

Audiotape labeled:

Early History of MCG by Lane Allen, 12/13/83

Transcribed by Renée Sharrock, May 2020

Tape begins during mid-sentence of unknown speaker introducing Dr. Lane Allen:

Dr. Allen has over 50 publications, mainly on the subjects on physiology and anatomy of the lymphatic system and has developed and maintained an international reputation in that area of research. He has been the author of VET's section of lymphatics and spleen of Morris' anatomy. Dr. Allen's enthusiasm for and vast knowledge of the history of the Medical College of Georgia is well-known to all of us. And it gives me great pleasure to introduce Dr. Allen who will speak to us today on the subject of Grandison Harris, slave, resurrectionist, and judge. Dr. Allen...

Dr. Lane Allen begins:

Thank you, Tom for that wonderful introduction. I look around; I haven't been in this room in a number of years and I look around it and I see many things including people. Straight ahead of me is my last medicine professor, Dr. Eugene Murphey. He was an unusual teacher in that he was probably the last teacher here at the medical school who have a full-time course in physical diagnosis. Now you know at the turn of the century medical diagnosis was changing from physical diagnosis to laboratory diagnosis. X-ray was coming in and the general laboratory way. Dr. Murphey was brought up in the old school of physical diagnosis – inspection, examination, palpation, and so forth. So, to listen to him describe a patient, work over a patient, was like reading a Sherlock Holmes novel almost. And I was fortunate, I think, to be in his last class.

I look on the wall to the right here and I see two anatomists. Dr. Goodrich, on the right there, was an instructor of anatomy at one time in the Department of Anatomy and then he finally became dean. Dr. Wright he became professor of anatomy around 1875 and he became dean.

I look at the buildings around here. I don't recognize all the buildings but I've never seen this picture before. It's the second Augusta Hospital. It's on Walker Street and if you look right past the edge of it, you can see the old medical school building, as you see it in that sort of beige color. And you see the same thing directly across there. You see the classic Greek façade, the Doric columns and pediments and so forth of the old medical school building. Now at back of the medical school building there is Walker Street. The old medical school building is on Telfair Street, but right back of it is Walker. If you go down Walker for two blocks, two or three blocks, you come to Magnolia and Cedar Grove Cemeteries. And that is where Grandison Harris carried out his occult work.

The principle character that I'm going to talk about next in the anatomy department is a Gullah slave named Grandison Harris. The word Gullah, if you're not from Georgia, you're probably not familiar with it. But the Gullahs are a, I don't know if they are a race of blacks or not, but

Gullah is a dialect. And I used to visit on Edisto Island and a Gullah used to take me crabbing down there, and I could never understand a word he said. I think it's a mixture of French, Indo, French, oh, what is it? The islands off the Pacific, the Caribbean, some of those islands they have their own peculiar dialect. And so, this language is incidentally passing away. I happened to see in the newspaper the other day somebody is preserving this language. There's a similar language in Savannah, and we used to call medical students from Savannah Geechees because of the Geechee dialect. The blacks down there have the Geechee dialect which is also part Indian and part English. But I never mastered Gullah, the Gullah dialect.

So, I've oriented you now as to the main character and the location of the medical school building and so forth. I'd like to tell you a little something about the dissecting room before I go any further. You see there the building, the two-story building with its Doric columns. And anatomy, when it was first built in 1835, it was planned to have anatomy on the upper floor, facing the front, with three sky lights over it. The sky lights were built and anatomy was put up there.

Two or three years later, in reading the faculty meeting minutes of that time, I ran across these comments by the dean. The dean said, "I wish to inform the faculty that a building has been built at the back of the medical school now for the dissecting room. And that is that." In other words, he got the anatomy out of the main building. Now when you know how bodies were embalmed, you'll understand why the dean wanted to get rid of it.

When you go into the medical school, and look down, in the back, you find yourself looking down into a very large room. There is a story around Augusta that this is the old dissecting room. It was never used for dissecting. In fact, it was not even built until 1895. The vat room is down in the basement, under the old building, but in 1895, in anticipation of a large class, this rather sunken room, down on ground level at the back, that was to be used as a sort of teaching amphitheater. It was never used, as far as I know, for dissecting purposes. The little building back of the main medical school, which was built back there, a little concrete or brick building, probably brick, housed the students dissecting work. Upstairs professor of anatomy had his office up there and he was always kept provided by preceptor with a dissecting body so when he came in to lecture, there was a body for him to lecture from. But the students did most of their work in the back of the main medical building in this special room that was built apparently to please the dean and maybe some other people, too.

