Archana Upadhyay

Penn and Slavery Fall 2018 Research Report

In 2018, the Penn and Slavery Project expanded its focus from slave-owning trustees and early donors to understand other ways in which the University of Pennsylvania was complicit in eighteenth and nineteenth century American slave society. This research included findings on alumni who contributed to systems of racial thought that undergirded antebellum slave society.[1] In particular, Carson Eckhard and Alexis Neumann examined alumni and faculty from Penn's medical school who learned and forwarded notable scientific theories of racial difference used to justify slavery and later segregation.[2] This report expands on that research concerning Penn's medical school with a specific focus on Penn's collection of medical specimens housed at what was known as the Wistar and Horner Museum.

The Museum was established in the early nineteenth century by Caspar Wistar (1761-1818), chair of the Department of Anatomy, and originally consisted of anatomical models and preserved dry-specimens of human samples. In 1818, Wistar appointed William Edmonds Horner (1793-1853), Professor of Anatomy and Dean of the Medical Faculty, as curator. The collection developed to its largest extent under Horner and his assistant Joseph Leidy (1823-1891), whom Horner appointed curator of the Museum in 1847 and who later also became a professor of Anatomy at the university. In her Summer 2018 report, Neumann found that the collection was worth $53,000 in 1853, and asks the question: "How were Horner (the medical school Dean) and his associates acquiring cadavers and medical specimens?"[3] This question is the primary focus of my research.

---

[1] For a further summary of these findings, see: Alexis Neumann, *Report for Penn & Slavery, Summary of Research Progress,* report, Penn and Slavery Project, University of Pennsylvania (2018).
[2] Carson Eckhard, *Penn Slavery Project Spring 2018 Findings,* report, Penn and Slavery Project, University of Pennsylvania (2018).
[3] Neumann, *Report for Penn & Slavery*, 2.

Historians such as Daina Ramey Berry have shown that there was a widespread and systematic use of African Americans and enslaved people as cadavers in early United States medical schools, including those in northern states. Berry calls the circulation of these bodies the "domestic cadaver trade," and in the routes of that trade, "all roads lead to and from Philadelphia."[4] The first anatomy lectures in the United States were given at the University of Pennsylvania by Dr. William Shippen Jr. (1736-1808), who was accused of grave robbing, and faculty at Jefferson Medical College were arrested for stealing bodies from a black cemetery in Philadelphia.[5] From Berry's examples, and as we will see with Penn, we know that professors and physicians relied on networks of alumni, peers, and colleagues to obtain specimens or cadavers. We also know that at Penn this coincided with a large network of medical school alumni from slaveholding states, numbering as much as 69% of the medical student body, with many from slaveholding families. Horner himself was from Virginia, and he also disinterred and prepared the skeleton of a Cherokee man there to be transported to Penn.[6]

While the broader question remained about how Horner and Leidy obtained cadavers and specimens, some other specific questions arose: What kinds of specimens were being acquired by the Museum? Who were the associates who provided some of these specimens and what were their connections to the University? Through these questions I aimed to understand what Penn's specimen-obtaining network in the nineteenth century looked like, one that was shaped by the medical interests of the physicians in it as well as their own connections both within and outside of Philadelphia.

---

[4] Daina Ramey. Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (United States: Random House, 2018), 158.
[5] Ibid., 161.
[6] Neumann, *Report for Penn & Slavery*, 5.

To begin answering the first question about the Museum and its collection, I primarily looked at the Wistar and Horner Museum Records at the Kislak Center at the University of Pennsylvania. These records contained different editions of Catalogues of the Museum as well as receipts, lists of preparations, reports on the condition of the museum, additions made to the museum, contracts, and account books. I also used a fully searchable digitized scan of the 1850 catalogue at archive.org. In order to do research on individuals referenced in the Museum Records, I used digitized records of faculty lists, medical lecture tickets, and biographies at the Penn University Archives and Records Center. I also began searching a number of digitized medical journals dating back to the nineteenth century, such as the Washington Medical Annals, The American Journal of Medical Sciences, The North American Medical and Surgical Journal, and The American Medical Intelligencer.

