

Kali Nicole Gross

A TALE OF RACE, SEX, AND VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

HANNAH MARY TABBS

AND THE

DISEMBODIED TORSO



HANNAH MARY TABBS AND THE
DISEMBODIED TORSO

HANNAH MARY TABBS AND THE DISEMBODIED TORSO

A Tale of Race, Sex, and Violence in America

Kali Nicole Gross

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

© Oxford University Press 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gross, Kali N., 1972– author.

Hannah Mary Tabbs and the disembodied torso : a tale of race, sex, and violence
in America / Kali Nicole Gross.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-024121-6 (hardcover : alk. paper) 978-0-19-086001-1 (paperback)

1. Tabbs, Hannah Mary.
2. Murder—Pennsylvania—Philadelphia—Case studies.
3. Family violence—Pennsylvania—Philadelphia—Case studies.
4. African Americans—Pennsylvania—Philadelphia—Social conditions—19th century.
African American women—Pennsylvania—Philadelphia—Social conditions—19th century.
6. Racially mixed people—Pennsylvania—Philadelphia—Social conditions—19th century.
7. United States—Race relations—History—19th century. I. Title.

HV6534.P5G76 2016

364.152'3092—dc23 2015032082

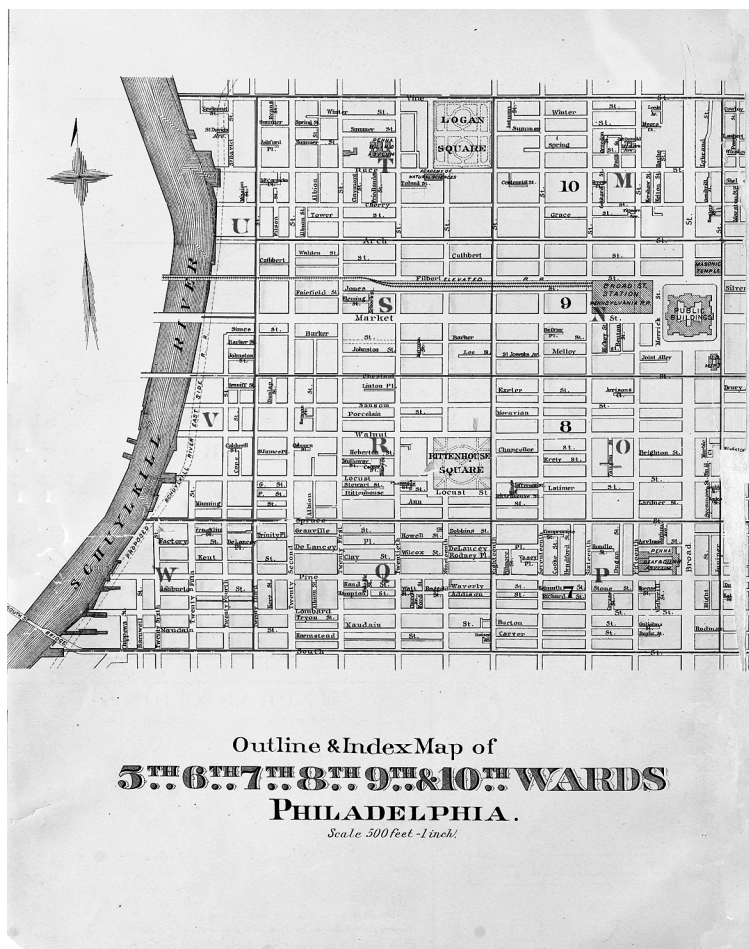
Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

