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Notes on the Life of Horace Wells

RALPH W. EDWARDS, D.D.S.

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Notes on the Life of Horace Wells

RALPH W. EDWARDS, D.D.S.

I. A LETTER OF GARDNER Q. COLTON (1814-1898)

A letter that has a bearing on the life of Horace Wells is one that recounts some of the incidents of the bitter controversy over the discovery of anesthesia. The letter from Professor Gardner Q. Colton, the chemist, to Doctor Edward Bumgardner (1865-1953), a Lawrence, Kansas, dentist, was written on September 16, 1896, two years before Colton's death. It furnishes information on the Wells-Morton-Jackson dispute by one who knew the claimants and could relate true facts pertaining to their contentions. The issues in this unhappy controversy centered on who was the discoverer of anesthesia and who was the first to use ether as an anesthetic.

It will be recalled that Gardner Q. Colton was the chemist who made a public demonstration of the effects of nitrous oxide gas on December 10, 1844, in Hartford, Connecticut. Wells was in this audience, and observed that those who had inhaled the gas and were staggering about the stage apparently suffered no pain from injuries received from colliding with benches and other objects. Wells reasoned that, if no pain was experienced from these injuries, a tooth could be removed painlessly after inhaling this gas. An arrangement was made with Colton to prepare and bring a bag of nitrous oxide gas to the office of Doctor John M. Riggs the next morning. There, on December 11, 1844, in the presence of Colton, Wells inhaled the gas to the point of insensibility, and Riggs removed the tooth. Since Colton was a witness to this historic incident, he felt well qualified to serve as an apologist for Wells.

With remarkable clarity of mind for one of 82 years, Colton wrote the following letter in defense of Wells (Fig. 1):

New York Sept 16th 1896

Edward Bumgardner M.D., D.D.S.

Dear Sir-

Your favor of Sept 16th came safely to hand.

I send you a pamphlet [sic] which wrote several years since

Dr. Edwards is Assistant Clinical Professor of Surgery (Oral) and Lecturer, History of Medicine, University of Kansas Medical Center.

9th sheet
put into an Enigma and
died soon after coming out!

The last years of Marten's
life, he spent in traveling
around the country, soliciting
aid from dentists, physicians
and others. Dr. Conyok a
Western Medical Journal gave
him a scolding, and said
he was trying to "stand"
the honor of the dictionary
of anaesthesia from Dr
Wells. This was after the gas
had been demonstrated to
be an anaesthetic.
But enough.
Yours Truly
F. D. Colton.

New York Sept 16th 1896
Edward Bumgardner M. D. & D. O.
Dear Sir -

Your favor of Sept.
16th came safely to hand.

I send you a pamphlet
which wrote several years
since, which was prepared
with great care as to details
and statistics. I sent a copy
to each of the Professors in
the "College of Physicians and
Surgeons" of New York, and,
without exception they endorsed
the correctness of my statement.
Prof. Lewis A. Sayre wrote
me that if this clear statement
had been made many years

FIG. 1. First and last pages of letter sent by Gardner Q. Colton to Edward Bumgardner on September 16, 1896.

which was prepared with great care as to details and statistics. I sent a copy to each of the Professors in the "College of Physicians and Surgeons" of New York, and, without exception they endorsed the correctness of my statements. Prof. Lewis A. Sayre wrote me that if this clear statement had been made many years ago, it would have prevented much angry correspondence.

Since the 4th of February 1864, when I commenced to take autograph signatures of my patients, I have given the gas to a little over 192,000; and have never had an accident from its effects. Every name is numbered on the scroll.

I do not know any of the relatives of Dr. Riggs.

With cheerfulness I send you my photograph and autograph.

Also a little pamphlet on "Cheerfulness & Health" at the close of which is "A Dam Letter."

I am nearing my 83d year. With thanks for your courtesy—
Truly yours—G. Q. Colton.

Apparently the letter had been finished at this point and for some reason not mailed immediately. In September of 1896 Mrs. Elizabeth Whitman Morton, the widow of William T. G. Morton (1819-1868), published an article in *McClure's Magazine* under the title, "The Discovery of Anaesthesia. Dr. W. T. G. Morton and His Heroic Battle for a New Idea—How Painless Surgery Began Fifty Years Ago." Colton apparently read a copy of this article and evidently was not in harmony with the statements contained therein and decided to write additional comments to Bumgardner. The letter continues without a new date and without a salutation.

