

SWGFAST ORIGIN and GROWTH

With the development of the field of DNA analysis the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) implemented a technical working group to develop best-practice guidelines for the community. Having witnessed the success of the program, in 1992 they explored the concept of promoting the development of additional Technical Working Groups (TWGs) in support of other forensic disciplines. Three members of the latent print community were introduced to this initiative when they attended a meeting with Kenneth Nimmich at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. They heard about the program that provided for a structured means to develop consensus standards to preserve and improve the quality of service within the DNA discipline. Following this informal presentation they were asked if there would be any value in establishing a similar working group to address the latent print discipline. Stephen Meagher from the FBI Laboratory, Curtis Shane of the Naval Investigative Services, and Leonard Butt with the Baltimore County, Maryland, Police Department were all in agreement that they would support such a program. The meeting ended, and time passed.

On June 10, 1995, a group of 15 distinguished individuals came together at the first meeting of what became known as the Technical Working Group on the Forensic Aspects of Friction Ridge Analysis. The following people represented this founding body: David Ashbaugh (Royal Canadian Mounted Police); Margaret Black (Orange County Sheriff's Office, California); Diane Bowman (Oakland Police Department, California); Robin Bratton (Michigan State Police); James Johnson (United States Secret Service); John Nielson (Wisconsin Department of Justice); Curtis Shane (Naval Investigative Services); James Springs (South Carolina Law Enforcement Division); and, from the FBI, Danny Greathouse, John Massey, Stephen Meagher, Eugene Mulholland, Kenneth Nimmich, James Ridgely, and Claude Sparks.

The discussions that took place over the next 11 days served to lay the foundation for what this technical working group would attempt to accomplish. Amazingly, the thought was that this would be a short term project. Expectations were that it would terminate upon the completion of the issuance of a set of guidelines to satisfy their self imposed goal.

From the minutes of that first meeting:

The basic proposed purpose of the group is:

Create guidelines for latent print practitioner knowledge, analytical methodology, and ability to perform friction ridge examinations. To establish and promulgate methods for research and validation of innovative techniques. That the guidelines be recognized by forensic administrators and the judicial arena as the standard for acceptable practices of friction ridge examinations.

By definition, technical working groups are formed to address specific tasks. When the tasks are completed, the group is disbanded. The FBI determined that the established TWGs were to become long term functioning bodies and were reestablished as scientific working groups. To reflect this the name Scientific Working Group on Friction Ridge Analysis, Study, and Technology (SWGFAST) was officially adopted in 1998.

Over the years the primary topics that have been the subject of consideration by the group have not changed very much. These include minimum qualifications and training, certification, proficiency testing, quality assurance, integrity, advancement of the technology, and adoption of guidelines. When appropriate, as events have occurred over the years that had the potential to impact the practicing community at large, attempts have been made to address them individually. There has never been a want of topics to be considered by SWGFAST.

As the role of SWGFAST evolved, its objectives became more refined and are more accurately reflected by the following:

- To establish standards and guidelines for the development and enhancement of friction ridge examiners' knowledge, skills and abilities.
- To discuss and share friction ridge examination methods and protocols.
- To encourage and evaluate research and innovative technology related to friction ridge examination.
- To establish and disseminate standards and guidelines for quality assurance and quality control.
- To cooperate with other national and international organizations in developing standards.
- To disseminate SWGFAST studies, standards, guidelines and findings.

SWGFAST's policy is to publish all guidelines and standards for comment from the community prior to being accepted as final documents. By design, this process is meant to ensure that the final work actually represents and satisfies the needs of practitioners as well as the science community, and provides a vision that extends beyond that of just the SWGFAST membership.

After being discussed a minimum of three times over the years, in 2007 the decision was made to expand the role of SWGFAST beyond that of the latent print discipline. This was accomplished through the establishment of a standing committee of representatives from the tenprint community. Although it was recognized that each discipline has its own specific responsibilities, the underlying principles and interest are the same. Furthermore, tasks performed by latent print examiners are dependant on the services performed within the tenprint community. Experiences gained as a result of this expansion have revealed that the true differences between the disciplines are really quite minimal.

Evolution in the SWGFAST program is further demonstrated by the diversity represented among its members. SWGFAST has up to 40 Parent Body members and up to 10 members on the Tenprint Committee. Initially, the membership represented managers and practitioners from the latent print community. As consideration was given to new members, it was recognized that there would be significant value in providing a broader representation of backgrounds and interests. Currently, members come from diversified backgrounds and include latent print examiners, tenprint examiners, defense experts, researchers, academics, and managers. This group's diversity provides an objective, yet varied, perspective to all matters of interest to the group. The demographics represented by such a group serve to assure the inclusion of many justified, yet often times opposing, perspectives that are to be discussed during the normal deliberations. This equates to a process that is better able to serve the community by injecting an internal measure of balance and objectivity when considering work on a particular task.

SWGFAST maintains a continued commitment to the overall needs of the friction ridge science community. As part of that commitment, the group makes recommendations that extend beyond the practicing community in order to support the discipline. A primary example of that can be found in the *Fingerprint Sourcebook*.

As with the SWGFAST documents, there will be a continuing need to update the materials contained in the *Fingerprint Sourcebook*. Provisions for such updating bring additional merit to the work as being a living document conceptualized to provide ongoing and current support for the profession.

SWGFAST appreciates the opportunity to serve the community of friction ridge examiners and customers. Suggestions and comments are essential in permitting the Group to do so effectively and are always encouraged.

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Scientific Working Group on Friction Ridge
Analysis, Study and Technology
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