

Anatomy, Grave-Robbing, and Spiritualism in Antebellum St. Louis

BY LUKE RITTER



With the professionalization of medicine and medical training in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came new forms of research and teaching, including human dissection. One occupation that emerged in response to a growing demand for cadavers was that of graverobbing. (Image: Library of Congress)

When Mrs. Malter went missing on the eleventh of September in 1849, her family suspected Dr. Joseph Nash McDowell, head of the Missouri Medical College. She was last seen at seven o'clock in the evening, walking her dog along Chouteau Avenue in south St. Louis. The mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Malter, a German immigrant married to a respected German American businessman, headlined the local newspapers. In the excitement surrounding her disappearance, one witness told reporters he thought he saw Mrs. Malter's handkerchief, "or some other article" of hers, near McDowell's medical college. The Missouri Medical College was then located at Eighth and Gratiot streets, just one block away from Mrs. Malter's last known location. According to one local newspaper, the rumors about the handkerchief and McDowell's implication in her disappearance "excited in the minds of many Germans a suspicion that she [had] been *burked*, seized, and taken for dissection." St. Louisans suspected Dr. McDowell and his students of robbing the city's graveyards for cadavers, and for good reason, but this accusation was murder. By Friday morning, September 14, hundreds of Germans in the city's south side were convinced someone had seen a whole "bundle (of clothing)" in front of the college. Mr. Malter demanded satisfaction, and at noon "two to four hundred persons collected in the vicinity of the College." Dr. McDowell

Dr. William Beaumont was professor of surgery when this photo of the medical school at St. Louis University was taken, and something of a competitor to McDowell. Beaumont had his own unconventional method of studying anatomy. Beaumont treated Alexis St. Martin for a severe wound to the abdomen in 1822, but didn't expect him to survive; St. Martin lived, but had a fistula in his stomach the rest of his life, through which Beaumont could study the process of digestion, earning him the reputation as the "Father of Gastric Physiology." (Image: St. Louis University Libraries Special Collections)



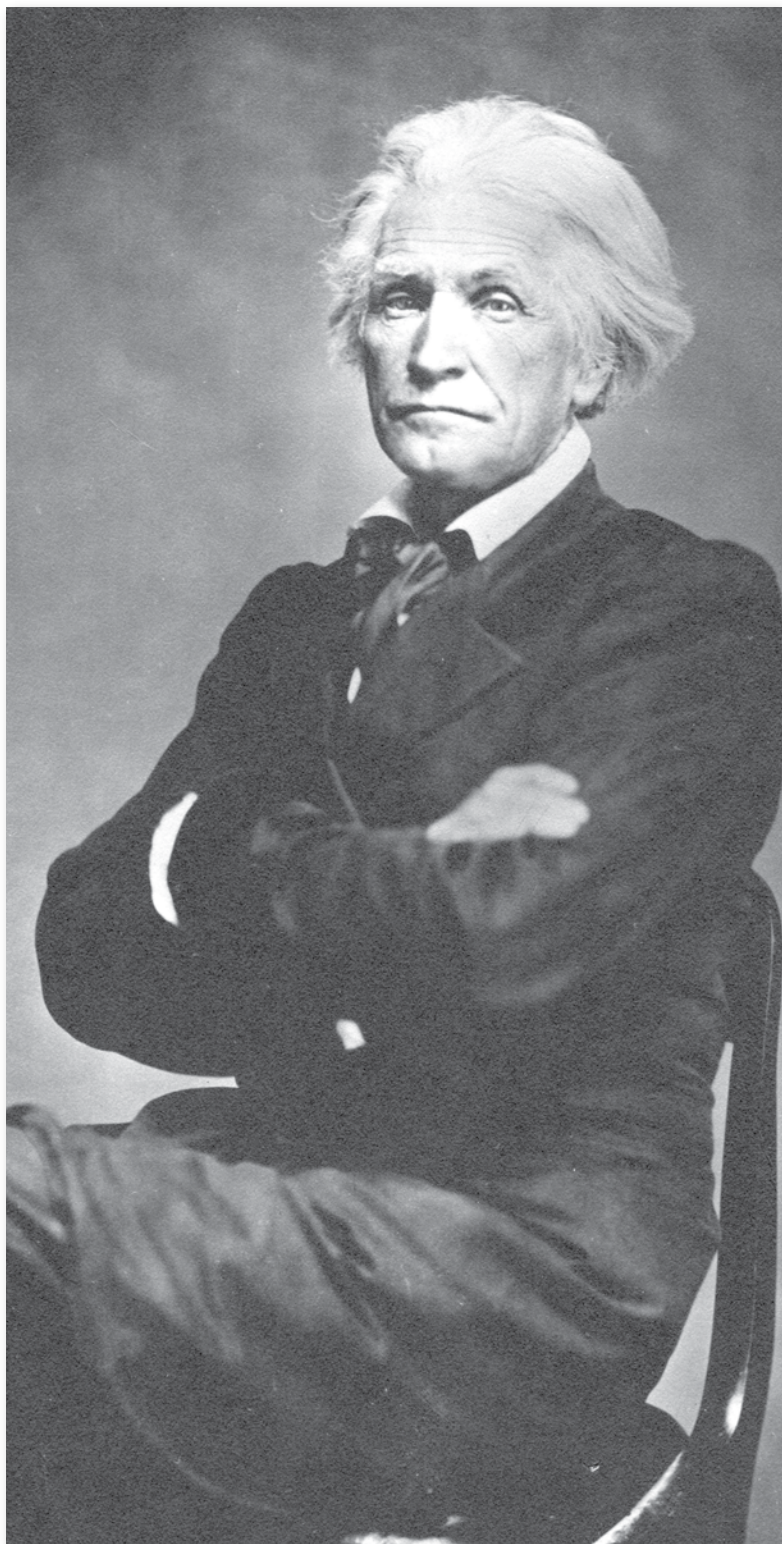
and his medical students prepared for battle as they heard the crowd's "howling and cursing" approach the school.¹

McDowell's colleagues and students later sketched anecdotes of McDowell's token "eccentricities" during the disturbance. The inflamed doctor vowed before his students that he would never permit diplomacy with any German. He told his colleague John B. Johnson that he intended to "blow up every Dutchman out there" who attempted to enter his college. He mounted three cannons in the upper room of the school and gathered "old flintlock muskets" from his private arsenal, which he had acquired in his home state of Kentucky in 1846, explained McDowell's student John Snyder, for a "hairbrained filibustering expedition to assist the Texans in maintaining their independence." The filibuster never came to pass, but McDowell kept three cannons and 1,400 muskets. The doctor and thirty armed students manned the bastion.

