

# THE RESURRECTIONISTS AND THE RISE OF RACIAL MEDICINE

*The Rise of America's First Medical School, and the Origins of a Racialized Medical Theory in Philadelphia*

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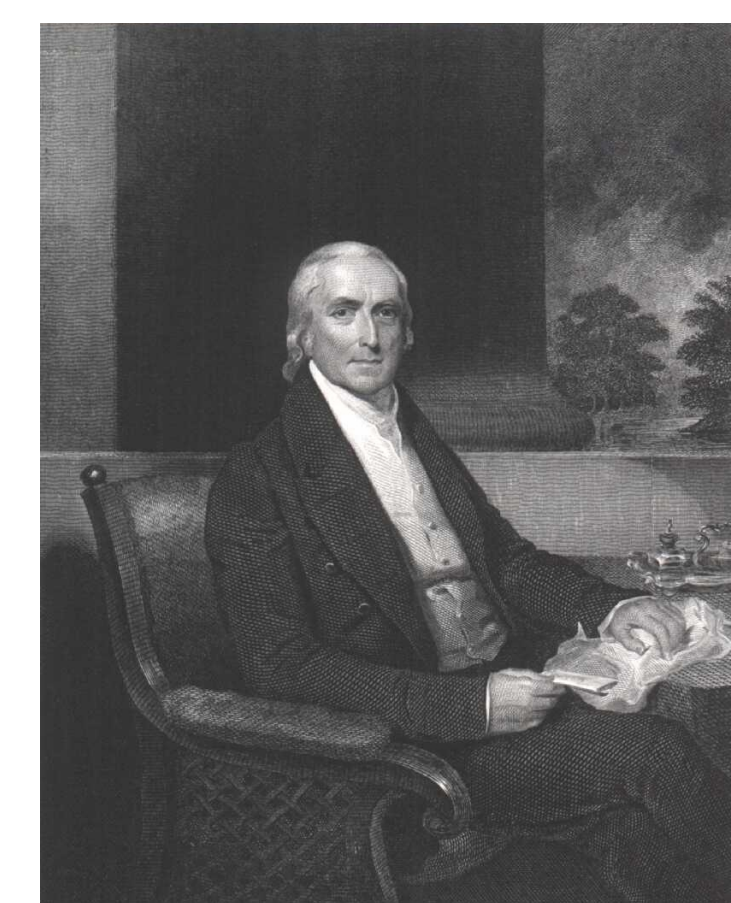
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## Abstract

This research project comprises the beginnings of a senior thesis in the history department. This project concerns the selling of cadavers for anatomical dissection, a practice that was widely viewed as a social punishment for poverty or marginalization—and effectively acted as one. However, by studying the introduction of grave robbing, as a component of early medical education, to the United States from Britain, and the ways in which grave robbing may have further codified racialized ideas of health and care into the origins of American medicine, deeper roots and processes of radicalized medicine may be studied. This is a story about Philadelphia, the site of the first American medical school, the first epicenter of American medicine and medical theory, and a major site of education that exported graduates and their work across the young country. Grave robbing was a key link in the system of medical education, professionalization, and ideological advancement. The Resurrectionists and the Rise of Racial Medicine is an attempt to examine the deeper points of origin and intellectual beginnings of pervasive trends around race that were generated in the 18th and 19th century in medical schools across the early United States.

## Background

The University of Edinburgh was the premier destination for medical education in Europe and the Americas in the 18th century and well up into the beginning of the 19th. It is of particular significance to the story of medical education and development in colonial North America and Philadelphia because most of the highly respected physicians from the American colonies trained in Edinburgh. Nearly all of the founding members of Penn's medical school received Scottish training, like Benjamin Rush and Philip Syng Physick to the left.



## Edinburgh and Philadelphia

The key difference between social dynamics of the cadaver trades in Edinburgh and Philadelphia was the added racial tensions that came naturally in a city with a substantial free Black population and high social stratification between racial groups. For the most part, Edinburgh was divided solely among class lines. However, the social outrage was comparable.

