A "Professor Without Degrees":

The Medical College of Virginia's Chris Baker

Copyright

Kate Schmitz
History 490
Dr. Ryan K. Smith
6 May 2011

Late one night, a couple of blocks away from the Medical College of Virginia's campus in Richmond, a short, stocky black man was walking up the street, pushing a wheelbarrow that contained a recently exhumed body. Upon seeing an approaching police officer, the man scurried into the shadows with his wheelbarrow and lifted his cargo out of it. Placing one of the body's lifeless arms around his shoulders, the little man tottered out of the shadows and said to his cold companion, "now, Joe, jus' 'nother block 'n we'll be home." The officer chuckled at the two drunk men and Chris Baker and his deceased friend made it safely to the dissecting halls of the college.[1] Or so legend has it.

Anecdotes about Chris Baker, who was the custodian of the "stiffs" and a former grave robber for the Medical College of Virginia, are numerous. However, they must be taken lightly—Chris Baker was, after all, a Richmond legend and due to the intrigue of his profession, those who wrote about him after his death may have embellished stories or made them up altogether. One student, for example, claims to have gone on a body-snatching excursion with Baker, but it is hard to determine whether that was true (students were, in fact, frequently sent out to obtain bodies, as doctors preferred to distance themselves from such unsavory business) or if the student was inserting himself into the legend.[2] Given Baker's occupation, his race, and his social status, there are few, if any, personal records about him, and therefore his story must be gathered from the only sources available—from newspaper articles and through the recollections of white doctors who worked with him.

Dr. Charles Robins, an MCV graduate who knew Baker, said that it was "highly probable" that Baker was born in the old Medical College building (now known as the

[1] *The Messenger* 41 no. 3 (July 1944).
[2] George E. Barksdale, et al, "The Legend of Chris Baker," *Scarab* 3, no. 1 (March 1954): 4

Copyright

Egyptian Building) on the MCV campus, although this, along with his date of birth is speculation. Whether or not he was born on campus, he lived there from a very young age until his death in 1919. His father, "Old Billie," preceded him as custodian and his mother was a laundress.[3] Later, Baker and his wife, Martha, and their son, John lived in the basement.[4] Baker was well known to the doctors and students at the college, all of whom "held him in high esteem."[5] The Greater Richmond area first became acquainted with Chris Baker in December of 1882 when he, another grave robber, and two students were caught in an attempted snatching at Oakwood Cemetery. In the next meeting of the General Assembly, the issue of grave robbing was taken up and in 1884, Virginia's first anatomy law went on the books and the Virginia Anatomical Board was created. The board distributed eligible bodies—those of criminals and the unclaimed—evenly among Virginia's three medical colleges, which technically meant the end of the need to obtain cadavers from the grave. Although he was no longer required to serve the college in such scandalous ways, public interest in Chris Baker did not die out after the Anatomy Law was passed. Baker continued to rob the occasional grave, but it does not appear that he was ever caught again after his 1882 arrest. This may have been in part to a growing acceptance of the use of cadavers for anatomical study—the Anatomical Board sanctioned the practice, and the zeitgeist of the late nineteenth century was progress through scientific knowledge. Even prior to the Anatomy Law, Richmond authorities tended to look the other way when it came to grave robbing, so long as the victims were not white.[6] Newspapers, describing him

[3] G. Watson James, Jr., "Chris Baker: Faithful Servant of Medical Science in Virginia," *Virginia Record* (September 1957): 23. And "A Study in Real Life," *Richmond Dispatch* (29 October 1893).
[4] Ibid, 23.
[5] *Bulletin* 37, no. 8 (April 15, 1940)
[6] James O. Breeden, "Body Snatchers and Anatomy Professors: Medical Education in Nineteenth-Century Virginia." Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 83, no. 3 (July 1975): 321-345, http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/stable/4247966 [accessed February 24, 2011].

Copyright

as an "ex-grave robber," may also have taken attention away from the issue by asserting that bodysnatching was no longer taking place.[7] Whatever Baker's true activities were, in the years after his debut in Richmond, he was frequently in the local papers, and even in the years after his death in 1919, Richmond was still talking about MCV's Anatomical Man.



Figure 1: Chris Baker

[7] "A Study in Real Life," *Richmond Dispatch* (29 October 1893).

During the nineteenth century, the number of medical schools in America grew exponentially—"from four schools in 1800 to more than 160 in 1900."[8] It was also during this century that medical men sought better understanding of the workings of the human body through the dissection of cadavers. As a result, anatomy and dissection became integral parts of the curriculum and "served as the ritual that inducted young men into the cult of medical knowledge."[9] Despite the fact that executed criminals' bodies were allowed to be used for the purpose of dissection, there were not enough executions to provide medical schools with a sufficient number of cadavers. With no other way to obtain bodies, medical schools resorted to grave robbing. Medical schools lobbied for legislation that would give them legal rights to cadavers other than executed criminals; they were, at first, successful, having been granted access to the remains of the indigent and the unclaimed. After a time, however, most of these anatomy acts were repealed and the black market for medical school cadavers became a lucrative business.

However short-lived the anatomy acts were, they established lasting social implications. In essence, they reaffirmed that in death, as in life, there were clear social distinctions regarding the rich and the poor. By condoning the use of the bodies of indigents and criminals for medical instruction, the respectable upper class was, for the most part, safe from having their graves desecrated. Even when it was fully illegal to use any person's remains for medical exploration, those who could not afford guards, heavy tombstones, or reinforced coffins—namely the poor blacks and whites who often ended up in potter's fields—were most often the victims of grave robbing.

[8] Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002): 2.
[9] Ibid., 3.