There is a short walk from the entrance of the Magnolia Cemetery to the last resting place of Dr. George M. Newton. In life, he was demonstrator, professor of anatomy, and dean. He alone of the early faculty never practiced medicine but devoted his life to his college and the care of orphans. His marble monument stands in the sea of little markers where lie his waifs and foundlings. In the hush of the great cemetery this minor monuments testify to the humanity of this good man.

Just beyond and across a crumbling brick wall is Cedar Grove Cemetery. Here lie the resurrection slaves who served Newton and the Medical College of Georgia in the early days. At the third meeting of the faculty in July 1834, the dean and Dr. Newton, demonstrator of anatomy,

were appointed as a committee to find a resurrection man. You never hear that word any more, but the word was really an English word. The English has a lot of trouble with resurrection men as you recall the story of Burke and Hare in England. I've never heard of anyone in the United States being "Burked". But in England, they seem to enjoy Burking people. Do you know how to Burke somebody? You walk up behind them, a strong man walks up behind a weak, skinny man or woman, reaches around them, grabs hold of the chest, and "Ugh" jerks them like that, you see? Knocking the breath out of them. Then he would take the body to England, they'd take the body to the medical school, and sell it. Now that was called Burking people. But I've never heard of Burking being used in the United States, only in England.

At the third meeting of the faculty, the dean and Dr. Newton, demonstrator of anatomy, were appointed as a committee to find a resurrection man. [Dr. Allen repeated himself] One A. Clegg was hired to furnish subjects at 75 cents each. An assistant was provided by the school. There are no records to authenticate the success of A. Clegg. However, the dissecting room was in operation. The local supply of subjects for dissection was early recognized as inadequate. In fact, it's always been inadequate. The population of Richmond County was only 7,000. This was around 1830s. Many plantations on the edge of Augusta had their own burial grounds. There are hundreds of these, in fact. And these are widely scattered.

The school was required to go to extraordinary lengths to supply its needs. In 1839, \$100 worth of subjects were ordered from New York City. These were shipped in casks of brine or whiskey by coastal steamer to Charleston and then carried by the Best Friend to Augusta. The Best Friend, incidentally was the railroad that ran from Charleston to Augusta. I believe it was one of the first railroads in the United States.

In 1842 Dr. Newton was sent to Baltimore to secure subjects for the coming year. This shows how difficult the situation was here. There were plenty of bodies on the eastern seaboard – New York, Philadelphia, Maryland. Schools up there had plenty of bodies. They depended on, down here, black bodies. Now how do you suppose they got their bodies up there? These were immigrants, largely immigrants. You see, they had a tremendous immigrant population coming into the cities along the coast. And these immigrants had no connections, no relatives, many of them were alone. They died and somehow the bodies were picked up by the medical schools and were used. So, they even got enough cadavers it became sort of a commercial business. They sent bodies up as far as New Hampshire, and they sent them down apparently as far as Georgia. They were put in casks and sometimes they were labeled hams or something like that or whiskey.

Dr. Newton kept meticulous records...[soundtrack skips and continues...] means of meeting of the Klan, the Klan get together. It would have been very offensive to the blacks if any had taken the funeral prepared body away from them. So, there was very little of that that went on, if any. Most of it was worked out in an agreeable fashion with the blacks. People on the eastern seaboard had the advantage of using whites.

In 1849, Dean Paul Eve wrote "against human dissection popular indignation has been directed chiefly with such success that in but one state, Massachusetts, has the subject been legalized. In

all others to dissect is a penal offense, subjecting the offender to fine and imprisonment. The law is held over us in terrorum if we dissect. That the dead must be examined for the good of the living, all must admit. For in the faint inadequate reply of Abernathy before the government of Great Britain when interrogated on the subject of human dissection, ‘all out to know that if the dead be not mangled, the living will be.’”