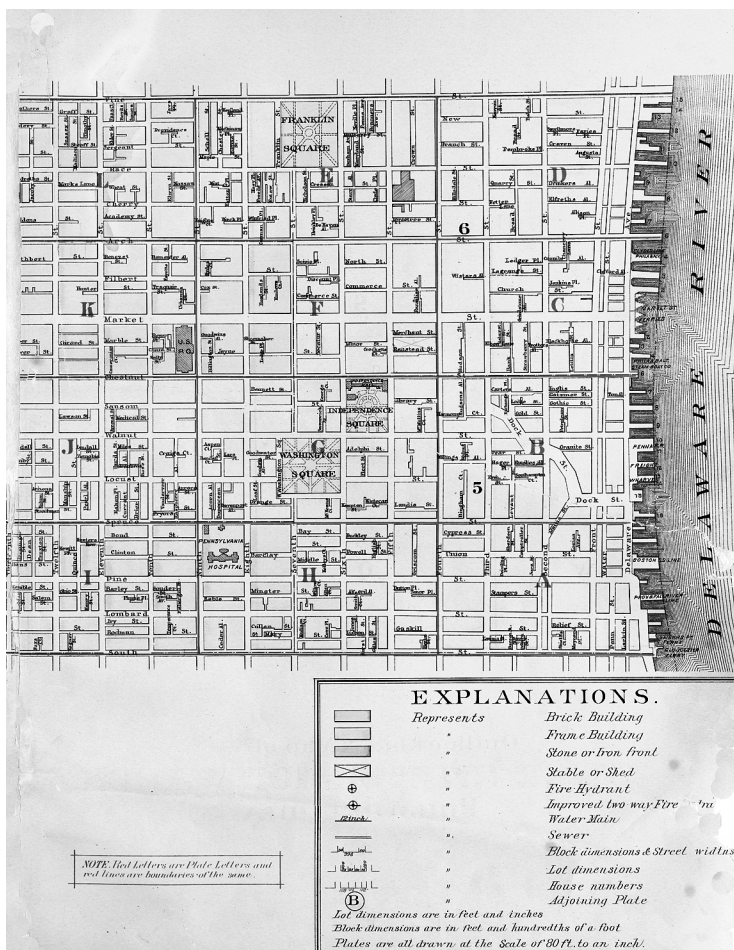
For Sylvia E. Neal

1917–2010

I love you. I miss you. I'm glad my daughter got to meet you.



Frontispiece. Map: Outline & Index Map of 5th 6th 7th 8th 9th & 10th Wards. From *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia*. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Call #O.728 v.1).



CONTENTS

Prologue	3
Chapter One: Handle with Care	7
Chapter Two: The Woman Found	26
Chapter Three: To Do Him Bodily Harm	50
Chapter Four: Wavy Hair and Nearly White Skin	72
Chapter Five: Held for Trial	103
Chapter Six: A Most Revolting Deed	129
Epilogue	148
 <i>Acknowledgments</i>	 153
<i>Notes</i>	157
<i>Bibliography</i>	197
<i>Index</i>	213

HANNAH MARY TABBS AND THE
DISEMBODIED TORSO

Prologue

Instead, her manner of self-presentation draws attention to the fact that both these narratives and her autobiographical persona are disorderly.

—Rhonda Frederick, “Creole Performance”

When I stumbled across the story of a murder and dismemberment that occurred in Philadelphia in 1887, complete with a love triangle and press coverage across the country, I knew that it wasn’t your average African American historical tale.¹ Like hundreds of turn-of-the-century readers before me, I scoured newspapers to follow day-to-day accounts of the victim’s demise. All of the figures involved enthralled me, but especially the black woman at the heart of the story, Hannah Mary Tabbs. The case captivated me as a scholar of black women and criminal justice, but I was also mesmerized by the entire ordeal because it was a different kind of story about a black woman and her relationships with not just black men but also with her world—a world in which she navigated the difficulties of moving between the black and white communities. Much about my discussion of the crime will be deliberately vague from this point on, as I want readers to experience the story as I first did, letting it unfold step by step in the following chapters.² However, I do want to highlight the reasons I find Tabbs so compelling.

