



AN INTERRUPTED DISSECTION.

(Harpers 1882)

The Gory New York City Riot that Shaped American Medicine

Back before medical school was a respected place to be, New Yorkers raised up in protest over the doctors' preference for cadavers for study

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For most Americans, being a physician is a respectable profession, held in high esteem and relatively untarnished by the constant health care debates. But that wasn't always the case, and one of the first major riots in the post-revolution United States was caused by popular anger against doctors. The so-called "Doctors' Riot," which began on April 16, 1788, and killed as many as 20 people, influenced both the perception of American medicine and the way it was carried out for decades to come, even though it has been mostly forgotten today.

In the closing years of the 18th century, New York was home to only one medical school: Columbia College. At the time, those looking to practice medicine didn't have to graduate from a professional school, and this led to some students attending private, not-for-credit classes at New York Hospital, taught by Richard Bayley, a Connecticut-born doctor who had studied in London with the famous Scottish surgeon John Hunter. Anatomical dissections were a central component of these classes, and medical training in general, but they were offensive, even seen as sacrilegious, to early New Yorkers. In the winter of 1788, the city was abuzz with newspaper stories about medical students robbing graves to get bodies for dissection, mostly from the potter's field and the cemetery reserved for the city's blacks, known as the [Negroes Burial Ground](#). While some of those reports may have been based on rumor, they pointed to an underlying truth: with no regulated source of bodies for dissection, the medical students had taken matters into their hands and begun plundering the local graveyards.

In February, a group of the city's free and enslaved blacks submitted a petition to the Common Council complaining of "young gentlemen in this city who call themselves students of the phisic," and who "under cover of the night, in the most wanton sallies of excess ... dig up bodies of our deceased friends and relatives of your petitioners, carrying them away without respect for age or sex." The petitioners didn't ask for a stop to the grave-robbing, only that it be "conducted with the decency and propriety which the solemnity of such occasion requires." But the petition was ignored; many in the city were willing to turn a blind eye to grave-robbing as long as those bodies were poor and black. However, on February 21, 1788, the *Advertiser* printed an announcement saying that a body of a white woman had been stolen from Trinity Churchyard. With that, popular resentment began to boil over.

There are conflicting accounts of how the riot began, but most place the start outside New York Hospital, where a group of boys playing in the grass saw something that upset them—and then incensed the city. In some tellings, the boys saw a severed arm hanging out of one of the hospital windows to dry. In other versions, one of the boys climbed a ladder and peered into the dissecting room, where a surgeon waved the severed arm at him. In yet other versions, the boy's mother had recently died, and the surgeon told the boy the arm had belonged to his mother. In this version of the tale, recounted in Joel Tyler Headley's 1873 *The Great Riots of New York*, the boy ran off to tell the news to his father, a mason, who went to the cemetery and exhumed his wife's coffin. After finding it empty, he marched on the hospital with a group of angry worker friends still carrying their picks and shovels.

Colonel William Heth, writing in a letter to Governor of Virginia Edmund Randolph, described what happened when the men got to the hospital:

“The cry of barbarity and etc. was soon spread—the young sons of Galen [a poetic allusion to a physician in Ancient Greece] fled in every direction—one took refuge in a chimney—the mob raised—and the Hospital apartments were ransacked. In the Anatomy room, were found three fresh bodies—one, boiling in a kettle, and two others cutting up—with certain parts of the two sex's hanging up in a most brutal position. The circumstances, together with the wanton and apparent inhuman complexion of the room, exasperated the Mob beyond all bounds, to the total destruction of every anatomy in the hospital.”

Although most of the doctors and medical students fled when the workmen appeared, a handful remained to try and guard the valuable collection of anatomical and pathological specimens, many imported. Their efforts were in vain, and the specimens were dragged out in the street and set ablaze. Bayley and his protégé, Wright Post, might have been added to the fire too if it hadn't been for the arrival of Mayor James Duane and the sheriff, who ordered the doctors and medical students escorted to jail for their own protection.

