



## Ben Franklin's Bones

### PRESS RELEASE MATERIAL

#### ONE LINE

In 1997 the bones of twenty eight people are found in the basement of Benjamin Franklin's London home. How did this macabre pit of bones come to be, and was one of America's Founding Fathers responsible?

#### SHORT PARA

In November 1997 when the skeletal remains of at least twenty eight bodies were unearthed in the basement of an elegant town house, police feared this was the work of a serial killer. But when research indicated the bones actually dated to the mid 1700's the implications became even more dramatic. This was no ordinary house. 36, Craven Street was the former residence of one of the most important men in American history - Benjamin Franklin. Could the unthinkable be possible? Could one of America's most iconic figures have been responsible in some way for the bones in the basement?

#### LONG PARA

In November 1997 when the skeletal remains of at least twenty eight bodies were unearthed in the basement of an elegant town house police feared this was the work of a serial killer. But meticulous research indicated that the bones actually dated to the mid 1700's. The implications became even more dramatic as this was no ordinary house. 36 Craven Street was the former residence of one of the most important men in American history - Benjamin Franklin. Could the unthinkable be possible? Could one of America's most iconic figures have been responsible in some way for the bones in the basement?

As the Colonial Ambassador to the British Colony of America, Benjamin Franklin lived and worked in London for nearly 20 years in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In addition to his diplomatic activities Franklin pursued his other interests of philosophy and science. He publicly demonstrated many of his early experiments with electricity to visitors at No.36 - among them some of the most eminent thinkers and scientists of the time. Could his interest in



science and medicine mean he had a role to play in this haul of bones? Whoever had been responsible was meticulous. The bones and skulls were sawed, drilled and cut with great precision - they had been surgically dissected.

This documentary unravels the extraordinary story of who was responsible for this macabre haul of bones and the secret history of 36 Craven Street. During the mid-1700s the house was owned by a widow named Margaret Stephenson and her daughter Polly, and in them Franklin found a surrogate family. But number 36 had another notable resident - a brilliant young doctor called William Hewson who in 1770 had married Polly. But Hewson was no ordinary physician; he was one of the leading human anatomists of the age. Men like Hewson were involved in pushing the boundaries of modern science and medicine, turning it into a credible profession based on experimentation, logic and evidence. But in order to do this Hewson and his surgical contemporaries occupied the shadier fringes of the Age of Enlightenment. At that time the only legal source of fresh corpses were the gallows, but this could not supply anything like the number of bodies they required. So they were forced to turn to body-snatchers - otherwise known as the “Resurrectionists” who scoured graveyards in the dead of night, plundered freshly dug graves and sold them to the anatomists.

Men like Franklin accepted the necessity of this deeply unpleasant activity. The illegal snatching and selling of corpses helped doctors greatly improve their understanding of anatomy and general medicine and it also allowed them to make significant advances in amputation techniques.

But this story has a poignant twist. Hewson cut himself while working on a corpse allowing bacteria from the cadaver to enter his bloodstream. He died of septicaemia. A year later Franklin left London to establish America as an independent nation, but he didn't leave Craven Street completely behind. Franklin invited Hewson's widow Polly and her 3 children to join him in Philadelphia. He encouraged the eldest son Thomas to pursue a career in medicine and a medical dynasty was born. When Benjamin Franklin died Polly was at his bedside.