For one hundred and twenty-five years this story was a secret. During all of this time not more than a dozen people knew of it but in October 1936, through the efforts of Dan Frohman, on behalf of The Actors Fund of America brought it to life through Doctor Ross V. Patterson, Dean of Jefferson Medical College.

George Frederick Cooke was the first great Shakespearean actor of the American theatre. He has been forgotten by all but the students of theatrical history. After playing all over America during the early part of the past Century, and the most noted actor in America of that time, Cooke began to drink and threw himself away and finally died as a pauper in 1812 in a New York charity hospital.

Dr. John W. Francis was a young and brilliant surgeon who was interested in the study of the brain. Brain research at that time was an almost unknown science. But Francis thought that something might be learned about human genius through studying the brain cells and skull formation of unusually smart people. Francis was also interested in the theatre and had seen Cooke act many times and was an admirer of him. It happens that Francis was one of the surgeons of the charity hospital in which Cooke the pauper died. Francis learned that he was a patient and immediately adopted him as his patient. He not only treated him medically but helped him in every way and would sit and talk with him for hours at a time. Francis was with Cooke at the time of his death. No one else was in the room. Francis had a desire to study Cooke's brain. As soon as Cooke died he severed his head from his body, wrapped it up and put it in his medicine bag.

He then put Cooke's body in a box, by himself, nailed it up, and Cooke was carried to Potter's Field and buried. Soon after the notice appeared in the papers of Cooke's burial in Potter's Field, the actor's former fans claimed the body and made arrangements for it to be transferred to St. Paul's Church Yard in lower Manhattan where they bought a burial plot.
When the time came for the new burial and he was taken from his box to be placed in
a nice casket, it was discovered that Cooke’s head had been severed from his body. From
that day until last October the whereabouts of the actor’s head and the nature of its
disappearance has remained clouded in mystery, known through the years by only a few.
From that day until this the remains of the actor, minus the head, have rested in a
grave in the shadow of Wall Street’s sky-scrapers.

When it was discovered that his head was missing the former admirers of the actor,
and the public generally, became intensely interested in what had become of his head.
Such a to-do was made about it that Doctor Francis was afraid to let it be known that he
had taken his head. Since nobody knew about it but Francis he felt that he could keep
it a secret. The Actors League made all possible investigations but to no avail.

Francis studied the brain and destroyed it but kept the skull. During the last
illness of Dr. Francis the Cooke skull changed hands for the first time and came into
the possession of a very famous family where it remained for three generations. The
founder of this family was Dr. George McClellan, a close friend of Dr. Francis. Dr.
McClellan attended Francis in his last illness and just before he died Dr. Francis
confided his secret and gave to Dr. McClellan the precious skull. This Dr. McClellan
became a very celebrated man. He was one of the founders of Jefferson Medical College,
if not the sole founder. He had two sons, one General Geo. B. McClellan the Commander
of the Army of the Potomac in the Civil War; the other one was Dr. John Hall McClellan
who became a noted surgeon.

The first Dr. McClellan recorded on paper the history of the skull as told by
Dr. Francis and hid it in the skull. Upon Dr. McClellan’s death, he passed it along to
his second son, who succeeded him as Chief Surgeon at Jefferson Medical College. This
Dr. McClellan in turn passed the skull to his own son, another Dr. George McClellan,
grandson of the first Dr. McClellan and name-sake of both his grand-father and his uncle.
It was through this last Dr. George McClellan, who was Professor of Applied Anatomy at Jefferson Medical College when I was a student there, that I first became interested in the skull (I will refer to this later). Upon the death of this third Dr. McClellan in 1913, the skull passed into the possession of his widow.

Dr. Ross V. Patterson was a close friend of the family and family physician to the McClellans and two years after McClellan's death in 1913 his widow bequeathed to Dr. Patterson this skull and many other historic belongings and documents that had been owned by the first McClellan.

About five years ago, sitting in Patterson's home late one night, I was telling him of an episode concerning this skull that involved Dr. W. J. James, my roommate, and me. Patterson got up and opened the skull and handed me a skull stating that it was the skull. In it was the original writing of the first Doctor McClellan.

I said this had been kept secret during all the time. During the period of the possession of the second Dr. McClellan the skull made its only public appearance in all these years. That was in this wise: Edwin Booth played in a performance of Hamlet in Philadelphia during the 1880's. Shortly before the curtain was to rise, Booth was handed a skull with the request to use it - "as a special favor to a patron of the theatre" - as Yorick's skull in the grave-digging scene. Booth did so, and after returning it, asked for an explanation as to why he had been requested to use that particular skull.

Dr. McClellan committed him to secrecy and told him that it was the skull of George Frederick Cooke and Edwin Booth kept the secret.

Sometime before his death in 1928 Horace Howard Furness, noted Shakespearean authority, known to scholars through his "Furness's Variorum", learned that Dr. Patterson had the skull. He attempted to obtain it for exhibition purposes as part of the museum of theatrical relics of the Players Club in New York. Patterson declared that he would give up the skull only to an authorized organization which would assure its burial with
the rest of Cooke's remains. Upon this statement Mr. Frohman is now hoping to restore the skull to its original possessor, after a lapse of nearly a century and a quarter.

Mr. Daniel Frohman is President of the Actors Fund of America which has as its purpose "to care for and nourish to health the indigent sick, to extend to the helpless the hand of charity, to shelter the aged and infirm, and to provide burial to the unfortunate in the theatrical profession."

I stated that I became interested in this while at Jefferson. One night in the fall of 1907, the third Dr. McClellan (George B.) Professor of Applied Anatomy at Jefferson at the time, delivered a private address to the Academy of Jefferson Medical College. Dr. James and I were members and attended the lecture. The distinguished Dr. McClellan spoke on the anatomy of the brain and in telling of the first research on the brain, said it was made by Dr. Francis on the brain of a distinguished actor and that he had the skull. He then dramatically raised a little black bag and took from it the skull of Cooke. We were asked to keep it a secret.

After leaving the lecture, James and I separated. I went to my room and James came in late during the night. He had with him a little black bag exactly like McClellan's and in it a skull and told me how, as McClellan was getting his overcoat out of the coat room, that he swiped this skull. He seemed very much excited and scared. Of course I was too. I began to tell Will what a serious and dangerous thing he had done, that I could not understand his doing it, etc., etc. That went on for several days. Finally it came to me that James was playing a joke on me and that he had borrowed this skull and had gotten the black bag and that it was not Cooke's skull at all. In those days boys carried trunks to school with them and James had this in the bottom of his trunk. While he was out I took the skull from the bottom of his trunk and put it in the bottom of mine. And then that night I did not come in until late and then I told James that it was such a serious thing that he had done and that I was so much disturbed about it and was afraid that he would get into trouble, that I had taken the bag and put a rock in it, with the skull, and had dropped it
from the middle of the bridge over the Schuylkill River so that no one could ever catch up with him. Then James went off at a tangent and told me how he had begged a man to lend him that skull, that he had guaranteed to bring it back to him in good shape, and he worried two or three days over it and then I gave him his skull and black bag back. That was the only time in the past 35 years that James and I have ever come anywhere near having trouble between us but it got pretty tense there for about a week.