

E. Carson Eckhard

The Penn Slavery Project Fall 2018 Report

December 2, 2018

Fall 2018 Report

In 2003, Brown University created a Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, aiming to examine Brown's ties to the Atlantic slave trade and American slavery. In the years following Brown's announcement, universities across the nation have followed suit. As Penn joins the coalition of historical universities examining their complicated legacies, we must begin to reckon with the implications of our institution's involvement in American slavery. The Penn & Slavery Project (P&SP) aims to examine the ways in which the University of Pennsylvania was complicit in and benefitted from the Atlantic slave trade and African slavery. During the Fall 2017 Semester, the Penn Slavery Project found that, of the 28 trustees closely investigated by PSP, 20 owned enslaved people. Many of these men were prominent leaders in Philadelphia and the nascent United States of America. Although the extent of ownership and involvement in the slave trade varied heavily among the examined trustees, it is important to consider the ways in which their wealth and resources, supported by the labor or trading of enslaved Africans, benefitted the early university. Findings from the spring 2018 semester encompass a wider range of subjects. Research included information on the construction of Penn's first campus at 4th and Arch Streets, early fundraising efforts in the South and the Caribbean, as well as information on Penn's landholdings and contemporary buildings named for slaveholders. My research focused on the early medical school, and the ways in which Penn's physicians and medical students

produced racial pseudoscience¹ that ultimately provided the foundation for virulent pro-slavery rhetoric in the antebellum South. I particularly focused on the writings of Samuel Morton, a graduate and medical professor at Penn who led the so-called “American School” of ethnology, the epicenter of which was at Penn. During his tenure at Penn, Morton’s lectures and publications² referencing Biblical events and Divine creation as support for racial difference. He also collected 867 human crania, which he organized according to a pseudoscientific racial hierarchy³. Today, the crania remain at the Penn Museum. I also examined the work of Josiah Nott (MD 1827) and Charles Caldwell (MD 1796), both of whom published notable works on race science and founded medical schools in the South. Ultimately, Nott, Cartwright, Caldwell, Morton and their colleagues provided a scientific rationale for American racism. As they founded medical schools in the South, these Penn graduates established medical curricula and conducted research in the South. Their ideas, circulated widely throughout the South, heavily informed pro-slavery rhetoric.

In seeking to understand the nature of Penn’s connections to slavery, we reflected on the meaning (and implications) of institutional “complicity” in a slaveholding society. The absence of sustained institution-wide ownership or exploitation of the labor of enslaved Africans does not render Penn “non-complicit” in slavery. It must be noted that institutional “complicity” does not

¹ I use the term “pseudoscience” throughout this paper with the understanding that “pseudoscience” refers to the contemporary view of this science. For the 19th century physicians who created this body of research, their work *was* science. Given that this work has since been debunked (and given the incredibly antagonistic effects that this research had on attitudes towards African Americans and other marginalized groups), I choose to acknowledge the erroneous nature of this research throughout my paper by describing it as “pseudoscience.”

² Lectures on the Varieties of the Human Species, circa 1840. Box 5, Folder 1. Samuel George Morton papers, 1832-1862, Library Company of Philadelphia.

³ It should be noted that Paul Mitchell, a PhD candidate in anthropology at Penn has found that Morton falsified much of his data on the skulls to support his racial hierarchy.

necessarily connote the University's active and persistent ownership of enslaved persons⁴. Rather, complicity encompasses the many ways in which universities as institutions of higher learning and epicenters of (supposed) intellectual progress relied on and contributed to America's slave society in the years prior to the Civil War. As we began planning for the semester, our research group focused on asking questions that we hoped would distinguish Penn's narrative from that of other universities. In seeking to do so, we asked the following questions: How did the University benefit from enslaved people in Philadelphia? Aside from the ownership of enslaved persons by prominent University-associated men, how was Penn, as a major center of scholarship and research, involved in discussions around slavery? How were enslaved peoples' bodies potentially used in medical instruction?

In conducting this research, I relied heavily on information found in the University Archives and the Library Company of Philadelphia. I also used the Ancestry genealogy database to search through relevant census and tax records. Correspondences between notable 19th century Penn Medical graduates and professors proved especially valuable in addition to their published works and lectures. Daina Ramey Berry's *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh* and Deidre Cooper Owens' *Medical Bondage* served as pivotal foundational texts in my research throughout the semester. This report focuses on several physicians of note whose work and careers were not examined during the Spring 2018 semester as well as the cadaver trade at Penn and in Philadelphia. In the coming semesters, I hope to expand upon this research to further map

⁴ Consider the connections of Georgetown or the University of Virginia: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/us/georgetown-university-search-for-slave-descendants.html>, or Neale, Catherine. "Slaves, Freedpeople, and the University of Virginia" M.A. honors thesis, University of Virginia, 2006, respectively.

the ways in which medical research and practices at Penn influenced the Antebellum south and the nation's continuing nineteenth century commitment to slavery.