Copyright

Those who robbed the graves were known as body snatchers, resurrectionists, or 'sack-'em-up men'. Working at night in groups of at least three or four, the robbers labored quickly, quietly, and with as little disruption to the surrounding area as possible. The bodies were then taken to a medical assistant who paid the men for their dirty work, between eight and fifteen dollars per body.[10] These men were rather unsavory characters who were "non-descripts in person, as they were in character."[11] A few of these cadaver peddlers did not rob graves at all, choosing instead the less labor-intensive route of murder—and the vast majority of anatomists turned a blind eye to bodies that arrived clean and with no clear cause of death.[12] The most infamous murderers-for-profit were Brendan Burke and William Hare, whose chest-compression method of killing has been memorialized as "burking." These murders for profit were, however, rare in America. American snatchers like Chris Baker preferred skulking around cemeteries to find their victims.

Grave robbing was by no means a new scandal in the 1880s; in eighteenth-century Europe, where the best medical schools were located, surgeons like London's John Hunter frequently resorted to grave robbing in order to learn anatomy.[13] Even in America, where few medical schools existed in the eighteenth century (most American physicians were educated abroad), grave robbing and dissection were not uncommon. During the Revolutionary War, physician John Warren wrote how the New York-New Jersey campaign provided him with endless numbers of cadavers on which to work.[14] In New

[10] Breeden, 333
[11] Henry Lonsdale, qtd. in Sherman B. Nuland, "Grave Robbing," *American Scholar* 70, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 125.
[12] Sappol, 5.
[13] Wendy Moore, *The Knife Man: Blood, Body Snatching, and the Birth of Modern Surgery*. (New York: Broadway Books, 2005): 29.
[14] Suzanne M. Shultz, *Body Snatching: The Robbing of Graves for the Education of Physicians in Early Nineteenth Century America*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2005): 26.

Copyright

York City, graves in the Negroes Burying Ground were plundered for anatomical study at Columbia College. In 1788, when the body of a white woman was reported stolen from Trinity Churchyard, a group of 5000 men rioted against the anatomists. The riot came to an end when the militia was ordered out by Governor Clinton.[15]

Despite its illegality, as the number of American medical schools grew, grave robbing flourished, especially in the south where there was a large black slave population. Slave owners sometimes brought the bodies of their human property to anatomists, and robberies of bodies took place almost exclusively in black burial grounds.[16] In Virginia, grave robbing was outlawed in 1848, right around the time that Chris Baker was born. Even though newspapers rarely "informed their readers of the extensive grave robbing in black burial grounds and potter's fields," Richmond's curiosity was piqued in 1880 when the *State*, a modest local newspaper, reported missing bodies in the pauper's section of Oakwood Cemetery.[17] Two years later, in December 1882, Richmond would be abuzz with the talk of grave robberies and the recent arrests of two medical students and two black resurrectionists on the Oakwood Cemetery grounds.

The land for Oakwood Cemetery, located east of Richmond, was purchased in 1852, and in 1856, the first burial took place. During the Civil War, soldiers who died at nearby Chimborazo hospital were buried in Oakwood; by the war's end, over 16,000 Confederate dead were buried on the property. The pauper's section of Oakwood Cemetery was located in the far northeast corner, on a plateau-like stretch of bank along what was once called Stony-Run creek. Hidden at the bottom of a ravine, this area was "the receptacle of the

[15] Sappol, 107-108.
[16] David C. Humphrey, "Dissection and Discrimination: The Social Origins of Cadavers in America,1760-1915," *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 49, no. 9 (September 1973):822. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.proxy.library.vcu.edu/pmc/articles/PMC1807060/pdf/bullnyacadmed00187-0073.pdf [accessed February 24, 2011].

[17] Ibid, 822; "The Richmond Ghouls," *State* (6 January 1880).

Copyright

remains of nearly all the colored people who [died] in the eastern part of [Richmond]."[18] In early 1880, it was estimated that about three hundred poor blacks had been laid to rest in this ground. On January 6 of the same year, the *State* reported that several grave robberies had occurred and the culprits were as yet unknown. The cemetery, however, had known about the robberies as far back as June of 1878; William Smith, the keeper at that time, reported that he had received an angry letter from a surgeon of the then-called "colored lunatic asylum." In his letter, the surgeon claimed that the body of one of his recently deceased patients had been buried in Oakwood only to reappear on a table of the dissecting room at the Medical College of Virginia. Later, in March of 1879, Smith was paid a visit by a surgeon. The purpose of the visit was to make Smith a proposition, "in effect to connive at the stealing of the dead bodies for use in the institution to which he was attached." Smith had no trouble in connecting the two incidents, and he "indignantly rejected" the proposal and contacted the Committee of the Council on Cemeteries.[19] Initially, precautions were taken to guard the paupers' section, but as summer came, the robberies stopped. With very few exceptions, graves were not robbed in the summer months, due to heat-accelerated decomposition that would render the bodies unfit for dissection; for this same reason, anatomy classes were not held in the summer.[20] With the onset of colder weather, grave-robbing season began, but the guard did not return; the number of robberies would rise to forty before the *State* published its 'Richmond Ghouls' article.

The grave robbers at Oakwood Cemetery were clearly not worried about being caught. This was, perhaps, because the public was largely unaware of the robberies, and

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] The *State* was either unaware of the fact that robbing graves in summer was useless, or it decided that such a fact was obvious to its readers, because it offered no explanation for the sudden cessation of ghoul activity.