In the account book of Dr. Newton, there is no reference to grave robbing. The very term grave robbing was a misnomer. The legal prohibition seems to have been against dissection. Under old English law a dead body was not property and one cannot steal that which is not property. However, this legal distinction must have been lost on the relatives of the disinterred.

From 1848 to 1852 there’s reference to 64 subjects available for dissection or 16 subjects per term. In a period of four years, several resurrection slaves were employed. Their names were King, Peter, Jackson, John, and Edmund. The following items are taken from a two-month period in 1849. Johnathan Meigs hire for Joe - \$16. Jackson for two subjects – Joe for ditto - \$20. Wages for King for January 15 - \$13. King for subject - \$5. Joe for ditto. Joe for two subjects. Jackson for ditto. Hire of Joe for two months. King’s board to \$5.

And we can find out what things cost from this. I think what was happening, Dr. Newton was giving one of his resurrection slaves \$5 telling him there was a death somewhere, go and see if he could secure the body. It would be much better to get it that way than to dig it up, you see. So, I think this what was happening. It’s a little hard – “Hire of Joe for two months for \$32” so that’s \$16 a month. I think Joe cost them. I don’t know if Joe belonged to Jonathan Meigs or not.

Not all subjects came from local sources. Some came from Hamburg, SC which is just across the river, from Greensboro and Savannah, Georgia. One subject from Savannah cost \$40. There are records of bodies bought, disinterred, dissected, and then re-interred. October the 11th, 1851, boy for subject, \$10. For subject re-interred, Bernard Abraham, re-interring, \$5. And coffin for subject re-interred, \$7. This must have been an unusual body of some sort that they wanted because they went to so much trouble and expense to get it.

The year 1852 marks the beginning of a new chapter in the annuals of resurrection. The dean was sent to Charleston where he purchased from the auction block a powerful Gullah slave, Grandison Harris. According to the faculty minutes: The faculty having purchased a slave named Grandison Harris for \$700, it was resolved that on case any member of the present faculty should vacate his seat for any cause whatsoever, while said slave remains the property of said faculty, he or his heirs will receive one-seventh part of value of said slave at the time of the vacation of his seat shall occur.

The following items are listed in Dr. Newton’s account book for the six months after Grandison’s arrival. Blankets for Grandison, \$3. Board for Grandison to March 6th, \$16. Whiskey, \$14.47. Mattress for Grandison, \$1.38. Six barrels of whiskey, \$60.05. Board for Grandison, \$18.25. Clothes, \$6. Over the next few years, the records indicate that Grandison lived progressively better. In 1856 he was provided even with sundries at a cost of \$9.60. And no doubt, since he had seven masters, there must have been numerous fringe benefits.

In 1858 the dean was authorized to go to Charleston and purchase Grandison's wife and son, for a price not to exceed thirteen hundred dollars [\$1,300]. That gives you some idea of the tremendous price for able-bodied slaves. This he did, reporting that he had made the purchase for twelve-fifty [\$1,250]; \$600 down, and \$650 on his note as dean. This was not only a humane act, but it kept Grandison off the railroad between Augusta and Charleston, the round-trip costing \$12.

For almost two years after Grandison arrived, only two subjects were purchased. The accounts of the previous two years show the legitimate purchase of thirty-one subjects. It was at this time that Grandison was most active in the practice of his sullen craft. However, in 1854 the practice of purchasing subjects was resumed and Grandison acted as an intermediary in these transactions. It is in interest in the decade before the civil war, some two thousand gallons of whiskey was purchased by the school, at an average price of thirty cents per gallon. The bodies were embalmed with whiskey and then covered with whiskey in the wooden vat in the basement. Museum specimens were also put up in sealed jars in whiskey.

The Medical College closed during the Civil War. The dissecting house behind the college was cleaned and rented to the Confederate Hospital Corp for one hundred dollars per month. In other words, this is another bit of proof in the records that anatomy had been put in the backyard, you see. The Corp also built wooden barracks on the grounds to house the sick and wounded. It is believed that Grandison worked for the hospital corp. At least he was around. In July of 1863 the dean provided him with 75 cents worth of medicine and accorded his expenditure in his account book.