While the majority of scholarship on slavery and institutions of higher learning have focused on the ways in which universities and their associates directly exploited the labor and bodies of enslaved people, Penn's academic ties to slavery constitute a distinctly different type of connection, as individuals associated with Penn published research that heavily influenced pro-slavery rhetoric during the antebellum period. For example, John Peter Mettauer (1787-1875) of Prince Edward County, Virginia graduated from Penn's medical school in 1808.⁵ Following his medical education, Mettauer returned to the South, where he founded a hospital near his hometown⁶. Known as The Prince Edward Medical Institute, Mettauer's private medical school proved extremely successful. The hospital-school, which was in operation until 1861, became associated with Randolph-Macon College in 1847⁷. Three years after he established his hospital, Dr. Mettauer performed the country's first known successful vesico-vaginal fistula operations on a local white woman in 1837, five years before J. Marion Sims, the "Father of Gynecology" began his experiments. Mettauer then performed the same surgery on a 20 year old enslaved woman, whose surgeries he wrote about in an 1847 article in the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*⁸. Mettauer performed a total of eight surgeries on the enslaved woman, with no success.

Mettauer wrote:

⁵ General Alumni Catalogue of the University of Pennsylvania, 1922." Google Books. 1922. Accessed December 18, 2018, page 570

⁶ Kight, John R. John Peter Mettauer and the first successful closure of vesicovaginal fistula in the United States *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology*, Volume 99, Issue 7, 886
⁷[https://www.ajog.org/article/0002-9378\(67\)90234-7/pdf](https://www.ajog.org/article/0002-9378(67)90234-7/pdf) 888 -

⁸ Mettauer, John Peter, "On Vescio-Vaginal Fistulae," *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, 1843 vol. xiv, page 119 <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044103079059;view=1up;seq=125>

“The operation was repeated, but with no better success than the first. I continued, however, to repeat the operation twice a year, after the second trial, for eight times, and finally had to relinquish the case. . . . I believe this case . . . could have been cured in process of time, more especially, if sexual intercourse could have been prevented⁹.”

Although Mettauer does not describe his relationship to the enslaved woman, she likely either belonged to him or was rented to him for surgical purposes; therefore, it is extremely unlikely that she consented, as a free woman might have done, to the eight operations which Mettauer performed on her. It should be noted that Mettauer owned enslaved people throughout his lifetime; according to the 1840 census, he owned 29 enslaved people, twelve of whom were women¹⁰. Ultimately, Mettauer’s experiment on an enslaved woman, likely without her consent, allowed for significant medical progress, as his publications greatly advanced American gynecology.

Pitman Clemens Spencer (1793-1861) also received his MD from Penn, graduating in 1818¹¹. Spencer claimed that he was the first to conduct successful surgeries in lithotomy, or surgeries involving the pelvis and urinary tract¹². Spencer practiced medicine in Virginia, where in 1830 he owned eight enslaved people¹³. Spencer published many articles throughout his

⁹ Ibid, 119

¹⁰ Year: 1840; Census Place: *Eastern District, Prince Edward, Virginia*; Page: 225; Family History Library Film: 0029691

¹¹ "General Alumni Catalogue of the University of Pennsylvania, 1922." Google Books. 1922. Accessed December 18, 2018, page 489

¹² Kelly, Howard Atwood. "A Cyclopedia of American Medical Biography." Google Books. 1912. Accessed December 18, 2018, page 400

¹³ 1830; Census Place: *Nottoway, Virginia*; Series: *M19*; Roll: *195*; Page: *217*; Family History Library Film: 0029674

lifetime, including several treatises on lithotomy; in all, he published seven journal articles. According to his obituary, Spencer performed his surgeries with great accuracy, “losing only his first two patients¹⁴.” In the coming semesters, I hope to investigate the details of Spencer’s surgeries to a greater extent, as it is unclear from online archival sources if he performed his operations on free or enslaved people. However, given that Spencer practiced in rural Virginia and owned enslaved people himself, it is likely that he did make use of the bodies of the enslaved.

