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Grave misconduct

On the eve of Thanksgiving 1864, the bodies of seven Confederate soldiers were snatched from their fresh graves. Now some Civil War historians suspect five of the cadavers were sold for medical research.

Barbara Rivera Holmes

ALBANY — The men had barely settled in for a long night when their slumber was disturbed.

Yet, they did not awaken when cold hands pried their bodies from pine beds, for theirs was a rest in death.

"Disinterred by unknown hand on the night of Nov. 24, 1864," read scripted burial records housed at the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), provided by Civil War historian and Randolph County resident Dennis Ranney, for five Confederate States of America soldiers who were once buried at the 2.5-acre Camp Chase cemetery. The camp, established Aug. 1, 1863, was also a federal prison.

- A. J. Hensley, 45th Battalion, Virginia Infantry, grave No. 507;
- John W. Lester, 33rd Regiment, Tennessee Infantry, grave No. 510;
- Jonathan P. Lindley, 1st Confederate Infantry comprising soldiers from Georgia and Mississippi in 1861, grave No. 511;
- Thomas J. Stephens, 19th Regiment, Louisiana Infantry (later in the 16th Regiment), grave No. 512;
- Hiram Bland, 1st Georgia Infantry Regiment, grave No. 513.

Two other bodies, in graves No. 508-509, were dug up. Stephen Jones, 1st Regiment, Florida Cavalry, was reburied and that of Curtis Hooks, 59th Regiment, Georgia Infantry, was left behind.

There are 2,260 Confederate graves at Camp Chase.

The story of the grave robbing was reported in Columbus-area newspapers as word spread of the incident.

"It seems that a systematic exhuming of dead bodies of rebel prisoners buried at Camp Chase has been going on for some time past, in order to supply a Medical College at

Cleveland with subjects for dissection," reported the (Columbus) Ohio Statesman on Nov. 28, 1864. The well-known Dr. Joab R. Flowers was arrested in the matter. He was released on bail.

Despite the "repugnance of the community to body snatching (Columbus Gazette, Dec. 2, 1864)," the incident was forgotten to yellowed, archived papers.

The men, however, were not.

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"They buried him, and he didn't stay buried for six hours," said Thomas D. Houston of Ludowici, descendant of Pvt. Hiram Bland, one of the five disinterred and stolen. Bland, of Bulloch County, was captured at Kennesaw. It was Bland's second tour, as he had been previously sent home because of illness.

"They dug him up and took him to Cleveland (Ohio)," Houston said.

Alan Marsh, cultural resources program director at Andersonville National Historic Site, said that "so far as I've ever seen, there was not any problem or suspicious circumstances or anything" in regards to grave robbing at the the Andersonville cemetery, where nearly 13,000 Union soldiers are buried.

The historian, who is vaguely familiar with the Camp Chase story, offered that "when you have a war-time situation and prisoners of war — as we've seen in the past and also in more recent times — unfortunate things sometimes happen that shouldn't."

Andersonville, or Camp Sumter, as it was officially known, was one of the largest Confederate prisons established during the war.

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Cpl. Jonathan Lindley was captured at the Battle of Atlanta on July 22, 1864. He was taken as a prisoner of war to Camp Chase.

Like more than 600,000 soldiers, Lindley, about 32 years old at the time, did not come home alive from the war that pitted brother against brother.

But Lindley's body didn't return either.

"I found his widow's pension records, and I saw that he had died up there," said David McDonald of Powder Springs, great-great-grandson of Lindley. "So, I figured he was buried up there."

The corporal died of pneumonia on Nov. 23, 1864. Records show he was disinterred a day later.

"Nobody had any knowledge of (the theft). All we knew is that he had died," said McDonald, who began researching Lindley as a high schooler in the 1970s.

Delving further into research and old books, McDonald found that "(these) didn't show him buried anywhere."

Later McDonald found a note among the widow Lindley's things referring to stolen bodies at Camp Chase a day after Lindley's death.

"A light went on," McDonald said. "There were (five) guys who died right around my ancestor, and none of them were buried there either.

"I started sending e-mails — 'Hey, what's going on ?' Nobody want(ed) to talk about it. Then Dennis (Ranney) heard of (it) or saw something ... and he took off with it," McDonald recounted.

Ranney, from Ohio and who has studied the war for more than 40 years, was fascinated by the body-theft theory shared by historical lecturer Marlitta Perkins on Jim Martin's Civil War site, www.history-sites.net.

After more than 300 hours of research and compiling more than 1,000 pages of historical material, Ranney does not doubt that the men's bodies were sold.

"Once I found out what happened to these soldiers," said Ranney, 52, "I wanted to take care of them the best I could."

"Walking through the graveyard now, sometimes soldiers will tell their stories by their names," Ranney said. "But for 140 years, these soldiers have been denied (a soldier's respect) because their names are lost."

Jeff Yoest of Brig. Gen. Roswell Ripley Camp No. 1535 of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, out of Worthington, Ohio, said the camp "is in the process of possibly doing some kind of recognition" for those soldiers.