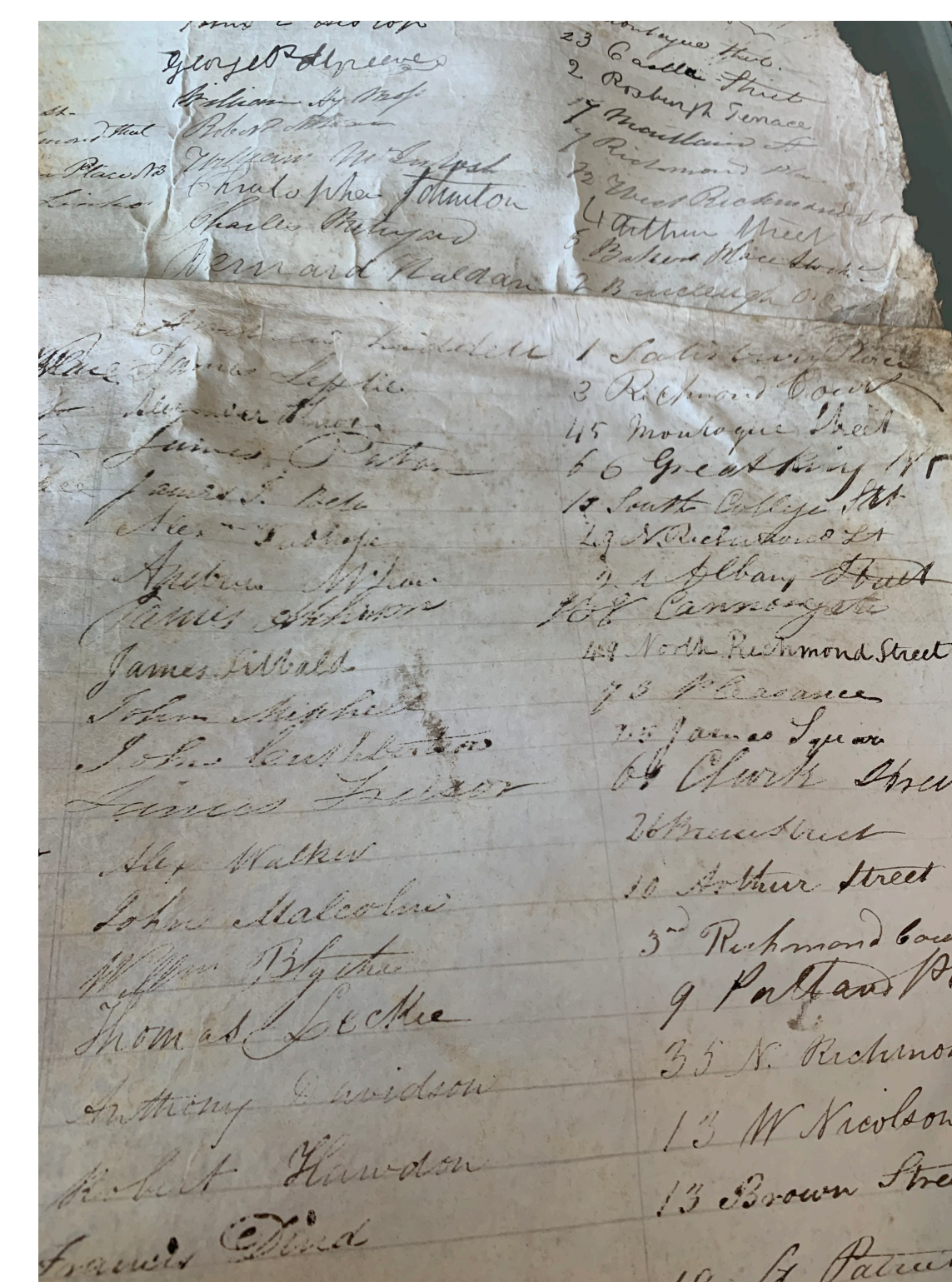
However, as the medical field became increasingly professional, due in part to the rise of anatomical dissection as a key component of medical education, the ability of doctors to define themselves in opposition the cadavers they operated on and the general public became more and more a key feature of prominent doctors and medical institutions.

Ways in which Scottish doctors at Edinburgh scorned the religious “superstition” of the lower classes, flirted with phrenological concepts of personality as defined by skull, and placed themselves outside of the law laid the foundation for North American doctors to approach the racial body.

*“... several malicious and evil-disposed persons have industriously raised and spread calamitous reports importing That the bodies of the Dead have been by them or their apprentices, raised from their graves, to be dissected at the Theatre in their Hall: Which reports have met with great Credit among credulous and unthinking people, insomuch that they have created great uneasiness in their minds, and as of late, have been artfully improven, by factious designing men, into tumults, and disturbances in this city.*”

*“And also, the Incorporation understanding, that country people and servants in town are frightened by a villainous report, that they are in danger of being attacked and seized by Chiruigians (surgeons) apprentices, in order to be dissected: and though this report will plainly appear ridiculous and incredible to any thinking person ...”*

*- Act of the Town Council approving acts against "attempting to raise the dead from their graves their Graves." April 17 1725. RCSEd 1/2/1/24*



## Methodology

- Read medical student theses from Edinburgh (and Philadelphia)
- Examined record books, minutes, meeting notes, financial records of the University of Edinburgh's medical department and the College of Surgeons
- Read the lecture notes of American and Scottish students in Edinburgh
- Examined instructional materials on anatomical dissection from the department of Anatomy

## Moving Forward

In many ways this research comprises just half of a project. While some primary research in Philadelphia was completed prior to research in Edinburgh, much more remains. This is not the final story of the relationship between Edinburgh and Philadelphia. However, just an examination of Edinburgh illuminates Philadelphia, and vice versa.

## Bib.



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