Hardly anyone alive today has ever heard the name John Scott Harrison. However John Scott Harrison has the distinction of being the only man in American History whose father and son became President of the United States. John Scott Harrison’s father was William Henry Harrison the 9th President and his son Benjamin Harrison became the 23rd President of the United States.

THE SUDDEN DEATH OF JOHN SCOTT HARRISON

On May 25th, 1878 John Scott Harrison died suddenly at his home at Point Farm located close to North Bend, Ohio, about 16 miles west of Cincinnati overlooking the Ohio River.

Funeral services were held at the Presbyterian Church in Cleves, Ohio on May 29th. There were two funeral sermons. First, blind and infirm Horace Bushnell gave an address extolling the virtues of Mr. Harrison. Then the Rev. Mr. R.E. Hawley, acting pastor, concluded the services by sketching Harrison’s life. Among the family of John Scott Harrison was his highly successful lawyer son from Indianapolis Mr. Benjamin Harrison, who was already at the helm of the Indiana Republican party and within 19 years would become the nation’s 23rd President.

At the conclusion of the funeral the family filed past the open coffin and cast a last glance upon the person who had so frequently and so successfully influenced their lives. Interment was in the Congress Green Cemetery where the Harrison family plot and vault was located on a hill commanding a broad and beautiful view of the Ohio River Valley.

CONCERN IMMEDIATELY BECAME AN ISSUE

One thing only marred the burial service. As the funeral party walked to John Scott’s grave it was noticed that the resting place of 23 year old Augustus Devin, a nephew of Benjamin Harrison and who had just been buried himself less than a week before John Scott’s death, had been disturbed. Though placed in his grave only the Saturday before, indications were that young Devin’s grave had been robbed by body snatchers. Others thought that only hogs had been at work uprooting the earth. However on close examination, it was revealed that indeed there had been a theft of the corpse. This discovery made two precautions necessary: one was to hide the fact from Devin’s widowed mother until the body could be recovered, and the other was to take additional safety measures for safeguarding John Scott Harrison’s remains. To this end Benjamin Harrison together with his younger brother John supervised the actual lowering of his father’s body into an eight-foot-long grave. At the bottom, as a secure receptacle for the
metallic casket was a brick vault with thick walls and a stone bottom. Three flat stones, eight or more inches thick were procured for a cover. With great difficulty the stones were lowered over the casket, the largest at the upper end and the two smaller slabs crosswise at the foot. All three were carefully cemented together. For several hours the grave was left open so that the cement might dry. Finally, under guard a great quantity of dirt was shoveled over the stones.

GHASTLY GHOULS GO TO WORK

Benjamin Harrison took a train back to Indianapolis late on the day of his father’s funeral so that he might have a few days to finish his address which would open the Republican State Convention on Wednesday, June 5th. The Harrison family saw Benjamin and his wife off at the depot and then all returned to North Bend except for the younger brother John. He stayed in Cincinnati in order that he might begin a search in the morning for Augustus Devin’s body.

In the morning, armed with a search warrant, John Harrison and his cousin George Eaton started their search. They were aided by a Constable Lacey and a Detective named Snelbaker. The search began at the Ohio Medical College on 6th Street located between Vine and Race on the south side. Apart from the general fear that the resurrectionists (that was the name the public gave to grave robbers) might have been in collusion with the medical school, their only actual clue was indeed a weak one. They were informed that at three o’clock that morning a wagon had passed through the alley on the south side of the college building and had stopped at the door where all anatomical bodies were dumped – literally. They further learned that before the wagon had rattled off, something or some body had been taken out. This information did not necessarily suggest that young Devin’s body was there, for both John Harrison and George Eaton, now playing the role of Sherlock Holmes supposed that their young kinsman’s body had been sold much earlier in the same week – and as will be seen, they were absolutely correct.

Nevertheless, at the suggestion of the police officials, a close search of the college was begun. An obnoxious protesting janitor named A.Q. Marshall showed them the various rooms of the college but he stoutly maintained that no bodies were to be found. With the help of a lantern the darkness in the chute where bodies were usually dumped from the street dispelled the darkness, still no trace of any body.

THE TERRIBLE DISCOVERY

At last when the building had been thoroughly searched, young John and George were ready to look elsewhere. Constable Lacey, however, noticed a taut rope attached to the windlass. Immediately he ordered Detective Snelbaker to haul it up. It was not an easy task for as the windlass was pulled it was soon evident that there was a heavy weight at the end of the rope. At last there emerged into the light a body. A cloth covered only the head and shoulders of what appeared to be the body of a very old man.
John Harrison dismissed the discovery simply because Augustus Devin was a very young man – not an old man. In any event the body was placed on the floor and Lacey cast aside the cloth with a stick. As he did so, Harrison caught sight of the dead man’s face and exclaimed in horror that the dead body was none other than that of his father, John Scott Harrison!