Once the club- and axe-wielding German mob came into view, McDowell struck a valiant pose, "looking just like the pictures of General [Andrew] Jackson," his favorite hero, and "stood valiantly by his guns with a fuse in one hand and some loco-foco matches in the other."² Before McDowell could light the fuse on his cannon, the police arrived and demanded the mob disperse on the condition that Mr. Malter could search the premises. The doctor "pretended to be furious" that the city's authorities had disrupted "such a splendid opportunity to wipe his enemies off the face of the earth." His students found this humorous because they knew "he had gone to the city hall the evening before to beg for this very protection."³ Fortunately for McDowell, the mob dispersed. Two months later Mrs. Malter was discovered in Alton, Missouri, with a "handsomer man." Those who found her thought she seemed mentally unstable.⁴

Colorful stories like this one pervaded the recollections of Dr. McDowell's acquaintances. They noted his alcoholism (one time he gave a speech on temperance while swigging from a flask of brandy), his obsession with Andrew Jackson, his paranoia of Jesuits and St. Louis University, and his abrasive bedside manner. At night, he exhumed dead bodies from the city's graveyards for dissection and nearly was caught red-handed, too. Though the doctor had not bashed Mrs. Malter in the head and taken her into his college for dissection, as it was rumored, he did narrowly avoid arrest that same year by hiding the stolen corpse of a young German girl just minutes before a posse raided the school.⁵

Despite his controversial antics, McDowell held a prestigious position in one of the preeminent medical colleges in the West for 20 years. In fact, his medical school was the first established west of the Mississippi River, in 1840, and it constituted the foundation of Washington University. He contributed in a major way to a generation of doctors that his oldest surviving student John Snyder warmly referred to in 1914 as the "McDowell Era." Dr. McDowell represented a new empirical paradigm in medical science based on anatomy, and his college epitomized the cutting edge of medical education in the West.⁶ But when he was not treating patients in the city



Joseph Nash McDowell (d. 1868) imagined "himself a second Jackson," wrote student John F. Snyder, a personal hero whom "he almost worshipped." He even bore a striking resemblance to the former president: "tall, erect and slender, with long, sharp face, gray eyes and sandy hair." (Image: Washington University School of Medicine)

hospital, teaching students about human anatomy in the lecture hall, resurrecting corpses at night, or irritating Germans, the doctor spent his private time studying ghosts and other preternatural mysteries. He promoted empirically driven anatomical science yet entertained an alternative spiritualist fascination with death, dissection, and the life beyond. In the mid-nineteenth century, the new anatomical science based on human dissection emerged alongside old folk practices and worldviews. Dr. McDowell exploited the situation and flourished as an anatomist, healer, resurrectionist, and spiritualist.⁷

Once the generation of doctors that knew McDowell passed, his memory survived in local ghost folklore. During the Civil War, McDowell served as the Surgeon General for the Confederate Army of the West. In his absence, the Union army remodeled his college into a prison for Confederate prisoners-of-war.⁸ Reports that Union soldiers cleared three carts of animal and human bones from the basement of the school during the prison renovation led the superstitious to believe that disturbed spirits of dissected bodies haunted McDowell's college. One man reported in 1880 that he "had heard of a phantom that haunted McDowell's old college." He investigated this particular instance and found two boys meddling nearby with white sheets and "other concomitants of fictitious phenomena of this character." Nevertheless, it remained customary for St. Louisans to cross themselves when they walked past the college. While the Missouri Medical College continued at a different location, McDowell's old school remained vacant until the Terminal Railroad Association leveled it to make way for tracks in 1882.⁹

Though largely forgotten today, the eccentric doctor was "one of the most conspicuous and best known men in St. Louis."¹⁰ He came from a famous family of doctors in Kentucky. His uncle Ephraim McDowell performed the first ovariectomy in the United States on December 13, 1809. Joseph McDowell received his MD under the erudite Dr. Daniel Drake from Transylvania University, Kentucky, and married Drake's daughter.¹¹

McDowell gained wide acclaim in an entrepreneurial network of young doctors whose startup medical programs differed from European state-run schools because they were more tightly organized around the personalities of individual professors.¹² His professional reputation as an esteemed faculty member at medical departments in Kentucky, Philadelphia, and Ohio preceded him when he arrived in St. Louis in 1839.¹³ Despite an immediate falling-out with the city's leading doctor, William Beaumont, and the Medical Society of Missouri, he received enough financial support to found Missouri's first medical school in 1840. After a seven-year stay at Kemper College, the doctor began construction on the Missouri Medical College in 1847 at Eighth and Gratiot streets.¹⁴

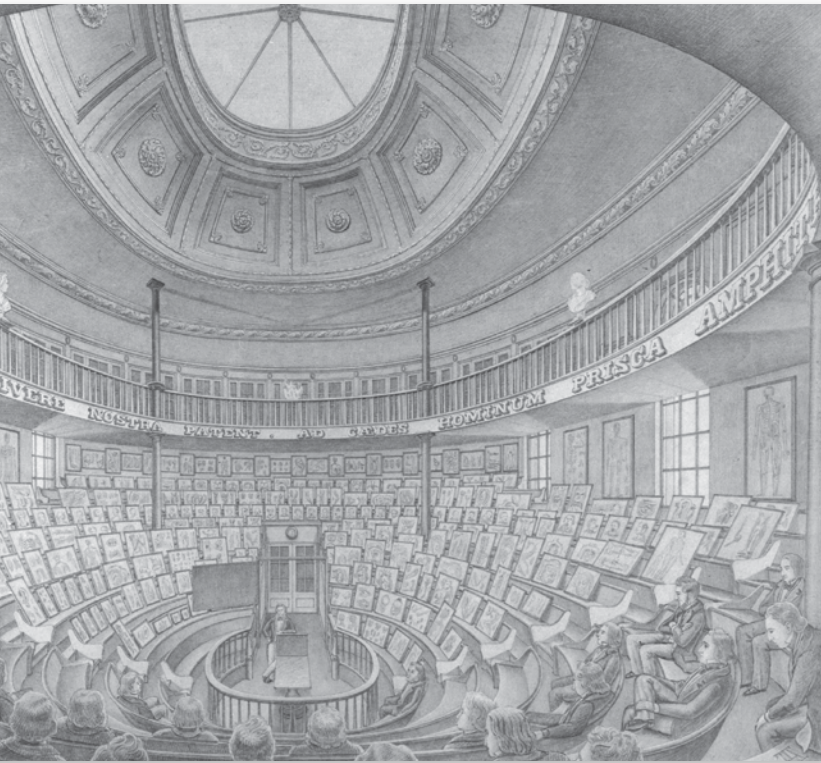
McDowell's college epitomized the emergent professionalization of medical education. The *Sunday Morning Republican* of St. Louis pronounced Missouri Medical College "the pride of our city." Medical schools like McDowell's, the article continued, "are living examples of the growth and progressive spirit of the West,

and of our city." President Zachary Taylor appointed McDowell head physician and surgeon of the city's largest hospital in 1849.¹⁵ McDowell bragged six years later, "Our City Hospital is finished and we have such advantages as place us in the position to make a *jump* over Hospitals, the best in the great valley." McDowell's students attributed the doctor's "Strenuous cultivation of our Science" to the Missouri Medical College's status as "the leading school of the West."¹⁶