Things quieted down after that, but the next morning, a mob ran around the city searching for doctors, medical students, and bodies. Hundreds descended on Columbia, despite the efforts of alumnus Alexander Hamilton, who pleaded with the crowd from the school's front steps. He was shouted down and pushed past, and the crowd ran into the school, where they searched the anatomical theatre, museum, chapel, library, and even student's bedrooms for signs of dissection. Finding no bodies (students had removed them all the previous night), the men searched several other doctors' homes—including Bayley's—in vain, then marched down Broadway to the jail. Governor George Clinton, Mayor Duane, and other prominent politicians urged them to disperse, but the crowd refused and swelled into an estimated 5,000. Armed with rocks, bricks, and timber torn from the nearby gallows, they finally attacked the jail, yelling “bring out your doctors!”

Inside, the medical students clambered over the broken glass and used the rocks and bricks thrown at them to fend off their attackers. One of the rioters climbed inside the jail through a ground floor window, only to be killed by a guard, which further incensed the rioters outside. Governor Clinton called out several rounds of militiamen, who attempted to calm the scene, although they had strict orders not to fire their muskets. That is, until Secretary of Foreign Affairs John Jay (who would become the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court the following year) “got his skull almost cracked” with a rock, and the Revolutionary War hero General Baron von Steuben was hit with a brick. The militiamen could no longer be restrained, and they opened fire. In the tumult, at least three rioters and three members of the militia were killed, with the final death toll estimated as high as 20.

In the days that followed, local newspapers stopped running their ads for doctors and medical classes. People regularly went to the cemeteries to inspect the graves of their loved ones, and formed armed groups known as “Dead Guard Men” to protect the cemeteries. Several of the city's most prominent physicians, including Bayley, published notices saying they had never robbed any cemetery in the city, nor asked anyone else to do so. The key there was “in the city”—the Negroes Burial Ground and potter's field had been established outside the city. A grand jury investigated the riot, but there is no record of anyone being convicted. Nevertheless, the reputation of the medical profession in New York was tainted for years.

The New York Doctors Riot was just one in a stream of so-called “anatomy riots” that plagued the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries. Medical historian Michael Sappol has counted at least 17 such incidents between 1765 and 1854, in New Haven, Baltimore, Cleveland and Philadelphia. These riots were sparked by anger over dissections and grave-robbing, which was how most schools got their bodies, since there was no legal supply. People saw grave-robbing as an affront to the honor of the dead and the sacred nature of graveyards, and dissection frightened many Christians who believed that only complete bodies could be resurrected. Dissection also had a veneer of criminality: in England, the only legal source of bodies was executed criminals, and many saw anatomical dissection as an extra layer of punishment suitable only for the wicked.

In response to these riots, anatomy acts—also known as “bone bills”—were passed to legislate the supply of cadavers. The year after the Doctors Riot, the New York legislature passed “An Act to Prevent the Odious Practice of Digging Up and Removing for the Purpose of Dissection, Dead Bodies Interred in Cemeteries or Burial Places.” The act outlawed grave-robbing, and provided that criminals executed for murder, arson, or burglary could be sentenced to dissection after death. But it wasn’t effective: there weren’t nearly enough bodies of executed criminals to satisfy demand, and so medical students continued to rob graves, albeit more discreetly than before. Rumors of grave-robbing and dissection-related scandals continued into the twentieth century before finally disappearing from the newspapers’ front pages. (Today, the [illegal harvesting](#) of organs and tissues fuels our medical science horror stories.)

But the riot did have other, longer-lasting effects. It led to one of the earliest medical licensing systems in the colonies, in which would-be doctors had to apprentice with a respected physician or attend two years of medical school in addition to passing a rigorous government exam. No longer could medical students simply attend a couple of classes and hang out their shingle in a small town upstate. Nevertheless, memories of the opportunistic “students of the physic” persisted for years, and it took a long time before being a doctor was considered an entirely respectable profession in the city.

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