As a preface to my findings, it is important to understand the language physicians used to describe the human remains and bodies referenced in the sources, as well as my own choices in terminology. My research deals primarily with records that refer to human remains generally as "specimens" or "preparations." Both of these words imply processes of production: what was once a human being then became a dead body, that body was claimed as a cadaver, which was then dissected into body parts, which finally were injected with preservatives, dried, brined, jarred, wired, or mounted to create a specimen or preparation. Sometimes the person was not yet a dead body or never became a cadaver, in the case of an amputated foot or lock of hair. Sometimes the "humanness" of a specimen is ambiguous: Is a cancerous tumor a human remain? What about an embryo? The existence of these preparations still implies steps in the process, a human being was still operated on or a cadaver was still dissected. A production process also

implies the people active in preparing. In this sense, the words "human remains," "body parts," "cadaver," and "specimen/preparation" describe ranges of human presence. On one end ("human remains"), we are made most aware of the person who once was and less aware of any process or person thereby involved. On the other ("specimen/preparation"), we are least aware of the human at its source, and most aware of the people in the production process. Because of this, it is important to use the word "specimen," with its implications of production and process, in specific contexts.

At the same time, physicians and scientists used, and indeed still use, the word specimen to describe human remains in an effort to create impartiality and objectivity in their studies. However, that objectivity was never as absolute as they hoped. The different types of information provided about patients and cadavers make this clear, from gendered language in descriptions of pain levels to discussions on sexual history and constructed racial characteristics. In the case of the specimens we are concerned with, we need to be aware of the constructions and prejudices that informed the science for which they were produced. More importantly, a goal of the Penn and Slavery Project is to center the enslaved people whose lives (and in this case, perhaps, afterlives) the University exploited. In the case of human remains, already contentious discussions on objectivity-subjectivity and agency become even more complex. In sources that explicitly aim to distance human remains from the living people they once were, uncovering the experiences of those people has proven difficult. This report focuses overwhelmingly on the actions of white physicians and enslavers, in part because there is more research to be done on the enslaved people mentioned in these sources. However, this also emphasizes the daily actions the physicians and enslavers took to objectify black and enslaved people and the power they had,

showing that this is still also a story of people's and an institution's historic accountability. With these understandings in mind, I use the word "specimen" when discussing the specific contents of the Wistar and Horner Museum; while investigating the deceased people and the human bodies those specimens came from, I will use "human remains" as the general term.

In using the Wistar and Horner Museum Records, I focused first on the types of specimens in the catalogues, acquisition lists, and preparation lists, noting the instances where specimens were described as "negro," "black," or "African." I also read the receipts, contracts, and account books in order to understand what the Museum's normal expenses were, as well as what the expectations were for those who were contracted or paid by Horner and Leidy for acquisitions and unspecified work. I then recorded the names I found in the catalogue and in the receipts connected with acquisitions and preparations. After recording this information, I turned to the digitized records of Penn Archives and the medical journals to search for those names and research their backgrounds.

In the 1850 catalogue, there are about 500 items listed as part of the Museum. Not all of these are human specimens. A significant portion is made up of animal, insect, and plant specimens or models and objects like paintings and drawings, though the catalogue is not organized separating animal from human anatomical specimens. Of the human specimens in the catalogue and acquisition lists, I found 23 labeled as "negro," "black," or "African." Of the 25 different categories of specimens that contain human remains, nearly a third of the labeled specimens fall under the two categories "Female Organs of Generation" or "Conception and Pregnancy." [7]

[7] Book, *Catalogue of the Wistar, or anatomical museum of the University of Pennsylvania*, 1850, Ms. Coll. 1117, Box 1, Folder 6, Wistar and Horner Museum records, The Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Philadelphia, PA.

One entry in the additions to the Museum that stood out was "Negro mummified by means of chloride of zinc" from 1847.[8] By the very last couple decades of the nineteenth century, chloride zinc was a popular chemical used to preserve human remains, including at Penn.[9] The earliest references to zinc chloride as a preservative for human remains, however, appear in 1845 and 1846, as experiments by physicians at various London hospitals and University College London, and it slowly became introduced to other English physicians and "private individuals" in 1847.[10] It is unlikely that Horner mummified or preserved the remains himself, especially since Leidy took a special note of it while the other specimens prepared at Penn in the same list are described as "injected."[11] Due to the use of similar brines and chemical preservatives by those involved in the cadaver trade who would not have published their preservation-related findings in any medical journals, it is much more likely that the remains had been preserved for shipment and thus arrived at Penn in that state.

Like other entries, the 23 specimens are sometimes accompanied by more contextual information, such as the age or cause of death of the person from whom the specimen was created. Unlike a number of other specimens, none of these have the name of the patient or person the specimen came from attached to them. The names associated with specimens are usually the physicians who "presented" them if they were not attained by Horner, Leidy, or Wistar themselves. These were either area physicians, alumni from the medical school, or, most often, faculty at the medical school.