McDowell successfully carved a class of new medical professionals out of an old folk culture that deferred to the experience of local healers.¹⁷ This was no easy task because "the American public was very skeptical of doctors," explained one historian, and many consulted "sectarian practitioners rather than physicians for their medical needs." The skills and techniques taught in American medical schools, which numbered 26 in 1840, "were hopelessly inadequate."¹⁸ Insufficient medical knowledge and immature professional standards caused many Americans to fear university-trained surgeons, evidenced by the adage, "doctors are as likely to kill you

Photograph of McDowell's Missouri Medical College, completed in 1849. The impressive octagonal, thick-walled, three-story building included the largest anatomical amphitheater and museum in the Mississippi Valley, a medical library, and several dissecting rooms. Currently, the Purina complex stands at the prior location of McDowell's college at Eighth and Gratiot streets. (Image: Washington University School of Medicine)





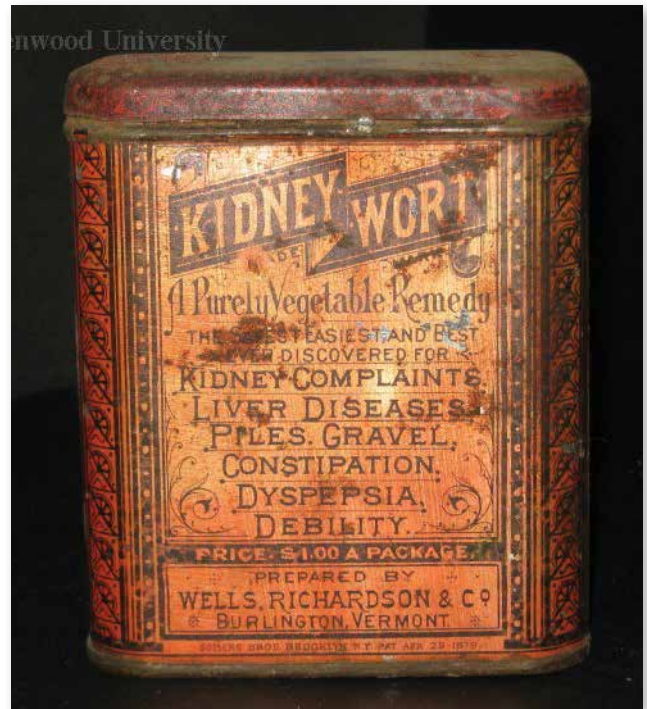
A gallery like this one was standard at medical schools for demonstrations. (Image: Washington University School of Medicine)

as cure you.” Through much of the nineteenth century, Americans preferred local practitioners with little to no medical education. In 1845, one St. Louis journal counted 146 practitioners when the city’s population was around 40,000, of which “probably ninety or one hundred hold diplomas.” That left a third who had little or no formal medical training. One doctor in St. Louis thought “there are too many physicians.” The “old men,” thought this university-trained doctor, were “extremely ignorant,” though, they had “the confidence of families, and cannot be ousted by younger ones.”¹⁹

Dr. McDowell thought the old men lowered the overall reputation of the medical profession and made it harder for him to legitimate his cause. He told one story about an “old doctor” who mixed tobacco spit into his homemade pills. When McDowell asked him about it, the old doctor replied: “Oh, I am just making some pills for a lady across the street, and as there isn’t any water handy, I just do this way.” While traveling in Missouri in 1854, Drake, McDowell’s first-born son and also a doctor, could only find one town along the entire Missouri River “which is not rammed full of pill venders.” The relative quackery of pill vendors represented outdated medicine for McDowell, his son, and other doctors attempting to distinguish themselves as professionals. These new professionalized

doctors wanted medicine based on human dissection to replace pills made from spittle.²⁰

McDowell differentiated his lot from “those ‘cure-all’ fellows” on the premise that anatomical medicine represented *true* science. In this way, he was a progressive. Several studies on antebellum medicine in America correctly point out that anatomy played a crucial role in the formation of modern science. One historian connects the rise of anatomy to a transformation of medical identity from “trade” to “craft,” art to science.²¹ Before anatomical medicine became standard practice after the Civil War, many physicians practiced “therapeutics,” which primarily regulated bodily secretions to deliver a person from a state of disequilibrium, or illness, to equilibrium, health. Physicians in the early nineteenth century tended to focus



Patent medicines like this one were widely available in the nineteenth century. Despite efforts to professionalize medicine, people continued to take “cure-alls” with herbal foundations, dubious ingredients, or alcohol and addictive drugs. This kidneywort, for example, was used for liver ailments. Wells, Richardson, and Company in Burlington, Vermont, made a whole line of such products before passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906. (Image: Lindenwood University Wetterau Collection)

on drugs that “worked,” in that they produced immediate and visible “alterative” effects. For example, during the cholera epidemic of 1849, doctors prescribed drugs that induced constipation to regulate the symptomatic diarrhea and vomiting of patients infected with cholera. Anatomical medicine promised more precise diagnoses and corrective surgeries; but prescriptions based on anatomical discoveries did not offer immediate remedies, and surgeries often resulted in death. Doctors and laymen alike



Patent medicines like Athlophoros were widely marketed without a shred of scientific evidence that they worked. Some patent medicines were outright harmful. Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup, first on the market in 1849, was a morphine-based syrup to quiet infants. As medicine became more professional, the medical community increasingly decried products like Mrs. Winslow's. The American Medical Association listed it among its "baby killers" in 1911; incredibly, it was still available in England until 1930. (Images: opiads.com; Lindenwood University Wetterau Collection)



noticed the inconsistencies between anatomical science in institutional settings and clinical practice in homes.²²

