

White Coats and White Supremacy: The University of Pennsylvania's Medical School and the
Foundations of Race Science, 1820-1860

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Background

Established in 2017, the Penn and Slavery Project aims to investigate what, if any connections the University of Pennsylvania has to the institution of slavery. In its first semesters, the project focused on the ownership of enslaved people by the university's original trustees and early donors. This initial phase revealed complex financial and personal ties, indicating a deeper, more systemic relationship between the university and the institution of slavery than previously acknowledged. However, the project soon expanded on their definition of complicity. Instead of limiting complicity strictly to the ownership of enslaved people, the team realized the importance of examining broader institutional practices. In short, it was necessary to encompass all the ways the university supported, justified, and benefited from the Atlantic slave trade.

I joined the project in January of 2019, driven by my eagerness to closely examine a topic of interest and a desire to gain archival experience. This experience was particularly meaningful to me as it aligned with my long-standing interest in historical justice and the way institutions reckon with their past. My interest grew when the Penn & Slavery Project extended its focus to include the university's medical school. Examining the anatomical collections at the Penn Museum, I began to study osteology, a discipline that provided me with critical insights into the historical treatment of human remains. This assignment allowed me to identify and cross-reference human remains within the *Catalogue of the Anatomical Museum of the University of Pennsylvania* by W. E. Horner, professor of anatomy at the University of Pennsylvania between 1831 and 1853. Through careful examination and comparison of records, this work shed light on how anatomical research was intertwined with broader societal issues during the late nineteenth century.

Through this project, I gained a deep appreciation for the remains themselves which was quickly tempered by the understanding of ethical dilemmas inherent in their use. Often used as

teaching instruments, these specimens have been exploited to further harmful theories on race and for the justification of slavery. Moreover, I discovered that the University of Pennsylvania, despite previous denials of their ties to slavery, propagated race science that is still extant in the medical field. This revelation was particularly disturbing given the contemporary relevance and implications in these scientific misconceptions. In fact, many alumni of the University of Pennsylvania built successful careers trying to prove a biological basis for white supremacy.

Overview

My current research delves into the University of Pennsylvania's medical school as an integral site of knowledge production in North America, specifically, how Penn employed race science to justify slavery in the United States from the mid-19th century up to the Civil War. In this context, "race science" refers to a belief that empirical evidence exists to support or justify racism. This research aims to shed light on the University of Pennsylvania's complicity in the development and implementation of race science, drawing parallel the connections between education and practice, as originally envisioned by the University of Pennsylvania's founders. It also uncovers the unsettling 'truths' that were meticulously engineered and perpetuated through years of medical education, sustaining racial inequities.

I initiated my background research for this project by consulting *Pedagogies of the Black Body: Race and Medical Education in the Antebellum United States* by Christopher D. Willoughby.¹ This dissertation provided me with valuable context and guided the direction of my research. For example, *Pedagogies of the Black Body* highlighted American medical schools as primary producers and disseminators of race science. Willoughby's analysis revealed the complex

¹ Christopher Willoughby, *Pedagogies of the Black Body*, (Tulane University, 2016)

interplay between academic institutions, individual educators, and the broader societal context in which they operated. It revealed how professors' theories on race and practice, and their connection with the institutional power of elite universities, influenced the idea of "blackness" in the medical community. Moreover, it underscores how African American patients were treated as "a sort of medical chattel", a dehumanizing perspective that had profound implications for medical ethics and patient care. Falling somewhere between animal test subjects and white patients, this treatment reflects a deeply entrenched racial hierarchy within medical practice. It was reading Willoughby's work when I realized the possibility of tracing the production of harmful beliefs and/or practices.²

