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Hiding in Plain Sight: Medical Theses, Slavery, and Reparative Archival Practices

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Hiding in Plain Sight:
Medical Theses, Slavery, and Reparative Archival Practices

Anna Marie Schuldt

Archives in the Atlantic Conference

Session 5C: Finding the Patients, Following the Careers, and Encouraging New Audiences:

Enhancing the Academic, Archival, and Wider Learning Potential of the Waring Library's

Inaugural Thesis Collection

May 17, 2024

Introduction

We think Charleston the most eligible [for a medical school]— because Anatomy, which constitutes the basis of the Science, cannot be efficiently taught unless the means of obtaining Bodies are ample and easy. Anatomical preparations, public demonstration, as well as the private but more practical illustrations of the Dissecting Room, unequivocally point to Charleston as the place most likely to afford the facilities required.¹

In 1821 Dr. Thomas Cooper addressed the Medical Board at Columbia, SC, advocating for the founding of a medical school in the South to prevent southerners from returning home as “a northern practitioner.”² His address underscores that students from the South were at great risk for “[acquiring] northern habits, propensities, prejudices and modes of thinking.”³ Cooper said, “It is an evil... That they should be tempted to form habits and opinions unsuited to the country in which they are ultimately to live.”⁴ To be clear, the proposal to found a medical school in the South was largely in part to help uphold the belief in the institution of slavery.

The introductory quote to this paper was given on November 22, 1822, at the South Carolina Medical Society’s special meeting to further discuss the founding of a medical college in South Carolina. They sought permission from the South Carolina state legislature to found a medical school, spurred on by Cooper’s prior address. They preferred Charleston for the school instead of Columbia as proposed by Cooper. This quote claims Charleston to be the superior location for founding such a school largely in part due to the access to ample bodies of deceased enslaved individuals to be used in dissection. They were successful in their petition, and the

¹ Medical Society of South Carolina Meeting Minutes: 1810-1833, 22 November 1822, MSSC 1810-1833, Medical Society of South Carolina Digital Collections, Waring Historical Library, Charleston, South Carolina. <https://waringlibrary.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/min/id/9112/rec/15>

² Address to the Medical Board at Columbia by Dr. Thomas Cooper, 1821, Printed Ephemera Collection, Portfolio 173, Folder 28, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.17302800/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Medical College of South Carolina was founded in 1824 with the first class graduating the following year.

In the 1830s, the faculty temporarily split the Medical College into two separate, rival institutions. During this period, each College established its respective teaching infirmary. Both colleges advertised their services in the *Charleston Courier* calling for enslavers to bring enslaved individuals for medical treatment.⁵ Again, the bodies of the enslaved were used as tools for teaching, but this time by allowing students to experiment on them as they learned medical treatments.

The institution of slavery laid the foundation for the justification and establishment of the Medical College of South Carolina, now the Medical University of South Carolina. White doctors and students benefited from the use and abuse of enslaved individuals. The crumb trail of evidence confirming this claim comes from scant records: newspaper articles, the Medical Society of South Carolina Minutes, MUSC's bulletins, and transcribed addresses. The Waring Historical Library, the university archives and special collections at MUSC, should hold these records and more because they pertain to the history of the institution and the use of enslaved bodies was highly prevalent in medical education. When searching for documentation of MUSC's involvement with slavery within the Waring Historical Library's catalog, resources are limited. Broader-related searches such as general care for the enslaved population or plantation medicine also retrieve limited results of primary sources. So where is the archival documentation of the intersection of medical history and the lives of the enslaved population in the South at the Waring? The Waring Historical Library Inaugural These Project aims to identify and bring these hidden narratives into focus through reparative description work.

⁵ "Infirmary," *Charleston Courier*, December 18, 1834. "Medical College of S. Carolina, Queen Street," *Charleston Courier*, November 6, 1834.