Rather than simply bowing to the social mores of her time, ideals such as chastity and morality, Hannah Mary Tabbs lived by a different

set of values. Her life and daily interactions evidenced someone who appeared to adhere to mainstream notions of respectability but instead employed deceit, cunning, and cold-blooded ruthlessness to control those around her, both in her home and in her neighborhood. Her ability to slip seamlessly between displaying deference to wealthy and middle-class whites whose houses she cleaned while violently coercing other African Americans in her own fraught effort to be self-determining amazed me. Tabbs's maneuvers seemed to expose the inherent disorder within restrictive categories such as race, gender, and geography. In many ways, her role in the gruesome murder afforded a multidimensional historical rendering of a black woman and the complexities of her life that defied the customary narratives of suffering, resistance, and, ultimately, redemption.³

These narratives, which dominate much of African American history, are rooted in structural and institutional biases. Historical research methodologies largely mute the experiences of African American women—particularly those of poor and everyday black women. Enslavement and its legacy severely stunted their ability to access the written word, silencing many voices, save the most elite and learned with enough education and resources to create and save documents such as personal papers, letters, and memoirs. Barring this, most records about everyday black women exist only because they mark a moment when a black woman's life intersected, or collided in some way, with white people. Typically in positions of authority, whites—such as slave owners, employers, doctors, journalists, lawmakers, teachers, and prison administrators—have unwittingly left behind many of the sources that scholars rely on to reconstruct information about the black past. Historians have done some incredible work in finding ways to tell black women's stories; often they have done so by writing against one-sided historical records that would otherwise map these women only in the barest sense.⁴

Still, through these materials we have come to know black women as laborers—unfree or impoverished domestics and field hands. We know them as victims—of rape, sexual exploitation, and other forms of violence. We encounter these women as problems—subjects that shame the race or are used to pathologize it. We understand them as displaced—those denied civil rights, protection, access, and justice. We glorify them as freedom fighters—resisting enslavers and corrupt authority figures. We do our best to animate them—as clubwomen, as mothers and wives, as sexual beings, as queer, as entrepreneurs, as artists, as sanctified, as activists, and as teachers and legislators.⁵

Indeed, historians of African American women's experiences have done much with very little. Yet even as I have laughed, cried, and cheered aloud while learning about black women's tribulations and triumphs, I have also found myself yearning for histories that permit black women to be fully visible, fully legible, fully human, and thus vulnerable, damaged, and flawed. Most of our stories—my own research included—are often one-dimensional portraits. We piece together fragments of lives and events—good, bad, and traumatic—but rarely do we stumble across figures or sources that sustain richer accounts. Few records reflect the historical difficulties that bisected black women's lives at the same time they reveal in nuanced ways how black women managed to survive between heroism and heartache. We have precious few examples of black women who lived as people with depression and joy, with desire and love, as well as contempt and rage. We do not have many stories of individual women who lived for themselves and did not put the race or their children or families first. And we certainly do not have tales about African American women who were very good at being very bad. Enter Hannah Mary Tabbs.

Though Tabbs is appealing not just because she is a kind of anti-hero. Equally compelling is the fact that while the circumstances of white supremacy and antiblack violence encapsulated Tabbs's life,

the case and all of its macabre elements do not depict her or other African Americans as existing solely in opposition to or engaging with white people. Rather this crime opens a window onto violence within the black community and shows how that violence is deeply rooted in the pervasive racism of the criminal justice system.⁶

The 1887 murder, then, serves as an evocative meditation on both the vicissitudes and rewards of violence as deployed by Hannah Mary Tabbs, because Tabbs, as the Philadelphia investigation would reveal, used physical aggression and intimidation in ways that afforded her power and agency in black enclave communities. Simultaneously, Hannah Mary's prolific record of violence, as fearsome as it appears, also seems to have been an artifice of her profound vulnerability. Black women such as Tabbs were at tremendous risk for violence and sexual assault because the legal system so often failed to protect them. Being formidable in her home and neighborhood—reprehensible though her actions may have been—nonetheless had a practical function. Further, her record of brutality, existing largely in the absence of detailed information about her early life, may well constitute evidence of her otherwise-unknowable past: in the sense that she had to have had prior experiences of violence to learn how to wield it so deftly.⁷ With this in mind I consider Hannah Mary Tabbs's life and her more troubling behaviors.