McDowell straddled the proverbial fence separating anatomical and therapeutic science and institutional and folk medicine. In this sense, he was both artist and scientist. During the cholera epidemic of 1849, which claimed the lives of 4,557 St. Louis residents in a single year, McDowell promised that if anyone applied his therapeutically-based cholera prescription, the disease was "sure to be subdued." Unfortunately, he was wrong because therapeutic methods seeking equilibrium emphasized dehydration instead of the real antidote to cholera: water. McDowell's cholera prescription included one chief ingredient, opium, and measurements of various spices such as "African pepper," a relative of black pepper. His prescription came with precise instructions about what to do if the opium-pepper pills proved ineffective: "If vomiting continues, at intervals blister the stomach and back... The discharges from the bowels must be checked, and stopped at once, to do this give injections [of sugar and laudanum]... To *quench the thirst* give a tea spoon full of powdered ice occasionally." Opium and laudanum, a preparation made of alcohol, herbs, and powdered opium, dehydrated patients. Desperate for water, cholera victims on McDowell's treatment were only allowed "a tea spoon full of powdered ice." McDowell's therapeutic prescription was actually quite popular despite its seemingly apparent ineffectiveness. As St. Louisan Flora Caldwell remarked, Dr. McDowell "was one of the most successful Physicians during the time of the Cholera."²³

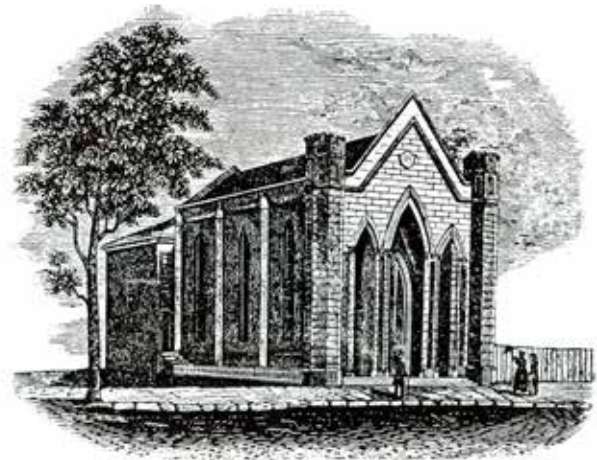
McDowell was frequently the last stranger called to the



The three Fox sisters—Leah (1814-1890), Margaret (1833-1893), and Kate (1837-1892)—were part of the rise of spiritualism in the mid-late nineteenth century, holding that the spirits of the dead could be contacted. Their séances were famous starting in 1850. Margaret and Kate revealed the methods of their hoax in 1888 when a reporter offered them \$1,500 to do so; Margaret recanted her confession a year later, but both died in poverty. (Image: Emma Hardinge Britten, *Nineteenth Century Miracles: Spirits and Their Work in Every Country of the Earth*, 1884)

bedside of the dying. He administered the penultimate injections, pills, and second-degree burn treatments before his patients passed from life to death. Then, he summoned the dead to his dissecting room. Dr. McDowell possessed a new relationship with the dead by which corpses transformed into anatomical specimens in his laboratory and provided him with empirical knowledge of the human body. What was even more uncommon than his professionalized role as dissector was the illicit way he obtained fresh cadavers: McDowell required his students to dig up dead bodies from the city graveyards under the cover of night and to perform at least one human dissection before their graduation. It was all part of their education.²⁴

McDowell and his students resurrected corpses at a time when human dissection was illegal. Though medical education in nineteenth-century America progressed at relatively the same rate as in Europe, Americans were especially slow to pass laws that permitted the dissection of deceased persons other than executed criminals. Frequent grave-robbing in Britain resulted in the Warburton Anatomy Act of 1832, which legalized the state-managed sale of unclaimed dead bodies — usually paupers and vagrants — to medical schools. In France, claimants to the body of any patient who died in a state hospital had only 24 hours before medical schools could collect the deceased from the state. In the United States, only five states passed anatomy laws that allowed the dissection of non-felons before the Civil War, three of which were summarily repealed. Only the Massachusetts anatomy law of 1831 and New York “Bone Bill” of 1854 survived. Desperately short on anatomical specimens, doctors resorted to their own illegal devices. Amazingly, before New York passed the “Bone Bill” in 1854, reports estimated that grave-robbers snatched six to seven hundred bodies from New York City’s graveyards annually. This



The first Medical School of Saint Louis University, located on Washington at Tenth Street, 1842.

The medical school at St. Louis University at Washington and 9th streets, pictured here from 1842, was the site of an anatomy riot in 1844, when people saw discarded remains behind the school. (Image: *St. Louis University Libraries Special Collections*)

was the context in which Dr. McDowell’s students began their own subterranean operations in St. Louis.²⁵

Body-snatching escapades pitted McDowell and his students against the law and the will of the community. If McDowell or his students had been caught with a stolen corpse, they could have been prosecuted with a \$500 fine, at the time an exorbitant fee, and up to twelve months in prison.²⁶ Yet the higher the risk medical students took to obtain cadavers, the tighter their fraternal bond grew. Because of the risk involved in their late-night visits to the graveyard, the medical brotherhood rarely mentioned their



Human dissections like these, both at the Missouri Medical College in 1887 and 1890, became standard in medical schools in the second half of the nineteenth century. McDowell's thinking on the necessity of dissection was somewhat mainstream in Europe at the time, but less so in the United States—and St. Louis. (Images: Washington University School of Medicine)

dissecting practices outside their own circles, and when they did, it was often in code. They referred to themselves as “brothers” or “old boys,” playfully calling their leader “old Mac.” McDowell’s son Drake informed a classmate that the “old man” had plenty of “surgical business” in the spring of 1853, and “my abilities as a Getter have been largely called upon.” Drake’s “abilities as a Getter” was code for snatching dead bodies. The next semester he wrote his “Old Friend” again, reporting that he was “busily engaged” that winter, and his colleagues had “no less than nine subjects on the tables with several calls for *more beef*.” Another student, Thomas Curtis, recalled visiting a city cemetery to exhume the body of a “first-rate subject.” *Getting* meant body-snatching, and *subjects* or *beef* referred to cadavers.²⁷

Fraternal pranks accompanied by alcoholic jollity further strengthened the bond between these “old boys.” Dr. McDowell encouraged his students to imbibe. One Fourth of July, students hailed the professor as he delivered a two-hour speech on the evils of alcohol while taking swigs from a flask of brandy. Drake McDowell, like his father, became an alcoholic. While he served as the Demonstrator of Anatomy, his classmate John Snyder urged him to cease drinking and dissecting with the students. Drake tried to heed Snyder’s advice so he could do “justice in the dissecting rooms in the fall” of 1853.²⁸ Morbid pranks followed late-night drinking bouts. One night McDowell and his students carried “a corpse they had just resurrected” in a covered wagon. A student discharged his gun. The doctor “whirled around, and saw the corpse sitting up pointing a revolver at him.” Spooked, “McDowell took to his heels,” while the pranksters cackled.²⁹

