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HISTORICAL NOTES ON HORACE WELLS

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HISTORICAL NOTES ON HORACE WELLS

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I.

AUTHORSHIP OF OLD PAMPHLET CLAIMING WELLS THE DISCOVERER OF ANESTHESIA ESTABLISHED

DISCOVERY by the late Dr. Horace Wells of the Applicability of Nitrous Oxyd Gas, Sulphuric Ether and Other Vapors in Surgical Operations, Nearly Two Years Before the Patented Discovery of Drs. Charles T. Jackson and W. T. G. Morton (Press of Case, Tiffany and Co., Hartford, Conn., 1850) is one of the most powerfully written pamphlets in existence presenting Horace Wells' case as the true discoverer of anesthesia. Yet this pamphlet, which contains many affidavits from leading dentists, physicians, and citizens of Hartford, carries no author's name. The Congressional Library card attributes the authorship to J. Wales, citing as authority Richard Manning Hodges, who, in the bibliography of his narrative of events connected with the introduction of sulphuric ether¹ thus credits the authorship.

On a visit to the Connecticut Historical Society in Hartford, to investigate their collection of material dealing with the discovery of anesthesia, the librarian placed before me, among other items, a large manila envelope on which was written in what is said to be the handwriting of Charles T. Wells (the son and only child of Horace Wells), the following: "Chas. T. Wells, Ms. of Pamphlet by Isaac Toucey" (Fig. 1). The name Toucey was a strange one,

¹ This book by Dr. Hodges, a former surgeon of the Massachusetts General Hospital, was published by Little, Brown and Company of Boston in 1891. It contains a history of the use of ether in surgical practice, an Appendix dealing with the "operations at Massachusetts General Hospital between October 18 and December 31, 1846," which includes those in which ether was used and also a Bibliography which is "a fairly thorough enumeration of all the important literature bearing on the History of Surgical Anesthesia, and especially of the Ether controversy."

one which I had never seen on any documents supporting Wells. Hence it was with considerable surprise when on opening the envelope the original manuscript of the well known pamphlet mentioned in the opening paragraph of this article was discovered (Fig. 2). On acquainting Dr. Max E. Soifer, Librarian of the Hartford Dental Society with this find, he offered to attempt to identify Isaac Toucey. Subsequently, he advised me that I would find complete information concerning Isaac Toucey in Frederick C. Norton's "The Governors of Connecticut, 1635 to 1905." Albert C. Bates, Librarian of the Connecticut Historical So-

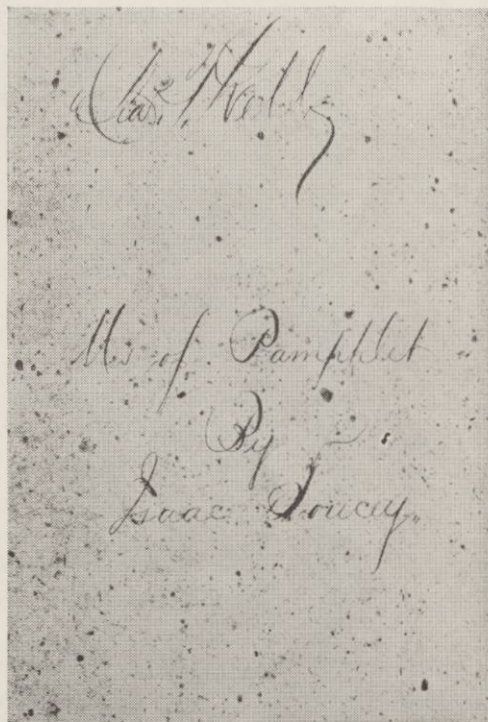


Fig. 1.—The envelope in which manuscript was found. The handwriting is that of Charles T. Wells.

ciety, very kindly had the following information photostated from the book:

Isaac Toucey was born in Newton on November 5, 1796, and was a descendant of Rev. Thomas Toucey, the first Congregational minister of the town. He received a good education, but never attended college, as he commenced studying law with the Hon. Asa Chapman of Newton, who was afterwards judge of the Supreme Court of Errors.

In 1818, at the age of twenty-two years, Toucey was admitted to the bar in Hartford, and began practice in that city. Possessing an unusual knowledge of the law for so young a man and being untiring for his clients' interests, Toucey soon gained prominence and secured a large and lucrative practice. Four years after being admitted to the bar he was chosen state's attorney for Hartford county, which office he held for the next thirteen years.

