streams October 4 via [pbs.org/secrets](http://pbs.org/secrets) and PBS apps*

### **Synopsis**

On October 4, 2011, construction workers were shocked to uncover human remains in an abandoned lot in the Elmhurst neighborhood of Queens, New York. So great was the level of preservation, witnesses first assumed they had stumbled upon a recent homicide. Forensic analysis, however, revealed a remarkably different story. Buried in an elaborate and expensive iron coffin, the body belonged to a young African American woman who died in the first half of the 19th century, before the Civil War and the federal abolishment of slavery. But who was she? ***Secrets of the Dead: The Woman in the Iron Coffin*** follows forensic archaeologist Scott Warnasch and a team of historians and scientists as they investigate this woman's story and the time in which she lived, revealing a vivid picture of what life was like for free African American people in the North.

### **Notable Talent**

- Scott Warnasch – Forensic Archaeologist
- Kevin Karem - Associate Director for Laboratory Science, CDC
- Prof. Carla Peterson – Author, *Black Gotham*
- Prof. Clarence Taylor – Historian, Baruch College

- Dr. Jeffrey Kroessler – Historian, John Jay College
- Prof. Jerry Conlogue - Diagnostic Imaging, Quinnipiac University
- Prof. Rhonda Quinn – Anthropologist, Seaton Hall University
- Rev. Kimberly Detherage – Pastor, Saint Mark AME Church
- John B. Houston – Funeral Director, Cushnie-Houston Funeral Home
- Joe Mullins – Forensic Imaging Specialist

### **Noteworthy Facts**

- The iron coffin was created in 1848 by Almond Dunbar Fisk, a stove manufacturer from New York. The coffin was created to preserve bodies for sanitary storage and for transportation prior to modern embalming. The airtight coffins also preserved bodies well enough for legal identification purposes. Iron coffins were very expensive for the era and used by the wealthy and elite, including former first lady Dolley Madison, former President Zachary Taylor, and former Vice President John C. Calhoun.
- New York, one of the largest slaveholding states, officially abolished slavery on July 4, 1827. Following the abolishment, freed African Americans began to establish communities in New York City, including the Queens community of Newtown (now Elmhurst), where a body was found at what was once the location of an African Methodist Episcopal church and burial ground.
- The “Woman in the Iron Coffin” was first discovered by construction workers on October 4, 2011 and was believed to be a victim of a homicide. Archaeologists were called to the site on October 5, 2011, where they discovered metal fragments, suggesting the woman was buried more than 150 years ago.
- From initial examinations, it was determined that the body was that of an African American woman, dressed in a long white nightgown with thick, knee-high socks and a hand-crafted comb that held a delicate knit cap on her head.
- After examining the body and studying the 1850 Census of New York City, Warnasch determines that the remains likely belonged to Martha Peterson, a 26-year-old African American woman living in New York City in 1850. Peterson was the daughter of John and Jane Peterson, prominent figures in Newtown’s African American community.
- Public records also noted that Martha Peterson lived with William Raymond, the brother-in-law, neighbor and business partner of Almond Dunbar Fisk, the iron coffin creator.
- In 2016, the “Woman in the Iron Coffin” was given a proper burial by the Saint Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church of Jackson Heights.

## **Buzzworthy Moments**

- For a non-evasive way to further examine the woman's remains, Warnasch seeks the help of Prof. Jerry Conlogue to conduct a "virtual" autopsy. Using sophisticated computer software and hardware, Warnasch and Conlogue determine the woman was between 25 and 30 years old, and died from smallpox.
- Forensic imaging specialist Joe Mullins creates a facial reconstruction of the "Woman in the Iron Coffin" by using a CT scan of the skull, digitally fixing the damaged parts of the skull, and incorporating age-and-ancestry-appropriate features from a database of thousands of body parts. To give back to the Queens community, Warnasch shares the image of the woman with members of the Saint Mark African Methodist Episcopal Church.

## **Short TV Listing**

Uncover the story of early America's free black communities via remains of a woman from 1800s NY.

## **Long TV Listing**

Follow a team of forensic experts as they investigate the preserved remains of a young African American woman from 19<sup>th</sup> century New York and reveal the little-known story of early America's free black communities.

**Running Time:** 60 minutes

## **Series Overview**

At the intersection of science and history, ***Secrets of the Dead*** uses the latest scientific discoveries to challenge prevailing ideas and throw fresh light on unexplained historical events.

## **Production Credits**

***Secrets of the Dead: The Woman in the Iron Coffin*** is a production of Impossible Factual. Directed by Adam Luria. Stephanie Carter is executive producer for ***Secrets of the Dead***.

## **Underwriters**

Funding for ***Secrets of the Dead*** is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and by public television viewers.

## **About WNET**

WNET is America's flagship PBS station and parent company of [THIRTEEN](#) and [WLIW21](#). WNET also operates [NJTV](#), the statewide public media network in New Jersey. Through its broadcast channels, three cable services (THIRTEEN PBSKids, Create and World) and online streaming

sites, WNET brings quality arts, education and public affairs programming to more than five million viewers each week. WNET produces and presents such acclaimed PBS series as [Nature](#), [Great Performances](#), [American Masters](#), [PBS NewsHour Weekend](#) and a range of documentaries, children's programs, and local news and cultural offerings. WNET's groundbreaking series for children and young adults include [Get the Math](#), [Oh Noah!](#) And [Cyberchase](#) as well as [Mission US](#), the award-winning interactive history experience. WNET highlights the tri-state's unique culture and diverse communities through [NYC-ARTS](#), [Theater Close-Up](#), [NJTV News with Mary Alice Williams](#) and [MetroFocus](#), the daily multi-platform news magazine focusing on the New York region. In addition, WNET produces online-only programming including the award-winning series about gender identity, [First Person](#). Through multi-platform initiatives [Chasing the Dream: Poverty and Opportunity in America](#) and [Peril and Promise: The Challenge of Climate Change](#), WNET showcases the human stories around these issues and promising solutions. In 2015, THIRTEEN launched Passport, an online streaming service which allows members to see new and archival THIRTEEN and PBS programming anytime, anywhere: [www.thirteen.org/passport](http://www.thirteen.org/passport).

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