Spencer and Mettauer’s contemporary, Charles D. Meigs, who received his MD from Penn in 1817, also used the bodies of enslaved people in his teaching practices. Following the death of an enslaved woman named Mary from Alabama, Dr. Meigs displayed her uterus at his medical museum in Philadelphia. It should be noted that Meigs’ museum was likely part of Thomas Jefferson University’s medical program, as Meigs was a professor there.

Meigs obtained Mary’s uterus from Dr. Paul Fitzsimmons Eve (1806-1877), who graduated from the Medical School in 1828¹⁵. Eve studied under Meigs while enrolled at the Penn; following his graduation and a brief time in France, Eve returned to the South where he taught at medical schools in Georgia and Tennessee. In the months prior to Mary’s death, Dr. Eve had diagnosed her with cancer, and removed her uterus without her knowledge¹⁶. Dr. Eve later wrote about the operation, which garnered him a degree of fame in the medical world. Reflecting on Mary’s condition in “Article XII,” published with Meigs, Eve wrote, “The history

¹⁴ Kelly, page 400

¹⁵ "General Alumni Catalogue of the University of Pennsylvania, 1922." Google Books. 1922. Accessed December 18, 2018, page 594

¹⁶ Owens, Deidre Cooper. *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology*. University of Georgia Press, 2018, page 20

of diseases among our negro population is generally very imperfect and unsatisfactory, and this is especially true as regards uterine derangements¹⁷.” Eve’s quote illustrates the extent to which physicians relied on ascribing medical conditions to racial otherness when treating enslaved patients as illustrated by Eve’s use of the word “derangements” in describing ailments affecting Black patients. It is crucial to consider that such stereotypes were likely part of Eve’s medical education. At Penn, professors such as Samuel Morton (MD 1820) and Charles Caldwell (MD 1796) gave lectures on racial difference and medicine¹⁸. In considering Penn’s “complicity” in American slavery, it is imperative to consider the ways in which Penn as an academic institution taught principles that ultimately allowed for the justification of slavery. As referenced in my Spring 2018 report, the “scientific” basis of race, illustrated in Morton’s lectures, and Eve’s (and others’) treatment of enslaved patients, formed a crucial aspect of the paternalistic ethos that underscored Confederates’ defense of slavery, as demonstrated by Alexander Stephens’ “Cornerstone Address,” in which he cites slavery as a “natural condition.”

Eve also served in the Confederate Army during the Civil War; in 1850, he owned fourteen enslaved people¹⁹. Although he did not own Mary, it is possible that in other instances he operated on enslaved people. In the coming semester, I hope to further investigate the details of Eve’s other successful surgeries.

¹⁷ Ibid, 20

¹⁸ Lectures on the Varieties of the Human Species, circa 1840. Box 5, Folder 1. Samuel George Morton papers, 1832-1862, Library Company of Philadelphia.

¹⁹ Ancestry.com. *1850 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004.
https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?_phsrc=Loj13&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&qh=SaaMFjxrPpe0cLQ24bTo4Q%3D%3D&gss=angs-c&new=1&rank=1&msT=1&gsfn=Paul%20Fitzsimmmons%20&gsfn_x=0&gsln=Eve&gsln_x=0&msypn_ftp=Tennessee.%20USA&msypn=45&msbdy=1806&catbucket=rstp&MSAV=0&uidh=mt4&pcat=35&h=3415109&recoff=17%2018%2019&dbid=8055&indiv=1&ml_rpos=4

The Cadaver Trade and Body-Snatching

Since the founding of the Medical School, the study of anatomy was a central aspect of Penn's curriculum. Dr. William Shippen, who co-founded the medical school with Dr. John Morgan was first accused of body-snatching in 1765 while serving as Professor of Anatomy at the medical school. At the time, Shippen was conducting lectures in anatomy in his father's home on Arch street. In light of these accusations, Shippen took out an ad in Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*:

“It has given Dr. Shippen much Pain to hear that notwithstanding all the Caution and Care he has taken to preserve the utmost Decency in opening and dissecting dead Bodies, which he has persevered in chiefly from the Motive of being useful to Mankind, some evil-minded Persons, either wantonly or maliciously, have reported to his Dis advantage that he has taken up some Persons who were buried in the Church Burying Ground, which has disturbed the Minds of some of his worthy Fellow Citizens. The Doctor with much Pleasure, improves this Opportunity to declare that the Report is absolutely false ; and to assure them that the Bodies he dissected were either of Persons who had wilfully murdered themselves or were publicly executed, except now and then one from the Potter's Field, whose Death was owing to some particular Disease ; and that he never had one Body from the Church²⁰.”

