

# The Long, Strange History of Grave Robbing and Its Modern Counterpart

After the manager of a Harvard Medical School morgue was arrested last week, we had some questions.

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Last week, the New York Times [reported](#) that the manager of a morgue at Harvard Medical School had been charged with stealing and selling body parts. Cedric Lodge, along with his wife and three others (who apparently collect and sell these things as a practice), were [indicted](#) by a federal grand jury in Pennsylvania for their involvement in conspiracy and transporting the stolen goods between states. The goods in question, according to the New York Times' reporting, include dissected faces (two of them, sold for a mere \$600!), "braiiiiins" for just \$200 (perhaps be a little more discreet with labeling your transactions, folks!), and what seems to have been an entire head for \$1,000 (labeled, it should be noted, "head number 7").

In response to the events, two Harvard deans released a [statement](#) calling the actions of the university's former employee "an abhorrent betrayal" and vowing to "improve security" for the cadaver donation progr



But while the allegations are indeed abhorrent, a closer look at the history of how medical schools (like [Harvard's](#)) have exchanged cadavers shows that last week's indictment is not quite the anomaly you might think: Medical education was built on stealing bodies.

For Benjamin Reiss, an English professor at Emory University who studies the history of medicine, the particular details of what happened at Harvard were surprising, but the essence of what happened felt eerily familiar. The commercialization and stealing of dead bodies in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was “essential to medical education,” he said. Without the “underground trade in dead bodies,” Reiss told me, “there would be no medical schools, and there would likely be no medical profession, or it would have taken generations longer for the medical profession to establish legitimacy.”

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A big part of this underground trade involved grave robbing. Sometimes, graves were robbed to retrieve valuables that had been buried with a person, or as a “measure of contempt, or sometimes even for fun,” said Michael Sappol, a historian who studies the cultural politics of anatomy. But in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the United States, a lot of grave robbing was done with a specific purpose: “to supply medical schools and medical students with bodies to dissect,” said Sappol, who wrote the book *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America*. There’s a pretty straightforward reason for this. As medical education became more established in the U.S., it conferred legitimacy upon itself by prioritizing human dissections, Reiss said. The idea was that anatomical knowledge was emblematic of a higher medical truth. But because there wasn’t exactly an established cadaver supply chain, medical students often self-sourced bodies by robbing graves. As Sappol noted, “Medical students were wild about anatomical dissection, and they did a lot of extracurricular and extramural grave robbing, especially in places where there wasn’t a legal source of bodies.”

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It’s easy to be cavalier about all this—but of course, these bodies, reduced by grave robbers to their anatomy, once belonged to people, and those people often belonged to groups that were already heavily marginalized in life: Black and Indigenous people, sex workers, people convicted of crimes, and immigrants. Many of the people whose graves were later robbed either didn’t have living family in the area or didn’t have the money to build “mausoleums or fancy tombs” to protect the bodies from robbery or advocate on their behalf, historians told me.

There are important differences between this history and the Harvard morgue story. The bodies stolen by the rogue Harvard employee and his co-conspirators were first donated to the university by families, and only stolen later. The stealing of bodies in this case is representative of a small black market these days, not the basis for an entire medical education system.

Today, [an estimated 20,000 people](#) donate their bodies to medical research and education each year in the United States—and this is what props up medical school morgues like Harvard’s. But it wasn’t until the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century that people began to willingly donate their bodies to research and education upon death, Reiss told me. Before then, “there was a pervasive fear of dissection being an affront to religious sensibilities,” he said. This required people to “hold two contrary things at once,” Sappol told me: “they wanted a doctor who was well trained in anatomy of bodies, but they hated doctors who stole bodies to dissect.”

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Instead of supplying medical education, it seems like modern grave robbing, of the kind we saw in last week's indictment, is more about supplying the human fascination with morbidity and its emblems. According to the indictment, the defendants toured the morgue and stole remains, transported them across state borders, coordinated shipments over social media, and shipped them through the U.S. Postal Service. (Hope your mail hasn't been smelling like formaldehyde!) Alarmingly, the five people indicted in this case are just a [sample of a niche market](#) that already exists for human remains.

Still, at the root, this story and our long history of body-stealing are really about a similar thing, said Kathleen Brown, a historian who studies gender, sexuality, and race. “The continuity appears in the treating of these body parts as if they came from people who don’t have loved ones,” she said, “as if they’re already diminished by virtue of being dead and falling into the hands of people outside their own families and communities.” The context is very different, but there’s a unifying risk: “An opportunist might somehow see the bodies as up for grabs—that the body parts can become commodities if nobody’s loving them.”

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