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Ranney was aided directly and indirectly by many, including Perkins and Dennis M. Keese, whose great-great-grandfather served in the same Ohio regiment as Ranney's.

Ranney, interim director of S.H.A.P.E. (Southern Heritage Advance for Preservation and Education) uses the alias Dennis Brooke for research purposes. He splits his time between New Albany, Ohio, and Randolph County.

Ranney cited a record by Camp Chase Prison Cmdr. and Ohio State Attorney William Pitt Richardson in an essay he wrote, "The Ghoul of Camp Chase, the Honored Citizen of Columbus, Ohio." According to information on pages 1161-1162 of the Official Record Series 2, Vol. 7:

"On the night of the 24th instant the bodies of six deceased prisoners were stolen from the graveyard attached to camp where prisoners only are buried. I arrested the perpetrators of this outrage."

Flowers was quoted in several Columbus-area papers, including the German-language *Der Westbote*, as saying that the cadavers were in need at the college and "that the bodies were those of rebels, who were fit for nothing but dissection!"

Houston, whose ancestors waited for Bland to return home from the war, suspected for some time that the soldier's body was stolen and sold.

"They could at least let him die in peace, (but) they was too greedy for the money," Houston said in a recent interview from his office at Fort Stewart.

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The Ohio law books of 1841 state that "digging up, or attempting or aiding to dig up or carry away a dead body" is offense enough for one to be "imprisoned in the cell or dungeon of the county jail, fed on bread and water only, not exceeding 30 days, or both, at the discretion of the court."

That Flowers was released on bail is all that is known of his legal tangle. He went on to become a Columbus city councilman.

"There's lots of questions of what did happen to the doctor — was he penalized, was he (tried)," said Keesee, New Albany, Ohio, author of "Too Young to Die: Boy Soldiers of the Union Army 1861-1865." "We couldn't find any information. The court records are gone."

"I do think there were more" thefts, and at other camps, Ranney said. "But, I cannot document (that) and verify the other soldiers."

Less than five years after the Confederate graves were emptied, another incident was recorded.

"I heard today that two of our boys had to stay in the station house Thursday night. I guess they were trying to steal a subject," Cleveland Medical College student James Mumford Woods wrote in his diary on Jan. 9, 1869.

It is not clear who the "subject" was.

The Cleveland Medical College, founded in 1834 as the Willoughby Medical College, is the parent of today's School of Medicine at Case Western Reserve University.

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Ranney suspects the Camp Chase thefts are the only such incidents of the war. But grave robbing as an enterprise dates back long before 1864.

Where once cadavers of murderers were enough, "only upon the growth of medical schools ... did the need (for bodies) become a serious problem on both sides of the Atlantic," wrote David Burrell in his paper, "From Sanctity to Property: Dead Bodies in American Society and Law, 1800-1860."

It's estimated that in London, from 1809-1813, 1,211 adult bodies were sold, Burrell wrote.

In April 1788 there was the New York City "Doctor's Mob," which occurred when the community heard about grave robbing.

The Medical College of Georgia, which was closed during the Civil War, has a well-documented history of grave robbing by "resurrectionist" Grandison Harris, a Gullah slave bought for \$700 in Charleston, S.C., according to a June 21, 1996, story in The Augusta Chronicle.

Not until 1887's Anatomical Act was the dissection of human bodies legal in Georgia. Harris was paid to furnish the school with cadavers.

In 1989, more than 10,000 bones belonging to bodies dissected at the college between 1838-1912 were discovered at the school, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported in July 1994.

As recently as 1999 and 2002, directors of willed-body programs at two U.S. universities were suspected of selling body parts, which is illegal.

And early this year, the former owner of Noble-based Tri-State Crematory, Ray Brent Marsh, was sentenced to 12 years in prison after convicted of improperly burying bodies. Marsh plead guilty to 787 counts that include theft and abuse of a corpse.

Today, the Medical College of Georgia receives about 50 requests per month from people wishing to donate their bodies to the college for research, said David E. Adams, director of anatomical donations at the school.

No bodies are paid for, and certainly not stolen, Adams said.

"I personally have a big problem with robbing graves," he said. "Graves are sacred and they should be respected."

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Descendants Houston and McDonald, and researcher Ranney, say they just want to set the record straight.

"I have no hate for what Dr. Flowers did ... that was 150 years ago and it's over with. I think the story needs to be told," Houston said.

Himself a soldier — an army sergeant in the Korean War — Houston relates to his ancestor not only through bloodline, but through sense of duty and honor.

"Hiram Bland was a patriot, like a lot of others," he said.

And, through a sense of the reality those left behind face.

"My great-great-grandfather ... his wife was left with seven children to raise, 100 acres and some cattle," Houston said.

McDonald "grew up about half a mile from where (Lindley) grew up."

"I felt kind of close because that's where I live," he said of Powder Springs. There are Lindley descendants in Georgia and Alabama, McDonald said.

Lindley's house, in which McDonald's grandmother grew up, was recently torn down.

On May 29, Worthington, Ohio, Sons of Confederate Veterans, will hold its annual memorial service for all soldiers that died at Camp Chase.

The bones of the five stolen soldiers' have yet to be found.