Doctors bemoaned the anti-dissection sentiment that drove them underground. “We must study anatomy. We must dissect,” argued the chair of surgery at McDowell’s

college, Dr. John T. Hodgen; “Let us have the privilege of dissecting without the curse of incarceration hanging over us.” He offered a solution. People who died in alms houses, hospitals, and jails could “be taken to the dissecting rooms and used for the benefit of the public.” For Hodgen, this measure, already widespread in Europe, was not immoral because deceased felons and vagrants often black and Irish were “a public charge.”³⁰ Offering their bodies for the progress of scientific knowledge would be recompense. Besides, Hodgen argued coldly, the indigent “have no friends to grieve on the thought that they have been dissected.” As long as dissection remained illegal, however, medical schools seeking to develop anatomical medicine had to exploit a limited supply of fresh corpses.³¹

The public in St. Louis denounced these exclusive medical fraternities, who served their colleges so loyally yet violated the sensibilities of the local community. While students at any college identified themselves as privileged beneficiaries within one of several polarized professional enclaves, the public often conflated all medical schools and their body-snatching minions into one big problem. One of the ways the public retaliated, as the 1849 disturbance at McDowell’s college illustrates, was rioting. Between American Independence and the Civil War, about twenty anti-dissection mobs rioted against medical colleges in towns across the United States. One of the larger anatomy riots occurred in St. Louis on February 25, 1844, when passersby spotted the discarded remains of several dissected cadavers in an uncovered pit behind St. Louis University. Rioters targeted both of the city’s medical colleges, but they only destroyed St. Louis University before the militia intervened.³²

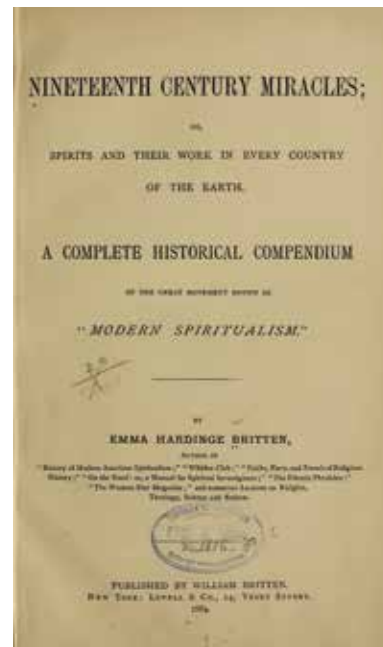
A mob stormed into McDowell’s college five years later in 1849, before Mrs. Malter went missing, because a German family discovered that the grave of their deceased

daughter was empty. They suspected Dr. McDowell and rightly so. In his own account, McDowell recalled how he narrowly avoided arrest by following the instructions of a glowing apparition of his dead mother. After stashing the corpse of this German girl in the loft of the college, he saw his mother standing near the table from which he had just taken the corpse. Following her instructions, he “laid like marble” on the dissecting table. The armed German posse entered the dissecting room and inspected each corpse: “They uncovered one body,” recounted McDowell, “it was that of a man, the next, a man; then they came to two women with black hair, the girl they were looking for had flaxen hair.” When they saw McDowell lying there, one man assumed he was just another corpse and announced to the others: “Here is a fellow who died in his boots; I guess he is a fresh one.” Against all odds, the doctor slipped past the guards. The next day, he “dissected the body, buried the fragments and had no further trouble.”³³

As this story illustrates, McDowell’s relationship with the dead was strange not only because it exceeded the bounds of the law and violated the will of the community but also because his morbid attachment to human anatomy exceeded the demands of science. McDowell believed that he possessed a special charisma that enabled him to communicate with ghosts. McDowell’s obsession with the supernatural was a unique variation of a popular American phenomenon called spiritualism, a belief in the power of mediums to communicate with spirits. The movement gained momentum in 1848, when New Yorkers Kate and Maggie Fox attracted national attention for their uncanny ability to channel dead spirits. When the English scientist Michael Faraday produced electromagnetic induction in the 1830s by passing an electric current over a conductor in a magnetic field, people imagined that electromagnetism composed the ultimate life-giving energy. Spiritualists theorized that apparitions, revelations, and visions transmitted from eternity to earth through electrical and magnetic fields. Dr. McDowell experimented with the mysterious forces of electricity and magnetism.³⁴

Many shared McDowell’s fascination with the elusive forces of electromagnetism. At a time when the word *scientist* had just become a common term for a new class of medical professionals who paired the noble pursuit of “science” with body-snatching, dissection, and experimental surgery, anatomical medicine seemed more mysterious and powerful than empirical and exact. Spiritualism paralleled the new science as an alternative theory. For much of the nineteenth century, the public remained impervious to the “professional” doctors who claimed that they, instead of mediums or mesmerists, were the true divines.³⁵ Spiritualism crossed classes, attracting even the most learned men and women. McDowell himself hosted a lecture series on spiritualism, and he regularly attended lectures of touring spiritualists. When the Fox sisters visited St. Louis in 1852, McDowell applauded their demonstrations.³⁶

The same year the Fox sisters came to St. Louis, one esteemed gathering, which included the daughter of Senator Thomas Hart Benton, saw an apparition of a



Emma Hardinge Britten (1823-1899) first came to America from London to attend séances and write a book about the susceptibility of Americans to such ideas. However, a series of mystical experiences at these séances convinced her otherwise, and she became an active part of the spiritualist movement. She is perhaps best known for her 1884 book, *Nineteenth Century Miracles: Spirits and Their Work in Every Country of the Earth*, pictured here.

young woman named Helen Bennett, who was then in Egypt. When they rose to speak to the apparition of the girl, “it vanished.” They immediately sought a medium to interpret the vision, who forecasted bad news: “The medium hand was guided without her will, and this was the reply: ‘Helen Bennett was murdered on the desert by the Arabs on the 8th of May.’” The group panicked and called Dr. McDowell to investigate the incident further. Apparently, he had developed a reputation for knowing something about ghosts. McDowell’s dual roles — ghost hunter and physician — blurred into one at this peculiar bedside call. One woman who witnessed the apparition justified appealing to the doctor’s judgment on the grounds that he was “a man acknowledged to be (though eccentric) one of the learned men of the day.” McDowell investigated the matter until he grew weary and offered his verdict to the group: “this is not magnetism, nor electricity, but a spiritual revelation.”³⁷