To explore the production of harmful beliefs and practices, I started by examining medical school professors' lecture notes and publications. Specifically, I delved into the University archives with the aim of investigating George Bacon Wood (1797-1879), who earned his M.D. from Penn in 1818. Wood's tenure at the university coincided with a pivotal period in American history, where the moral and scientific discourse around race and slavery were at their zenith. Wood was the Professor of Materia Medica between 1835 and 1850, Professor of Theory and Practice of Medicine between 1850 and 1860, and later a trustee to the University.³ These dual roles as educator and trustee placed him at the intersection of academic and institutional power. Though my initial attempt focusing on George Bacon Wood did not yield substantive results, it nevertheless provided crucial insights into the pedagogical approaches and institutional dynamics of the time. I redirected my research towards tracing the transmission of knowledge from professors' lectures on the human race to students through the classroom, analyzing the rhetoric in Penn professors' lecture notes, students' theses, post-graduate publications, and their correspondence with peers. This allowed me to establish an ideological lineage with roots in Penn

² *Ibid.*

³ George Bacon Wood. University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania.

with several of my colleagues already confirming that Penn professors such as Joseph Leidy and Samuel George Morton vigorously defended and propagated race science. As a result, my research became more focused as I descended into the medical theses of graduating doctors and their post-graduate publications. This deeper dive into individual works of graduates provided a granular view of how race science was internalized and expressed by those who were educated under its influence.

Promptly, I began a new line of research. I started by conducting keyword searches in the *Catalogue of the Alumni of the Medical Department of the University of Pennsylvania 1765-1877*. This catalogue lists the ‘name, residence, date and subject of essay’ for all medical school alumni within those dates. This search proved fruitful as more than a dozen of the essay titles alone piqued my interest. Ultimately, I chose to focus my research on two individuals.

Initially, I scrutinized John Ramsay McDow, and his thesis titled *The Negro and the White Man*. With the invaluable assistance of John Pollack from the Kislak Center, I successfully located the original essay. During my research, the alumni catalogue also led me to William Stump Forwood, another graduate of the University of Pennsylvania who later extensively published justifications for slavery and promoted a perceived racial hierarchy. Originally, I was in search of an essay listed in the catalogue as authored by Thomas C. Rogers in 1855 titled *The Negro – a Distinct Species*. However, my exploration of the University archives revealed that *The Negro – a Distinct Species* appeared as a series of published justifications by William Stump Forwood starting in 1857, rather than as a thesis by Thomas C. Rogers. Further research unveiled that Rogers’ first child’s middle name was Forwood, likely named after W. S. Forwood as they were

classmates at the University of Pennsylvania.^{4,5} Both had writings with the same title – Rogers as his dissertation in 1855, and Forwood’s publication in 1857. Unfortunately, Rogers’ dissertation remains undiscovered.

John Ramsay McDow

My research uncovered a valuable source for tracing the production of knowledge—through the work of John Ramsay McDow. Originally from Alabama, McDow received his M.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1855. He practiced medicine in Gainesville, Alabama until 1859 and subsequently in Texas until 1861. During his professional career as a doctor, McDow enslaved twelve people. McDow later served as the surgeon for the Eighth Texas Calvary during the Civil War, ultimately sacrificing his life for the Confederacy in 1864.⁶

In his 1855 thesis *The Negro and the White Man*, John Ramsay McDow preserved evidence of the institutional embedding of racist ideology by citing University professors. McDow’s citations extended a traceable link between the University of Pennsylvania’s medical practices and the perpetuation of racist ideologies throughout the medical community. In fact, it could be argued that McDow was granted his Doctor of Medicine based solely on his justifications for slavery. For instance, McDow heavily cited Dr. Samuel Morton’s divisive work, *Crania Americana*, published during his time at Penn in 1839, and taught entire courses on the differences between black and white people.^{7,8} Another example is that of Professor Joseph Leidy, a prominent

⁴ University of Pennsylvania, "Catalogue of the Alumni of the Medical Department of the University of Pennsylvania, 1765-1877.

⁵ Dr Thomas Cooper Rogers (1825-1878) - Find A Grave..., "Find A Grave, accessed July 1, 2019

⁶ "The Alpha Delta Phi, 1832-1882," Google Books, accessed July 1, 2019

⁷ Lectures on the Varieties of the Human Species, circa 1840. Box 5, Folder 1. Samuel George Morton papers, 1832-1862, Library Company of Philadelphia.

