

*Berkshire's Medical College*

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Perhaps the concentration aroused in certain residents of Pittsfield by the announcement at the *Pittsfield Sun* on August 22, 1822, that a medical school would commence in Pittsfield on September 18 was understandable. The new Berkshire Medical Institution was taking over for its premises the old Pittsfield Hotel (the resort of Berkshire's free-thinking democrats, by the way) on the east side of Park Square, which meant that the medical school would be *next to the cemetery!*

To an easily inflamed provincial mind in 1822, the motive was transparent. The school would be teaching anatomy, and anatomy required dissection, and dissection required a continuing supply of reasonably fresh bodies. Why else would a medical school locate next to a cemetery?

The Institution devoted several pages of its initial announcement to the subject of grave robbing and the laws against it. Like other medical schools of the time, it published disclaimers in newspapers and its catalogues. It sought to neutralize the public's opinion that medical students made "resurrections." The professor of anatomy was responsible for providing all material for dissection, and he wouldn't do anything illegal or detectable, would he?

By 1822, seven scientific medical schools had sprung up in New England, but the closest one to Berkshire was in Castleton, Vermont. Prospective doctors had to go elsewhere for the academic part of their medical training, and the expense, distance, and inconvenience worked considerable hardship for Berkshire farm boys who wished to enter the profession.

So Pittsfield physician Henry Halsey Childs (Williams '02) responded enthusiastically to Castleton's Professor J.P. Batchelder's suggestion that the Berkshire District Medical Society ought to establish a medical school at Pittsfield. The society appointed Childs along with Dr. Asa Burbank of Lanesborough and Dr. Daniel Collins of Lenox, to ask the Legislature in Boston for a charter and an endowment.

Before the Legislature acted, the Institution opened anyway, as advertised, with 22 students taught by five faculty members in anatomy, physiology, chemistry, physic (medicine), *materia medica* (pharmacology), surgery, and midwifery. In addition, a lawyer came in to teach medical law.

On January 4, 1823, Governor Brooks signed the act the Legislature had passed granting the Institute a charter (over strenuous objections from Harvard Medical School) but no endowment. By then Williams had agreed to cooperate with the Institution as the Legislature had stipulated as a condition of its approval, an association which continued until 1837. Thereafter the Institution was linked with Vermont Medical College until 1856.

In those days, formal study at a medical school was not a large part of most doctors' three-year professional preparation. As late as the Civil War only 50% of all doctors had graduated from a medical school. The rest had become doctors by "reading" with an established local doctor, keeping his accounts, reading in his medical books, and helping with his patients. The inadequacy of this apprentice system to introduce the student to scientific methods and the fruits of medical research was the despair of advanced medical educators like Oliver Wendell Holmes, who for a time apparently toyed with the idea of accepting Child's twice-repeated offer of a professorship at Pittsfield.

At a country medical school like Berkshire, the faculty assembled only for the lecture term, which lasted between 12 and 16 weeks. Several of the instructors were teachers from Williams; some were itinerant lecturers from other medical schools; some were country doctors. Students had to attend two terms of lectures to get the degree, but as the course of study remained the same every term, the second must have been repetitive. Tuition each term was \$40 and board was \$1.75 a week, including washing, room, and use of the laboratories in the old hotel stables.

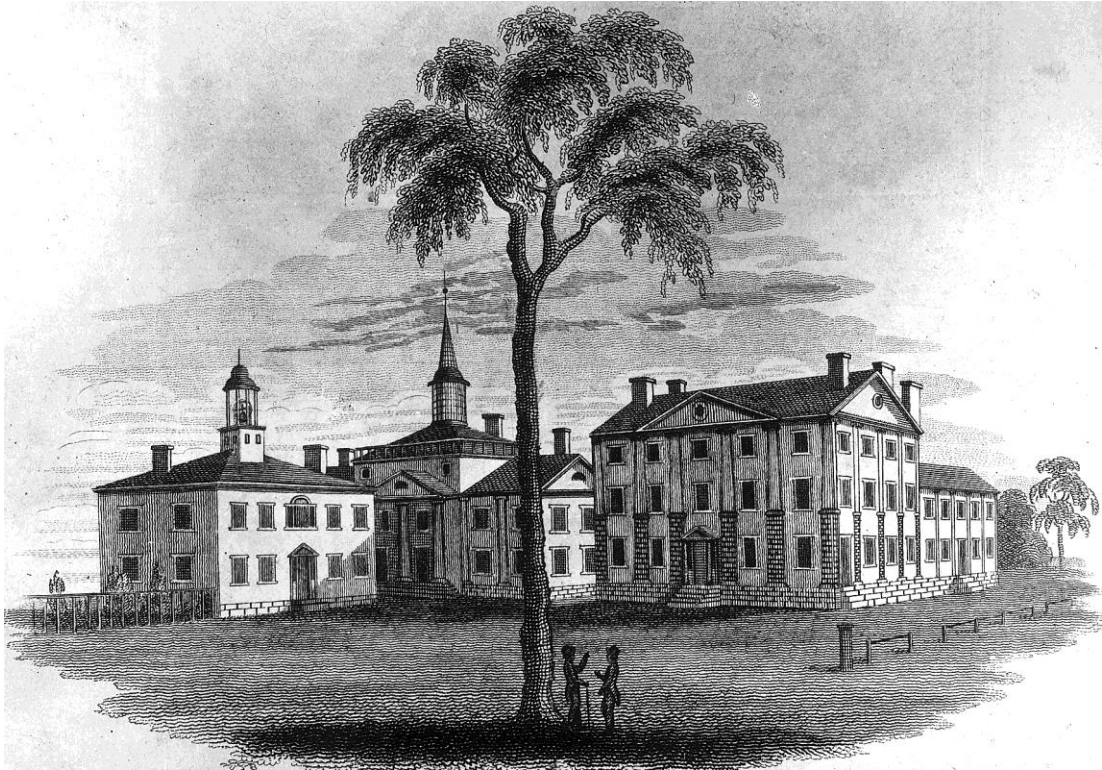
By 1830 the Institution was graduating 24 medical students, four more than Harvard. It introduced pathology to the medical school curriculum, and opened a clinic for the needy. It sponsored a series of science lectures open to the public as well as to students, and tried to do something to round out medical students' education in literature, history, and general intellectual cultivation. In the 44 years of its existence it graduated 1138 doctors and was an acknowledged success, a leader, even, in medical education.

But the legislature's refusal from the beginning to back it financially meant that it was never self-supporting and never out of debt. It reeled from one crisis to another, often calling upon its teachers for loans, who were frequently paid in IOU's by their students. On February 5, 1850, the old hotel quarters burned, but with a grant of \$10,000 from the state and \$5,000 donated by Berkshire citizens, the Institute shortly erected a new building on South Street, which it occupied until 1867, when a drop in enrollment sank in for good.

Pittsfield bought the new building for a high school and the Institute after finally paying its debts, turned the rest of its assets, \$4,400, over to the Berkshire Athenaeum. With that, 19<sup>th</sup> century medical education disappeared from the Berkshires, and Pittsfielders no longer had to worry about body-snatching.

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The Berkshire Medical Institution, ca. 1830. Pittsfield Town Hall is the building on the left, then the Institution's classroom building, then the dormitory converted from the old Pittsfield Hotel.