McDowell was so convinced of the liveliness of the dead that he prepared for the repose of his soul and the souls of his family for the afterlife. Though many of McDowell’s students did not agree entirely with the doctor’s unusual views, they shared an affinity with the spiritualist rituals to which McDowell introduced them. New recruit Charles Stevens happened to arrive in St. Louis in 1850 on the same night McDowell held a memorable funeral service for his son — perhaps a victim of the cholera epidemic. At midnight, all the medical students formed a candle-

lit procession outside the college. The faculty carried a copper vase filled with alcohol and the remains of his small child. Stevens noted the eerie, almost liturgical uniformity of motion as the students silently followed the doctor to the rear of the college, where he resided. The doctor had prepared a vault in which his colleagues placed the copper vase for safe keeping.³⁸

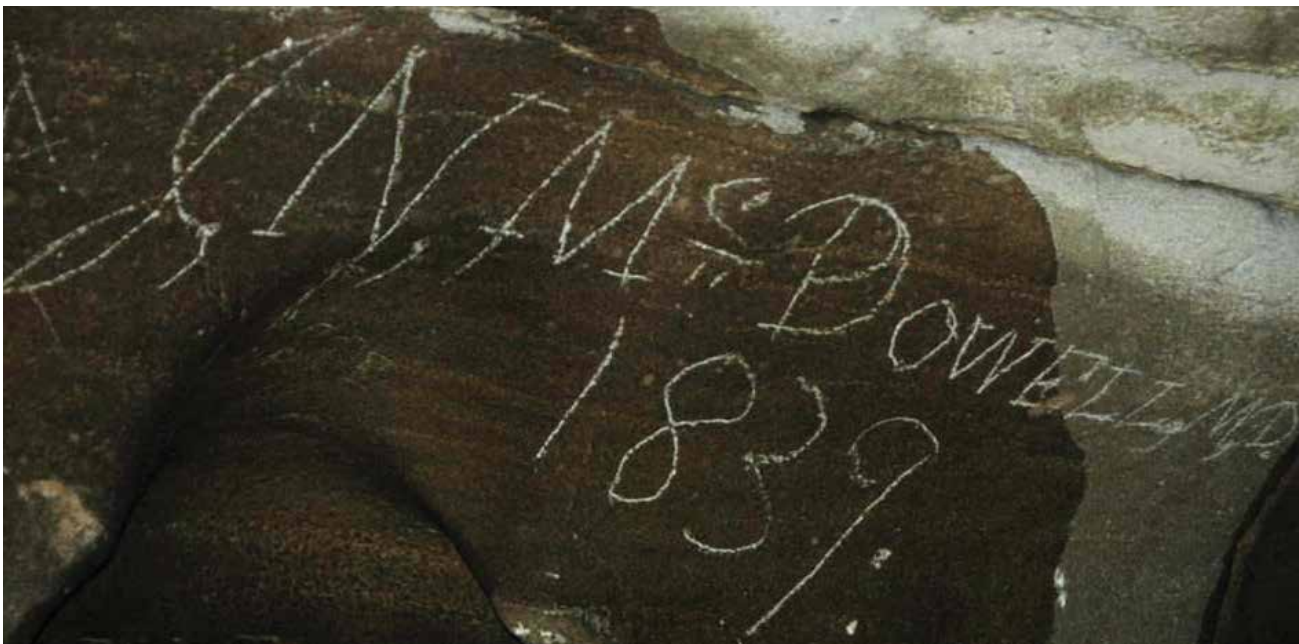
Dr. McDowell believed that normal burial customs stifled the dynamism of one's soul after death. That is why he interred his first wife atop a Cahokian Indian mound on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River. With the aid of a telescope, he often spied her tomb from the tower of his college.³⁹ When his daughter died, McDowell purchased a cave in Mark Twain's home town Hannibal, Missouri, to store the remains. He kept the body of his fourteen-year-old daughter suspended from the ceiling of the cave in an alcohol-filled copper cylinder. When he discovered in 1849 that some locals had been daring each other to break into the cave, open the cylinder, and yank his daughter's head into view, he transported her remains to the family vault behind the college. He believed an above-ground sepulcher, alcohol, and copper encasing reposed his family members in a netherworld between earth and heaven. McDowell thought these unorthodox burial rituals could open otherworldly communication with his deceased daughter, son, and wife.⁴⁰

McDowell suspended his dead daughter from the ceiling of a cave because he theorized that natural deposits of saltpeter, a substance commonly used in gun powder,

could preserve corpses. Several years earlier, spelunkers had discovered a partially mummified Indian in Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, which contained saltpeter.⁴¹ Apparently, this discovery made an impression on the doctor. He once asked his son Drake, and his student Charles Stevens, to bury his remains in Mammoth Cave. McDowell even visited the cave in 1839 before he settled in St. Louis. One can still view McDowell's signature, scratched into a large rock called "Giant's Coffin." The odd mausoleums, the alcohol, copper, and saltpeter — these burial methods were the bizarre culmination of the doctor's years of experience with the dead on dissecting tables. For McDowell, "rest-in-peace" had lost its traditional sacred meaning because dead bodies became scientific objects in his laboratory.⁴²

Without centralized medical standards in the mid-nineteenth century, American popular culture encompassed the professional development of modern medical education and the progress of anatomical science. In this context, McDowell carved a niche for the medical profession in St. Louis by incorporating therapeutic and anatomical medicine, old and new worldviews. Instead of attempting to channel popular fear of death and dissection into respect for professional anatomy and medicine, McDowell towed a middle course that enabled him to thrive as an anatomist, healer, resurrectionist, and spiritualist.