Copyright

therefore public opinion had rendered secrecy and stealth unnecessary. In addition, pauper's graves were not of much concern to the upper classes; the poor dead were "buried with scant care, and the graves were very shallow, so the body could be easily removed."[21] Their jobs made easier because of this, the robbers had taken so many victims that they had worn a path by dragging the unearthed bodies along the ground. This careless behavior was very unusual; grave robbing was a stealthy task that was done under cover of darkness with the utmost care so that it could not be detected. In order to work quickly and quietly without drawing attention, special tools were used: shaded lanterns to limit the reach of the light's beam, and wooden shovels and daggers, which made no noise when they struck rock.[22] Before digging, the graves were studied and details memorized so that once the robbers had removed their treasure, they could put everything back in its place. Tarps were laid out alongside the gravesite to collect dirt and prevent loose soil from revealing that the grave had been disturbed. A heavy rain was undesirable and added to the difficulty because mud was heavier to lift and it was difficult to return the grave to how it had looked before the snatch. Snow could be either a curse or a blessing—a light snow would betray the robbers' work by advertising footprints and overturned dirt, while a heavy snow would remove all traces of the robbers' presence. Cloudy nights and moonless nights were ideal.[23]

The body snatchers worked quickly, often in teams of three or four. A talented grave robber could have a body removed from its resting place in an hour.[24] It took two men to perform this part of the snatch. A hole was dug directly above the head and shoulders of

[21] Robins, 19.
[22] Nuland, 126.
[23] Shultz, 35.
[24] Breeden, 323.

Copyright

the deceased, which was the widest portion of the coffin and therefore the easiest section from which to remove the body. When the lid of the coffin was reached, it was snapped open with hooks—the weight of the dirt over the rest of the coffin ensured that only the exposed portion was opened.[25] The body would then be lifted out of its resting place. Some robbers used hooks that attached under the jaw of the body, but this often resulted in a less-than-pristine cadaver, and those who were determined to get the most money for their labor used an under-the-arm approach to removal.[26] The body was usually stripped of its clothing, which was returned to the coffin, and "sacked up." The grave was covered over carefully before the robbers left the crime scene. A third and sometimes fourth man would be waiting at a predetermined spot to collect their cohorts and spirit their contraband away to a waiting doctor.

Dr. John F. Woodward, who graduated from MCV in 1890, had a typical grave robbing experience with Chris Baker in 1889—after the creation of the Anatomy Board, which should have made grave robbing unnecessary. He and another anatomy student named Matthews "fell heir to Chris and his friends, the stiffs," after being placed in charge of selecting cadavers for anatomy lessons. One day, Woodward and Matthews went to Baker in order to obtain a body. "All gone," Baker claimed, "one, two, no good." Dr. Bosher, the anatomy professor, was consulted and he determined that "a body snatching job is in order, boys." After being reassured that he and his fellow student would be well protected and provided for—grave-robbing excursions always aroused the police—Woodward, Matthews, a driver, and Chris Baker, who would "do the real snatching," set off on a "moonless Saturday night" for the pauper's burial ground. A black cart, pulled by a

[25] Nuland, 126.
[26] Breeden, 323.

Copyright

black horse would take the men, who were dressed in dark clothing with blackened faces, to their destination. Woodward described Baker's actions: Baker dug at the head of the gravesite by the light of a lantern "that threw the light in only one direction." Matthews was enthusiastic about the mission and helped by shoveling. Once their contraband was secured, Baker dragged it over to the wagon and wrapped it up in black canvas. Just then, a shot was fired from a nearby cabin, which spooked the horse and sent the robbers scrambling to exit the scene. With the police force searching for the culprits, Woodward and Matthews were taken to a beer garden and put into hiding for a couple of days, while Baker and the driver "left to deliver their precious charge as best they could."[27]

On December 13, 1882, two years after grave robberies were reported in the "Richmond Ghouls" article, the *State* was able to identify some culprits. Once again, a keeper of Oakwood Cemetery—this time, a Mr. W. A. Dickerson—had reported grave robberies in the black section to the Committee on Cemeteries, and a guard was set in place to catch the perpetrators. On a bitterly cold and wet night, the robbers were apprehended by Police Captain J.B. Angle and identified as William Smith (different from the William Smith who had once been keeper of Oakwood) and W.B. Meredith, both of whom were students at the Medical College of Virginia. The other two were identified as Caesar Roane and Chris Baker, the latter of whom was referred to as a "professional body snatcher." After the arrests at Oakwood, a search warrant was issued for the anatomy room at MCV, and several bodies were identified as being recently deceased (and recently buried) wards of Central Lunatic Asylum.

[27] Barksdale et al., 4.

Copyright

It must be assumed that this was Chris Baker's debut in Richmond. In the *State* article of two years prior, there was no culprit named in the grave robberies; had Baker been known as a professional snatcher at that time, it stands to reason that he might have been mentioned as a potential suspect. Further, there is no mention of Baker's previous run-ins with the law in this article. The amount of coverage given to Baker in the days following his capture aided his rise to celebrity in Richmond; the local papers dug up as much information on Chris Baker as they could.

The very next day—December 14—the *State* published a character piece on Baker titled "Chris the Snatcher: Dual Character of Pall-Bearer and Grave-Robber." Baker had previously been taken to court to answer grave-robbing charges that took place in Sycamore Cemetery, an African-American burial ground located in Richmond's north side, on January 6, 1882. The cemetery's keeper, George White, had identified Baker as both the man responsible for the robbery of Clay Lomax's grave and as a pallbearer at Lomax's funeral! For a grave robber, however, becoming a fake mourner was standard procedure in the procurement of a body. Sometimes, it was a matter of turning up after a death at an asylum and pretending to be a bereaved relation who wanted to take possession of their deceased "relative." Other times, as seen with Baker's stunt as a pallbearer, the snatcher would attend the funeral of his soon-to-be victim in order to assess the exact location of a grave, so as to be able to reach it quickly under cover of darkness. One of the most accomplished fake mourners of the grave-robbing era was Edinburgh, Scotland's "Merry" Andrew, who was "able to transform his face to fit the solemnity of the occasion and become suffused with tears when discussing his 'deceased' relative." Along with his accomplices Spoon (who was "skilled at scooping bodies from their coffins") and Mole

Copyright

(named for the fact that he was a "furious digger"), Merry Andrew would return to the graveyard in the middle of the night to retrieve his "relative" and take him or her to the surgeons' anatomy chamber.[28] According to Dr. Charles R. Robins, the keeper at Oakwood Cemetery had his suspicions aroused "when he observed that Chris, a stranger to him at the time, was a perpetual mourner at most of the burials in the Potter's Field."[29] Though probably not as good an actor as Merry Andrew, this behavior marked Baker as a true professional.