²⁰ Shultz, Suzanne M. *Body Snatching: The Robbing of Graves for the Education of Physicians in Early Nineteenth Century America*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2005, page 23

Despite Shippen's ardent denial of stealing from any "private burying ground," his admission to snatching corpses from the "Potter's Field" indicates the possibility that Shippen stole the corpses of enslaved or free African Americans for dissection in his anatomy lectures. Furthermore, according to Shippen, people who committed suicide or were executed lost the right to maintain bodily integrity after death. This sentiment reflects the notion that early physicians did not believe that sanctity of the human body was ubiquitous.

In fact, according to an 1891 piece by Westcott Thompson, Shippen's first dissection at the new Penn Medical School was a black man who had committed suicide. Thompson wrote, "'Late in November 1762, Dr. Shippen received the first subject for dissection of which there is any record. A negro man having cut his throat with a glass bottle, from the effect of which he died, the action upon his case is thus recorded by the Gazette of December 2. 'After the coroner's jury had pronounced him guilty of self murder, his body was immediately ordered by authority to Dr. Shippen's anatomical theatre,' this accession to the stock of the dissecting room must have been received a day or two after the opening lecture²¹.'"

It also must be noted that, despite Shippen's claims, the public remained skeptical of his integrity. In subsequent generations, rumors of Shippen's illicit procurement of bodies for dissection was widely-circulated among Philadelphians. According to a 1906 newspaper

²¹ Martin, Newell and Brooks, WK. *Studies from the Biological Laboratory*. John Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1888, page 88

clipping, Shippen, “instructed his students in the ways of body-snatching” and the anatomy rooms at Penn were filled with bodies, as “no grave was safe against his predatory plans²².”

Shippen’s dissections marked the debut of Penn’s famed anatomy department. In the years following Shippen’s tenure, which lasted until his death in 1808, prominent Penn faculty members began collecting human anatomical specimens to use for teaching purposes. By the time of Caspar Wistar’s death in 1818, the University of Pennsylvania held a large collection of human and animal specimens. William Edmonds Horner, who later became the dean of the Medical School was appointed to care for the collection shortly before Wistar’s death. Horner added to the collection, developing an enormous range and variety. Upon Horner’s death, he bequeathed it to the Wistar Museum and it became known as the Wistar and Horner Museum of Anatomy. Joseph Leidy, MD ultimately became the curator of the Museum; his meticulous catalogues of the collection survive. According to an 1848 memo, additions to the Wistar collection that year included “arteries of the upper extremity” and separated fetal skeleton supplied by Horner²³. The collection also included a “pelvic preparation...heads of both femurs in hip joint, all preserved with soft tissue,²⁴” Samuel Morton’s crania collection, as well as many preserved fetuses, some with fatal congenital conditions²⁵.

It is important to note that Leidy and his fellow physicians rarely noted the race of the anatomical specimens in the collection. On occasion, the race of specimens is recorded, as Morton did on the crania that he collected. Given the clandestine nature of body-trafficking, we

²² In *Ghostly Old Times: Gruesome Troubles of a Medical Doctor Then and Now*,” American Press Information Bureau. October 16, 1906, newspaper clipping in the William Shippen Jr. Faculty Folder, UPenn. Accessed via *A Price for Their Pound of Flesh*

²³ UPA 3, Box 27, item 49. University Archives, The University of Pennsylvania. Accessed September 2018

²⁴ Currently located at the College of Physicians

²⁵ UPA 3, Box 27

cannot definitively prove the race of specimens such as the aforementioned pelvis. However, given Horner's connections to Virginia and the widespread practice of stealing the corpses of enslaved people for dissection, it is almost certain that physicians at Penn engaged in the cadaver trade in enslaved people's bodies at least to some extent. In the coming semesters, I hope to examine the ways in which physicians and their students obtained bodies for dissection.

Conclusion:

As the Penn's medical school evolved into one of the most prominent medical institutions in the nation during the 19th century, its professors and graduates sought to expand medical knowledge by using the bodies of enslaved people and free African Americans. In the coming semesters, I hope to further examine the ways in which the medical school grew and profited from this exploitation. Questions that arose from this semester's findings include: Where did Penn obtain the cadavers it used for dissection? How did this process change from the founding of the medical school under Shippen to the mid-19th century? To what extent were the publications on the treatment of enslaved people tied to racially-informed curriculum of the medical school? Which professors, aside from Morton and Caldwell, were the most prominent instructors in racial "science"? Although Penn as an institution cannot be held entirely responsible for the publications and opinions of its graduates, it is necessary to examine the ways in which Penn's medical curriculum shaped their careers and their subsequent work in support of slavery.