Project Development

Toward the end of 2023, Brooke Fox, Tabitha Samuel, Stephen Kenny, and I began meeting to create a collaborative project that connected Kenny's research focus with the Waring Historical Library's collections. We quickly centered our attention on the Inaugural Theses Collection, an invaluable set of theses written by early graduates of the Medical College of South Carolina, documenting medical theories taught in the South during the early to mid-1800s. Kenny, having spent significant time reviewing these theses during research visits to the Waring Historical Library, had developed an in-depth familiarity with them. His knowledge proved instrumental to this project.

Kenny's research, along with that of other historians, has unearthed stories revealing the connections between medicine and the enslaved population, either in detail or in passing within the inaugural theses, typically as case studies. Such insights could only be discovered through meticulous research. As previously discussed by the panelists, various efforts to make the Inaugural Theses Collection more accessible have been undertaken over the decades, including indexing and digitization projects. However, the minimal subject headings in the online catalog often fail to indicate whether case studies presented in the theses discuss the enslaved population. Additionally, the current index does not include this information to the fullest extent and uses outdated and harmful language. Therefore, the collection requires further descriptive work to increase accessibility and recover marginalized experiences and voices.

Early conversations within the workgroup provided a user and historian's perspective on developing the most beneficial resources to enhance future users' experiences. Through collaboration, we recognized a deeper need beyond revising the catalog record's metadata. In addition to updating subject headings within catalog records, Kenny suggested drafting

supplemental information on the authors of the theses to provide context for each thesis. He proposed including details such as the authors' involvement with slavery and the Confederacy, which would help researchers better understand how intertwined the institutions of slavery and medicine were. This addition would help disrupt the often glorified narrative of doctors and the medical profession and remind researchers that these authors were more often than not enslavers as well as reminding them of the broader social context. Other details, such as the student's advisors and geographical areas, could further assist researchers in making connections early on.

Through the workgroup's meetings, we established the Waring Historical Library Inaugural Theses Project and began work at the beginning of 2024. Our goals are to increase the accessibility and searchability of the 1,858 inaugural theses and to highlight underrepresented or historically excluded communities. Our key outcomes include enhancing the current index and transferring it to a LibGuide format, as well as improving the descriptions, subject headings, and transcripts within our catalog records. We agreed that this project would be a long-term endeavor. While the reparative work is significant, it is also ongoing and evolving. This project has not received additional funding, and workgroup members contribute a limited amount of their free time when possible.

Workflow

Workflow Overview

1. Develop Working List
2. Link Catalog Record and Digitized Record
3. Pursue Delegated Tasks
 - a. Transcription Writing

- b. Biographical Blurb Writing
 - c. Developing Suggested MeSH Headings
 - d. Developing Online Guide
4. Updating Catalog Record

Project Set Up

The first step in the project was to identify the relevant theses from the collection and create a working list to focus our efforts on. The sheer number of theses in the collection made it incredibly difficult to go through and analyze each one individually. However, past research efforts by historians Stephen Kenny and Chris Willoughby provided a foundational resource for our project. During a previous research visit, Kenny meticulously examined a majority of the dissertations and compiled a list of those that mentioned an enslaved individual or population. Additionally, he noted specific details about the individuals or populations referenced in a significant number of these theses. Willoughby also included several relevant theses in his book's bibliography. The consolidation of their lists resulted in 115 theses to include in our subject guide, offering a robust starting point for our work.

For context, only three of these 115 theses had related subject headings, such as Black or African Americans, Ethnicity, Minority Groups, Racial Groups, Slavery—United States, Enslavement, and Black People. These three theses were the only ones in the collection with titles that specifically mentioned their focus on the enslaved population. Consequently, out of 115, only these three would have been easily discoverable by researchers using our catalog to explore the medical treatment and experimentation experiences of enslaved individuals.

In developing a comprehensive approach to cataloging and digitizing the inaugural theses, our workgroup created a Google Sheet documenting basic descriptive elements for each

thesis, including title, call number, location, author, publication date, and subjects. Initially, we decided to focus on the first forty theses to assess the time and resources required to complete the project.