In the days that followed Baker's grave robbing arrest, local newspapers weighed in on the morality of body snatching. The *State* was quick to assert its belief that grave robbing for anatomical study was

> a necessary evil, one that cannot be dispensed with. Were dissecting to be abolished skilled surgeons would be replaced by bungling butchers of humanity. It is a necessity—a most unfortunate one, but nevertheless a necessity, that material should be furnished for the demonstration of anatomy. This is a cold scientific fact, but one that the protection of the living demands.[30]

The next day, the *State* seemed to have backed down slightly from its position, writing a lengthy article on the nation's interest in the topic of grave robbing in which the editors claimed that people everywhere were "perhaps morbidly, very sentimental." In keeping with the zeitgeist of the late nineteenth century—faith in science and progress—man was now seen as matter in motion, but without a meaning or importance beyond his own achievements in the world. Despite the optimism that progress would make life much more comfortable, there existed a kind of underlying malaise: could man be truly content with the knowledge that he was merely a highly evolved organism that was defined in purely

[28] Shultz, 26-27.
[29] Robins, 19.
[30] "Body-Snatchers Captured While in the Act of Robbing Graves in Oakwood, *State* (13 December 1882).

Copyright

material terms? The *State* captured this conflict with its December 14 article, a conflict that was seen in society's reaction to the resurrectionists who snatched bodies from graveyards for anatomical study: "though nothing but dust lies in [the caskets], yet that dust is sacred, and we love to think that there is still something left on earth of those we loved in life."[31]

Certainly people wanted competent and knowledgeable surgeons and were supportive of medical advancement, but many were unable to condone the only true way for this advancement to happen: dissection of a recently deceased human being. One reader—his letter is signed "M.D." although whether he is a doctor or just a man with coincidental initials is unknown—wrote to the editor of the *State* in favor of legal ways to obtain cadavers for anatomical education. The law, M.D. said, "grants charters to medical colleges and gives them the right to dissect human bodies. Yet it fails to provide any way for them to get such bodies, and even imposes a heavy penalty upon all persons detected in procuring bodies for such purposes."[32] Even the *State*, which remained supportive of anatomical education, was hesitant to support a legal channel through which to obtain bodies. "We confess," they said on December 14, "[that] we prefer the present mode of obtaining supplies for the dissecting room so long as it is not found out, to the 'burking' method of old, when it was perilous for belated husbands to walk the street."[33]

The *Virginia Star*, an African-American paper, was staunchly against grave robbing. In the December 16 edition, the *Star* disagreed with the *State* that grave robbing was necessary to the advancement of medical science, calling for the editor of the paper to be "duly hauled up out of his silent grave by 'Chris.'" The *Star* also discussed the racial disparity involved in the ghoulish activity, saying that if grave robbing was, as the *State*

[31] "Robbing the Grave," *State* (14 December 1882).
[32] "A Grave Affair, To the Editor of the *State*:" *State* (15 December 1882).
[33] *State* (14 December 1882).

Copyright

claimed, a necessary evil, why not "divide the honors between Oakwood and Hollywood alike, and between the two races?" The *Star's* argument was intended to shame body snatchers and doctors for targeting the graves of African Americans, as well as to turn white supremacist assertions against the white community: the article stated that "it has been claimed by many white men that Negroes are physically dissimilar to Caucasians. If it be true, then, it is not fair to the white people that only colored ones should be dissected and should be the only ones of whose physical structure the doctors have any knowledge."[34]

As in the case of social relations, race played an important role in the snatching of bodies. Scholar D. C. Humphrey put it most simply when he claimed that, "dissecting a white was risky business. Dissecting a black was largely a matter of finding a body."[35] Both whites and blacks took measures to prevent the theft of bodies, although most of these measures were cost- and time-prohibitive. Grave watchers might be hired to stay with the body until it was too decomposed to be of use in an anatomy lesson, but this was generally unavailable to the lower classes who could neither afford to hire guards nor do the job themselves; ten days of patrol was needed to ensure the safety of the body.[36] Also cost-prohibitive were burial vaults, impenetrable coffins and mortsafes, though mortsafes were never popular in America. Poorer families were not without ways to keep robbers from taking their loved ones, however. If such a thing was available, an iron slab could be placed on top of the grave, which meant that the whole grave had to be dug up in order to be robbed; very few resurrectionists would risk doing this because of the extra time involved. Rocks might also be used to fill the grave, deterring robbers with their weight and noise. Cemetery walls, when they existed, might be built six to eight feet higher than average

[34] "The Grave Robbers," *Virginia Star* (16 December 1882).
[35] Humphrey, 820.
[36] Breeden 324.

