
**Dr. Horace Wells, Dentist, Who First Discovered, Demonstrated
And Proclaimed The Blessings Of Surgical Anesthesia**

W. HARRY ARCHER, M.A., D.D.S.

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Dr. Horace Wells, Dentist, Who First Discovered, Demonstrated And Proclaimed The Blessings Of Surgical Anesthesia*

W. HARRY ARCHER, M.A., D.D.S.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Professor of Oral Surgery and Anesthesia
and Chairman of the Department of Oral Surgery,
School of Dental Medicine, University of Pittsburgh



For over a 100 years periodically someone renews the old controversy, who is the true discover of anesthesia?

A universally accepted definition of a discoverer is: *one who first finds and brings the fact to the knowledge of the world!*

The only individual who completely fulfills this definition is Horace Wells.

Editor's Note: Howard R. Raper, D.D.S., in his book, "Man Against Pain," states: "Thanks mainly to the published work of Dr. W. Harry Archer, more of a reliable nature is known about the life and personality of Horace Wells than any other 'discoverer'."

Rear Admiral Alfred Chandler, DC, USN (Ret.) sent me in 1966 the following information:

"The introduction of the work anesthesia is erroneously accredited to Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1844. On page 160 of the "Dental Chronology, A Record of the More Important Historic Events in the Evolution of Dentistry" by Herman Prinz, published in 1945 by Lea & Febiger, is the following: "The word anesthesia first appeared in the English language in the Dictionary Britannicum" of N. Bailey, London, 1721'."

*Contribution to symposium, "Landmarks in Recorded Dental History," by Archer, Adbell, Deranian, Jacobs, Kauffmann, McCall, Rafetto, Robinson, Rosenthal, Sebelius and others.

Horace Wells' forum to publicly announce his original discovery of anesthesia on December 11, 1844, was before the medical class of Dr. John C. Warren, Professor of Anatomy and Surgery, Medical School, Harvard University, early in January of 1845 where he presented a lecture on "The Use of Nitrous Oxide for the Prevention of Pain" which was followed by a demonstration of the use of nitrous oxide on one of the students before this class.

Mankind's greatest boon, anesthesia, is therefore a contribution to the world by a member of the dental profession.

It seems hard to gain general acceptance of this fact, possibly because the average individual would expect that this discovery came from the medical profession.

This erroneous impression is still advanced from time to time, as we will see later with so-called "proof." However, the American Medical Association at its Twenty-first Annual Meeting in Wash-

ington, D.C., in May 1870, "Resolved, that the honor of the discovery of practical anesthesia is due to the late Dr. Horace Wells of Connecticut."

The American Dental Association at its Eleventh Annual Meeting in 1872 voted likewise.

Horace Wells was a sensitive, intelligent, conscientious, and compassionate young dental surgeon in Hartford, Connecticut. The suffering he caused when he extracted teeth troubled him greatly. Because the extraction of teeth was one of the most frequently performed dental operations, his mind was constantly occupied with the thought of discovering some way to prevent the terrible pain which accompanied the operation. Four years before his discovery he discussed the possibilities of preventing surgical pain with his brother, Charles, who was a physician in Manchester, New Hampshire, and with his medical colleagues in Hartford. They were unable to help him. Horace continued his studies and availed himself of every opportunity to advance his knowledge. Reading in the Hartford "Courant" on December 10th that there would be "A Grand Exhibition of the effects produced by inhaling Nitrous Oxide, Exhilarating or Laughing Gas . . . scientific to those who make it scientific . . . (and also) . . . most surprising Chemical Experiments . . ."—that evening in Union Hall, Horace and his wife attended. As part of his demonstration, Mr. G. Q. Colton manufactured some nitrous oxide, known as "laughing gas," and to amuse the crowd invited spectators from the audience to come forward and inhale the "laughing gas fumes." When this part of the lecture was reached, Wells, in the audience, observed that no sign of pain was exhibited when the volunteers under the "laughing jag" of the gas stumbled around the stage and scraped their shins on heavy benches. Immediately there crystallized in the mind of Wells the idea of inhalation anesthesia. Wells, it is thought, was unacquainted with the suggestion of Sir Humphrey Davy some forty-four years prior.

