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Grave's Anatomy: Abolitionists, Body Snatchers, and the Demise of Winchester Medical College

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Abstract

A census in 1890 listed Chris Baker's occupation as "Anatomical Man." While the title sounds like that one of today's superheroes, the nineteenth century existence of this vocation kept people from lingering around medical colleges after dark. By day, Chris Baker worked as a janitor for the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond. By night, he had the darker task of obtaining corpses for the school. He was a "resurrectionist," and he was not alone in his eerie nocturnal task of preying on the powerless and recently interred with a shovel, bag, and cart close at hand. Until legislation governing the supply of anatomical material in Virginia was passed in 1884, grave robbing and body snatching were primary means of obtaining cadavers for medical school instruction. African American cemeteries and potter's fields were primary targets, and medical students themselves were often the perpetrators. For students at the Winchester Medical College, this unseemly practice would lead to the destruction of their school.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Grave's Anatomy: Abolitionists, Body Snatchers, and the Demise of Winchester Medical College

By *Kaylyn Sawyer '17*

GRAVE, n. A place in which the dead are laid to await the coming of the medical student.

A census in 1890 listed Chris Baker's occupation as "Anatomical Man." While the title sounds like that one of today's superheroes, the nineteenth century existence of this vocation kept people from lingering around medical colleges after dark. By day, Chris Baker worked as a janitor for the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond. By night, he had the darker task of obtaining corpses for the school. He was a "resurrectionist," and he was not alone in his eerie nocturnal task of preying on the powerless and recently interred with a shovel, bag, and cart close at hand. Until legislation governing the supply of anatomical material in Virginia was passed in 1884, grave robbing and body snatching were primary means of obtaining cadavers for medical school instruction. African American cemeteries and potter's fields were primary targets, and medical students themselves were often the perpetrators. For students at the Winchester Medical College, this unseemly practice would lead to the destruction of their school.



Chris Baker (left) with anatomy students at the Medical College of Virginia around 1899. Image courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Tompkins-McCaw Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

The College of Physicians of the Valley of Virginia at Winchester was incorporated in December 1825. It closed its doors in 1829 but reopened in 1847 under a new charter as the Winchester Medical College. Among the faculty was surgeon Hugh H. McGuire, a native of Winchester. His son, Hunter Holmes McGuire, would graduate from the school and teach as a faculty member before commissioning as a surgeon in the Confederate Army, where he served as medical director of the Army of the Shenandoah on General Thomas Jackson's staff. The College was a red brick structure that contained a surgical amphitheater, two lecture halls, a dissecting room, a chemical laboratory, a museum, and offices.

As abolitionist John Brown and his followers raided the armory and arsenal at nearby Harpers Ferry in October 1859, Winchester's medical students, goaded by curiosity and sensing opportunity, travelled there by train. As the story goes, they were forced by military authorities to detrain before they reached the station, and they happened upon the body of a man. They put the body into a container and shipped it back to the college, where they later examined his papers and discovered that he was one of John Brown's sons. The cadaver was dissected, and the skeleton displayed in the college museum. As described by Louis De Caro, Jr., "The remains of Watson Brown...were maliciously stolen away by students of the Winchester Medical

College...and 'the whole hung up as a nice anatomical illustration'." The body of Watson Brown would be joined in December by the recently hung, buried, and disinterred bodies of convicted African American co-conspirators John Copeland and Shields Green. As reported in the Richmond Dispatch, "They will be interred tomorrow on the spot where the gallows stand, but there is a party of medical students here from Winchester who will doubtless not allow them to remain there long." Thus, while John Brown's body lay "a-mouldering in the grave," the corpses of his son and two followers had little time to molder before falling prey to the resurrectionists.

For Winchester Medical College, the resurrectionists' zeal would bring about destruction. The start of the Civil War drew students and faculty away from studying and toward the excitement of battle. The medical college ceased teaching and transformed into a hospital for the wounded. In May of 1862, while Winchester was occupied by Union forces engaged in the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, the college was burned to the ground supposedly on orders of Union General Nathaniel Banks in retaliation for the dissection of Watson Brown's body. James Monroe of Oberlin College quotes Winchester Medical College graduate D.B. Conrad: "The College was burnt by General Banks' army in May 1862. He himself regretted it, but his New England doctors and chaplains did it – applied the torch with their own hands." It is reported that a surgeon in the Union Army took the remains of Watson Brown back to Indiana with him, where they remained for nearly twenty years. The body was ultimately recovered by the Brown family and reached its final resting place for burial near John Brown in North Elba, New York in 1882. As for the Winchester Medical College, it was never rebuilt. In an ironic twist of grim fate, the Winchester Medical College, like Watson Brown's body, was ultimately undone by its' own "anatomical men."

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