---

[8] "Additions made to the Wistar Museum," 1847, Ms. Coll. 1117, Box 1, Folder 3, Wistar and Horner Museum records, The Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Philadelphia, PA.
[9] Carl Lewis Barnes, *The Art and Science of Embalming: Descriptive and Operative* (United States: Trade Periodical Company, 1898), 344.
[10] William Burnett, *Reports and Testimonials Respecting the Solution of Chloride of Zinc*, (London: S. Mills, 1850), 10.
[11] "Additions made to the Wistar Museum," 1847.

One faculty member and Penn graduate whose name recurred often in the catalogue was Hugh Lenox Hodge (1796-1873), a lecturer and later professor of Obstetrics and the Diseases of Women from 1828 to 1863. He was highly influential in this new field, creating new techniques and instruments that became widely used, and he also wrote *Principles and Practices of Obstetrics*, which became a popular textbook at medical schools.[12] Beginning with Shippen, who offered a complete course on midwifery at the same time as his course on anatomy, and continuing with Hodge's predecessor and successor, the field of "women's health" was the only medically specialized professorship at the university. "Obstetrics and the Diseases of Women," which included what would later become gynecology, developed rapidly as a field in the United States, specifically in the antebellum South. As Deirdre Cooper Owens discusses in *Medical Bondage*, "reproductive medicine was essential to the maintenance and success of southern slavery;"[13] thus, most of the major techniques and operations in gynecology came out of operations and experiments on enslaved women, and medical journals became widely read amongst Southern slaveholders. Obstetrics courses, and thus the professorship, was likely in demand by Penn's large Southern student body, some of which returned to slaveholding states to conduct experiments on or treat enslaved women.[14]

The professors of obstetrics at Penn were known by physicians in the South, and were sometimes notified or sent medical cases concerning enslaved women, upon which they would then comment. In the case of Dr. Hodge, he was also sent the remains of an enslaved woman

---

[12] "Hugh Lenox Hodge," University Archives & Records Center, https://archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-people/biography/hugh-lenox-hodge.

[13] Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 4.

[14] For a more in depth discussion on these alumni, see Carson Eckhard, *Fall 2018 Report,* report, Penn and Slavery Project, University of Pennsylvania (2018) and Madison Pettaway, *Final Report,* report, Penn and Slavery Project, University of Pennsylvania (2018).

from Danville, Virginia in 1849 by Penn medical school alumni Dr. William G. Craghead.[15] Little personal information is mentioned of the enslaved woman, who was 35 years old at the time of her death and according to the case description had also been married twice and had two children. She lived in Danville, Virginia, and was enslaved by a man named James Washington Conway. We also know that she was in a great deal of pain in the weeks leading up to her death, and Conway initially tried to treat her himself, bleeding her and giving her doses of "laudanum to prevent abortion."[16] Rather than acting out of benevolence, Conway's main treatment against a possible abortion shows that he valued her ability to reproduce given her previous two children.[17]

During the initial autopsy, Craghead set aside the enslaved woman's uterus, fallopian tubes, and foetuses with the intention of sending them to Hodge. After then seeing "no opportunity to forward [them]," the doctor and four of his Virginian colleagues dissected and examined the remains once more. They finally sent the enslaved woman's entire abdominal cavity, preserved in alcohol, north to Hodge at Penn, who had Dr. John Neill, another faculty member, dissect it and examine it further, as well as preserve it and place it in Hodge's specimen collection. As of yet it is unclear whether this particular specimen was given to the Wistar collection or how it was eventually used, but specimens in the medical cabinets of professors were usually used for teaching.

There is evidence that this is not a unique instance, and that communication between Southerners concerned with the reproduction of enslaved women and Penn faculty was not

---

[15] University of Pennsylvania. General Alumni Society, *General Alumni Catalogue of the University of Pennsylvania* (1922), 502.
[16] William G. Craghead, "A Remarkable Case of Double Pregnancy--one Ovum Entering the Uterus, the Other Being Arrested in the Tube," comm. Hugh L. Hodge, *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 19 (January 1850): 114.
[17] Owens, *Medical Bondage, 66.*

limited to Penn alumni either. In another medical journal there is an "Extract from a note addressed to Professor James, of the University of Pennsylvania, dated November 5th, 1825" from South Carolina physician Lawrence J. Trotti.[18] In the note, Trotti tells Thomas C. James (1766-1835), Penn's first Professor of Midwifery and source of some Horner specimens, about an enslaved woman who gave birth in 1815 to triplets, two white sons and one black daughter. According to Trotti, the mother and two boys—the daughter died at 18 months—lived in Barnwell, South Carolina, and were enslaved by a Mr. Allen. Trotti tells James that he visited the mother and children with "other gentlemen" to confirm the truth of the story. Despite having no previous connections with him, Trotti thought the case was notable enough to bring to the attention of James. James then chose to publish this note in *The North American Medical and Surgical Journal* for the benefit of other physicians.