Even so, despite this analytical approach and rigorous, historical investigation, there is much about Hannah Mary Tabbs and her crimes that will ultimately remain a mystery.

Handle with Care

Most people who have seen the body agree that it is that of a negro of rather light color, but there are others who assert that it is that of a Portuguese or an Italian, and a theory that obtained a great deal of credence was that it was the trunk of a Chinaman or Japanese.

—*Evening Bulletin*, February 18, 1887

On Thursday morning, February 17, 1887, Silas Hibbs trudged to work along Bristol Turnpike in Eddington, a small village in Bensalem Township in Bucks County, which borders Philadelphia County, in Pennsylvania. Eddington consisted of large farms, a handful of local businesses, and roughly two hundred residents. Silas, a local white carpenter in his early sixties, was a married man and father. In addition to supporting his wife, thirty-two-year-old Clara, and their eight-year-old daughter, Anna, he housed two boarders—an elderly man and a young local carpenter named Charles Adams. A native of Pennsylvania, Silas knew the terrain along this route well and noticed almost immediately the peculiar object resting on the bank next to William B. Mann’s ice pond. With his curiosity piqued, Silas crossed the bridge over the pond to get a better look.¹ As he advanced, he noticed odd red lettering on the label of the object’s heavy brown paper wrapping:

HANDLE

WITH CARE²

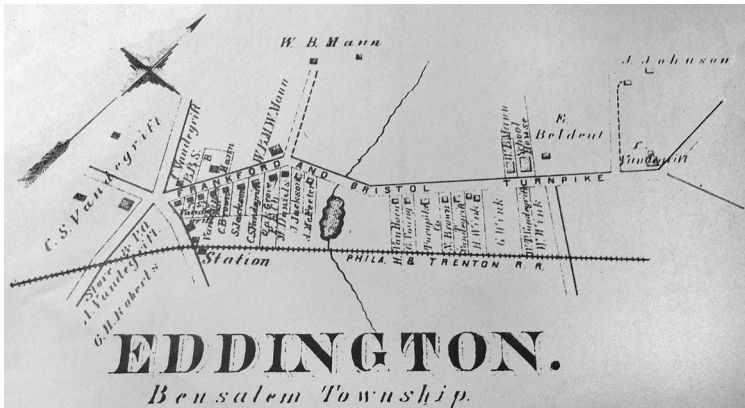


Figure 1.1. Map: Eddington. From *Combined Atlases of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, 1876–1891: Indexed*. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Call #MSS O.61).

Scrambling down the bank, he opened the seemingly fragile bundle, only to be shocked by its contents. Silas Hibbs had stumbled upon the headless, limbless torso of a man.³ “Blood flowed from the openings” and the flesh was soft, suggesting the victim had been dead only a short time. The winter season had likely staved off the odor of decomposition, but it did little to blight the visual horror of the mutilated trunk’s sagging entrails.⁴ The package’s contents would soon horrify most of Eddington’s residents, but it also titillated them. Townspeople and city dwellers alike awaited revelations about the origins of the trunk, and the investigation that they so closely followed would shed light on the private lives of otherwise-obscure historical figures and would profoundly test the skills of two coroners and two teams of investigators. Ultimately, the disembodied torso would lay at the murky intersection of violence, policing, science, and the vagaries of race in America.

Whereas Philadelphia employed a uniform, centralized police force comprising patrolmen, detectives, and a web of magistrates, district

attorneys, and judges, the administration of justice in towns such as Eddington relied on a local sheriff or police chief, a few constables, a coroner, and a state's attorney.⁵ This system allowed citizens to play a more robust role in policing, as Bucks County neared a frontier type of justice. As early as 1820, local residents had created organizations dedicated to curtailing horse theft and other crimes against property.⁶ When a series of robberies plagued Bensalem in the 1890s, the *Intelligencer* implored the public to assemble "a vigilance committee...to run [the thieves] down and effect their arrest." The piece concluded that "Judge Yerkes will do the rest."⁷ This approach to policing is certainly reflected in the events following Silas Hibbs's unsettling discovery.