Since writing the foregoing, I have received and read Mrs. Morton's statement. For facts, she has drawn on her fancy or imagination. There is no proof that Dr. Morton ever thought of anaesthesia till Dr. Wells called on him in December or January 1844. If Dr. Morton had been experimenting with Ether, why, in Sept 1846, did he go to Dr. Jackson to learn how to make the nitrous oxide gas, so as to test the truth of Well's discovery?

That experiment with Ether, at the Hospital as described by Mrs. Morton, was *not* on the 30th of September 1846. His first experiment with ether was the extraction of a tooth from a boy by the name [of] Eben Frost.

The distinguished Professor and Surgeon, Dr. Willard Parker, in a letter, stated that any one discovering that nitrous oxide

would destroy pain, "the substitution of Ether for the gas does not constitute an original discovery."

After the death of Wells, Dr. Morton denied that nitrous oxide was an anesthetic, and therefore he, Morton, was the discoverer of anaesthesia! This was a virtual admission of Wells' claim.

Mrs. Morton states that the first operation with Ether was on the 30th of Sept 1846. Before Wells went to Europe in 1845 [sic], Wells gave Ether for a surgical operation, the removal of a small tumor from the scalp of a gentleman. So that in the use of Ether Wells antedates Morton by nearly two years!

One important fact must be borne in mind. The proceedings in Boston and the decorations given to Morton, all took place after the death of Wells, when, for thirteen years, the world was made to believe that Ether was the first and only anaesthetic discovered.

When I revived the use of the gas in July 1863 and demonstrated its anaesthetic powers; the whole subject was opened up to the world of investigation, and today, every medical, surgical, and Dental Journal throughout the country, gives the honor of the discovery of anaesthesia to Dr. Wells, save the Boston Medical Journal alone! The Academy of Sciences in Paris gave the honor to Dr. Jackson, because Dr. Jackson suggested Ether to Morton; and so it stands to this day. This action was taken during the thirteen years that the gas was forgotten.

It is a singular fact that Dr. Wells became deranged and committed suicide; Dr. Morton became deranged and committed suicide. He threw himself head foremost into one of the ponds in our Central Park. Dr. Jackson became deranged and was put into an Asylum, and died soon after coming out!

The last years of Morton's life he spent in traveling around the country, soliciting aid from dentists, physicians and others. At length a Western Medical Journal gave him a scoring, and said he was trying to "steal" the honor of the discovery of anaesthesia from Dr. Wells. This was after the gas had been demonstrated to be an anaesthetic.

But enough.

Yours truly

G. Q. Colton

II. FRAGMENTARY LETTERS OF CRAWFORD W. LONG (1815-1878)

The Clendening collection (University of Kansas Medical Center) on the history of anesthesia was started by the purchase in 1935, from an Indianapolis bookseller, of a collection that was founded by a Boston layman soon after 1846. The collection was bequeathed to a physician friend whose widow later sold it to an Indianapolis physician. The last owner, in parting with it, stipulated that his identity was to remain unknown. To make certain that communications in the collection that probably were addressed to him would not reveal his identity he had cut such data as the city, date, name of addressee and salutation from letters received from Doctor Long's daughters, Frances Long Taylor and Eugenia Long Harper. His anonymity was preserved!

In this collection are some incomplete letters of Crawford W. Long and a letter of Frances Long Taylor which verifies the authenticity of her father's letters. Since Mrs. Taylor's letter throws light on the communications of Doctor Long and his letter writing habits, her letter is given first (Fig. 2).

I am gratified at your desire to have some relic of my Father. So much that was personal has been given away or placed at the Smithsonian, and Medical Museums in Europe and America, that it is difficult to find anything suitable for your purpose. My father was in the habit when writing on the subject of anaesthesia to roughly outline his paper or letter which he preserved, sending a finished correct copy. In this way we have much of his correspondence as he also saved the replies. From the reply to the scrap I enclose I learn it was written by Dr. G. L. McCleskey who was living near Jefferson Ga. at the time of the visit of the two men from Boston and who recalls the name of the one who operated upon a Miss Adeline McClendon for strabismus Dr. Bentley. The name of the Dentist he had forgotten. They remained in the town a week. I think 1844 was the time he gives as the time of their visit. So many Doctors when writing articles for publication have had access to these papers that a few have been lost others worn out. Written more than seventy years ago some have fallen to pieces where folded.