Our next step involved locating the catalog record link and digitized record link for each thesis. This process revealed an issue stemming from the migration of our catalog and digital repository platforms, which had disrupted the links connecting catalog records to their digitized counterparts. Additionally, we identified the digitization status of each thesis: eighteen were already in our digital repository, and another eighteen had been digitized but not yet uploaded. Furthermore, we were able to indicate which theses in the digital repository were still in need of transcriptions.

The Google Sheet consolidated the most pertinent information and expedited access to the resources, providing the workgroup a platform for pursuing our delegated tasks for the rest of the project.

Delegated Tasks

The next step in the process, which the workgroup is currently engaged in, involves working on delegated tasks: transcription writing, biographical blurb writing, developing suggested subject headings, and creating the online guide. The Google Sheet was expanded to include rows for suggested subject headings and biographical blurbs.

In early discussions, the workgroup agreed that additional transcriptions would provide better access to the materials for researchers. Fox and Samuel have dedicated time to this aspect, with Samuel also overseeing one volunteer working on transcriptions. Currently, six additional transcriptions have been completed.

Kenny spent significant time researching the authors of the theses to create mini biographical blurbs, highlighting relevant biographical details. He referred to Federal Census Slave Schedules, Find a Grave, and other resources to provide details beyond the content of their theses. Thirty-four biographical blurbs have been written, with the overwhelming majority revealing these men to be enslavers.

Subject headings are a key element of catalog records, providing insight into related topics and assisting in discoverability. The Waring Historical Library has used both Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH). As part of this process, Fox developed suggested MeSH additions for individual records, which requires close reading of each thesis. She has created new subject headings for twelve theses. MeSH provides specific medical-related terms and relevant options such as Enslaved Persons, Human Experimentation, Domestic Slave Trade, and Racialized Medicine.

Developing Online Guide

The Waring Historical Library has access to LibGuides through MUSC Libraries, which we chose for the guide to the collection. Benefits include easy integration into our website and LibGuide's accessible and mobile-friendly, pre-designed elements.

In designing the Guide to the Inaugural Theses Collection, I prioritized the ability to expand the guide in the future and to make it functional for patrons. There are three main pages: the Welcome, About Guide, and Subject Guides pages. The Welcome page succinctly introduces the Inaugural Theses Collection. The About Guide page provides more details about the collection, the guide, and how to access the collection, helping researchers get the best use out of the guide. The Subject Guides page serves as the springboard to more specific subject guides for this collection. Currently, we have subject guides for Geographical Epidemiology and Treatment

and Experimentation of the Enslaved Population. The former was used as a test group with a smaller selection of theses for the design of the subject guide pages. All pages within the Guide to the Inaugural Theses Collection include a shortened version of our Statement of Harmful Content to provide appropriate notice to users.

I reviewed subject guides at peer medical archives to understand standard practices. Most often, subject guides had long lists of resources with embedded links and limited contextual descriptions, which are visually overwhelming. My goal was to limit the amount of content displayed at one time while providing the necessary context to inform patrons about each thesis.

As a result, I created a subject guide that segments the 115 theses into smaller groups such as “Infectious Disease” or “Reproductive and Gynecological Health,” allowing theses to be displayed in smaller numbers. There are currently ten categories, each with a carousel of related theses. This decision was informed by design and past patron requests. While some researchers look broadly into the medical treatment of enslaved individuals, others seek more niche topics. For example, a recent researcher was looking for documentation of “venereal disease, comments on fertility or infertility, cases of gender ambiguity or ‘doubtful sex’, or instances of medical experimentation in this vein.” This design also allows researchers to focus on more specific areas of interest.

The overall structure of the page includes a brief general overview of the specific guide on the left, including the guide’s description and categories within the page (Fig. 1). On the right side is the listing of the theses organized by category. Each listing includes the title (embedded with the catalog link), the author (embedded with a biographical blurb link), the publication date, access information, and a brief statement on how the thesis relates to the treatment and experimentation of enslaved individuals.

