

Podcast Transcript: “Secrets of the Campus Cadavers”

Narrator: From the University of Utah, “Secrets of the Campus Cadavers.” I’m Paul Gabrielsen.

Episode 1 – The Discovery

Narrator: This is Presidents Circle on the University of Utah campus. The buildings on this circle are stately and historic, dating back to the earliest days of the school. On the southwest corner of the circle is the George Thomas Building. This building was originally built as a library and then hosted the Utah Museum of Natural History up until 2011. The building sat empty for five years after the museum moved to a new facility, but now the George Thomas Building has a new life. It’s been renovated, expanded, and recently opened as a brand-new interdisciplinary research hub called the Crocker Science Center.

The renovation is a bright, shining part of the university’s future, housed in an iconic connection to its past. But in April 2016, shortly after beginning work, project personnel found a part of the past they weren’t expecting.

Shepherd: My name’s Charles Shepherd. I’m a historical architect and a campus planner here at the University of Utah.

Narrator: Shepherd’s job is to help the university manage its historic buildings. On the morning of April 20, 2016, just two months after he was hired by the U, Shepherd went to tour the George Thomas Building site with Sheri Ellis, a consulting archaeologist.

Shepherd: So, Sheri and I were on site. We’d taken a look at a couple of other issues dealing with historic materials on the outside of the building.

Narrator: And then they walked around a corner of the building into an area where crews had been excavating for the past few days.

Shepherd: And I remember that Sheri sort of went off – we were just kind of wandering and looking at the ground surface. The ground, the excavated soil surface was quite smooth, it was a sandy surface, rather sandy soil, and there was what I thought was a large cobble, stone, over to my left. And I walked over to it thinking, “Oh, this is just a big rock.” And immediately could tell it was not just a big rock. I’m not an anthropologist, never had an anatomy class in my life or anything, but I could recognize a skull when I saw it.

Narrator: He called Ellis over.

Shepherd: Is this what I think it is?

Narrator: Yep. A human skull.

Shepherd: You expect to find pieces of broken glass and interesting bricks, or whatever, to me anyways as a historical architect, an interesting brick. Human remains obviously were not on the radar to be found.

Narrator: Shepherd and Ellis went around to the contractors on site, telling them of the discovery. He put in a few phone calls – one to the police and one to the state forensic

anthropologist. Police arrived quickly. They ruled out that the remains were part of a crime scene. Hot on their heels, however, were local media cameras. They had heard the news on their police scanners.

KSL: The University of Utah has a mystery on its hands right now.

ABC: Construction workers found what appear to be human remains just before 8 this morning.

FOX: . . . possible burial site under the old museum.

ABC: Onlookers and sources near the site wonder if it's a possible burial ground.

KSL: But it's not a crime scene, so anthropologists have been called in to investigate.

ABC: Work has been halted on the site until the state forensic anthropologist reviews everything.

Narrator: The State Forensic Anthropologist is Derinna Kopp.

Kopp: Charles called me and he had a very concerned sound in his voice. I think he was, had never dealt with anything like this before.

Narrator: But Kopp has. Whenever human remains are found, anywhere in the state of Utah, it's her job to examine the remains and reconstruct, as much as possible, who the person was.

Kopp: I tried to calm him down and say, "This isn't unusual. It happens all the time, actually."

Narrator: The vast majority of cases, she says, are determined to be ancient Native American remains. When that is the case, Kopp recovers and analyzes the remains. Then she works with Utah tribes to return the remains for a proper reburial. But this was not one of those cases.

Kopp: When I looked down there and started picking through the soil and finding the bone fragments I saw a part of a cranium that had been purposefully sectioned off with a saw. And that's when I was like, oh, well these are not archaeological Native Americans, they are actually anatomical specimens.

Narrator: And by anatomical specimens, she means cadavers. The kind that medical students dissect as part of their medical education, or that researchers use to develop new treatments and technologies. She would need to do a full forensic analysis to confirm her initial impression. But if they are cadavers, then that raises a string of questions. Who buried these remains, and why? How old are they? Are they connected to the university's medical school? And how did the school get the cadavers in the first place?

Kopp: The main question that always pops into my mind with any set of human remains I look at is – who was this person?

Narrator: That's the question that you and I are here to try and answer. Bones belong to *people* – people with families, people with jobs, people with stories and histories. Somehow they got from there to here.

Before this podcast is all over, we'll talk with some of the many people who helped with this nearly year-long investigation. We'll talk with the consulting archaeologists who arrived that day and began carefully excavating to find the rest of the bones. We'll dig into the history of the U medical school from its beginnings. And we'll go into a modern cadaver lab to see how anatomical dissection has changed from the time of these bones – and how it hasn't.

You and I are here to learn about who these people were and where they came from – and to see them to their resting place. Stay with us as we explore the Secrets of the Campus Cadavers.

This podcast is a production of University of Utah Marketing and Communications, produced, written and edited by Paul Gabrielsen and Brooke Adams.

Find other podcasts in this series at unews.utah.edu/cadavers

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