

Podcast Transcript: “Secrets of the Campus Cadavers”

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

Episode 2 – The Building

Narrator: So, let’s recap. In spring 2016, excavation at the University of Utah’s George Thomas Building found something unexpected — human remains. The police determined that the remains were not part of a crime scene. The state forensic anthropologist determined that they were not Native American remains. Instead, it seems most likely that these were anatomical cadavers — bodies dissected by medical students.

Shepherd: The biggest question is: Why are they here? At this point, at this location, which was literally under the floor slab of the historic building.

Narrator: That’s Charles Shepherd again. He’s the University of Utah historical architect. To help him answer these questions he called in archaeologists from the Salt Lake City office of SWCA Environmental Consultants. Their job would be to recover the remains professionally and completely, and put together the story of how they got there. Here’s one of the project’s principal investigators, Kelly Beck.

Beck: It typically can take a month to four months to mobilize and get archaeology crews in the field with all of the necessary permits. But because this was such a quick discovery, we were out in just a couple of days.

Narrator: So, the archaeologists spent 10 days at the site, digging carefully, by hand. It’s time-consuming work. They would dig down six inches, screen through all the soil to find anything of interest, take careful notes of what they found, and then do it all over again.

Beck: So, then we’re trying to keep track in three-dimensional space of these relationships between artifacts and materials and remains. In archaeology, context means everything.

Narrator: In addition to the main site, right next to the George Thomas Building, Beck and his archaeologists screened through two piles of dirt and rocks that had previously been dug up by construction crews. These are called spoils piles. The intent was to make sure that every fragment of human bone was recovered.

Beck: When we went out for an initial visit, really with no tools at all, just walking, climbing up the piles of dirt, scraping away with our hands would find, on occasion, a bone.

Narrator: The pile was too big to sift through with traditional archaeological methods. Instead, Beck’s team rigged together a mechanical screener.

Beck: So, we could, instead of having shovelfuls, spadefuls of dirt processed at a time, we could process backhoe buckets of dirt at a time.

Narrator: Beck says that learning to recognize bone fragments is an acquired skill.

Beck: It’s always fun to be out in the field and watch people’s faces when they start to recognize artifacts. It’s one of those things that takes a little bit of practice. You’re walking across a

landscape, you're looking at big piles of dirt and all of a sudden something just doesn't look the same.

Narrator: Before we get to what they found at the excavation site, let's talk about the history of the land where the George Thomas Building sits. Presidents Circle is a U-shaped lawn and drive. You can look at a map of Presidents Circle on the university's website map.utah.edu. At the top of the curve of the U is the Park Building. That's the university administration building. The first buildings on the circle went up beginning in 1899.

The George Thomas Building was the last of the nine buildings. It was originally built as the university's library. In 1968 it re-opened as the Utah Museum of Natural History. The museum moved to a new larger building in 2011, leaving the Thomas Building empty until its recent transformation into the Crocker Science Center.

When the crews began the renovation in 2016, one of the first items of business was removing the old book stacks that hearkened back to the building's original use as a library. Here's Charles Shepherd again.

Shepherd: The building structure itself and the literal book stacks were sort of one element. Shorter floor heights, impossible to re-use for anything besides bookshelves. And it also had some serious structural problems.

That's where he found the remains — under the former book stacks. Before the book stacks and the Thomas Building were built, part of the land they sit on was just a gulch. It's called Cottam's Gulch, and there's actually a little bit left of it southwest of the building, marked by a little brick path. The rest of it was filled in during the Thomas Building construction. But it was open until then. That gulch, or close to it, is where the archaeologists are digging. And apparently more than bones ended up in the ground before the building was built. They found some broken bottles, some dishes and even some buttons.

Beck: A preponderance of those looked to be derived from a science lab. So, things like test tubes and burettes. Some of the more interesting artifacts, I think, that we recovered: Some crucibles, glass crucibles, ceramic crucibles, really interesting egghead-y lab equipment. And that actually kind of threw us a little bit for a tailspin.

Narrator: So, when does an archaeological excavation stop? When they reach so-called "sterile soil," meaning there's no artifacts or bones within a six-inch level of earth. The next question is to determine when these artifacts and remains were put in place.

Beck: We're interested in the behavior that put the artifacts there and not necessarily the thing itself. And, but the behavior that we're interested in, what put the artifact there, isn't a physical thing, so we can't actually get a date on that, we have to make an inference about the date.

Narrator: The archaeologists would have had a much harder time without the help of building historians, historical architects, and others on the team that investigated these remains. Some of them you'll get to know better later on.

Beck: We're incredibly fortunate to have a really good historic record. So, we knew when the building was constructed, we knew the sequence of modifications to the building, when additions were made, how they were made. That isn't always the case in archaeology. In prehistoric archaeology we have nothing like that.

Narrator: Like Beck says, context is everything. So, here's what we can tell from the context: The University of Utah medical school was founded in 1905. No cadavers would have been on campus before then. Cottam's Gulch was open and accessible all the way up until 1933, when the site was filled in as part of the Thomas Building construction. So, there we go. The remains date to sometime between 1905 and 1933. It's a wide range.

Beck: This is one of a fairly unique set of circumstances that was able to bring together in one large interdisciplinary team all of these specialists to, I think, tell a much better story. I think that the story it tells is of an early medical school training students in a time where considerations of disposal of lab materials, across the board, glassware to remains even, is radically different from what we experience today.

Narrator: So, here's where we're at. The remains have been professionally investigated and fully recovered. We're fairly certain the remains are anatomical specimen cadavers. We even have a date range — the early years of the 20th century. So now what? Now it's time to start looking at the bones themselves.

That's coming next time on "Secrets of the Campus Cadavers."

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