

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

APRIL 16, 2020: THE DISSECTION RIOTS

This week's theme: Connecticut history, because it's my home and I'm sheltering in it. Today's story has plenty of excitement: grave robbing! Investigations! Riots!

THE STORY

On a cold January 1824 morning in New Haven, Connecticut, someone came knocking on Jonathan Knight's door. Knight was a local doctor and a professor at the young Medical Institution of Yale College, and his visitor informed him that, sometime between Saturday night and Sunday morning, someone had opened a fresh grave at the cemetery in nearby West Haven, and removed the corpse of a recently deceased young woman. News spread quickly around town after the site was discovered in disarray, and while no one knew who might be responsible, they certainly suspected the medical students.

A constable soon joined the men at Dr. Knight's house, and the three searched the school from "bottom to top." While at first they found nothing, the policeman thought a faint disturbance in the dirt on the cellar floor seemed odd, and scraped at it with his walking stick. Taking up a flat stone in the floor, they indeed found a body. Town residents were outraged, and almost every night throughout the week, angry New Haven residents either protested or outright attacked the medical school building, assaults that only let up when one particular student was brought into court to account for the crime (even though most accounts believe the accused was a scapegoat). That same year the Connecticut legislature introduced a new law into the general statutes, entitled "An Act to prevent the disinterment of the bodies of deceased persons."

(Body-snatching is [still illegal in Connecticut](#).)

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

Should med schools use cadavers?
(Can it be done [without them](#)?)

Some people put [anti-theft devices](#) on their graves to deter robbers.
Dumb idea, or awesome one?

When grave robbing did happen, how do you think those in search of corpses decided [where to find them](#)?

What does that say about power dynamics and marginalized people?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

Kristina Killgrove, "[How Grave Robbers And Medical Students Helped Dehumanize 19th Century Blacks And The Poor](#)," *Forbes*, July 13, 2015

Miss Cellania, "[The Era of the Body Snatchers](#)," *Mental Floss*, Oct. 16, 2014

* Hannibal Hamlin, "[The Dissection Riot of 1824 and the Connecticut Anatomical Law](#)," *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, v.7, n.4 (1935)