In 1835 Toucey became the choice of his party for representative in Congress, and was elected to that position during the year. Toucey remained in Congress four years, retiring in 1839, with an honorable record of service. He was elected governor of Connecticut in 1846, and remained in office one year. At this time Governor Toucey was considered to be one of the ablest lawyers in Connecticut and his fame reached far outside of the state.

President Polk appointed Governor Toucey attorney-general of the United States, and he served as such from June 21, 1848, to March 3, 1849. During a portion of this period Toucey was acting secretary of state. After retiring from the office of attorney-

general Toucey returned to Connecticut and was elected a member of the United States Senate, and held the office during the full term of six years.

When James Buchanan was inaugurated President on March 4, 1847 [incorrect, should be 1857] Isaac Toucey was named as secretary of the navy to succeed the Hon. James C. Dobbins of North Carolina. Commencing his duties as the head of the navy department March 6, 1857, Toucey served throughout the administration, retiring from office March 3, 1861. . . .

. . . . Governor Toucey returned to this state and resumed the practice of his profession, to which he was intensely devoted. Several offices were offered to him at this period; among these was a place on the bench of the United States Supreme Court.

Living at Hartford the remaining years of his life, he was the recipient of many honors at the hands of his fellow townsmen. He died on July 30, 1869, aged 73 years.

Of his professional ability the "Judicial and Civil History of Connecticut" says: 'He justly ranked among the ablest lawyers in the state. He was a very accurate lawyer, learned and exact in pleading, and clear and orderly in the presentation of his case.'

The same article continues, in referring to his personal characteristics: 'He was tall in person, and though of slender figure, he had fine features and a commanding presence. He spoke slowly, but with great precision. His diction was strong and clear, but without a particle of ornament. His private character was without a stain. He was a consistent and devout member of the Episcopal church. In his convictions he was firm, and held to them with a strength and tenacity of will that were never surpassed. His self-possession never forsook him, and on all occasions he exhibited the bearing of a high-toned gentleman.'

Isaac Toucey, it would seem, was an important figure in the affairs of his state and country, and certainly in the affairs of his city—Hartford—and his opinions and writings naturally would be of value. Therefore, if it could be established that Toucey was the author of this pamphlet crediting Wells with the discovery of anesthesia, another strong supporting argument in the controversy concerning Wells' place in this event could be advanced.

The one way of establishing beyond doubt the authorship would be to compare Toucey's handwriting with the handwriting of the manuscript in question. This has been done (Figs. 3-4). I obtained a copy of a let-

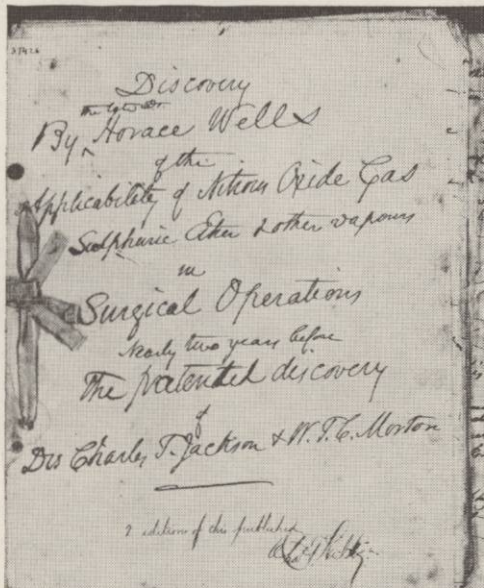


Fig. 2.—Title-page of manuscript.

My dear Mrs. Sigourney

I had the pleasure
to receive your Christmas gift
by the hand of Mr. Dixon.

A beautiful volume of
illustrated poems, just from the
press, as a gift from the favourite
poetess herself, whose wide-spread
fame has in it an enduring
monument, & no slight favour.

Accept my acknowledgments
for the compliment so gracefully
bestowed, & believe me,

dear lady

truly yours

with perfect

esteem & regard

I. Toucey

Washington Dec 27 1848

Fig. 4.—The second page
of the manuscript. The sim-
ilarity of this handwriting with
that of Toucey's (see above)
can be noted easily.

Fig. 3.—A letter written by
Isaac Toucey to the poet, Mrs.
Sigourney.

