

January News Stirs Up An Unsolved Mystery

By Judy Haynes

News on January 30, 2022 from Boylston reported on the loss by fire of the antique home known as “The Physician’s House.”¹ The good-sized house sat on the side of the hill at 29-31 Central Street and was there from 1800 until 2022, where now sits only its remains.

Why this was dubbed ‘the physicians house’ is derived from its ownership history. The house was built about the year 1800 and owned by Dr. Thaddeus Chinnery, who lived there until 1805 when it was sold to a young, new-in-town doctor, a Seth Knowlton. Next owner of this house would be another physician, Dr. John Andrews in 1825; thus, resulting in the so-called nickname, “*The Physicians House*”. Details on the house can be found on Boylston Historical Society’s website under “Then and Now” by Nancy A. Filgate see [Physicians House.pdf](#).²

Scalp Found At Malagasco Brook

How did the news about the Physician’s House conjure up an unsolved mystery of a grave robbery? That’s where Dr. Seth Knowlton’s name rises to the forefront as a prime suspect in the disappearance of the body of a young black man, along with the finding of a “wooly scalp” in Malagasco Brook by one Gershom Flagg who was on his way to a town meeting in February 1810.³ He saw this unusual item caught up under the bridge, removed it and turned it over to Constable Robert Andrews, who then began to investigate. By March 13, 1810, the *Worcester Spy* reported “Grave Robbery in Neighboring Town – Foul Deed perpetrated on recently deceased colored man.”⁴

The Mystery of the Missing Cadaver

First thought was to exhume the cadaver of a recently deceased black man, known as Moses Robert Bondsman, who at the age of 30 years had died suddenly from a fall on 4 February 1810. It was found that the body was missing. As Constable Andrews started putting together his thoughts on the matter, he kept a diary of notes. He interviewed two young men, Plyma and Joseph White, and thought that the most likely scenario was that Dr. Seth Knowlton had hired the young men to remove the body from the winter holding site so he could then dissect and continue his medical education. During the nineteenth century, this type of medical research was carried on clandestinely since it was regarded by some as sacrilegious. It was said that Dr. Knowlton believed that the medical teachings should include more anatomy and dissecting a cadaver would advance his knowledge of the internal workings of the human body.

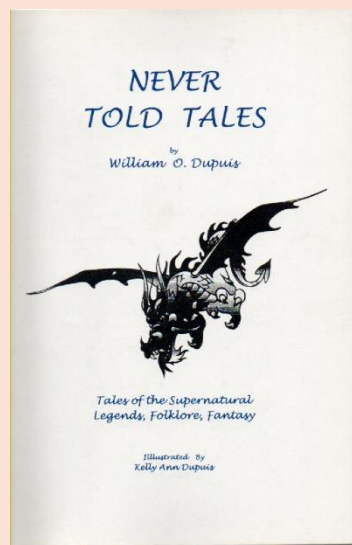
Was Dr. Knowlton ever charged with this crime? No, as this speculation and evidence was purely circumstantial, but he left Boylston not long after this event. According to notes by historian George L. Wright, “Dr. Knowlton returned to Shrewsbury soon after” where his remaining children were born.⁵ The Shrewsbury/Boylston Tax Records do confirm that Dr. Knowlton who was in town in 1810 does not appear in the tax records in 1811, but is listed on the tax records again by 1812.^{6,7} Additionally, Dr. Knowlton and his wife Relief Howe had additional children born in Boylston from 1813 to 1818.

There was also a thought that the cadaver had gone to Harvard Medical School, but it seems more likely met its demise was here in Boylston based on the fact that the “wooly scalp” showed up in the brook. It is also thought that the desecration of a body of a “colored man” caused less concern by the white majority of the times; thus, few paid a great deal of attention to the missing black man, leaving this tragedy of a disappearing body as an unsolved mystery.

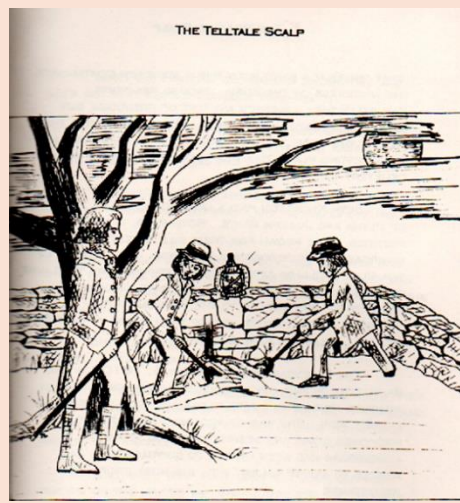
Boylston Historical Society Historian William Dupuis (1932-2017) was also told of the grave robbery by a descendant of the Flagg family and his version and conclusion was similar to Constable Andrew’s speculation and to George Wright’s notes.⁸

Fictionized Version Evolves

As often is the case with unsolved mysteries, authors use the known facts as a basis to create a fictionalized story. Mr. William Dupuis has taken the liberty to tell a fictionalized version of this story in a book titled *Never Told Tales*. The book holds fictionalized versions of five of the Boylston



legends, folklore or fantasy tales, with *The Telltale Scalp*⁹ as a very possible scenario (though fictional) portraying the grave robbery as it may very well have taken place. It is a fun read and the book can be purchased at the Boylston Historical Society. Other stories within this book are: The Legend of the Old Pot; The Telltale Scalp; He Searches; The Ghost Horse, and The Doorstep Murder.



Come to the historical society some Tuesday or Saturday morning 9-12 to relax, sit and read the tales or buy the book (\$12) and take a tour of the museum. We would love to see you.

¹From “The Item” Multiple towns respond to fire at 29-31 Central St., Boylston, Sunday, January 30, 2022.

² See www.boylstonhistory.org, ‘Then & Now’ series, the Physicians House, 2023.

³ Boylston Death Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1810

⁴ Dupuis, William, “The Grave Robbery” in Filgate, *Boylston Historical Series*, pp.361-367.

⁵ Wright, George L, unpublished ms and notes, Boylston Historical Society.

⁶ Tax Records, Boylston, 1804, 1805, 1806, 1807, 1808, 1809, 1812, 1813

⁷ United States Federal Census Records, Boylston, Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1810

⁸ Dupuis, William, “The Grave Robbery” in Filgate, *Boylston Historical Series*, pp.361-367.

⁹ Dupuis, William, *Never Told Tales: The Telltale Scalp*, Old Pot Publications, Boylston, 1996, pp. 31-50.

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