Copyright

walls. Broken glass and loose stones and bricks sometimes littered the cemetery wall to prevent a would-be wall-scaling snatcher from gaining purchase. Graves might have been decorated with intricate patterns, although snatchers, if they were good, were meticulous about returning the grave to pre-robbery conditions.[37] Still, blacks were, for the most part, powerless to stop the graves of their kin from being robbed. "The most they could hope for if they wished to remain in their graves was to die during the summer when classes were not in session and bodies decomposed rapidly."[38]

As a black man, Baker was feared and hated by his own community who likely saw him as a reverse Robin Hood who robbed from the poor and disenfranchised to give to the privileged. Rumors abounded in the black community, claiming that Baker not only obtained his victims through the robbing of graves, but also by stalking and suffocating those who ventured too close to the medical college after dark.[39] Mothers warned their children not to disobey, or else "Ole Chris" would come and snatch them away.[40] Baker was afraid to leave the building in which he lived, and rightfully so, as there were many attempts made on his life. Once, he was shot at as he exited the dispensary and pathology building.[41] Another time, while celebrating the inauguration of President Grover Cleveland, he was severely beaten by a group of African Americans. After this near-fatal beating, Baker existed in self-imposed isolation, leaving the "environs of the old college building under his own power but once."[42]

Copyright

[37] Shultz, 41.
[38] Shultz, 39.
[39] *The Messenger* 41, no. 3 (July 1944)
[40] "The Boy Who Disobeyed His Mother," *Times-Dispatch* (12 March 1905).
[41] James, 52.
[42] Ibid., 52.



Figure 1: Baker with students and cadaver, 1910.

The only world to which Baker partially belonged was the white, privileged world of doctors and medicine. In the late 1800s, black men were not admitted as students at MCV; Baker's access to this world was therefore truly unique. Not only did he earn the respect of the doctors and students with whom he worked, but he also knew as much as any doctor on staff due to years spent as keeper of the bodies. Baker was remembered by the students as possessing a "remarkable gift" as an anatomist, ably assisting the doctors with "dispatch and accuracy."[43] After the dissection, Baker undertook the bodies' final preparation; covering the bodies with quick lime that would dissolve the flesh and leave only the bones behind, Baker assembled the bones into un-joined skeletons that were sold to students at five dollars apiece. The students would then own the bones, upon which they could practice their anatomical knowledge.[44] Dr. John Woodward recalled that, in his first semester at MCV, after being advised to take an anatomy class, he was told to "see Chris in the rear of the building…he looks after the bones and stiffs." Having to talk to Baker was daunting: "my

[43] Ibid., 53.
[44] *Bulletin* 37, no. 8 (April 15, 1940)

Copyright

desire to be a doctor was certainly at a low ebb." Woodward called out and Baker appeared, holding a skull and saying that he had "this beauty—bones scarce—all I got." Woodward slapped five dollars in Baker's palm and took off in a hurry, "the skull wrapped in newspapers under [his] arm."[45] In addition to being a "first-class skeleton manufacturer," Baker made money off of the students in other ways. In a 1929 letter to the editor of *Skull & Bones*, MCV alumnus Dr. James McCauley recalled the crap-shooting games—called "rolling the bones" by the students—that took place in the bone room that adjoined the dissection hall. Baker was tasked with keeping a look-out for professors and sounding the alarm if one approached. "Chris was always careful to announce the coming of a professor at the time there was a good stake on the floor," said Woodward. "Whenever he poked his head in the door and shouted 'de doctor am here,' the boys would generally desert the ranks and leave the 'kitty' for Chris."[46]

In the September 1957 edition of *Virginia Record*, G. Watson James, Jr. wrote glowingly of Baker, calling him "one of the most famous, beloved, respected, and in some quarters feared character in the Richmond of his day," the "Professor of Anatomy Without Degrees," and praised his contributions "to the advancement of medical science in Virginia." James also proposed that a "tangible memorial be erected" to honor Baker's invaluable role in MCV's history. Despite this praise, there exists, at times, condescending rhetoric in James' writing. He referred to Baker's "primitive genius" and called him a "simple" character.[47] Even so, Baker was also clearly a member of the MCV family. After their 1882 arrest at Oakwood, the jailed medical students were brought "tobacco, papers, text-books, and lecture notes," but Chris was not forgotten. He was brought food from the

[45] Barksdale et al., 3.
[46] From the vertical file on Chris Baker at Tompkins-McCaw Library at the Medical College of Virginia.
[47] James, 22, 52, 54.

Copyright

college, so he did not have to eat "that jail 'vittles.'"[48] MCV doctors Landon Edwards, Hunter McGuire, and Thomas Moore also appealed to Governor Cameron on Baker's and the students' behalf, which resulted in the governor pardoning the jailed men.[49]

After the creation of the Anatomical Board, when cadavers were available through legal channels, Baker's popularity in the news might have dwindled, since he technically would no longer have to lurk about cemeteries at night to steal bodies for the students at MCV. Despite this potential demotion for Richmond's most intriguing black man, Baker remained as captivating as he had in 1882 when Richmond first got acquainted with him. In 1893, The *Dispatch* published a front-page article about Baker. Describing him as a "queer darky," the article gave a full account of Baker's life up until that point, including his relationship with the MCV doctors and his own race. The article was laced with the racist sentiments common to the time, about both Baker and the African American community:

> Perhaps of all the races the negro will cling longest to the belief in the supernatural, and here, even in enlightened Richmond, they have their fears and superstitions, and it will be decades before these silly ideas vanish…the darkies have a nineteenth-century ghoul that fully comes up to specifications and makes the black folks quiver in their very boots.[50]

Within these lines, it is clear that in the latter part of the nineteenth century, men ridiculed the supernatural and favored the rational. It is also clear that the author of this piece did not intend to celebrate Baker, but instead sought to treat him like a sideshow. The author was certainly curious about Chris Baker, at times expressing amazement at Baker's life and job, but condescending nonetheless when referring to him as a "little well-made darky." The

[48] "A Study in Real Life," *Richmond Dispatch* (29 October 1893).
[49] "The Imprisoned Medical Students." *State* (20 December 1882).
[50] "A Study in Real Life," *Richmond Dispatch* (29 October 1893).