Harrison’s eyes bulged from their sockets. The terrible sight sickened him physically and tortured him emotionally. In good faith he came looking for a widow’s son, and he had found instead the corpse of his own father, entombed not more than twenty-four hours before. The scene was almost beyond belief: John Scott Harrison’s body caught by a rope around its neck, hidden in a black hole in the Medical College of Ohio right in downtown Cincinnati! In his daze the youngest of the Harrison’s thought only of the grave at North Bend – a grave bricked in and covered with nearly a ton of stone slabs, cemented and then covered with earth. Still deeply agitated, John Harrison engaged the Cincinnati undertaking firm of Estep & Meyer located at 214, 216 and 218 West Seventh Street and owned by T.B. Estep and G.B. Meyer to care for his father’s body until he could consult with his older brothers and other family members. Above all he was determined to keep the matter secret.

Secrecy, though highly desirable, was doomed to failure. A reporter from the Cincinnati Commercial learned the startling fact from the fire department boys next to the medical college. The reporter tracked down Harrison, Eaton, and the Estep & Meyer Undertakers, but to no avail. Nobody talked and the undertakers who had been sworn to silence would not even admit that it was John Scott Harrison’s corpse which had been uncovered. Before long, however, the news broke – not from Cincinnati but from North Bend. Three relatives had visited the Harrison to mb early that morning and learned for themselves the distressing news. They found that the two smaller stones originally placed across the outer coffin had been lifted on end. Then the ghouls had evidently drilled a series of holes in the outer coffin in exactly the same fashion as when young Devin’s body was stolen. Finally the lid of the inner coffin was pried up the glass seal broken and the body drawn out feet first. This was contrary to the usual practice of body snatching, indicating that one of the perpetrators had been present at the burial and had noted that the smaller stones were placed over the foot of the vault.

Young Archie Eaton was sent immediately to Cincinnati to apprise his brother George and his uncle John, the searchers for Devin’s body, that they now faced a far holier task in seeking to recover the stolen body of John Scott Harrison. At the last moment Carter Harrison decided to join Archie Eaton on the short trip to Cincinnati.

The subsequent meeting of the two Harrison brothers in Cincinnati was one of the strangest in history. When they met, Carter Harrison informed the others that John Scott Harrison’s body had been stolen while at the same time John Harrison informed the others that he had discovered the body of John Scott Harrison. It was a moment of profound grief mingled with stern satisfaction.
Benjamin Harrison had literally only arrived in Indianapolis when he was urgently called back to Cincinnati. The Cincinnati Police efforts availed little. The police rounded up the usual suspects but they were all released.

Just before Benjamin Harrison arrived from Indianapolis his older brother Carter decided to make a quick visit to the Ohio Medical College to examine the spot where his father’s body had been discovered. At the college he encountered Dr. W. M. Seely who was the Secretary of the Medical College as well as a Professor. It was a terribly unfortunate meeting. The eminent physician, who was already incensed by the newspaper criticism leveled at the medical college and the faculty had the indelicacy of remarking to the grief stricken Carter Harrison that the entire affair really mattered little since it would all be the same for everyone on the day of resurrection. Neither the public nor the Harrison’s would forget nor forgive that remark.

THE ARREST OF THE JANITOR

Before Benjamin Harrison arrived, his brother Carter swore out a warrant for the arrest of A.Q. Marshall the janitor at the Ohio Medical College. Marshall was arrested on the charge of receiving, concealing, and secreting John Scott Harrison’s body which had been taken unlawfully and maliciously from its grave.

Marshall was no sooner committed to cell 61 at the Hamilton County Jail than the entire college faculty rushed to his defense. The medical men pooled their resources and posted the $5,000.00 bond for their janitor’s release. This show of support for one which the public had come to regard as an accomplice in the grave robbery, angered the citizens of Cincinnati even more. Several people suggested mob action in defiance of the law, but this was quickly vetoed by Benjamin Harrison. However, Harrison made is abundantly clear that he would exhaust all the necessary legal processes to insure justice both to his family and to the family of Augustus Devin.

In Cincinnati things went from bad to worse when the Medical College of Ohio took the position that the attention this case was commanding was hurting their chances of obtaining additional cadavers for dissection. The press had a field day.

PROTECTION FOR JOHN SCOTT HARRISON’S BODY

While the public argued both sides of the controversy, the body of John Scott Harrison was quietly re-interred in the vault of Jacob Strader, who was a close family friend of the Harrison’s, at Spring Grove Cemetery.

Reports of John Scott Harrison’s reburial helped to keep alive public indignation in the Queen City. Crowds milled in and out of the alley behind the medical school attempting to peer into the now celebrated cadaver chute. Local reporters interviewed as many people as possible. They concluded that hysteria was growing and the question on the lips of thousands was, “What can we do with the bodies of our loved and lost ones to
save them from the ignominy of the ‘chute and windlass and dissecting knife of the Medical College?’

THE SEARCH FOR AUGUSTUS DEVIN’S BODY GOES ON

The mystery of Devin’s body went unsolved for another three weeks. A clue which eventually broke the case emerged. Medical professors from both the Ohio Medical College and the Miami Medical College both in Cincinnati admitted that like most other medical schools in the country they were under contract with “certain persons” who would guarantee a yearly supply of cadavers for dissection and anatomical demonstration. It was during these conversations that the fact leaked out that Cincinnati was a shipping center for this “dead traffic,” which moved on to smaller cities like Fort Wayne and Ann Arbor.