The screenshot shows the website for the Waring Historical Library. The header includes the library's name, a search bar, and navigation links for Website, Catalog, MEDICA, and MUSC History. Below the header is a navigation menu with links for Home, About, Services, Donate, MUSC Quick Facts, Visit Us, Become a Member, and Ask an Archivist. The main content area is titled "Treatment and Experimentation of the Enslaved Population Subject Guide" and features a "Subject Guides" dropdown menu. The page is divided into sections: "About" (describing the Medical College of South Carolina's history with slavery), "Cardiovascular Health" (focusing on heart and blood vessel conditions), and "Genetic and Developmental Disorders" (focusing on genetic abnormalities). Each section includes a description, a list of categories, and a list of featured dissertations with their authors and dates. The featured dissertations are "On Aneurism" by Samuel A. Mims (1846) and "On Heart-clot" by William H. Turner (1858). The page also includes images of handwritten manuscripts and a stack of books.

THE WARING HISTORICAL LIBRARY

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Waring Historical Library / The Guide to the Inaugural Theses Collection / Treatment and Experimentation of the Enslaved Population

Welcome About Guide Subject Guides

Treatment and Experimentation of the Enslaved Population Subject Guide

About

The Medical College of South Carolina was founded in part due to the institution of slavery. They taught how to treat illnesses that frequented the South and enslaved populations and utilized the bodies of enslaved individuals in the dissection classroom. Many of the inaugural theses mention the connection between medicine and the enslaved population, either in detail or in passing. This guide is meant to make visible the presence, contributions, and abuse of enslaved individuals in the development and study of medicine. The theses are organized by topic/date.

To learn more about an author's life, career, and connection to slavery, select "About Author."

Cardiovascular Health

This category focuses on conditions affecting the heart and blood vessels, encompassing a wide range of cardiovascular diseases. Conditions such as heart diseases and aneurysms, which impact the function and structure of the heart and blood vessels, are included here.

Categories

- Cardiovascular Health
- Dermatological Health
- Geographical Epidemiology
- Genetic and Developmental Disorders
- Infectious Diseases
- Medical Treatments and Therapies
- Neurological and Psychiatric Disorders
- Reproductive and Gynecological Health
- Respiratory and Pulmonary Health
- Trauma and Injury

Genetic and Developmental Disorders

This category encompasses conditions resulting from genetic abnormalities or disruptions in normal developmental processes. Genetic disorders are caused by mutations or alterations in genes, leading to inherited conditions that can affect various aspects of health.

On Aneurism
Samuel A. Mims | 1846
[Read Online](#)

This dissertation includes a case study of a free Black person.

On Heart-clot
William H. Turner | 1858
[Access Options](#)

This dissertation includes an autopsy of a young enslaved woman.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the Treatment and Experimentation of the Enslaved Population Subject Guide.

The guide is still in development and may change based on input from various stakeholders at MUSC.

Case Studies

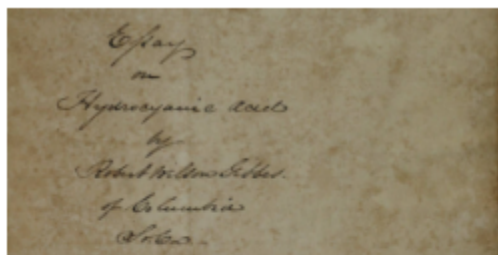
The first example presented is *Essay on Hydrocyanic Acid* written by Robert Wilson Gibbes in 1834. Initially, this thesis was listed in the catalog with the only subject heading being Hydrogen Cyanide, not indicating any further topics covered in the seventeen-page thesis. Gibbes writes, “Dr. Trezevant of Columbia has made a great many experiments with this acid and thinks highly of it in tetanus and infantile convulsions.”⁶ Gibbes also suggests that it may be useful in treating convulsions in children enslaved “in [his] plantation practice.”⁷ Once hidden behind sparse description, this project revealed that this thesis outlines medical experimentation on enslaved children, underscoring the violence enacted by enslavers in the pursuit of medical discovery.

After the completion of the project, the updated subject headings will include Enslaved Persons, Black or African American, Human Experimentation, Tetanus and Convulsions, Prussic Acid, Medical College of South Carolina (1824-1838), and South Carolina. The listing of the thesis in the subject guide now clearly states the subject matter (Fig. 2). While the biographical blurb has not yet been linked, it will outline Gibbes's past as an enslaver and his frequent appearances in the Charleston Bill of Sale.