Copyright

article, for all its sensationalism, did provide a unique look into the work of the man who was "rather shy of reporters."

Calling Baker's life "a story as weird and ghastly as a romance from the pen of Victor Hugo," the article describes his workroom, located on the top floor of the Egyptian building, in great detail. "Kept as clean as a pin," shelves lined the walls, on which were perched pickle-like jars of specimens, labeled accordingly: HEARTS, BRAINS, SPINAL CORD, LIGAMENTS, VERTABRAE. In the dissecting room, which was located on the top floor of the building and lit naturally from skylights above, the reporter noted nine corpses, all covered save for their heads. When asked if he believed in ghosts, Baker was quoted as saying "I'se feared of living ghosts, but the dead ones can't skeer me." He was referring, of



Figure 3: Baker with students, cadaver, and skeleton, 1900.

course, to those of his own race who wished him dead. His level of comfort with the dead was seen in an anecdote from James' September 1957 article. Polk Miller, a ventriloquist and friend of Baker, enlisted the help of a student to play a prank in the dissecting room. Hidden from site, Miller waited for Baker to approach one of the cadavers before throwing his whispered voice to say, in the words of the article, "Niggah, you doan want me."

Without startling, Baker went to another body only to have it speak to him as well. At the third body, upon hearing yet another protesting voice, "Chris looked down with supreme indifference and replied, 'Damn you Niggah, I gwine take you anyways.'"[51]

In 1896, Baker made headlines again for playing a small and unwitting role in the aftermath of one of the most sensational murder trials in Virginia's history. In rural Lunenburg County, a fifty-six year-old white woman named Lucy Jane Pollard was found dead just outside her house on June 14, 1895, her skull having been bashed in and cleaved with a meat ax. With the whole state of Virginia abuzz with the scandal, hundreds of people in the area pitched in to help locate the murderer.[52] William Henry "Solomon" Marable, a black sawhand who lived near the Pollard farm, was arrested four days after the murder; he insisted that while he was near the Pollard property on June 14, he did not commit murder. The murderers, he claimed, were three women: Mary Abernathy, Mary Barnes, and Pokey Barnes. News of the murder reached all over the state. The *Richmond Times* called it "one of the most diabolical murders ever committed in this section [of Virginia's Lunenburg County]…never was a more heinous crime committed on Virginia's soil."[53]

The four suspects were charged with first-degree murder, and even though none could read or write, each one of them had to defend him- or herself during the trials, as no one was willing to defend black suspects in a case involving the death of a white woman. Fearing that the suspects would be lynched—mob violence was not uncommon at this time—the governor called in troops to protect Marable and the three women. Surrounded

[51] James, 54.
[52] Suzanne Lebsock, *A Murder In Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003): 16.
[53] *Richmond Times* (18 June 1895).

Copyright

by angry whites who believed in mob justice, a militia, and without the aid of legal counsel, all four suspects were found guilty of the murder of Lucy Pollard and sentenced to hang.

Following this story very closely was John Mitchell, Jr., one of the most influential black men in the state. Mitchell was the editor of the black newspaper the *Richmond Planet*, and it was he who alerted the African Americans in Richmond to the plight of Mary Abernathy, Mary Barnes, and Pokey Barnes.[54] Able to move easily between the barriers that separated race and class, Mitchell became personally involved with the plights of the three convicted Lunenburg women, raising money, hiring them legal counsel, and traveling back and forth to speak with them in jail and to record their stories in the *Planet*. Through Mitchell's and the attorney's efforts, all three women were eventually released, but Solomon Marable, who had changed his story half a dozen times, was found guilty and hanged for first-degree murder. Prior to his execution, there "had been quite a contention as to what disposition should be made of Marable's body."[55]

During this time, the Anatomical Board allocated to medical schools the bodies of the indigent, the unclaimed, and those whose relatives could not afford to have the remains of their loved one transported—such was the case with Marable, who died penniless and whose wife had written him before his death to say that she too was destitute. Dr. William Matthews, a professor of anatomy at MCV, had made a demand for the remains of Solomon Marable, as had Dr. Irving, treasurer of the University College of Medicine. Mitchell, who had been involved with the case for well over a year, promised to pay for the delivery of Marable's body and personal items to Marable's wife in North Carolina. Three individuals, therefore, were waiting to stake their claim on Marable's remains. The body

[54] Lebsock, 16, 110.
[55] "Farewell, Solomon Marable," *Richmond Planet* (11 July 1896).

Copyright

was sent to MCV, but it did not stay there long; armed with a written order from Dr. Matthews to surrender Marable's corpse, Mitchell and a group of men arrived at the MCV building around midnight. They sought Chris Baker, "the colored wizard of [that] institution of the body," but Baker was too afraid to come out at first. Eventually, Baker appeared, barefoot and carrying his shoes. "Is this Mr. Mitchell?" he asked. Mitchell answered affirmatively and Baker said "Produce the order and you can get the body."[56]

The order having been shown, Baker proceeded to get the body, asking assistance from W.S. Selden, the Funeral Director. No one else would be allowed to accompany him into the dissection room. The two men were gone for about half an hour before Selden reappeared and told Mitchell that the body would not be able to be moved that night. Mitchell entered the building and saw Marable's body "extending from a barrel into which it had been forced." Also spilling from the barrel was a large amount of salt that had been tinged with Marable's blood. Marable himself was bloated, blistered, and puckered, and gas was escaping from his open mouth.[57]

