

William Thomas Green Morton, the man who is credited with being the first to demonstrate the use of ether as an anesthetic in surgery, was born in Charlton, Massachusetts in 1819. He studied dentistry at the College of Dental Surgery in Baltimore, and then opened a practice in Farmington, Connecticut, in 1842. In Farmington he became acquainted with Horace Wells who was experimenting with the use of laughing gas in the extraction of teeth.

Morton and Wells began the practice of dentistry together in Boston in 1844, specializing in the manufacture of artificial teeth. The business was not overly successful, largely because the roots of extracted teeth had to be removed before the patient could use a set of false teeth and the process of removing the roots was almost unbearably painful. Morton tried a variety of methods--opium, mesmerism, stimulants to the point of intoxication--but nothing was successful. Horace Wells continued to experiment with laughing gas until the unfortunate death of a patient so unnerved him that he withdrew from the practice. He continued to brood over this event until eventually he took his own life.

Hoping to learn some way to overcome the pain of dental surgery, William Morton enrolled in Harvard Medical School where he studied under Dr. Charles Thomas Jackson who had been experimenting with pure sulphuric ether, even inhaling it himself mixed with air. Morton also tried it on himself; and then on September 30, 1846, he anesthetized Eben H. Frost and removed a firmly rooted tooth.

Shortly thereafter, Morton acted as anesthetist for two operations for the removal of tumors at the Massachusetts General

Hospital. The first one was performed on October 16, 1846 by Dr. John Collins Warren and the patient was Gilbert Abbot. On the following day Dr. George Hayward operated on a young woman.

Morton promptly patented sulphuric ether as Letheon both in the United States and England and offered it free to charitable institutions, but he gave no credit to Jackson. Dr. Jackson and Horace Wells, Morton's former partner, immediately claimed part of the credit and the ensuing controversy consumed most of the remainder of Morton's life and impoverished him as well.

The French Academy of Science investigated the matter and then gave equal prizes to Jackson for the discovery of ether and to Morton for the application of it to surgery. Morton refused his share, saying he deserved it all.

The argument raged for many years and was never really settled. Much was written on both sides and is still being written today. Congress conducted its own investigation and gave Morton the credit for the discovery, but failed three times to pass a bill for the appropriation of funds for a national testimonial to Morton.

The medical profession rallied to his support eventually. Washington University in Baltimore granted him a medical degree in 1849 because he had never finished his degree at Harvard. In Boston in 1856, New York in 1858, and in Philadelphia in 1860 the medical societies acknowledged Morton as the discoverer of anesthesia, but these were honors only with no financial compensation. Almost a century later (November 6, 1920) he was elected to the Hall of Fame on University Heights, New York.

Morton died of apoplexy in New York City on July 15, 1868.

Another claimant to the honor of being named the discoverer of ether was Dr. Crawford Williamson Long who is supposed to have used ether in surgery in 1842 for the first time and eight times thereafter in the next four years. He did not publish his claims until 1849 and very little attention has been paid to them. Morton is today called the discoverer of modern anesthesia.

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