Penn professors were also aware of the opportunities Southern students had to exploit enslaved people to study anatomy and "biological differences" between the races, and encouraged them to use those opportunities. Neill believed that there were biological differences between the skulls of different races, and he used the skulls of enslaved Africans from the Morton collection in his research.[19] He even notes in his article that none of the skulls had a "doubtful history, although many such specimens of my own possess this feature to a striking degree," but he then goes on to say that the skulls labeled African came from enslaved people from Africa who had died in the slave yards in Cuba. For Neill, a skull with "doubtful history" meant "wanting in authenticity," which perhaps refers to skulls with faked provenances. Leidy

---

[18] Lawrence J. Trotti, "Extract from a note addressed to Professor James, of the University of Pennsylvania, dated November 5th, 1825," *The North American Medical and Surgical Journal*, 1 (1826): 466.
[19] John Neill, "Observations on the Occipital and Superior Maxillary Bones of the African Cranium," *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 19 (January 1850): 80.

too, in reference to his belief in differences between the skulls of white and black people, wrote: "I have several times desired medical students, from our Southern States, whose opportunities of investigating the anatomy of the negro are frequent, to make this a subject of inquiry."[20] As shown in Madison Pettaway and Carson Eckhard's Fall 2018 Penn and Slavery reports, Southern graduates did take these opportunities.

Of the other faculty members and physicians I have researched so far who are listed in the Horner and Wistar Museum catalogue as sources for specimens, Charles D. Meigs, who provided several specimens, was known to have obtained the remains of enslaved people.[21] Others, like Drs. Goddard and Harlan, who are both listed as presenting a few specimens, provided a number of skulls to Samuel Morton's collection and to the Academy of Natural Sciences, including some listed as Nubian, Burmese, Native American, and New Zealander.[22] In the case of one specimen, Theophilus C. Dunn, a graduate of Penn, sent Horner the preserved foot of an elderly black woman who lived in an almshouse in Newport Rhode Island, and who seemed to have died in 1845 of natural causes. Another Penn graduate who provided specimens, Samuel Betton, was a Philadelphia physician and wealthy planter from Jamaica who continued to profit from his land there until the Baptist War in 1831,[23] but no records exist of where he obtained his specimens. Some of the specimens are listed as coming from Virginia, South

---

[20] Leonard Warren, Joseph Leidy : The Last Man Who Knew Everything, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 99.
[21] On Meigs' specimen, see Carson Eckhard, *Fall 2018 Report,* report, Penn and Slavery Project, University of Pennsylvania (2018).
[22] "Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia" Publications of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, 53 (1856).
[23] Historical Society of Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, Publication Fund of Philadelphia, 6 (1882): 9.

Carolina and Tennessee as well, but thus fur I have no found information on how those specimens were acquired.

At the most basic level, we can conclude that the remains of at least one enslaved person were shipped from Virginia to Penn and were dissected and preserved on Penn's campus by Penn medical faculty. Based on the secondary literature and accompanying evidence, however, it is very likely that this instance represents a larger pattern in specimen acquisitions by the university. Penn Professors Neill, Hodge, and James clearly did not reject specimens that they and their colleagues openly acknowledged were the remains of enslaved people; furthermore, this means that at least three of the physicians listed as sources for specimens in the Horner and Wistar catalogue (Neill, Hodge, and Meigs) are confirmed to have owned or dealt with specimens that were the remains of enslaved people. It also means that the Penn medical faculty relied heavily on a network of graduates, most of whom were from slave holding states, operating on enslaved people, or who they themselves were enslavers, for specimens. There are a number of names that are mentioned in single instances in the catalogue that remain to be researched, as well as many volumes of medical publications that still need to be searched that could bring to light more cases like Hodge and the 35 year old enslaved women, whose name and story I hope to uncover more of as well. Other questions that could be fruitful are: What was the nature of the personal and professional connections between Penn's southern graduates and Penn faculty look like? What was the nature of Horner's connections to Virginia? These seem to be the lines along which the remains and bodies of enslaved people were being traded or discussed, and they could help us further uncover the sources behind the specimens, the

circumstances of their creation, and hopefully the people from whose bodies those specimens were harvested.