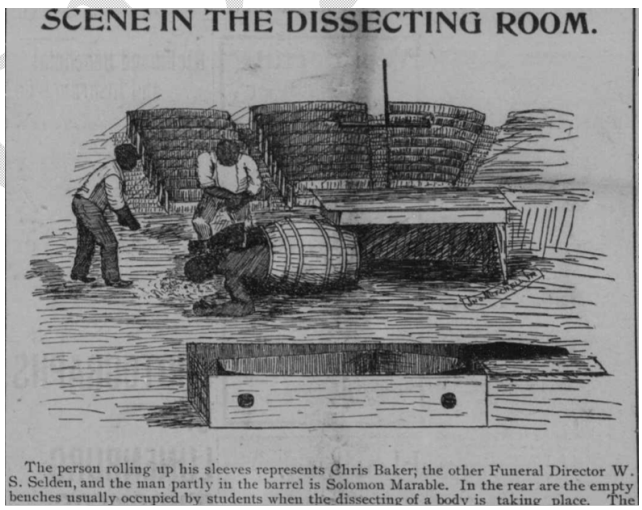


Figure 4: Illustration from August 1, 1896 *Planet* of the night that Mitchell and Selden came to take Marable's body from Baker.

[56] "Scene in the Dissecting Room," *Richmond Planet* (1 August 1896).
[57] Ibid.

Copyright

Described as being "in his glory," Baker hopped around the room singing "Can't get it out to-night! Wait 'till the gas passes off! Can't pull on it anymore. If you do, you'll burst the knee-pans off. Let it stay 'till morning—'twill be all right." He and Selden proceeded to force the body back into the barrel, succeeding with all of Marable's parts, except for his head. In order to close the barrel, Baker "backed off a few paces, then took a flying leap, landing squarely on top of what remained of Solomon Marable."[58] Marable's barreled body was picked up by Selden the next day, but the swelling had not gone down as Baker had predicted—the barrel had to be broken in order to retrieve, embalm, and prepare Marable for his trip back to North Carolina. The *Planet* reported that there was an incision in the throat, as well as numerous punctures and a severed artery, all seeming to exist for the sole purpose of making embalming difficult. If the *Planet* was correct in its suspicion, Chris Baker was acting in the interests of MCV's anatomy department by unnecessarily damaging the body so that it could remain within the dissection room.[59] His ploy did not work; the *Richmond Planet* called the return of Marable's body to his wife "the triumph of humanity over science."[60]

Baker's name would appear in Richmond publications for years to come, even after his death in 1919. In 1900, the *Times* printed an article that retold the story of Baker's 1882 arrest. Captain Angle, one of the officers at the graveyard that night, recalled that Baker and his men "worked rapidly, talking in an undertone, and telling jokes, as though they were engaged in a lawful occupation." Confirming Halperin's assertion that "relatively few grave robbers…were ever punished for their crimes," Angle "did not let [Baker and his men]

[58] Lebsock, 288.
[59] "Scene in the Dissecting Room," *Richmond Planet* (1 August 1896).
[60] "Farewell, Solomon Marable," *Richmond Planet* (11 July 1896).

Copyright

lift the body, for this is a penitentiary offence."[61] Certainly, the officers neither wanted to see the body nor disturb its final resting place, but implicit in the statement is the idea that authorities only half-heartedly punished the men who robbed graves for anatomical study. Indeed, the publication of the article nearly twenty years after the incident took place demonstrated that Baker and his profession were still objects of curiosity.

Two years later, in December 1902, the *Dispatch* published an article titled "The Jolly Medicos," which covered the annual holiday ball that was held for students and their "best girls." The first two paragraphs of the piece were dedicated to the students' frivolity and the decorations of the hall. The remainder of the article was dedicated to an impromptu appearance at the party by Chris Baker; at one point, Baker poked his head through a crack in the door, at which time the students cried "Chris! Chris!" and implored him to make a speech. Baker's nerve failed him. When he was later interviewed about the appearance, he is quoted as saying, "we am just done had a innertainment for them students, and some speechifying to tell them this here am the best school where they can git any larning and to wish them all happy Christmas and tell them to go home and 'joy themselves and come back and study." In regard to his nervousness, Baker explained that he was not afraid of the students, but that the women and newspaper reporters present made him uncomfortable.[62]

In May 1917, an article appeared with the title "Death Hovers Over Mysterious 'Chris.'" The rhetoric of the article mimicked that of the October 1893 "Study in Real Life." Simultaneously reverential and condescending, the author claimed that some called

[61] Edward C. Halperin, "The Poor, The Black, and the Marginalized as the Source of Cadavers in United States Anatomical Education," *Clinical Anatomy* 20 (2007). http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/doi/10.1002/ca.20445/pdf [accessed February 24, 2011]; "Adventures with Body Snatchers," *Times* (8 April 1900).
[62] "The Jolly Medicos," *Richmond Dispatch* (20 December 1902).

Copyright

Baker "the most expert anatomist in the country…[even] with no education whatsoever," while also painting Baker as a member of the most superstitious race and a "wielder of black magic" who spoke to the dead. The article reiterates what was already known about Chris Baker—that he was feared and hated by members of his own race, that he lived in self-imposed isolation within the walls of the Egyptian building, and that he was both mysterious and intriguing.[63] Death was not quite ready for Baker at this point, however; he died two years later, on June 8, 1919. His death made the front page of the Monday June 9, 1919 edition of the *Richmond News Leader*, and he was buried at Evergreen Cemetery, very near the grounds of Oakwood Cemetery where he used to obtain cadavers for the college. It is unknown whether Baker was wanted in the all-black Evergreen, given the African-American community's aversion to his occupation, but despite his life-long place among the white doctors of MCV, burial in a black cemetery was his only option. The last line of the article read "It is expected a number of members of the medical profession will attend his funeral."[64]

It was not until after his death that the mysterious Chris Baker was better explained through the recollections of the former MCV students and doctors who knew him. While it is necessary to employ a healthy skepticism towards the stories told years later about a sensational subject and a well-known man, it is clear that the men who remembered Baker held him in the highest esteem. Dr. Greer Baughman recalled Baker's "initiation" into the Pi Mu medical fraternity, which involved "innumerable" toddies. Baker, an otherwise taciturn man, "launched into his unforgettable anatomy talk and later on gave a talk on the

[63] Name of paper unknown; article found in vertical files at Tompkins-McCaw library at the Medical College of Virginia.
[64] "'Chris' Baker is Dead; Funeral Tomorrow," *Richmond News Leader* (9 June 1919).