Almost immediately after Silas raised the alarm, Eddington's citizens answered the call and summoned neighboring authorities. Coroner William S. Silbert, a thirty-three-year-old Bristol resident and saloonkeeper, was first on the scene, along with fifty-three-year-old Evan J. Groom, the coroner's physician. Locals clustered and whispered among themselves, speculating about the identity of the victim and the circumstances surrounding the repulsive package. Some hypothesized that the torso had been ill-discarded medical waste.⁸ This initially seemed plausible given that Philadelphia served as a hub for medical research and training. Indeed, the city boasted Jefferson Medical College and the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania, and it housed the nation's first medical college for women.⁹

However, Silbert and Dr. Groom dismissed the theory based on the amateurish nature of the cuts to the torso. Although the head had been severed with a degree of precision at the fourth vertebra, one arm had been removed above the joint, through the shoulder. The other arm had been sawed off at the joint. The torso had been cut off above the pelvis, roughly "four inches above the hip bone," leaving distended bowels protruding from the abdomen. Based on the striations of the wounds, the cutting instrument appeared to have been a fine-tooth

saw similar to the kind butchers used. Moreover, the wounds were fresh. Groom concluded that the dismemberment had most likely taken place sometime during the evening of Wednesday, February 16.¹⁰

A search of the crime scene yielded other clues. Investigators fished a shawl strap from the pond. From the appearance of its nickel buckles, they surmised that it had not been soaking for very long. A faded piece of calico, probably from a dress or wrapper, was discovered on the bridge across the creek. Bloodstains on the material suggested that the body had been wrapped in it before it was hurled onto the bank, most likely from the bridge. Authorities believed that the torso had been thrown because of the deep indentation in the earth at its landing spot.¹¹ John Murray, another local, told the coroner that he remembered kicking the shawl strap out of his way as he crossed the bridge late Wednesday night, sometime before 1 a.m.¹² Murray's observations would help investigators home in on the time of death and the time that the body was discarded.

As Coroner Silbert took charge of the torso and finished gathering the witnesses' statements, primarily those of Silas Hibbs and John Murray, he carefully collected the bloody garments found in the pond and along the bridge. Constable Frederick Jackson, a forty-five-year-old resident of Bristol, spent much of his time that day in hip-high rubber boots, dragging the pond with a scoop net and an iron rake. After two hours in the rain, reportedly "in the presence of District Attorney Hugh B. Eastburn, Coroner Silbert, Chief of Police Saxton and nearly all of the two hundred inhabitants of Eddington," his efforts failed to produce additional body parts. Constable Jackson and Silas had hoped to drain the pond partially and resume the search the following day, but ongoing rains swelled the creek and derailed their plans.¹³ On Friday morning Silbert returned to the crime scene hoping to recover more evidence.

Although heavy rain would keep most idle spectators at bay, District Attorney Eastburn, in his early forties, braved the nearly impassable

road conditions to assist the coroner and observe the investigation. Eastburn must have known that this case would likely become a scandal. Either in an attempt to get ahead of news reports or in an effort to take the reins of the investigation, he issued the following statement to reporters: “We will make a strenuous effort to discover the perpetrators of the crime, if it has been a crime and if they can be found we will find them.”¹⁴ Perhaps this tack seemed wise given the early stages of the inquiry, but his tentativeness regarding the torso’s circumstances did little to soothe public fears. Further, the halting nature of the statement appeared to be less an effort to avoid reaching hasty conclusions and more a sign of his unwillingness to tackle the challenges that such a case might pose.

