Dissertation Abstract for Edward Allen Driggers

Program: Ph.D. in History

Dissertation Title: Boundary Stones: Morbid Concretions and the Chemistry of Early Nineteenth Century Medicine

Abstract:

My dissertation is the story of communities of physicians seeking to understand the morbid concretion of the body using the new chemistry from the late eighteenth century. Morbid concretions, or calculi, were occurred in the urinary passages, lungs, joints, pancreas, uterus, and other areas of the body. At the turn of the nineteenth century, some physicians saw analytical chemistry, emerging out of the so-called chemical revolution, as applicable in understanding and treating stone-based diseases. However, some physicians and surgeons saw the treatment of stones with chemistry as evidence of the need to return to older practices of medicine, like humoral pathology, or the theory of health based on the balance of the fluids of the body. My dissertation examines the work of several medico-chemists and surgeons across the Atlantic cities of Charleston, London, and Philadelphia. They were united in their desire to understand the morbid concretions, offer better interventions to their patients, and in the optimism that chemistry held analytical value to medicine. The medical treatment of the stone intersects with questions regarding race and gender, as well as a transitory moment in medicine trying to explain diseases related to fluid blockages.