

The Birth of a Scientific Organization: How NAFEA came to be

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The 9th Annual North American Forensic Entomology Conference was a monumental event for many reasons, but first and foremost, we learned that NAFEA is now a legally recognized 501C3 Non-Profit organization. It has been a long and arduous journey to reach this goal and it all started with an idea between two scientists and long-time friends, Drs. John Wallace and Jeffery Tomberlin with the goal of improving the science but making it accessible for those developing scientists interested in forensic entomology.

In November 2002, while attending the Entomological Society of America (ESA) Annual Conference in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, Drs. John Wallace and Jeffery Tomberlin were sitting at a near by café discussing a variety of topics that included recent rumblings among ESA entomologists concerning the results of the Danielle Van Dam murder case and the lack of consensus by the entomologists involved in the case. Dr. Bob Kimsey (UC Davis, Forensic Entomologist) would label these two later as Shakespeare's Hungry young men, the two followed this conversation up with a discussion regarding the expense associated with such large conferences and the difficulty for students to attend and view all presentations on forensic entomology as well as attempt to network and meet the forensic entomologists involved with this research. At the time, scientific interaction as well as communication between the researchers and graduate students was low. Fueled on caffeine, this conversation and the desire to bring this new discipline within entomology back to the core – the science involved inspired Wallace and Tomberlin to pen on a napkin the makings of the first stand alone conference on forensic entomology. Both Tomberlin and Wallace recognized from this hour long conversation that this conference had to be international and had to be solely focused on all aspects of forensic entomology.

The initial goal was to develop a conference that would include national and international forensic entomologists as well as graduate students interested in this field to share cutting-edge science and focus the discipline more on developing theoretical and empirical research to support the applied aspects of it in the court of law. However, the primary objectives were to organize a conference that would be both low in cost and occur in a relaxed atmosphere so that students could attend and present. If successful, such an opportunity would provide forensic entomologists a venue to present developing research ideas to a cadre of graduate students, professionals in the field and law enforcement instead of having a limited symposium buried in the middle of another conference. Moreover, a forensic entomology conference would also create a network for graduate students (the future of the field) to interact with professional forensic entomologists as well as those in law enforcement allowing them to gain experience presenting their research along side established experts in the field. The hope was that the conference would serve as a platform for the development of collaborations amongst researchers. Four months (February 2003) later, Wallace and Tomberlin presented the

concept of a stand alone forensic entomology conference at an open session American Board of Forensic Entomology (ABFE) meeting at the American Academy of Forensic Sciences Conference in Chicago, Illinois and received unanimous support from those in attendance. That was the easy part, the real work began once both Tomberlin and Wallace returned to their host institutions because the ABFE suggested that this happen sooner than later. As anyone who has organized a meeting knows, doing so for a meeting that has a track record is one thing, starting that track record with the first is another.

With a shoestring budget and Wallace's credit card, Tomberlin and Wallace were able to organize the first North American Forensic Entomology Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada. The site was chosen partly because of the wave that forensic entomology was riding among the various television shows namely CSI Investigations which takes place in Las Vegas and also because this site is known for cheaper airfares and hotel accommodations. This endeavor would not have been possible without a local arrangements committee, but since we had no committee who was local to Las Vegas, Dr. Wallace drafted his undergraduate student, Lauren Way and the two of them served as the local arrangements committee that included setting a date for the conference, finding a hotel in Las Vegas that would provide reasonable accommodations, setting up a bank account, reserving a block of rooms at The Riviera for attendees (hence the credit card support), receiving and proof-reading abstracts from presenters and organizing them into a program, receiving/organizing registrations, communicating with registrants, organizing a conference room with audio-visual support, setting up food arrangements (as sparse as they were) and designing name tags and the banner in the photo and many other unrecorded tasks. But this was a collaborative effort as Shakespeare's hungry young men were accompanied by Drs. Jason Byrd and Eric Benbow who provided additional support with website development for the meeting and other logistical support.

After several months of preparation and sweating (by Dr. Wallace's creditors), the time had arrived to host the first-ever North American Forensic Entomology Conference in Las Vegas, NV. Fortunately, approximately 50 individuals representing 14 states and three countries were in attendance (Figure 1). A total of 14 presentations covering current research, methods for PMI estimation, teaching, and case reviews were given. The meeting covered a 1.5 days and generated a great deal of discussion and interest to take this effort to the next level. At the end of the conference, Dr. K.C. Kim who suggested that maybe we should develop a professional organization that would essentially take charge of this conference and make it an annual event approached Dr. Wallace. For the next two years, Drs. Wallace and Tomberlin heeded Dr. Kim's suggestion and the results from this conference served as an inspiration for additional developments in our field. Specifically, in 2005 at the NAFEA conference in Orlando, Florida, Drs. Wallace and Tomberlin organized and presented a set of By-Laws that resulted in the formation of the North American Forensic Entomology Association (NAFEA).

In its early instar period, NAFEA had to become a non-profit business due to economic constraints with the goal of it becoming a not-for-profit, tax deductible 501C3

organization. Dr. Wallace personally paid for the attorney who would legally establish NAFEA as a non-profit business based in Pennsylvania. This initial step gave NAFEA some wiggle room to establish a membership, a steady income of membership dues and the economic means to pursue 501C3 status. It took six more years and conferences to gain this status thanks to the diligence, perseverance and dedication of Dr. Jason Byrd.

Over the years, the NAFEA conference attendance has remained steady between 50-70 attendees, the location has varied across North America from Vancouver to Miami, specialized workshops have provided up-and-coming students (and established scientists) with much needed and specialized trainings, keynote speakers from a variety of disciplines have added greatly to conference agendas and the conference has finally found a home in the North American Forensic Entomology Association. While it may have been difficult to have predicted that the NAFEA conference would grow to the level achieved at the 2011 conference in College Station, Texas where 71 individuals from 12 nations would give 42 platform and 13 platform presentations; however, the foundation was poured and what started as an idea as now become a reality.

In the past 10 years, the field of forensic entomology has grown with more student interest and contributions every year at the conference, the science has expanded and improved, and a professional organization was born and now serves its community well. NAFEA and its conference are proof that with hard work, dedication, cooperation from many to an idea and a dream, we can make a difference in science and with the education of our students in forensic entomology.



Attendees of the 1st Annual North American Forensic Entomology Conference held in Las Vegas, NV (August, 2002).