⁸ Morton, Samuel George, and Combe, George. *Crania Americana; Or, A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America: To which is Prefixed an Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species*. United Kingdom, J. Dobson, 1839.

polygenist (theory that posits human races are of different origins) at the time, believed that “anatomical facts defined racial difference.” In his essay, McDow referred to an instance when Professor Leidy stated to the class in one of his lectures that the “characteristics by which naturalists distinguish between certain species of lions and tigers were indeed less and not more important between the white man and the negro; and yet, he says, no naturalist ever thought of calling them the same animal.”⁹ McDow’s career thrived on justifications like these, arguing that it was a “violation of some fundamental law of their nature” that had adapted black men and women to different environments than their white counterparts.¹⁰

Moreover, McDow employed environmentalism to strengthen his argument that phenotypical differences between Black and white people proved a racial hierarchy. For instance, McDow claimed that “natural causes” are sufficient to produce all the modifications observable in the races of man. He expanded his point by describing a species of eyeless fish in the Mammoth Caves of Kentucky that are said to be identical with a species in the neighboring stream. Here, he claimed that this example is “referred to as confirmatory” of his position. In other words, McDow suggested that the white race was naturally superior due to specific evolutionary adaptations. McDow ended his dystopian essay by claiming that “African Americans first history is one of servitude, and though they have been brought in contact with the loftiest civilization of every age, it has left them as it found them.”¹¹ In his essay, McDow denied thousands of years of African history by asserting that there would be no Black history without white history. The echo chamber of physicians who propagated these ideas ignored African history, focusing on manifest destiny and maintaining a social order that placed white Anglo-Saxon men at the center of power.

⁹ John Ramsay McDow, *The Negro and the White Man*, University of Pennsylvania, 1855

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

William Stump Forwood

The examination of these medical theses reveals that professors at Penn propagated harmful beliefs and practices, influencing countless physicians across the nation. However, the perpetuation of malpractice and race-based medicine extend beyond graduation and the confines of the university campus. Physicians such as William Stump Forwood were products of an institution that successfully ingrained racist theories into medical practice. Like many of his contemporaries, Forwood's career cannot be disentangled from the systemic racism in medical thought and practice through which it flourished. In essence, the origins of racist science, ideology, and practice can be traced back to both the University of Pennsylvania's medical education curriculum and graduates. Notably, Forwood himself acknowledged this reality, stating that "All unprejudiced men of learning and observation assert that the negro is vastly inferior in psychological development, and after 1000 years, the race will occupy exactly the same position, both as regards mental and physical characteristics that it now holds."¹⁰ The institutional racism that permeated the University of Pennsylvania medical school in the mid-nineteenth century fostered an academic environment tainted by human rights injustices.

William Stump Forwood's significant contributions to the Medical Society of Hartford County and his active role in various medical associations underscored his stature as a prominent national physician. According to the 1850 census his family enslaved 58 people.¹² In 1854, he received his M.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Forwood played a pivotal role in organizing the Medical Society of Harford County and represented them as a delegate to the

¹² Ancestry.com. 1850 U.S. Federal Census – *Census & Voter Lists* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004.

American Medical Association. He held prestigious positions such as the President of the Pennsylvania and Maryland Union Medical Association, and Vice President of the Medical and Surgical Faculty of Maryland. Additionally, Forwood assumed leadership as the President of the Clarke County Alabama Medical Society while actively participating in the Alabama State Medical Association.¹³ Forwood's reputation as a physician extended well beyond regional boundaries, earning him nationwide recognition and respect.

In 1857, Forwood published a series of justifications in *The Medical and Surgical Reporter*, titled *The Negro – A Distinct Species*. He substantiated his arguments by referencing Professor Leidy's lecture at the University of Pennsylvania in 1853-1854. Leidy's lectures, which were influential in shaping medical thought at the time, provided Forwood with a veneer of scientific legitimacy for his arguments. Forwood contended that "the characteristic anatomical peculiarities between the European and African, which will be pointed out in this essay, are all drawn from the best authority; indeed, they will be taken chiefly from a lecture delivered by Professor Leidy in the University of Pennsylvania, session 1853-1854." Forwood continued, asserting various peculiarities such as the color of one's own skin, concluding that "the coloration ought rather to be ascribed to the chemical effect of the calorific, than the luminous rays of the sun." Here, Forwood provided a counterargument to a prevalent belief at the time which attributed black skin to the sun's effects, by reasoning that "negroes are found elsewhere, outside of Africa, such as in Australia, under climate as cold as that of Washington." He concluded by suggesting that "if these changes are developed chemically, through calorific agency, the same results would follow from the application of artificial heat; and it would be in our power at any time to produce a negro, after