Then on June 14th another janitor, but this time from the Miami Medical School cracked and confessed collusion with the notorious resurrectionist Charles Morton, alias Dr. Gabriel, alias Dr. Morton, alias Dr. Christian, and alias Dr. Gordon. The janitor’s confession basically indicted the entire medical profession across the United States.

The janitor confessed that when Miami Medical College recessed for the summer good ole Dr. Morton had bribed him to use the medical building basement as headquarters for preparing and shipping bodies to other cities. It was an excellent hiding place as well as an efficient workshop, for with the exception of two hours each day no member of the faculty was near the school. Consequently, the good doctor Morton had worked unmolested for about a month – and in that time young Augustus Devin and old John Scott Harrison were two of his clients.

QUIMBY & COMPANY

The janitor also revealed that many bodies had been prepared and shipped from Cincinnati to the Medical College at Ann Arbor, Michigan, but the address on the barrels containing the cadaver’s read “Quimby and Co.” This was clue enough for the police whose previous search of the Miami Medical College had yielded nothing. The police left for Ann Arbor immediately and easily traced the barrels to the medical college where they found a vat of brine containing several bodies already prepared for use in the fall and winter school sessions.

“Quimby & Co.” as was suspected proved to be a blind by which the Michigan medical school avoided suspicion and detection. All shipments so addressed had been delivered to the college and signed for by college employees. The police made a quick check of the May and June arrivals and in short order they were convinced that young Devin’s body, stolen on May 22, had been shipped from the Miami Medical College on May 24 and had arrived in Ann Arbor on May 25th. In no time the police identified one of the cadaver’s as that of young Devin and a telegram was send immediately to the family in North Bend.
DEVIN’S REBURIAL

Young Devin’s remains were expected at North Bend at 10:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, June 16, 1878. Long before the scheduled arrival and despite the threatening skies, better than five hundred people gathered to follow the body for the second time to the grave in the family plot in Congress Green Cemetery. The townspeople lined the hill leading to the cemetery while relatives and close friends waited at the depot. Shortly before ten o’clock, word came that the body would not arrive for another twenty-four hours. This announcement caused no little disappointment and impatience in a community eager and bent upon seeing the body reverently buried again.

On the following morning a driving rain compelled hundreds to stay at home. The Harrison’s, however, including Benjamin, were counted among the one hundred and fifty prominent citizens assembled at the station in final tribute to young Augustus Devin. The family had scheduled no services, but once the coffin was placed in the freight room it was opened and all present filed past slowly and prayerfully. By the hour the procession had reached Congress Green and the small company of mourners had swelled to a large concourse. More than one made the observation that four weeks to the day had elapsed between the first and second interment.

Long after the funeral cortege had left the scene there remained around the sacred enclosure a volunteer guard composed entirely of citizens. This was a practice instituted the night after the robbery of John Scott Harrison’s grave. No precaution was overlooked. Even citizens late in getting home at night were halted by their self-appointed sentries.

THE SLOW GRIND OF JUSTICE

In the end, the final verdict in this case has been clouded by time. The records concerning all the indictment’s and lawsuits were burned when an angry mob burned the Hamilton County Court House in Cincinnati to the ground in 1886. Dr. Morton seems to have vanished from the face of the earth.

In December, 1879 the body of John Scott Harrison was reinterred without ceremony in the Harrison family tomb by Estep & Meyer Undertakers for a charge of $4.00. He rests in this tomb to this very day.

The ultimate issue of these private civil suits is relatively unimportant when compared to the lasting social benefit which occurred to the American people as a result of finding John Scott Harrison’s body in 1878. For in less than two years the Ohio Legislature passed a statute which effectively relegated resurrectionism to a dark and forgotten page of history. The best feature of the 1880 law, an important landmark in medical history, was an increase in the maximum penalty for the body snatching practice. This new law (a precursor for the Uniform Anatomical Gift Act) bearing unmistakably bright teeth, proved an important step in the legitimate donations of dead human bodies to medical
schools across the county. This lessened the popular odium previously associated with anatomical research on ghoul-given bodies. In time, young up and coming surgeons became more adept, people lived longer, and a more educated public cooperated with the medical profession.

On the funeral side of things, as a direct result of the Harrison Horror, Andrew Van Bibber who was an inventor in Cincinnati in 1878 invented what he called the “mort-safe” and patented the device. It was the first attempt at developing the modern burial vault. Then on the heels of Van Bibber’s invention, in 1879 George W. Boyd of Springfield, Ohio patented the first metal grave vault to use the air bell principle to seal. The purpose of both of these vaults was to stop the incidences of grave robbing and the devices worked extremely well.

So often today we say that the use of the burial vault is to protect the remains – from the elements found in the ground. True to be sure, but historically the burial vault was developed to protect the remains, but not from the elements in the ground, but from grave robbers. It is strange how the purpose of inventions change over time.