The second example is *A Dissertation on Puerperal Convulsions* written by Isaiah D. Barrett in 1834. The initial subject headings included Eclampsia and Puerperal Disorders. The thesis outlines the case study of an enslaved girl named Marie, who lived in Sumter, South Carolina, and was described as around eighteen years old. She had just had her first child. This case study details her symptoms and treatment, including bloodletting. Marie made a temporary

⁶ “Essay on Hydrocyanic Acid,” 1834, WZ 4 M4 1834 v.1 no.8, Waring Historical Library Inaugural Theses, Waring Historical Library, Charleston, SC.

⁷ Ibid.



Essay on Hydrocyanic Acid
 Robert Wilson Gibbes | 1834
[Read Online](#)

This dissertation discusses experimentation on enslaved children.

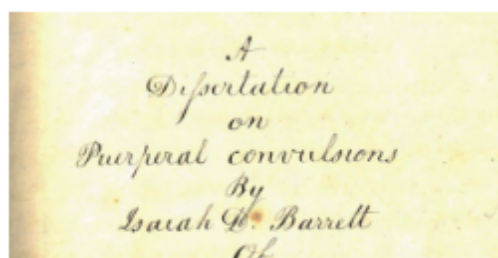
Figure 2: Screenshot of the listing of *Essay on Hydrocyanic Acid Treatment and Experimentation of the Enslaved Population* Subject Guide.

recovery and was able to resume her forced domestic labor and begin caring for her child. Less than two weeks later, she relapsed and passed away.⁸ Marie's story illustrates the dangers young women faced being forced to give birth under such conditions.

After the completion of the project, the updated subject headings will include Enslaved Persons; Black or African American; Maternal Health; Eclampsia; Medical College of South Carolina (1824-1838); and South Carolina. The listing of the thesis also highlights Marie's case

⁸ "A Dissertation on Puerperal Convulsions," 1835, WZ 4 M4 1835 v.1 no.2, Waring Historical Library Inaugural Theses, Waring Historical Library, Charleston, SC.

study, putting her at the center of the dissertation's description (Fig. 3). These two dissertations are illustrative of the vast amount of experiences to be uncovered as the project continues.



A Dissertation on Puerperal Convulsions

Isaiah D. Barrett | 1834

[Contact an archivist](#) to request a scanned copy.

This dissertation includes a case study of an eighteen-year-old enslaved girl named Maria. Also, it comments the treatment of sick enslaved individuals on plantations in the region.

Figure 3: Screenshot of the listing of *A Dissertation on Puerperal Convulsions* in the Treatment and Experimentation of the Enslaved Population Subject Guide.

Next Steps

The workgroup aims to slowly work through all 115 theses over the year. The guide will be completed during this time, and the final step will be to coordinate the updating of our catalog

records. We anticipate this resource will be highly valuable to researchers, especially historians and graduate-level students. The format of the guide will also allow for additional subject guides to be added in the future. We also hope to apply valuable insights from our archival community in the ongoing project to enhance our outcomes.

Takeaways

While the Waring Historical Library Inaugural Theses Project is ongoing, three central takeaways can be gleaned from the progress made thus far. First, the project relies on collaboration between archivists and historians, demonstrating the value of interdisciplinary cooperation in achieving comprehensive and meaningful archival work. Building relationships with the superusers of an archive can provide mutually beneficial outcomes and expedite certain parts of projects as illustrated here. Secondly, crucial insights into the intersection of medical history and the lives of the enslaved population in the South are prevalent in the inaugural theses, illustrating that White medical students benefitted at the expense of living and deceased enslaved individuals. Reparative archival work has revealed narratives hiding in plain sight within this collection. Thirdly, despite limited resources and no additional funding, the project demonstrates that significant progress can be made through strategic planning, the delegation of tasks, and the dedication of workgroup members who contribute their time and expertise.

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