2
in the latter part of the year 1844
, not known, that by the inhalation
substance the body ^{could} be rendered
without injury to the patient. No one, it is believed,
claims the honour of a previous discovery in
the ordinary sense of that term. No one
before that time had ascertained the fact
by actual experiment. We say this in full
view of the claims set up by Dr. Charles J.
Jackson of the City of Boston, because it is
not pretended by him, or by any one for him,
that he ever performed a surgical operation
or caused one to be performed upon a subject
under the influence of sulphuric ether, until
that, (the merit of which he claims) performed
by the hand of Dr. W. J. G. Morton on the
30th day of September 1846, nearly two years
after the period of which we are now
speaking. If we admit that as early as
the winter of 1841-42, when he inhaled the
vapour of sulphuric ether as a remedy for the
effects of chlorine gas, "he was + led to believe
as he now says "that the paralysis of the nerves
of sensation was so great during the continuance

ter by Toucey (written when he was attorney-general of the United States to the poet, Mrs. Sigourney) and have had this compared with the pamphlet in question by several handwriting experts. They were all of the opinion that the two specimens were written by the same hand. However, since the original documents were not available in Pittsburgh, and these handwriting analysts could study the photostatic copies only, a written statement could not be obtained from them.

The fact that Toucey was the author is supported further by finding the original manuscript still extant and contained in an envelope on which Wells' son has written "Ms. of Pamphlet by Isaac Toucey." Also, it is noted that Wells' son has written "2 editions of this published" on the title page (Fig. 2). He must have known Toucey to

be the author.

It would seem then, in view of these facts, that the pamphlet in question which definitely indicates that Wells was the discoverer of anesthesia, was written by Isaac Toucey—a man whose character, ability, training, and general information, show him to be a proponent of truth and fairness. The statements and opinions of Toucey, therefore, are of value, and carry weight. What he has said of Wells deserves consideration by all those interested in seeing the name of Horace Wells given its proper and rightful place in the history of anesthesia.

The photostatic copies of the original manuscript and the letter by Toucey were made available through the kindness of Albert C. Bates, Librarian of the Connecticut Historical Society.

II.

LETTER IN WELLS' HANDWRITING LOCATED

Original documents, such as letters, account books, and so on, in Wells' handwriting are rare. As far as I can discover there are at present but two known documents in his handwriting.

One is a Day Book in which he kept the charge accounts of his patients, beginning on May 13, 1841, and with regular entries up to January 17, 1845. Wells started to practice in Hartford in 1836, but the records of the first five years of his practice either have been destroyed or have been lost. This record book is now in the Walter R. Steiner Memorial Library at Hartford, Connecticut.

The second document I was able to locate through the courtesy of R. B. Shipley, Chief of the Passport Division, Department of State, Washington, D. C. It is a letter written by Wells on December 18, 1846, to the Hon. James Dixon, Congressman from Connecticut, asking him to obtain a passport for

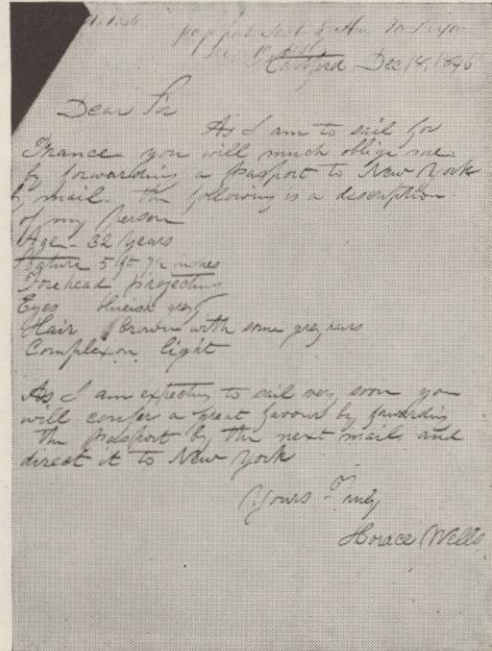


Fig. 5.—Letter written by Horace Wells to obtain a United States passport for his trip to France.

a proposed trip to France (Fig. 5). This trip was for the dual purpose of presenting his claims in Europe as the discoverer of anesthesia and to purchase oil paintings for resale in America.

It is interesting to note Wells' description of himself in this letter. He gives his age as 32 years when actually he would not be 32 until five weeks later, January 21, 1847. On receipt of Wells' letter, Dixon sent it with one of his own to the Hon. James Buchanan,

Secretary of State. An error enters here because of the duplication and addition of information by Dixon: Wells' age is given incorrectly as 35, and his profession as physician. This error on the part of Dixon explains why U. S. Government Passport No. 1487, issued on December 19, 1846, to Horace Wells, M.D., contains these inaccuracies, although the M.D. has been marked out with crosses. The passport now hangs in the Hartford Dental Library.

III.