Dr. Joseph Nash McDowell's defacement of Giant's Coffin in Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, dated 1839. (Image: James St. John)



NOTES

- ¹ “Mysterious Disappearance,” *The Republican*, September 14, 1849 (St. Louis); Dr. John B. Johnson, “The Old Guard,” *One Hundred Years of medicine and surgery in Missouri: historical and biographical review of the careers of the physicians and surgeons of the state of Missouri, and sketches of some of its notable medical institutions*, edited by Max A. Goldstein (St. Louis: St. Louis Star, 1900), 30.
- ² The “locofoco matches” McDowell waved in the air as the German mob came into view invoked the name of a radical populist movement during Jackson’s presidential campaign known as locofocoism, or the Equal Rights Party. The doctor saw himself as a populist Southern Democrat, a man of the people. For more on the politics of Andrew Jackson and the Equal Rights Party, see Harry Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York, 1990).
- ³ Dr. John F. Snyder, “Sketch of the Life of Dr. Joseph Nash McDowell,” 1894, Snyder Collection, Missouri Historical Society (MHS); J.B. Johnson, *One Hundred Years of medicine and surgery in Missouri*, 30.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*; “Mrs. Malter Found,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 23, 1849 (Philadelphia).
- ⁵ For more anecdotes of McDowell, see Goldstein, ed., *One Hundred Years of medicine and surgery in Missouri*, 50. Dr. McDowell was so paranoid of the Jesuits that he often wore a brass breastplate under his shirt, carried a long bowie knife under his coat, and packed two single-barrel derringer pistols on his belt for protection. Account from Snyder, “Sketch of the Life of Dr. Joseph Nash McDowell.” America had a long history of anti-Catholic vitriol. McDowell’s anti-Catholic sentiment was influenced by broader anti-foreign political rhetoric and anti-Jesuit conspiratorial literature. For example, see Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (Cincinnati: Truman & Smith, 1835); Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery*, with an introduction by Ray Allen Billington (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1962 [1836]); and Heinrich Boernstein, *The Mysteries of St. Louis, or, The Jesuits on the Prairie de Noyers: a western tale in four parts, complete in one volume* (St. Louis: Anzeiger des Westens, 1852). Also see Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1938) and Dale T. Knobel, “America for the Americans”: *The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996). So widely known was Dr. McDowell’s unconventional bedside manner that even the famous American wit Samuel Clemens, better known by his pseudonym “Mark Twain,” wrote an account of McDowell in his *Autobiography*. Clemens knew Dr. McDowell by reputation, but he also had a special acquaintance with the doctor, since his mother’s half brother, James Andrew Hays (Jim) Lampton, was one of McDowell’s students, sometime in the early 1850s, while Jim Lampton studied medicine at the Missouri Medical College. See Patrick Ober, *Mark Twain and Medicine: “Any Mummery Will Cure”* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).
- ⁶ Dr. J.F. Snyder, Virginia, IL, to Miss Ida M. Drumm (Stella M. Drum), St. Louis, MO, November 14, 1914, Dr. John F. Snyder Collection, MHS. See Estelle Brodman, “The Great Eccentric,” *Washington University Magazine* 50 (December, 1980): 5-11.
- ⁷ For more on the history of medicine in antebellum America, see Bonner, *Becoming a Physician*; Russell Charles Maulitz, *Morbid Appearances: The Anatomy of Pathology in the early Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); William G. Rothstein, *American Medical Schools and the Practice of Medicine: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); William G. Rothstein, *American Physicians in the Nineteenth Century: From Sects to Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); and Richard H. Shyrock, *Medicine and Society in America, 1660-1860* (New York: New York University Press, 1960).
- ⁸ *The Daily Picayune* of New Orleans, Louisiana, listed McDowell as the Surgeon General of the Confederate Army as early as November 5, 1861.
- ⁹ “A Spoiled Specter: The McDowell College Phenomenon Gives up the Ghost — A Hoax that Died Early,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, March 1, 1880. The *St. Louis Republic* reported in 1897 that “the old building at Eighth and Gratiot furnished the neighborhood with ghost stories for 20 years after.” “M’Dowell’s College Rises like a Ghost,” *St. Louis Republic*, October 17, 1897. For a family account of the haunting at McDowell’s vacant medical college, see Troy Taylor, *Haunted St. Louis: History and Haunting along the Mississippi* (Alton, Illinois: Whitechapel Productions Press, 2002). Also see John Rodabough, “The Eccentric Genius,” *Frenchtown* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1980), 63-75.
- ¹⁰ Snyder, “Sketch of the Life of Dr. Joseph Nash McDowell.” For biographies of McDowell, see Brodman, “The Great Eccentric,” *Washington University Magazine*; Dr. Harold Bulger, “Early Years of the Missouri Medical College,” *Medical Alumni Quarterly* 2:4 (July 1939), 193-204; Marjorie E. Fox Grisham, “Joseph Nash McDowell and the Medical Department of Kemper College, 1840-1845,” *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* 12 (1955-1956), 358-371; Dr. Robert E. Schlueter, “Joseph Nash McDowell (1805-1868),” *Medical Alumni Quarterly* (1937), 4-14; and James Walter Wilson, “Joseph Nash McDowell, M.D.,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 68 (Frankfort, Kentucky: 1970), 341-369.
- ¹¹ Joseph McDowell received his MD degree from Transylvania University, Kentucky, on March 16, 1827. His dissertation was on the human heart. For biographies of Joseph Nash McDowell’s uncle, Dr. Ephraim McDowell, see August Schachner, *Ephraim*