Although Penn's narrative is distinctly different from that of other colonial-era universities, as Penn itself did not own enslaved people, the University nevertheless profited from slavery as an institution and in some ways contributed to the defense of the "peculiar institution" in the

years preceding the civil war. As Penn continues to reckon with its complicity in American slavery, it is crucial that the university community, including administrators, faculty, alumni and current students engage in critical discussions regarding how to best address this history and honor the enslaved people and free African Americans whom professors and graduates exploited in the name of medical science.

Primary Sources Consulted:

Ancestry.com. *1850 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004.

https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?_phsrc=Loj13&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&qh=SaaMFjxrPpe0cLQ24bTo4Q%3D%3D&gss=angs-c&new=1&rank=1&msT=1&gsfn=Paul%20Fitzsimmons%20&gsfn_x=0&gsln=Eve&gsln_x=0&msypnftp=Tennessee,%20USA&msypn=45&msbdy=1806&catbucket=rstp&MSAV=0&uidh=mt4&pcat=35&h=3415109&recoff=17%2018%2019&dbid=8055&indiv=1&m1_rpos=4

Caldwell, Charles, *Autobiography of Charles Caldwell (1855)*

<https://books.google.com/books?id=oQgJAAAAIAAJ&ots=LUBvfBL5KW&dq=charles%20caldwell%20md&lr&pg=PA268#v=onepage&q=negro&f=false>

"General Alumni Catalogue of the University of Pennsylvania, 1922." Google Books. 1922. Accessed December 18, 2018.

https://books.google.com/books?id=BOwYAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA489&lpg=PA489&dq=Pittman Clemens Spencer 19th century virginia upenn&source=bl&ots=RIBFfAeYHG&sig=x_ZF4A-LkglZe96JLXctVwR9e9k&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjO6PLNkajfAhWIT98KHYZYDCQQ6AEwAHoECAYQAQ#v=onepage&q=Pittman Clemens Spencer 19th century virginia upenn&f=false

Mettauer, John Peter, "On Vescio-Vaginal Fistulae," *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, 1843 vol. xiv, page 119

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044103079059;view=1up;seq=125>

UPA 3, Box 27, item 49. University Archives, The University of Pennsylvania. Accessed September 2018

Year: 1840; Census Place: *Eastern District, Prince Edward, Virginia*; Page: 225; Family History Library Film: 0029691

1830; Census Place: *Nottoway, Virginia*; Series: M19; Roll: 195; Page: 217; Family History Library Film: 0029674

Secondary Sources Consulted

Berry, Daina Ramey. *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.

Johnston, George Ben, MD. "A Sketch of Dr. John Peter Mettauer of Virginia : The President's Address to the American Surgical Association, July 5, 1905 / by George Ben Johnston."

HathiTrust. Accessed December 17, 2018.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044086405958;view>.

Kight, John R. John Peter Mettauer and the first successful closure of vesicovaginal fistula in the United States *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology* , Volume 99 , Issue 7 , 885 - 892

Kelly, Howard Atwood. "A Cyclopedia of American Medical Biography." Google Books. 1912. Accessed December 18, 2018, page 400
<https://books.google.com/books?id=PdwbAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA399&lpg=PA399&dq=Pittman Clemens Spencer physician&source=bl&ots=Q4fAOISGqd&sig=ts9Dpf4B5gaX1rPX79Aeb3xDet0&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwit1PC0qajfAhVo44MKHbRzDeMQ6AEwCHoECACQAQ#v=onepage&q=Pittman Clemens Spencer physician&f=false>.

Martin, Newell and Brooks, WK. *Studies from the Biological Laboratory*. John Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1888
<https://books.google.com/books?id=-LcEAAAAQAAJ&lpg=PA80&ots=ZqGTiYGTol&dq=it%20has%20given%20dr%20shippen%20much%20pain&pg=PA80#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Mitchell, Martha Carolyn. "Health and the Medical Profession in the Lower South, 1845-1860." *The Journal of Southern History* 10, no. 4 (1944): 424-46. doi:10.2307/2197796.

Owens, Deidre Cooper. *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology*. University of Georgia Press, 2018.

Shultz, Suzanne M. *Body Snatching: The Robbing of Graves for the Education of Physicians in Early Nineteenth Century America*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2005.

Wilder, Craig Steven. *Ebony and Ivy*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011.

Wood, Ann Douglas. "'The Fashionable Diseases': Women's Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4, no. 1 (1973): 25-52. doi:10.2307/202356.