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Trusting this scrap of paper will prove satisfactory

I am

Very truly yours,
Frances Long Taylor

The "scrap" enclosed by Mrs. Taylor consisted of a sheet of ruled paper with writing on both sides. The holograph item was probably a rough draft of a part of the letter that was sent to Dr. G. L.

I am grateful
at your desire to have some relic of my father's
so much that was personal has been given
away or placed at the Smithsonian, and Med-
ical Museum in Europe and America, that
it is difficult to find anything suitable for
your purpose.
My father was in the habit when writing on the
subject of anaesthesia to roughly outline his
paper or letter which he preserved, sending
a finished correct copy. In this way we have much
of his correspondence as he also saved the replies.
From the reply to the scrap I enclose I learn it was
written by Dr. G. L. McLeskey who was in my near
Jefferson Va. at the time of the visit of the two men
from Bolton and who recalls the name of the one
who operated upon a Miss Adeline McLeskey
for Strabismus. ^{Dr. Bentley} The name of the Dentist he had for
Boston. They remained in the town a week I think
1844 was the time he gives as the time of their visit.
So many Doctors when writing articles for publication
have had access to these papers that a few have been
lost others worn out. Written more than seventy years ago
some have fallen to pieces where folded.
Trusting this scrap of paper will prove satisfactory
I am very truly yours
Frances Long Taylor.

FIG. 2. A letter from Frances Long Taylor, the daughter of Crawford W. Long.

McCleskey (*vida supra*). In it reference is made to Wells and Morton (Fig. 3).

to establish the operations
on J. M. Venable—

The evidence to establish the operations performed after 1842, was obtained to show that they were continued at to [the] time Dr. Wells claims to have used Ether as an anaesthetic [sic]. Permit me to say, here, that a Dentist and a Surgeon from Boston Mass were in Jefferson Jackson Co in 1842, 3 or 4 and remained for several weeks. The dentist practiced his profession & the surgeon operated ~~from~~^{for} strabismus—I have always thought it probable, that the dentist was Morton or Wells, & that a knowledge of my use of Ether in surgical operations was obtain[ed] at that time.

I have not been able to ascertain the name of the dentist, if you know the history of Dr. Wells, you can possibly ascertain [sic] whether he travelled South at the time mentioned.

Here Long emphasized that he had used ether prior to and at the time Wells claimed to have used it. Long cannot be censured for believing that a physician and a dentist visiting in Jefferson, Georgia, after he had successfully used ether for a surgical operation, had learned of his discovery and had taken that knowledge with them and exploited it as their own.

However, there is no evidence to show that Wells, with the exception of his trip to Europe thirteen months before his death, ever left the New England states in his travels. Of Morton no knowledge is available to show that he ever visited Georgia.

On the reverse side of the holograph the comment of Long is critical of some statements of Doctor Jackson. It follows (Fig. 4):

On 3rd and 4 Pages of Dr. Jacksons communication are some inaccuracies—Dr. J. Was mistaken in saying that the documents he saw in my hands were copies, the originals having been sent to Dr. P[aul] F. Eve & lost.

Only a few of the certificates obtained were published & only then were lost, the others were returned to me—Dr. Eve considered those published sufficient it was the published copies in the Journal that were exhibited to him—

The principal error in the communicat[ion] is when he gives

to establish the operations
 in S. H. Verable,
 the evidence to establish the
 operations performed after 1842, was
 obtained to show that they were
 continued ^{at the time} by Miller, claiming to have
 used Ether as an anæsthetic,
 Permit me to say, first, that a
 Dentist and Surgeon from Bolton
 Mass were in Jefferson Jackson Co
 in 1842, 3 or 4
 and remained for several weeks.
 The dentist practiced his profession
 & the Surgeon operated for
 Strabismus. I have always
 thought it probable, that the dentist
 was Morton or Miller, & that a
 knowledge of my use of Ether
 in Surgical operations was obtained
 at that time.
 I have not been able to ascertain the
 name of the dentist, if you ~~know~~
 the history of Dr Miller, you can possibly
 ascertain whether he travelled South
 at the time mentioned.

FIG. 3. Fragment of letter written by Crawford W. Long.

On 3rd Page of Dr Jackson
 Communication an error
 inaccuracy - Dr J. was mistaken
 in saying that the documents
 he said in my hands were copies,
 the originals having been ~~sent~~ to
 Dr P. H. Eve & lost.