- McDowell: "Father of ovariectomy" and founder of abdominal surgery, with an appendix on Jane Todd Crawford (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott company, 1921) and George Gellhorn, *Ephraim McDowell: the father of abdominal surgery* (St. Louis: Interstate Medical Journal, 1910). For more on Daniel Drake's coterie, see Otto Jüttner, *Daniel Drake and His Followers: Historical and Biographical Sketches* (Cincinnati: Harvey Publishing Company, 1909).
- ¹² Thomas Neville Bonner concludes, *Becoming a Physician: Medical Education in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, 1750-1945* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 7-8.
- ¹³ After working briefly at Transylvania University, McDowell became professor of anatomy at the newly founded Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia in 1827. He moved to Cincinnati in 1831 to work with Daniel Drake as an associate at the medical department of the University of Miami, which soon collapsed. He then helped found, alongside Daniel Drake and another well-known doctor, Samuel D. Gross, the famous though short-lived medical department of Cincinnati College. Samuel D. Gross, *Autobiography*, 70.
- ¹⁴ For more on the dispute between Beaumont and McDowell that led to his expulsion from the Medical Society of Missouri, see Cynthia De Haven Pitcock, "Doctors in Controversy: An Ethical Dispute Between Joseph Nash McDowell and William Beaumont," *Missouri Historical Review* 60 (1965-1966), 336-349.
- ¹⁵ Dr. George Johnson replaced McDowell as Chief Surgeon of the Marine Hospital in 1853. *Missouri Courier*, September 22, 1853 (Hannibal, Missouri).
- ¹⁶ "Yes Medical Colleges," *Sunday Morning Republican*, October 30, 1853. Joseph N. McDowell, St. Louis, to Dr. Snyder, November 17, 1855, Snyder Collection, MHS. "Minutes of meeting of students of the Medical Department of the State University of Missouri," 1853, Snyder Collection, MHS. For more on the development of American medical schools, see William G. Rothstein, *American Medical Schools and the Practice of Medicine: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- ¹⁷ For more on the convergence of local healing practices and institutional medicine, see Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America's Hospital System* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Sharon R. Kaufman, *The Healer's Tale: Transforming Medicine and Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993); and *Healing and History: Essays for George Rosen*, Edited by Charles E. Rosenberg (New York: Neale Watson Academic Publications, Inc., 1979).
- ¹⁸ Kenneth M. Ludmerer, *Learning to Heal: The Development of American Medical Education* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 10-11, 19.
- ¹⁹ John Thomas Scharf, *History of Saint Louis City and County*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts & Co., 1883), 1541. Dr. Frederick Graff to Charles Graff, June 29, 1838, St. Louis History Papers, MHS.
- ²⁰ Johnson, "The Old Guard," *One Hundred Years of medicine and surgery in Missouri*, 31. Drake McDowell, Lexington, to John (Snyder), April 7, 1854, Snyder Collection, MHS.
- ²¹ Johnson, "The Old Guard," *One Hundred Years of medicine and surgery in Missouri*, 33. For more on the anatomical revolution in mid-nineteenth-century medicine, see Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- ²² See Charles E. Rosenberg, "The Therapeutic Revolution: Medicine, Meaning, and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America," *The Therapeutic Revolution: Essays in the Social History of American Medicine*, edited by Morris J. Vogel and Charles E. Rosenberg (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 7-9, 20-21; John Harley Warner, *The Therapeutic Perspective: Medical Practice, Knowledge, and Identity in America, 1820-1885* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); and Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- ²³ "Dr. McDowell's prescription for cholera," 1849(?), George R. Genl. Smith Papers, MHS. At least McDowell's patients fared better than cholera patients in Austria, Vienna, who were instructed to ingest "3 grains of powdered charcoal." Duc de Raguse, September 27, 1849, Medical Envelope, MHS. Flora (Caldwell) to Mrs. Mayer, November 16, 1849, Mayer Collection, MHS. For more on the cholera epidemic of 1849, see Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866*, 101-174.
- ²⁴ The Snyder Collection in the Missouri Historical Archives contains two lecture cards and one dissecting ticket signed by Dr. Joseph Nash McDowell sometime between 1849 and 1853. The student who received this dissecting ticket, Dr. John F. Snyder, needed it to meet the graduation requirements of the Missouri Medical College. A dissecting ticket cost around \$10, the equivalent to \$200 in 2012 dollars.
- ²⁵ For more on the comparisons between American and European medical education, see Bonner, *Becoming a Physician*; John Harley Warner, *Against the Spirit of the System: The French Impulse in Nineteenth-Century American Medicine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Ludmerer, *Learning to Heal*, 29-33. For more on anatomy acts, see Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Gary Laderman, *Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883*, 84; Sappol, *A Traffic of Bodies*, 106, 123; David C. Humphrey, "Dissection and Discrimination: The Social Origins of Cadavers in America, 1760-1915," *Journal of Urban Health* 49:9 (September, 1973): 819-827; and Steven Robert Wilf, "Anatomy and Punishment in Late Eighteenth-Century New York," *Journal of Social History* 22:3 (Spring, 1989): 507-530.
- ²⁶ *The Revised Statutes of Missouri*, Vol. 1 (1850), Section

- 78:307. In Cincinnati, the fine reached one thousand dollars.
- ²⁷ Drake McDowell, St. Louis, to John Snyder, April 28, 1853, Snyder Collection, MHS. Drake McDowell, St. Louis, to John Snyder, December 14, 1853, Snyder Collection, MHS. For more on the coded language of dissecting practices, see Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 74-97.
- ²⁸ Goldstein, ed., *One Hundred Years of medicine and surgery in Missouri*, 50. Drake McDowell, St. Louis, to John Snyder, April 28, 1853, Snyder Collection, MHS.
- ²⁹ Grisham, "Joseph Nash McDowell and the Medical Department of Kemper College, 1840-1845," 368.
- ³⁰ Body-snatchers targeted black and Irish paupers and vagrants because they were less likely to have family and friends to protect them. Also, they were often buried in mass, unmarked graves. Few noticed when their graves had been robbed. In the South, white slave-owners could earn money by volunteering the bodies of their dead black slaves to dissectors. A recent archeological survey on human bones discovered in the basement of a medical college in Georgia determined that 75 to 80 percent of these bones belonged to the bodies of African-Americans. See *Bones in the Basement: Postmortem Racism in Nineteenth-Century Medical Training*, Edited by Robert L. Blakely and Judith M. Harrington (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997). For a brief history of cadavers and medical discrimination, see David C. Humphrey, "Dissection and Discrimination: The Social Origins of Cadavers in America, 1760-1915," *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 49:9 (September, 1973): 819-827. Also see Wilf, "Anatomy and Punishment in Late Eighteenth-Century New York," 507-530.
- ³¹ John T. Hodgen to John F. Snyder, Bolivar, Missouri, November 22, 1858, MHS. For more on grave-robbing, see Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 98-135.
- ³² Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies*, 106. For more on rioting in nineteenth-century America, see Paul Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).
- ³³ Quoted in Rodabough, *Frenchtown*, 70.
- ³⁴ Barbara Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2004), 89-90, 123. For more on Michael Faraday, electricity, and magnetism, see Alan Hirshfield, *The Electric Life of Michael Faraday* (New York: Walker, 2006).
- ³⁵ For more on the relationship between science and American religious thought, see Charles E. Rosenberg, *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
- ³⁶ For more on the Fox sisters, see Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*.
- ³⁷ Wilson, "Joseph Nash McDowell, M.D.," 354. Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 148. Flora Byrne, St. Louis, to Eliza Mayer, July 17, 1852, Mayer Collection, MHS.
- ³⁸ Scharf, *History of Saint Louis City and County*, Vol. 2, 1526-1527.
- ³⁹ Rodabough, *Frenchtown*, 74.
- ⁴⁰ For more on McDowell's cave, see Ober, *Mark Twain and Medicine*, 89.
- ⁴¹ Some doctors used saltpeter, along with arsenic acid and chloride, to preserve cadavers for dissection. This suggests another reason why Dr. McDowell placed his daughter in a cave filled with saltpeter. See "The Parkman Murder Case," *Daily Missouri Republican*, January 21, 1850.
- ⁴² Wilson, "Joseph Nash McDowell, M.D.," 347. Ober, *Mark Twain and Medicine*, 90. For more on the Indian mummy found in Mammoth Cave, see Angelo I. George, *Mummies, Catacombs, and Mammoth Cave* (Louisville: George Publishing Company, 1994). For more on the sacredness of burials, see Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 8, 50.