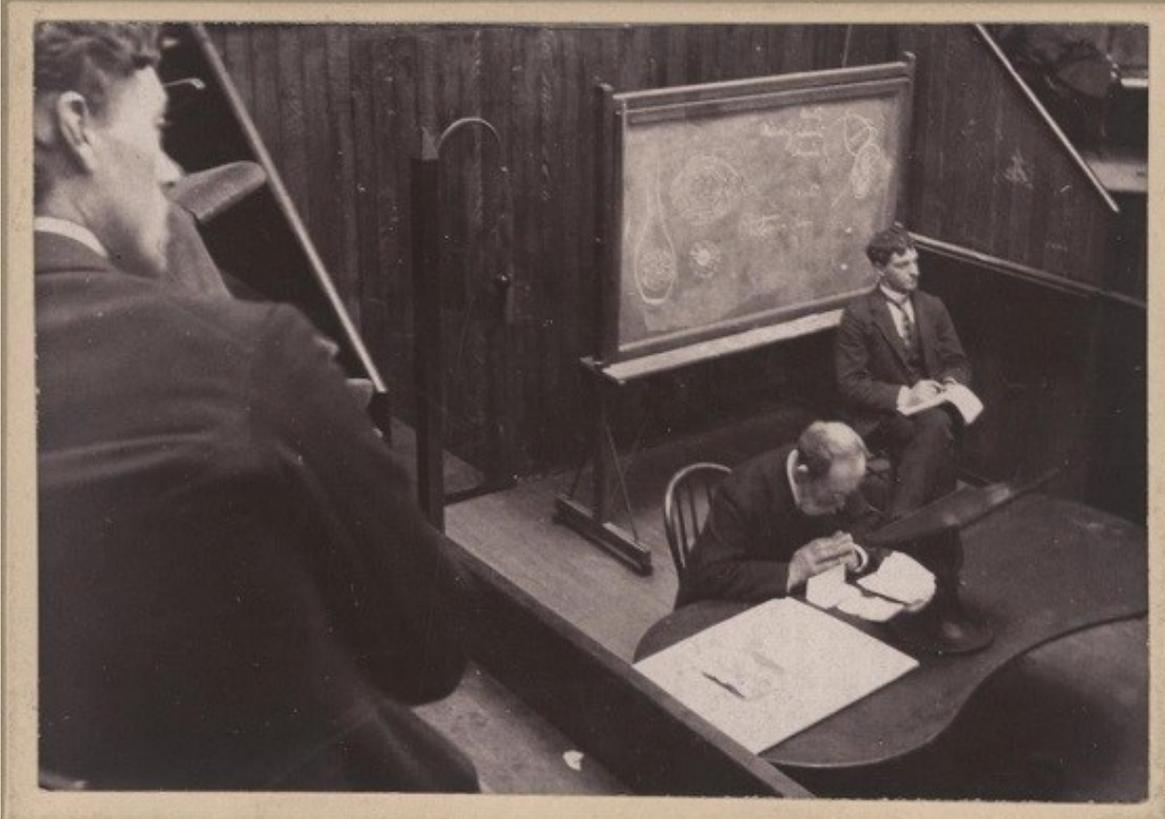




ALBANY  
MEDICAL  
COLLEGE

# Archives

## Albany Medical College and the Secret Compartment



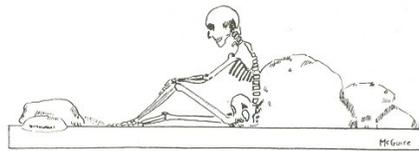
This photo, circa 1905 and found in the Albany Medical College Archives, contains a note on the back of it describing the scene. The note reads, “Dr. Albert Vander Veer seated at table in the amphitheatre of the Eagle Street building (this refers to the original building of the Albany Medical College). Above the door in the background was the secret compartment into which cadavers were put when word came of a raid, in the early days where cadavers were available only by graverobbing.”

