

0. A DEATH SENTENCE - Story Preface

1. MURDER AT HARVARD

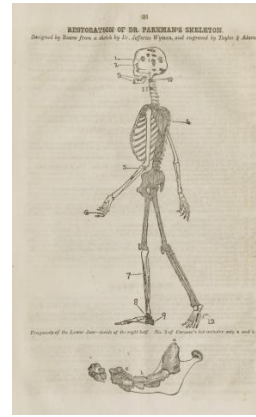
2. ATTEMPTED COVER-UP

3. AN ASTONISHING DISCOVERY

4. WEBSTER TRIED FOR MURDER

5. A DEATH SENTENCE

6. READ MORE ABOUT IT



Judge Shaw allowed the prosecution to use a skeleton during the murder trial of Dr. John Webster. Among other things, the skeleton depicted the victim's peculiar jaw. This illustration, depicting the "Restoration of Dr. Parkman's Skeleton," is from the *Trial of Professor John W. Webster for the Murder of Doctor George Parkman: Reported exclusively for the N.Y. Daily Globe* (at [page 21](#)). Online via U.S. National Library of Medicine and Archive.org. Click on the image for a much-better view.

The most important expert, in the criminal trial against Dr. Webster, was Nathan Keep, the dentist who had made Parkman's false teeth. Those teeth were unusual because of the way Parkman's lower jaw jutted out.

Dr. Keep testified that he recognized the false teeth. He said he'd made them for the murdered doctor. That evidence was crucial for the case. It was also the first time that dental evidence was ever used in a trial.

But prosecutors still had to overcome two huge issues:

- They did not have a body;
- They had to tie Dr. Webster to the crime.

Webster had denied any wrongdoing, and there were no eyewitnesses. The janitor's testimony—the link takes you to the notes of George Bemis, one of the prosecutors, regarding that testimony—was crucial, and he was unshakable on cross examination.

The prosecutors faced a final battle. Even though their circumstantial evidence was overwhelming, they still had the problem of the corpus delicti rule. They had great secondary evidence, but the primary evidence—the body—was missing.

How Judge Shaw instructed the jury would make or break the case against Webster. Here is the most telling part of his charge:

It has sometimes been said by judges that a jury never ought to convict in a capital case unless the dead body is found. That, as a general proposition, is true. It sometimes happens, however, that it cannot be found, where the proof of death is clear. Sometimes, in a case of murder at sea, the body is thrown overboard on a stormy night. Because the body is not found, can anybody deny that the author of that crime is a murderer?

The instruction was just what the prosecutors needed. It took the jury less than three hours to convict Dr. Webster.

Judge Shaw passed sentence: Death by hanging.

Dr. Webster tried to save his own life by filing an appeal. That didn't work.

Then ... he tried to save his life by petitioning the governor for clemency. That also didn't work.

Only after he had exhausted all the legal means to save himself, did Webster confess.

But therein lies the ultimate irony. Webster's confession was strongly supportive of temporary insanity. Had he told the truth at trial, he would likely have avoided the hangman's noose.

Instead, he was executed on August 30, 1850.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/A-DEATH-SENTENCE-Murder-at-Harvard-John-Webster-Story>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

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Media Stream

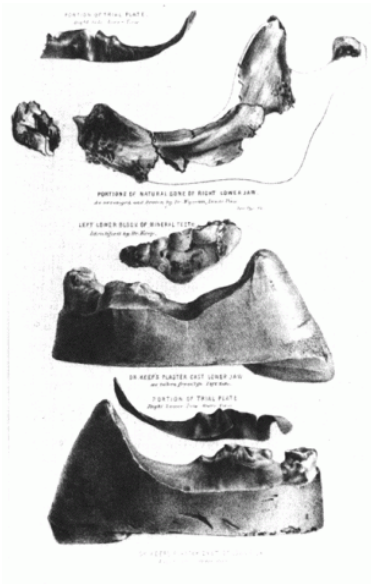


Nathan Keep

Image online, courtesy the Countway Repository of Harvard University.

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Parkman's False Teeth and Victim's Jaw Bone

Illustration from the *Trial of Professor John W. Webster, for the Murder of Doctor George Parkman. Reported Exclusively for the N.Y. Daily Globe*. New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1850.

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