

OPINION

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The most notorious murder trial of the 19th century

This is the first of a two-part column.

By R. Marc Kantrowitz



The medical evidence was gruesome.

"The head had been separated from the trunk just below the Adam's apple by sawing

through the upper vertebra. All the bowels and stomach were gone."

While various parts of the cut-up body were discovered in different locations, the head never was. Attached to the pelvis, recovered from a privy located underneath the building, were male genitalia and six inches of intestines from the rectal area. A leg here, a knee there, pieces of body jammed into gutted larger pieces of body, and dislodged teeth and pieces of bone.

The identities of the victim and defendant fueled the shocking and grisly medical aspects of the case. The deceased, Dr. George Parkman, a non-practicing physician, spent his time overseeing the family's extensive business holdings. Indeed,

Judge R. Marc Kantrowitz sits on the Appeals Court. He is currently writing a book on the history of the Supreme Judicial Court.

he was one of the wealthiest men in Massachusetts, if not America.

The accused, Dr. John Webster, taught chemistry at Harvard Medical School. That Brahmins — a term coined by Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., a friend of both men and dean of the medical school at the time — would behave in such a manner was unimaginable; or as one member of the upper class opined, "It was the most disgraceful event in our domestic history."

To the locals, the shock went even farther. For years they had heard dark tales of grave robbers

stealing dead bodies and illegally selling them to the medical school for all sorts of imagined frightening experiments. And now the genteel,

dignified and respected Dr. Webster was charged with the brutal slaughtering and dismembering of Dr. Parkman.

All highly unnerving and titillating. And as the word spread, the world reacted. In short order, reporters from as far away as London, Paris and Berlin flocked to witness the murder trial of the century.

Twenty years later, upon Charles Dickens' second visit to Boston, when asked what he wanted to see,

his first request was the room in which Webster killed Parkman.

Little did anyone know at the time but what transpired over the course of a nearly two-week trial would have vast legal ramifications to this day, notwithstanding that the factual details, like parts of Parkman's body at the time, are largely lost.

Dr. George Parkman was as odd as Dr. John Webster was inoffensive. If Parkman weren't so "quite peculiar in manner and person," it is conceivable that he would today be considered one of the great in-

novators for the humane treatment of the mentally ill. His oddity was perhaps the unspoken reason he was not named to the post he coveted

and desired, that of headmaster of Boston's first insane asylum. Rebuffed, he turned to managing the family fortune, part of which involved lending money.

Parkman helped secure his friend Webster a position at the medical school at Harvard. Sadly, academic employment afforded Webster far too little money to support the lavish lifestyle to which he had become accustomed. The small fortune he inherited, he squandered,

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DR. JOHN WEBSTER



DR. GEORGE PARKMAN

and to support his wife and four daughters, he borrowed.

Parkman was only too happy to lend Webster money. When Parkman discovered, however, that Webster had secured other loans by mortgaging property already pledged to Parkman, the incensed and demanding creditor chased and publicly embarrassed Webster, threatening to go to court and ruin him.

On Nov. 23, 1849, Parkman went to the medical college to retrieve part of the debt owed. He never came out.

Within a week, parts of a body turned up in Webster's lab and privy. Seeking to put the pieces of the puzzle and body together, the commonwealth turned to experts to prove its identity. More than

60,000 spectators, nearly half of Boston's population, marched in and out of court in 10-minute intervals to witness the state's attempt to prove the body was Parkman's and that Webster murdered him.

And what of Ephraim Littlefield, the janitor who made the grisly discovery by chiseling through a basement brick wall feet thick? Littlefield, the go-between purveyor of corpses, the man who purchased dead bodies from grave robbers for the medical school's consumption, and, more importantly, the man who was an expert at chopping up bodies.

NEXT WEEK: The trial and the legal legacy the above case spawned, affecting trials throughout America to this day. **MLW**