After the war, Grandison continued with the college on a salary of \$8 per month. There are few notations of Grandison for subjects for post-civil war decades. Blacks crowded into the city, and the mortality rates of blacks doubled that of whites. Most of the bodies came from Cedar Grove, the city cemetery a few blocks from the medical school.

In 1938, Dr. Eugene Murphey told the following story about Grandison: It was Grandison's practice to go to the cemetery late at night with only the moon watching, he would quickly dig down to the upper end of the box, smash it with an ax, reach in with his long and powerful arms, and draw the subject out. It was then put in a sack and placed in a cart and carried to the school. Grandison one night stopped his wagon in an alley behind the saloon and went in to refresh himself after his nocturnal labors. He had been observed for some time by two medical students. They removed the body, hid it, one student got into the sack. When Grandison returned the student groaned and cried out in a voice, "Grandison, Grandison, I'm cold. Buy me a drink." Grandison replied, "You can buy your own drink. I'm getting out of here."

In 1880 Charles Dickens published his *Tale of Two Cities*. It contained the macabre story of grave robbing. It was widely discussed in the states. About this time the dissecting situation had reached critical proportions. There were ads in newspapers all over the country. In Philadelphia some four hundred bodies were dissected each year. But the actual need was eight hundred. Philadelphia was ready a mecca of anatomy. Doctors from all over the country who had gone to

the other medical schools that had no anatomy department at all, sooner or later would go to Philadelphia and learn anatomy. Anatomy being the only real science at that time in medicine.

When the snow melted in the spring, the cemeteries around Philadelphia looked as if they had been subjected to artillery bombardment. In 1883 following riots, these were real riots, Pennsylvania passed its first anatomical act.

In 1882 the Augusta Chronicle carried the following editorial: A great deal of sensation has been created in the press recently because of the discovery that cemeteries have been entered and graves despoiled of their occupants. Of course, these resurrections are against the law but in the interest of science. Here is the serious difficulty, the law must be enforced, and yet is for the benefit of the human race that dissection must continue. All attempts to reconcile these contradictory elements have proven abortive. The necessity for procuring subjects in a surreptitious way causes periodic scandals and frequently grows abused. No stop can be put to it. Yet some way must be found to make the matter as nearly reconcilable to decency and urgency if possible. Superstition and prejudice, not say to reverence but what is least reverential stands in the way of knowledge and health. How to break down the one barrier lawfully and aid the trespass is the despair of both lawyers and surgeons.

In 1887 the Georgia legislature finally passed what is commonly called the Anatomical Act. Perhaps this was well for Grandison Harris. He was getting old. The relief upon the faculty of the passage of the Anatomical Act however was short lived. Three months later when no bodies had arrived, the faculty adopted a resolution: "Whereas the Anatomical Board has failed to furnish subjects for the use of the college, therefore be it resolved that the dean be authorized to contract for bodies in the usual way."

It was suggested that Grandison's talent again be utilized. It was also suggested that the dean contact the governor and have him enforce the law. According to the dean, "Glaring defects appear in our last announcement. I mention the rule requiring students to dissect every part of the human body. This rule is absurd and calculated to damage us in the esteem of the students. For they know as well as we, that we cannot furnish subjects in sufficient numbers. Our announcements have been too much on the Colonel Seller's order."

Colonel Seller was a medical mountebank who came over from England. He was an Army officer and he brought with him an eye salve which he advertised as being able to cure anything that was wrong with one's eyes. And it had a label on it, "A sight for sore eyes." And so "our announcements had been too much on the Colonel Seller's order" is that we have offered things that we can't simply live up to, when we tell students they can dissect. In addition, the situation disrupted upper classes. The freshmen being unable to dissect went next door to the City Hospital and took the best seats around the clinical demonstrations.