¹³ *Transactions of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of the State of Maryland*. Google Books. Accessed July 1, 2019.

a slight roasting from the white species.”¹⁴ This concept, while seemingly radical, found support in popular culture at the time, exemplified by an 1856 long-form article in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* titled *Cooking of Men*.¹⁵

Referring back to the eyeless fish statement in the McDow thesis, it is crucial to highlight that Forwoods principal post-graduate literary work was titled *An Historical and Descriptive narrative of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky; including explanations of the causes concerned in its formation, its atmospheric conditions, it’s chemistry, zoology, geology, etc., with full scientific details of the eyeless fish*.¹⁶ This work by Forwood earned recognition in the Encyclopedia Britannica as an authoritative source in its field, and significantly contributed to the widespread acceptance of race science as common knowledge. Forwood also expounded upon differences in hair and asserted that African Americans possessed smaller craniums and thicker bones, while associating these characteristics with lower class animals. As a nationally renowned physician, his words carried the prestige of an Ivy League institution behind them. Forwood stands as a prime example of how University of Pennsylvania physicians propagated race science long after their graduation, firmly entrenching the harmful ideology in the medical field.

Moving Forward

In the future, I plan to expand my research by incorporating a wider range of medical theses and data, allowing for a more comprehensive examination of the severity of race-based treatments across different medical specialties. This will help determine whether certain disciplines or regions within the medical community were more susceptible to embracing harmful theories on race. For

¹⁴ W. S. Forwood, The Negro – a Distinct Species, *Medical and Surgical Reporter* 1856-1858.

¹⁵ John William Draper, *Cooking of Men*, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 1856.

¹⁶ W. S. Forwood, *An Historical and Descriptive Narrative*, Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1875.

example, a comparative study of regional medical practices during the 19th century could reveal significant disparities in the propagation and application of race science.

I also intend to review theses from a broader range of years, establishing a connection between historical race theories and contemporary medical practices. This longitudinal approach will shed light on the evolution of medical thought and practice over time, revealing how past beliefs evolve to influence modern medicine. These data will enable a more precise measurement of the damage caused by race science produced at the University of Pennsylvania, potentially influencing healthcare policies nationwide. By quantifying the impact of these theories, we can better understand their role in shaping health disparities and contribute to the development of more equitable healthcare practices.

Additionally, I plan to delve deeper into the Mammoth Caves of Kentucky, examining the role of the eyeless fish in justifying slavery. This unique case illustrates how natural phenomena were often misappropriated to rationalize human inequality, and its examination will contribute to a broader understanding of the scientific underpinnings of race science. It seems that Forwood was using these fish as evidence for how certain species are only able to survive in highly specific environments. Exploring this analogy further, I aim to deconstruct how naturalistic comparisons were misused to promote and justify racial hierarchies.

Based on the extensive archival research and critical analysis conducted by my colleagues and me, the Penn and Slavery Project can conclude that the University of Pennsylvania, at the very least, contributed to and propagated harmful theories on race. Consequently, I propose that the University of Pennsylvania take steps toward reparative action. To start, I recommend the revocation of all M.D. degrees that were granted based on their contribution to race science. Such a bold step, while symbolic, would represent a profound acknowledgment of the university's

responsibility in rectifying the past. Furthermore, I advocate for the implementation of educational initiatives and programs at the university to educate future generations of medical professionals about the historical misuse of science in perpetuating racial biases, ensuring that such errors are not repeated moving forward. These efforts, collectively, will not only contribute to a more accurate and just understanding of medical history but also pave the way for a more equitable future in medical science and practice.

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