

The
CRAVEN STREET
BONES

1 X 55 HD



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Just off the Strand in London, at 36 Craven Street, is an elegant, four-story Georgian townhouse with a very important place in the history of the United States. As the Colonial ambassador to the British Colony of America, Benjamin Franklin lived and worked here for nearly 20 years during the 18th century. But two centuries later, the Craven Street house revealed a shocking history when a group of U.S. historians bought it for a museum and builders started the renovation in the basement. Work quickly stopped when over 1,200 bones from at least 10 bodies were discovered. The police were called and the house was cordoned off. Tests proved that the bones dated back to the mid-18th century—to the time Franklin was in residence.

Benjamin Franklin, a Founding Father, one of the most eminent thinkers and scientists of the 18th century Enlightenment, was a suspect. Careful investigation of the bones determined these were not victims of a serial killer but of another sinister act, and that others were implicated. Franklin knew very well that while he was upstairs drawing up the blueprint for an American republic, an illegal anatomy school run by his great friend, the brilliant young anatomist William Hewson, was thriving in the basement. Hewson, like his early surgical contemporaries, occupied the shadier fringes of the age of Enlightenment, yet his grisly practices would be the foundations of modern medical science.

In light of the British Anatomy Act of 1832 that severely restricted the legal dissection of bodies, Dr. Hewson was forced to turn to “resurrection men” to further his research. The grave robbers were paid to procure cadavers from the gallows or simply dig up fresh corpses buried earlier in the day in graveyards. These body snatchers were regarded by the public as unsavory citizens, but the illegal snatching and selling of corpses helped doctors greatly improve their understanding of anatomy and general medicine, and also allowed for significant advances in amputation technique.

The Craven Street Bones solves a modern mystery born in the dark fringes of the Age of Enlightenment, showing how illegal grave robbing practices—taking place right beneath Benjamin Franklin’s feet—proved invaluable to the advancement of medical science.

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CREDITS

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