Eastburn’s position—as the state’s attorney and in his refusal to rush to judgment—made him a kind of lightning rod for the public’s frustration with the handling of the case. Articles published subsequent to his comments and after investigators determined with certainty that a crime had been committed called for a more vigorous response from the authorities. As the *Intelligencer’s* opinion piece charged, “The remains have been found in Bucks County, and it becomes the duty of the officials here to use all diligence and faithfulness in the discovery of the guilty party or parties.” Calling for county commissioners to raise a substantial reward for any leads in the case, the piece suggested that the investigation should take priority at the upcoming commissioners’ board meeting on February 28. As representatives of the public, local officials needed to “give assurance that a crime like this cannot escape attention and that everything possible will be done to protect the citizens.” A succeeding article supported Eastburn by noting that “the district attorney has grave responsibilities, but other officials do as well.” A small follow-up piece even attempted to come to Eastburn’s aid by stating that he had “girded up his loins and is grappling vigorously with the crime.”¹⁵ Despite this affirmation, Eastburn was unable to escape being entangled in the

quagmire. He would have to balance the pitfalls of local politics with obstacles in the investigation, amid widespread media attention.

As journalists descended upon the otherwise-quiet town, a number of townspeople assumed informal investigative roles in the ensuing drama. The local store, run by J. V. Vandergrift, served as the place for area residents to meet and discuss the facts of the case and even speculate on possible victims and perpetrators—every detail seems to have found its way into press accounts. Discovery of the torso rattled the residents' sensibilities, and their speculations afford a glimpse of the community's underside. African American servants and other transient workers figured prominently in their theories. Local whites told officials of a black man in Byberry, a nearby settlement, who had been missing; they suggested that he might be the victim. Others speculated that the torso belonged to Henry Killum, a young mulatto, whom I. P. Morris, the hotelkeeper, had hired as a driver. The boy had left about a month earlier. Given the size and relative racial homogeneity of the close-knit town, those blacks who entered into or labored in the community proved extremely visible and ultimately vulnerable.¹⁶

Before long, speculation about a black man being the victim shifted to fears that an African American may have been the perpetrator. The primary witness, Silas Hibbs, commented on two unfamiliar black men he observed on the road the following morning. He told reporters, "Two suspicious looking colored men passed along the pike right here in front of my house at 7 o'clock this morning. They had a wagon with a green canvas cover and sides and one of the sides was torn off. They kept looking behind them, and when they got to the bridge they drove very slowly and looked over the stone wall." The possibility that the two men were as curious about the crime scene as the rest of Eddington's residents seems to have escaped Silas as he continued, "I was going to stop them, but I changed my mind. I'm sorry now. I can't get it out of my head that they knew something about that body."¹⁷

Outsiders were not the only ones vulnerable to accusation. The torso created an opportunity for residents to cast doubt on neighbors whom they had long mistrusted or against whom they harbored grudges. Vandergrift hypothesized that the victim had been murdered for money, most likely by a man of unsavory character. He claimed to have knowledge of just such a man who lived in Hulmeville, a small village nearby. Frank Allen, a Bucks County resident who held “an important position in the wholesale clothing department of Wanamaker’s store” told reporters of dangers he encountered on the night in question. As Allen, his brother, and a friend walked home from the train station Wednesday evening, he claimed that three men jumped a nearby fence and ordered him to “halt” and surrender his wallet. Allen had responded, “If you did get it you would not get much. Before you get that though, you may catch the contents of something else.” This response, reportedly delivered in a most stern tone, was enough to send the three would-be assailants back over the fence. Allen, his brother, and the friend thought the incident must have been a prank—at least they did before the “mangled remnant of humanity” was discovered. Although hardly conclusive, Allen and his party as well as the suspicious men, it was noted, had all come through the field from the direction of William B. Mann’s now-infamous ice pond.¹⁸ As the *Evening Bulletin* put it, “Suspensions are rife in Eddington to-day, and the people thereabout are full of many such stories.”¹⁹

Yet as theories about possible motives and victims surfaced, two key pieces of evidence were missing: the victim’s head and racial identity. The coroner’s physician worked swiftly to discover the latter. All who saw the torso had a different theory about its race—based both on the hue and the “rounded shape” of the shoulders. A number of spectators believed the victim to be Chinese: “The back showed that the man had very high shoulders. There is a natural hollow at the base of the neck, between the shoulders, as large as a man’s hand and the humped shoulders make the cavity look deeper. The back looked