Body-snatchers, also called resurrectionists, grave robbers, snatchers, or sack-‘em-up-men were prevalent in early 19th century America for the purpose of obtaining cadavers to sell for the education of medical students. Bodies were in short supply during this time period mainly because of the lack of methods to preserve the bodies as well as religious beliefs which led to the need for a proper burial, with the body intact. Often, family members would guard the recently buried in an effort to deter grave robbery. Because of the high demand from the medical community, grave robbing was a very lucrative occupation.

Albany Medical College was not immune from body snatching activities of the time. The following story from the 1913 Skull Yearbook, details the exploits of a group of students in the 1880s and their experience while trying to obtain a cadaver for anatomy class.

## “Back in the Eighties”

*Editor's Note. – The following is a story of the early 80's (1880s), related by an alumnus of AMC during whose college days the incident occurred.*



In the less balmy days of our old college it was extremely difficult to obtain cadavers for dissection work. In those days, however, the students were a great deal more courageous and adventurous than at the present. It so happened, on one occasion, that dissection material had “run short” late in the fall and because of this dearth extreme measures were adopted by the students themselves for procuring material.

There were four students – Green, Jones, Howard, and Sheldon – who lived in a small suite of rooms on Hudson Avenue. These young fellows were famous about college for their nerve and ability to consume spirituous liquids. It was their last year in school, and, feeling that they could afford a little time, they volunteered to obtain anatomical material either lawfully or by hook or crook. Sheldon was the mischievous mind of the party, but by his cleverness always escaped the ill effects of his inventions.

One evening, after supper, Green, who lived at Niverville, down the river a short distance, read in his local paper that one of the derelicts of the town had recently been interred. Turning to Sheldon he said, “What do you think, Shelly, shall we go down and look the town of Niverville over and see if they have any new drinks down there? Sheldon, after listening to the reading of the paragraph, began at once to plan for the trip.

The next afternoon Green, Howard and Jones drove forth in a light spring wagon whose floor was covered with straw, beneath which shovels, picks and a lantern were hidden. Sheldon had to leave town that afternoon “to visit his sister in the country” so could not accompany the others. The party stopped at every inn along the road, and it was nightfall when they reached Niverville. Supper, followed by several rounds of drinks, preceded their onward march to the graveyard. By the time they reached the obscure spot their spirits were at acme. The horse was tied to a near-by tree and excavations commenced at once. The dirt was soft, and eleven o'clock found the corpse safely lying in the bottom of the wagon, covered by a gray blanket. They drove back through the town to the inn, left their horse and wagon under the shed and went into the bar-room for another round of “bracers.” Meanwhile Sheldon with the assistance of the proprietor (whom he had confidentially told about the expedition), removed the corpse from the wagon, and Sheldon substituted himself.

The homeward journey was well under way when Jones thought he heard a peculiar gurgling sound behind him on the floor of the wagon. Glancing around, while the other two were singing at the top of their voices, he saw the outline of the body – spreading its arms and wiggling its feet. Without a moment's hesitation he leaped from the wagon and ran for all his might down the road. Joe Howard was about to whip up the horse in pursuit when something yanked the lash out of his hand. A cold shiver passed up his spine, his hair stood on end, and with great effort he succeeded in asking Green if he would see if the corpse was all right. Green now began to shiver involuntarily; something told him that either he had drunk too much or not enough. A cold perspiration began to ooze out on his forehead, and with great effort he managed to glance behind. There, silhouetted against the rising November moon, was the erect figure of the corpse. With a terrifying yell both jumped from the wagon. Green thinking his judgment day had come broke forth with a most incoherent prayer, mingled with cries of terror. Both soon gained their feet and tore down the road after their flying predecessor, leaving the horse and his ghost like driver to make the best of it. Sheldon hastily turned the horse about and reached the tavern in time to leave the rig and catch the next train for Albany. He sat up until the other boys returned, and his howls of laughter upon their arrival awoke the neighborhood

The following afternoon a letter was received from the proprietor of the inn at Niverville stating that a corpse was found in a wagon in their shed, and requested them to come after it immediately. However, a second expedition had to be formed before anatomical material was further obtained.