What happened subsequently can best be told in the words of one of the participants in the historic event, Dr. John M. Riggs:

Wells and I had a ". . . conference that night and determination to try the gas on Wells the next morning. Wells went to the Hall and asked Colton to let him have a bag of gas as he wanted to take it and have a tooth pulled—and he invited the party, Colton, Cooley, and two others to come up and witness the operation. I was attending to a patient but was awaiting Wells' return. When I entered Wells' office, the said parties were there. Wells took his seat in the operating chair. I examined the tooth so as to be ready to operate without delay. Wells took the bag in his lap—held the tube to his mouth and inhaled till insensibility relaxed the muscles of his arms—his hands fell on his breast—his head dropped on the head-rest and I instantly passed the forceps into the mouth—onto the tooth and extracted it.

"Mr. Colton, Cooley and the two there stood by the open door ready to run out if Wells jumped up from the chair and made any hostile demonstrations. You may ask—Why did he not get up? Simply because he could not. Our agreement, the night previous was, to push the administration to a point hitherto unknown.

"We knew not whether death or success confronted us. It was 'terra incognita' we were bound to explore—the result is known to the world. No one but Wells and myself knew to what point the inhalation was to be carried—the result was painfully problematical to us but the great law of Nature, hitherto unknown, was kind to us and a grand discovery was born into the world.

"Encouraged and gratified with the success of the first experiment the aforementioned Wells and myself continued to administer to various individuals the said gas and to extract teeth while under its influence, in the presence of several gentlemen, until fully satisfied of its usefulness and applicability in surgical operations, I further affirm that the said

Wells avowed his intention to communicate the discovery to the dental and medical faculty, and in pursuance of that intention, proceeded to the city of Boston, State of Massachusetts for that purpose. . . ."

When friends urged Wells to patent his discovery he said, "No!" "Let it be as free as the air we breathe. . . ."

This statement by Wells proves him to be a true humanitarian, because he had already been granted two U.S. Patents for household devices and was, therefore, fully acquainted with the gainful financial possibilities if he obtained a patent on his discovery.

It has been stated by some writers* on the History of Anesthesia that Wells had a death in his office from the use of nitrous oxide and so discontinued its use. I have not found a shred of evidence of any such fatality in my extensive research in the life of Horace Wells. Two years later, W. T. G. Morton, Wells' former pupil and partner, introduced ether as an anesthesia agent at the Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, October 16, 1846.

The basis for the claim that a member of the medical profession was the discoverer of anesthesia stems from the acknowledged fact that a young physician, Crawford W. Long of Georgia, as a participant in what were known as "ether frolics," which had long been a form of amusement among the young people in 1842, conceived the idea that possibly he could give a patient sufficient ether to inhale so that he could operate without pain. Selecting as his patient an

acquaintance whom he knew to be a frequent participant in ether parties, he painlessly removed a tumor from his neck while the patient was under the influence of ether, just as physicians and dentists had used whiskey as a preparation for surgery for those known to be addicted to its use. In the next four years Long administered ether four different times, and then stopped. It is quite apparent that Long was not impressed with the idea that he had made a discovery of great importance, for he made no effort to introduce the method regularly into his general practice, he did not demonstrate it or lecture on it before any medical or other group, nor did he write on the subject until five years after Wells' public lecture and demonstration on nitrous oxide and three years after Mortons' demonstration of ether. Therefore he cannot be called the discoverer of anesthesia.

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*Rene Fulop-Millers book, "Triumphs Over Pain". Bobbs-Merrill Company. Indianapolis and New York, 1938.