Copyright

technic [sic] of grave-robbing."[65] These doctors treated Baker with respect and humor and recognized his role as a "loyal, devoted, and faithful assistant, who breathed the very spirit of the old college."[66] Despite the warm memories that are told of Chris Baker, there was, at times, a sense of loneliness in his life, a burden that he alone carried. After his arrest in 1882, Baker told police that he was a "Jonah," a bringer of bad luck to the students who, had he not been involved with the snatch, would not have gotten caught.[67] James quotes an editorial that both paid tribute to Baker and touched upon the paradox of Baker's position: "Others got the glory of advancing science of medicine. Chris bore the stigmata."

Copyright

[65] Name of paper unknown; article found in vertical files at Tompkins-McCaw library at the Medical College of Virginia.
[66] James, 22.
[67] "Body-Snatchers Captured While in the Act of Robbing Graves at Oakwood," *State* (13 December 1882).

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Barksdale, George E. et al., "The Legend of Chris Baker." *Scarab* 3, no. 1 (March 31, 1954): 3-5.

James, G. Watson Jr., "Chris Baker—Faithful Servant of Medical Science in Virginia." *Virginia Record* (September 1957): 22-55.

The Messenger 41, no. 3 (July 1944).

Rawls, Benjamin W, "My Favorite Anecdote." *Scarab* 5, no. 2 (August 1956): 8, 20.

Richmond Daily Dispatch, 'Grand Indictments," December 17, 1882.

Richmond Dispatch, "The Boy Who Disobeyed His Mother," March 12, 1905.

Richmond Dispatch, "The Cases of the Medical Students," December 19, 1882.

Richmond Dispatch, "A Ghoul's Confession," December 15, 1882.

Richmond Dispatch, "The Jolly Medicos," December 20, 1902.

Richmond Dispatch, "A Study in Real Life," October 29, 1893.

Richmond News Leader, "'Chris' Baker is Dead; Funeral Tomorrow," June 9, 1919.

Richmond Planet, "Farewell, Soloman Marable!" July 11, 1896.

Richmond Planet, "Man and Barrel" August 1, 1896.

Richmond Times, "Adventures with Body Snatchers," April 8, 1900.

Richmond Times-Dispatch, "The Boy Who Disobeyed His Mother," March 12, 1905.

Robins, Charles R. "Chris Baker." *Bulletin* 37, no. 8 (April 15, 1940): 17-20.

R.V [?], "Death Hovering Over Mysterious 'Chris,'" May 7, 1917.
[From the vertical stacks at Tompkins McCaw Library at the Medical College of Virginia. Clipped from newspaper article, title of publication missing.]

Copyright

Skull & Bones, "Letter to the Editor." May 22, 1929.
[From the vertical stacks at Tompkins McCaw Library at the Medical College of Virginia; transcription of letter, information is incomplete.]

State, "The Richmond Ghouls," January 6, 1880.

State, "Body-Snatchers Captured While In The Act of Robbing Graves at Oakwood," December 13, 1882.

State, Editorial, December 14, 1882.

State, "Chris the Snatcher: The Dual Character of Pall-Bearer an Grave-Robber," December 14, 1882.

State, "Robbing the Grave," December 14, 1882.

State, "Letter to the Editor," December 15, 1882.

State, "The Grave-Robbery Cases," December 20, 1882.

State, "The Imprisoned Medical Students, Letter to the Editor," December 20, 1882.

Virginia Star, "The Grave Robbers," December 16, 1882.

Warner, John Hurley and James M. Edmonson. *Dissection: Photographs of a Rite of Passage in American Medicine, 1880-1930*. New York: Blast Books, 2009.

Secondary Sources

Breedin, James O. "Body Snatchers and Anatomy Professors: Medical Education in Nineteenth-Century Virginia." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 83, no. 3 (July 1975): 321-345. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/stable/4247966 [accessed February 24, 2011].

Copyright

Halperin, Edward C. "The Poor, The Black, and the Marginalized as the Source of Cadavers in United States Anatomical Education." *Clinical Anatomy* 20 (2007). http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/doi/10.1002/ca.20445/pdf [accessed February 24, 2011].

Humphrey, David C. "Dissection and Discrimination: The Social Origins of Cadavers in America,1760-1915." *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 49, no. 9 (September 1973): 819-817. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.proxy.library.vcu.edu/pmc/articles/PMC1807060/pdf/bullnyacadmed00187-0073.pdf [accessed February 24, 2011].

Lebsock, Suzanne, *A Murder In Virginia: Southern Justice on Trial.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003.

Moore, Wendy. *The Knife Man: Blood, Body Snatching, and the Birth of Modern Surgery*. New York: Broadway Books, 2005.

Nuland, Sherman B. "Grave Robbing," *American Scholar* 70, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 125-.

Sappol, Michael. *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

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

Images

Figures 1-3: *Special Collections and Archives, Tompkins-McCaw Library for the Health Sciences, Medical College of Virginia, Richmond.*

Figure 4: "Scene in the Dissecting Room," *Richmond Planet* (1 August 1896).

Copyright