WELLS' PARTNERSHIP WITH MORTON IN BOSTON WAS IN NAME ONLY

All writers on the history of anesthesia mention the partnership of Wells and Morton in Boston. As evidence that this partnership existed, an advertisement which appeared in the *American Traveller* (Volume 19, Number 61, January 30, 1844), a semi-weekly newspaper of Boston, is cited (Fig. 6). Also, as evidence, there is submitted a notice of the dissolution of the partnership by Wells himself some nine months later (Fig. 7). This appeared in the *Boston Daily Atlas* (Volume 13, Number 100, October 24, 1844).

This partnership apparently was in name only. When I examined Wells' Day Book, which dated from May 13, 1841, to January 17, 1845, I found that Wells was practicing continuously in Hartford during 1844—the year of the partnership with Morton in Boston!

The following selected entries from the Day Book, printed for the first time, show that Wells not only was still giving Morton "instructions in the art of dentistry, as per agreement," but did considerable of Morton's work in Hartford.

Westborough. E. H. Balch, Providence, R.I. James Green & Co., Worcester. Arnold Boyden, Lowell. Kendall & Co., Nashua, John Bixby, Keene, Moses B. Canney, Dover and Gosport, N.H. A. B. Sands & Co., 33 Broadway, N.Y.

mar17 pWly

DENTISTS

MESRS. WELLS & MORTON, DENTISTS, No. 19 Tremont Row, are determined to make their valuable invention extensively known, and duly appreciated in the shortest time possible: with this in view we now propose to insert teeth on gold (until further notice) without compensation until the expiration of one year; then if the patient is perfectly satisfied that our invention is really valuable and superior to any other mode of constructing gold plates, we shall expect a small compensation which may be previously agreed on, otherwise we will ask nothing. All we shall require when the teeth are inserted, will be just enough to pay for the materials used, which will be but a trifle. If by this means we are enabled to introduce our improvement more extensively than in the ordinary way, our object will be attained.

All persons can have the benefit of this proposition, whether living at a distance or in town, by calling or sending us word within one week after the publication of this notice, so long as it may be continued.

N. B.—Dr. Charles T. Jackson's certificate respecting this invention to be seen at our office.

WELLS & MORTON,
No. 19 Tremont Row.

nc. 4—Wly

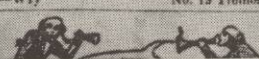


Fig. 6.—Boston newspaper advertisement announcing the partnership of Wells and Morton.

100 No. 2 Court square, 1 door 9 Building.

TOLMAN WILLEY,
HORACE G. HUTCHINS,
121w-estDec23 5 823

Boston, Sept. 21st, 1844.

COPARTNERSHIP NOTICE. THIS CERTIFICATE that the copartnership of WELLS & MORTON has been dissolved by mutual consent. HORACE WELLS. OZ3
Oct. 23d, 1844. ep23

COPARTNERSHIP NOTICE. THE CONNECTION in business between JOHN L. FRIEST and RICHARD S. BERRY, having been by mutual consent dissolved, the said parties have this day formed a Copartnership under the firm of

10 512

Fig. 7.—Notice by Wells in Boston newspaper stating that his partnership with Morton was dissolved.

Sept. 10th, 1843—Mr. Morton, Dr.
Solder . . . and spiral springs.....\$1.32
March 4th, 1844—Dr. Wm. T. G. Morton.
To operations on teeth and instructions in the art of dentistry, as per agreement.....\$50.00
May 4th, 1844—Dr. Morton, Dr.
Gold foil used in filling teeth for self, 7 sheets\$17.09
Also specimen work.....\$7.00
May 17th, 1844. Specimen, set of teeth, Dr. Morton\$7.00
Inserting 2 teeth for specimen.....\$3.00

May 21st, 1844—Dr. Morton, Dr.
 Inserting teeth for Mrs. Smith, \$16.00
 Difference in weight of gold, \$ 1.00—\$17.00
 May 27th . . . Dr. Morton.
 14 teeth at 37½ cents.....\$5.25
 June 11, 1844.
 Repaired Mrs. Smith's teeth for Morton...\$2.00
 August 30th, Dr. Morton.
 1 set of teeth at 37½ cents.....\$5.25
 Sept. 2, 1844—Dr. Morton.
 To inserting teeth for Mrs. Phelps.....

It seems difficult to explain the advertisement which infers that Wells was in Boston with Morton when these entries show otherwise. It is possible that Morton told Wells of his intention of opening an office in Boston at the time he was taking instruction in dentistry from Wells, which most writers state as in 1841 and 1842. Apparently he continued because on March 4, 1844, an entry indicates that Wells charged Morton \$50.00 for instruction.