In 1895 Grandison Harris was promoted from porter to janitor, but his salary remained at \$15 per month during the six-month school year, and \$10 per month during the summer months. His son George was made his assistant. Grandison's efforts to obtain a raise had long been unavailing. Grandison then presented the faculty with a petition. His amanuensis could hardly have been

other than his great admirer, Dr. Eugene Murphey, professor of medicine. Here is the letter that was sent by Grandison Harris to the dean:

Augusta, Georgia, April the 1st, 1898

To Dr. Eugene Foster, Dean and the profession of the Medical College of Georgia

Honorable Gentlemen,

I very respectfully take the opportunity to address your honorable and learned body relative to the position that I have filled for the past three years as janitor of your noble institution. Now that the present session has closed, I humbly submit to you that you consider this petition in consideration of past services faithfully carried out and in view of this respectfully request that you consider an increase in my salary for the summer months. Gentlemen, I have been connected with the college for the past fifty years and though my services have not been without fault nothing of any material consequence has ever been charged to my accounting as janitor and porter during these many years of service. I need not call your attention to my faithful discharge duty as directed by those in charge. For as my trustworthiness and reliability in the anatomical department, the honored gentlemen know very well. I hope the faculty will take due consideration of my petition. I am now receiving ten dollars per month and would like an increase during the summer months.

Honorable gentlemen, I remain yours obediently,

Grandison Harris, Sr., Janitor, Medical College of Georgia.

As for his trustworthiness in the anatomical department, there was no doubt. However, there was a dark chapter in his past that he may have preferred to forget. After the Civil War he moved across the river to the little town of Hamburg, South Carolina where he was set up as a magistrate by the infamous carpetbagger regime. It was a tribute, no doubt, to his standing in the community. He had long been an impressive figure with his Gullah accent, his store-bought shoes and suits, and of course, as a member of a grave profession. However, when Wade Hampton's Red Shirts went on the rampage and the Hamburg riots exploded, the carpetbaggers fled north, Grandison Harris fled south, crossed the Savannah River, sought sanctuary in his native habitat to that room. His old masters viewed his return without surprise or recrimination. However, the students did not permit him to forget. Ever after the addressed him as "Judge."

The team of Grandison and son continued for six more years. Finally, in 1904 the dean informed the faculty: "I am certain some action should be taken regarding the janitor position next time. Our faithful old servant and friend becoming too decrepit for the work and his son George, his assistant, too trifling to be kept in the position." Trifling was perhaps a weak word. The premises became so foul, that the students and physicians requested that the board of health to investigate the Medical College building as a health hazard. The Board of Health reported that the students spit tobacco juice on the floors and there was no cleaning up of dissecting droppings. The two

cellars showed accumulating fifth, old rags from cadavers, and cellar northeast corner contains old vat with bones from dissecting room.

Several months later the faculty in solemn session, resolved to prohibit the chewing of tobacco, except in the dissecting room. On January the 21st, 1905, Grandison Harris was granted a pension of \$10 per month. However, the dean could not bring himself to discharge the trifling George. After all, nepotism was a way of life at the Medical College of Georgia. The members of the faculty in 1905 were the sons, grandsons, and nephews of the early faculty. [Side 1 ends.]

[Side 2 begins] George was given his father's job at a salary of \$15 per month. There is no reason to believe that he reformed. The Flexner report of 1909 mentioned the exceeding foul dissecting room.

Grandison Harris lingered on. His accomplishments as a man and a human being were not inconsiderable. Separated from his family by the auction block, he had quickly learned to work and bend to his will seven masters. He accomplished almost impossible tasks of maintaining contact with and eventually reuniting with his family. He had served both the Confederacy and the Union and his services for the Medical College had been indispensable. His last accomplishment had been to pass his job on to his son in the tradition of the school.

His last public appearance at the school was in 1908 when he returned to lecture students on the practice and perils of resurrection. A student of the class of 1908 remembers he was very feeble. It had been 56 years since he had stepped down from the auction block in Charleston. All those who had owned one-seventh part of his corpus were long dead. He had even seen their grandsons mature and become doctors. He had become a legend, a living link with the founders. The students were told, and perhaps believed, that he had an honorary doctor's degree.

On June the second, 1911, the registrar reported to the faculty that Grandison Harris was in a most deplorable condition and was in great need of medical attention. The faculty moved immediately to place him in a nursing home next door to Lamar Hospital and a nurse was detailed to give him all needed attention. The pension checks soon ceased. The slave resurrectionist judge left to join Dr. Newton and his cherubs in paradise. The location of his grave in Cedar Grove is not known. The very records were washed away in the great Savannah River flood of 1929. Peace to his ashes.