Only a few of the certificates obtained
 were published & only these were
 lost, the others were returned to
 me - Dr Eve considered those
 published sufficient, it was
 the published copies in the
 Journal that were exhibited
 to him -

The principal ^{error} in the communication
 is when he gives the name for my
 not notifying him of my discovery -
 my name for not publishing earlier,
 as given in my published account
 of the discovery - I might
 have added, that I had no

Permet me to say here that I
 have had a strong belief, that
 Dr. Mills or Morton, was in
 Lisbon Sacha C. Co. in 1842 or
 there about, while there was much talk
 by operations & obtaining the
 knowledge of how to use the
 of ether oil that time -
 In one of these years, there was a
 dentist & an operator for deaf
 & dumbness of the eye, from Bath.
 Their names I have been unable
 to obtain.

Part of letter written in Dr. Long's own
 handwriting as testified by his daughter,
 Mrs. Frances Long Taylor.

one whom I saw. The operation was
 performed - He says the
 operation, performed in
 the same person, I think
 on the 6th Decr 1842 -
 Dr. Jackson of N. York, D.
 a boy, probably from the fact
 that at the time he was a
 pupil in the Eastern Co. as
 my father says. He was
 from 21 to 25 years old. At that
 time he of the pupils at that
 time was in the academy -
 and operated (Dr. Jackson's son
 was) - Most of the pupils
 he has & others obtained were
 performed - He says that these
 operations - The evidence to
 establish the operations after
 1842 - can only be obtained to
 show that the operations were
 up to him of the pupils during the
 time mentioned.

FIG. 5. Another fragmentary letter of Crawford W. Long.

the reason for my not notifying him of my discovery—my reasons for not publishing earlier, were given in my published account of the discovery—I might have added that I had no

The last of these incomplete letters of Doctor Long is one that is strikingly similar in content to the first two. Again he emphasized the period of his operations under ether anesthesia and his suspicion that Wells or Morton was the dentist who visited Jefferson, Georgia, in 1842 or 1843. It is likely that these fragmentary letters of Long were preliminary drafts of the letter that finally was sent to Doctor McCleskey. The last letter follows (Fig. 5):

on whom that operation was performed—He omits the second operation, performed on the same person, J. M. Venable on the 6th June 1842—

Dr. Jackson styles J. M. V. a *boy*—probably from the fact that at the time he was a pupil in the Jackson Co academy He was from 21 to 25 years old as were a large number of the pupils at that time in the academy—

3rd operation (Dr Jackson 2nd time correct—Most of the depositions & letters obtained were procured to establish these operations—The evidence to establish the operations after 1842 was only obtained to show that the operations were continu[ed] up to time of Dr. Wells claim to have made a discover[y].

Permit me to say here that I have had a strong belief, that Dr Wells or Morton, were in Jefferson Jackson Co Ga in 1842 or three, while there was much talk of my operations & obtained the knowledge of anaesthetic properties of Ether at that time—In one of these years, there was a Dentist & an operator for deform[it]ies & diseases of the eye, from Boston. Their names I have been unable to obtain.

University of Kansas Medical Center
Kansas City 3, Kansas

the reason for my not notifying him of my discovery—my reasons for not publishing earlier, were given in my published account of the discovery—I might have added that I had no

The last of these incomplete letters of Doctor Long is one that is strikingly similar in content to the first two. Again he emphasized the period of his operations under Robert Anderson and his opinion that Wells or Weston was the doctor who visited Jefferson, Georgia, in 1842 or 1843. It is likely that these fragmentary letters of Long were preliminary drafts of the letter that finally was sent to Doctor McCleskey. The last letter follows (Fig. 5):

on whom that operation was performed—He omits the second operation performed on the same doctor, J. M. Venable on the 6th June 1842—
Dr. Jackson says J. M. V. & Co.—probably from the fact that at the time he was a partner in the Jackson Co. Academy. He was from 21 to 25 years old as were a large number of the pupils at that time in the academy—

2nd operation (Dr. Jackson had time correct—Most of the dissections & letters obtained were prepared to establish these operations—The evidence to establish the operations after 1842 was only obtained to show that the operations were genuine) up to that of Dr. Wells claim to have made a discovery.

It might be to say here that I have had a strong belief that the Wells or Weston were in Jefferson Jackson Co. Georgia, 1842 or there, while there was much talk of my operations & obtained the knowledge of anatomical properties of matter at that time—in one of these years there was a Daniel & an operation for deformities & disease of the eye from Boston. Their names I have been unable to obtain.

University of Iowa Medical Clinic
Iowa City, Iowa

RECEIVED

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