Suggested Readings

Primary Sources: 18th century


-An account by a former slave ship surgeon about the conditions captive Africans endured during the Middle Passage, and their preparation for sale at slave auctions.

Rush, Benjamin. “Observations Intended to Favour a Supposition That the Black Color (As It Is Called) of the Negroes is The Leprosy” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, (1799):289-297

-There was no shortage of theories about why black skin appeared black. Even though the rete mucosum, (the Malpighian layer, location of pigment producing cells in human skin) had been discovered by Marcello Malphigi in the mid seventeenth century, questions still remained about how pigment entered that layer of skin and what its function was. The above article, by Benjamin Rush, a well-known American physician and abolitionist, sought to shed light on questions surrounding black skin color. According to Rush, black people suffered from a mild form of leprosy and that was, in his opinion, responsible for their skin color.


-This pamphlet was written by two free black clergymen, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in response to rumors that were spread about black people profiting unfairly during the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia. During the epidemic, Philadelphia’s black population stayed behind to help nurse the city’s white inhabitants and bury the dead. Black residents of the city were especially sought out, because of the widely circulating belief that black people had a natural (innate) immunity to yellow fever. This belief proved to be dangerously wrong, and Jones and Absalom voiced their anger about the damage this belief had done to their community.

Primary Sources: 19th century

This article was one of many that purported to describe a “slave disease.” These types of diseases were a product of their time. The disease in question was Cachexia Africana as it was connected with dirt eating. Rather than engage in retroactive diagnoses of the disease (the symptoms mimic that of the nutritional disorder beriberi), it is included here to show how physicians constructed a disease based on attitudes about race and bodily difference. Physicians referred to dirt eating in black populations as Cachexia Africana and believed they were observing a racial pathology—Cachexia referred to wasting, and the descriptor “Africana,” indicated that black populations were the chief sufferers of the complaint. While dirt-eating still exists today, known as pica, Cachexia Africana does not.


This article was written by a well-known pro-slavery physician, Samuel A. Cartwright. Cartwright worked in Louisiana and allowed his political views on slavery to influence his ideas about health. He is most famous for having coined the disease “drapetomania” or the disease that causes slaves to run away. The disease was a political and social construction, coined largely in response to pressure from Northern abolitionists. Even peer reviews of Cartwright’s article at the time noted its blatantly political posturing; few southern physicians identified any of their enslaved patients suffering from “drapetomania.” For more see, Anonymous. “Cartwright on the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race.” *Charleston Medical Journal and Review* 7 (1852): 90-98.

19 June 1824, *Medical Society of South Carolina Meeting Minutes 1810–1825*

The Medical College of South Carolina was the oldest continuously operating medical school in the Deep South and the Medical Society of South Carolina was instrumental in its founding. Meeting minutes from the medical society reveal the brazen ways the medical college’s faculty relied on black people’s bodies for the purposes of dissection—a trend that was motivated out of both blatant racism and professional ambition.


Advertisement for a private anatomy room was placed by Dr. John Wagner, a well-respected Charleston physician and faculty member at the Medical College of South Carolina. Dr. Wagner was appointed chair of pathological and surgical anatomy, a new position created at the college in 1829. He placed this advertisement in connection with another advertisement that he ran in the newspaper for a private infirmary that accommodated “Slaves and Coloured Persons” in surgical cases. (See attached images pages 4-5)

Secondary Sources


Mustakeem, Sowande "I Never Have Such a Sickly Ship Before": Diet, Disease, and Mortality in 18th-Century Atlantic Slaving Voyages *Journal of African American History,* (Fall, 2008): 474-496.


INTELLIGENCE.

With much pleasure we give place to the following. From our knowledge of Dr. Wagner, as an highly accomplished surgeon and anatomist, we cannot but wish him every success in his undertaking.—Ed.

CHARLESTON ANATOMICAL ROOMS,

For the Private Instruction in Practical Anatomy and the Operations in Surgery.

The subscriber will commence a Course of Dissections and Demonstrations in Practical Anatomy, on the second Monday in October, to continue until Spring; and will teach the art of making and preserving Anatomical preparations.

The Surgical Anatomy of all parts concerned, in the important operations, will be dissected and demonstrated; and the mode of performing all the surgical operations, as practised in the English and French hospitals, will be taught to such classes as may offer.

The Rooms will be provided with all the necessary Surgical Instruments, and with every convenience, for the improvement, comfort, and health of the Student.

TERMS.

Fee for the Dissecting Rooms and Demonstrations, $10
Fee for Demonstrations in Surgical Anatomy and Operations, 15

Private Pupils will be entered, at my office, in Broad-street, at the following fees; they will be examined three times in each week, upon the several branches of their Medical Education, and be entitled to tickets, for the Dissecting Room and Operations, gratis.

Fee for the Winter Season, 1 $ 60
Fee for one Year, 100
Fee for the whole term of Medical Education, 300

JOHN WAGNER, Surgeon.

Anatomical Rooms, Queen-street, Sept. 25th, 1828.

N.B. In connexion with the above plan, and in order to afford every facility to the Surgical Student especially, Doctor Wagner has established a private Hospital, at his office, in Broad-street; where he will accommodate Slaves and Coloured Persons affected with such Diseases only as require surgical treatment. The Diseases of the Eye will, in especial manner, receive particular attention, with the hope of extending his plan, at some future day, into an Infirmary (such as is now established in New-York and other Cities) for the cure of Diseases of that important organ.—Surgical Patients, from the country, will be received, in like manner, as from the city.
The Subscriber, will receive at his office, No. 61 Broad-street, slaves and coloured persons, labouring under Surgical Diseases and Accidents. The diseases of the eye will meet particular attention, with a view of connecting them to this establishment.

JOHN WAGNER, Surgeon.

July 10

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