A plausible explanation seems to be that Wells, who was quite an inventor, had dis-

covered about this time a new solder which he felt had great possibilities. It is likely that he entered into the partnership with the plan that Morton would open the office in Boston under both names, but until it was well established there, he would continue the excellent practice he had in Hartford. The hope apparently was that his soldering invention, which Charles T. Jackson had approved, would be of great use to them. Jackson had given them a certificate (see the advertisement) in connection with the invention, and Wells had paid him \$40.00—this entry is in the back of the Day Book. Jackson was a well known physician, chemist, and geologist, and later was one of the claimants for the title of discoverer of anesthesia.

Wells apparently decided that the Boston venture was a failure because he announced the dissolution of the partnership himself.

IV.

WELLS FAILED TO MAKE DAY BOOK ENTRY ABOUT NITROUS OXIDE INHALATION, DECEMBER 11, 1844

It was a distinct disappointment when I discovered that Wells made no entry in his Day Book on December 11, 1844, concerning his inhalation of nitrous oxide, administered by C. Q. Colton, for the extraction of an aching wisdom tooth. His friend and former pupil, Dr. John M. Riggs (of Riggs' Disease fame) performed the operation. The entries for this date are:

Governor Ellsworth—To filling teeth for Mrs. Ellsworth.....	
G. W. Corning—Extraction for daughter	\$.50
Thos. Jones, East Hartford—Filling 2 teeth	2.00
Daniel Seymour—Ext. tooth for daughter25
Rev. Mr. Richmond—Filling 3 teeth for wife	3.00
Two visits to house.....	1.50

Of course this book was for the recording of work *not paid for*; I am told that it was

the custom in those days to keep records only of that type of work. No record of work *paid for* at the time of completion was kept. Yet it is strange that having made such a momentous discovery Wells did not make some notation concerning it in his Day Book.

There were no further entries in this book from December 11 to 21, and then none until December 30 and 31. So Wells' Day Book proves his statement: "On making the discovery I was so elated respecting it that I expended my money freely, and devoted my whole time for several weeks, in order to present it to those who were best qualified to investigate and decide upon its merits, not asking or expecting anything for my services, well assured that it was a valuable discovery. I was desirous that it should be as free as the air we breath . . ."2

In 1845 entries were made for January 6, 7, 11, 15 and 16, and then there was a lapse until February 4. This is probably the

²Wells, Horace. *A History of the Discovery of the Application of Nitrous Oxide Gas, Ether, and other Vapors, to Surgical Operations*. J. Gaylord Wells, Hartford, 1847.

time Wells went to Boston "resolving to give it [the discovery] into the hands of proper persons without expecting to derive any pecuniary benefit therefrom."³

³Wells, Horace. Letter to Editor of *Hartford Courant*, December 7, 1846, setting forth his discovery.

V.

LONDON DENTISTS HONOR WELLS IN 1873

At the conclusion of a campaign to raise a testimonial fund for the benefit of Mrs. Horace Wells, as an "expression of English gratitude for the benefit conferred upon humanity by the labors of Horace Wells,"⁴ the following was engrossed on vellum and was forwarded to Mrs. Wells accompanied with the amount subscribed:

At a meeting held 25th March, 1873, at 6, Cavendish Place, London, W.

It was resolved that the sum of money subscribed by several Members of the Medical and Dental Profession and others in England, be forwarded to Mrs. H. Wells as a slight testimonial to the merits of her late husband Horace Wells (of Hartford, Connecticut, U.S.) to whom the world is indebted not only for the introduction of Nitrous Oxide as an Anesthetic but also for giving that impetus to the study of Anaesthesia which has resulted in the introduction of ether, chloroform, and various other agents for effecting that object.

Signed in behalf of the Committee

John Eric Erichsen . . . Chairman.

Dr. Frederic T. Murlless, Secretary of the Horace Wells Club of Hartford, and his secretary, Miss H. Louise Blair, whose cooperation has been invaluable, advise me that this certificate hangs in the Hartford Dental Library and that the following signatures are also on the original: Joseph T. Clover and N. Woodhouse Braine, Treasurers; Charles James Fox and Edwin Sercomb, Secretaries.

It is of interest that the list of subscrib-



HORACE WELLS

(This engraving loaned to the author by Charles J. Wells, M.D.)

ers comprised "the name of nearly every dentist of note, especially in the metropolis; and this list, as showing the recognition by gentlemen of high professional position of the merits of her late husband, cannot but afford gratification to Mrs. Wells; but, however highly such a compliment must be valued, a more tangible evidence of the sincerity of English feeling would not be less appreciated."⁵

⁴ ⁵From notices which appeared in the *British Journal of Dental Science* (16: 115, 391, March, 1873).