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**LETTERS OF
DR. AND MRS. HORACE WELLS
DISCOVERED**

W. HARRY ARCHER, B.S., D.D.S.

Assistant Professor

Department of Anesthesia and Exodontia

SCHOOL OF DENTISTRY

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

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LETTERS OF DR. AND MRS. HORACE WELLS DISCOVERED

W. HARRY ARCHER, B.S., D.D.S.

In March, 1939,¹ I reported the discovery of the second known document in Horace Wells' handwriting, a letter to Hon. Dixon, requesting his assistance in obtaining a passport to France. The only known document at that time was Horace Wells' Day Book.² Thinking that perhaps there might be letters from Horace Wells in the possession of relatives, a search was undertaken to learn what, if any, relatives of Dr. Wells were living. Several authorities on the life of Wells in Hartford were consulted, but they did not know of any relatives. Having heard that Dr. Wells' son, Charles, left a large fortune when he died in 1909, a search was made of the files of the Probate Court, Hartford, Connecticut, and a list of the names and addresses of the nine distributees of the Estate of Charles T. Wells was obtained.³

Letters sent to these individuals brought but two replies, the others were returned "address unknown". The two replies were from Mr. Arthur Wells Cole,⁴ the only living child of Horace Wells' sister Mary, and Miss Mary W. Wales, daughter of Joseph Wales, Horace Wells' brother-in-law.

The questionnaire returned from Miss Wales,⁵ South Deerfield, Mass., stated in

¹Archer, W. H., *Historical Notes on Horace Wells. Dental Rays*, Vol. 14, No. 3, March, 1939.

²Horace Wells' Day Book. Walter R. Steiner Medical Library, Hartford, Conn.

³Through the courtesy of Miss H. Louise Blair, Hartford, Conn.

⁴Born March 2, 1856, Died May 17, 1939.

⁵January 21, 1939. All correspondence with Miss Wales was handled by Mrs. Cornelia A. Peterson, in view of Miss Wales' incapacitating illness.

reply to the question: Do you have any letters, books, instruments, or equipment which belonged to Horace Wells, his wife or son?: "Miss Wales has a few letters between H. Wells and Miss Wales' father, Joseph Wales, but it is beyond her power to get them at this time."

These letters, a miniature oil portrait of Dr. Wells and one of Mrs. Wells, a photograph of Mrs. Wells and some printed material, have now been secured and forwarded to me for their first publication.

The first three letters relate the initial steps of the courtship by Dr. Horace Wells of Elizabeth Wales in 1838.

March 5th letter addressed to Miss Elizabeth Wales, Hartford, Conn.

Hartford, March 5th

Miss Wales:

It is with no little diffidence that I take my pen in hand to address you at this time, and to ask one or two questions for which I may be charged with presumption; the purpose, however, has not been formed without due consideration. We are comparatively strangers, and for that reason I at first resolved in this communication to ask but one, *vis.* Would it be in accordance with your wishes to become more familiarly acquainted with me? Here I intended to have signed my name, but there are reasons which have induced me to ask one more question and abide the consequences.

Whatever the answer may be, you must excuse me for being so explicit.

Are there circumstances which preclude the possibility of this proposed acquaintance ever resulting in a more intimate connexion than that of brother and sister in Christ? Now, Elizabeth, you doubtless understand the import of this, and I shall expect a candid answer.

If I have been premature in the last query, it remains for you to forgive.

Truly yours, H. Wells.

N.B. It would be well to add the word *Dentist*, with the superscription of your letter as there is another of my name.

March 6th letter addressed to H. Wells,
Dentist, Hartford.

Hartford, March 6th

Dr. Wells,
Sir:

With no small surprise I received your communication of the 5th and felt it to be my duty to confide in my Aunt, who has ever manifested the highest interest for my welfare. She wishes me to act agreeable to my judgment as her only wish is for my happiness, with the hope that the intercourse may be commenced and continued in such a manner that should it hereafter terminate, it may still exist as brother and sister in Christ without injured feelings to either.

I am therefore prepared to say in answer to your first question, it being direct, that to cultivate a farther acquaintance with you would be agreeable to my wishes. If the confession is too full pardon it. If I comprehend your second question it is one which involves our temporal happiness. You will not expect me to say much upon that subject at this time. I will only add that had I seen any insurmountable obstacle to the second I should not have been so explicit in answering the first.

Yours
E. Wales

March 7th letter addressed to Miss Elizabeth Wales, Hartford, Conn.

Hartford, March 7th

Elizabeth:

Permit me to suggest the propriety of making my visits periodical, for the present.

I would therefore propose to make you a one-half-hour call, on each Tuesday evening at 7½ o'clock.

If this time would be inconvenient, I hope you will not fail to inform me. If I mistake not, the right-hand bell belongs to you. If I am mistaken, please inform me; the mistake itself would be a small one, but sometimes little things cast great shadows.

Yours,
Horace

The following letter makes clear several points concerning the Wells and Morton partnership in Boston. There was some doubt in my mind that Wells ever went to Boston; that the partnership was in name only.¹ However, this letter clearly proves that Horace Wells went with W. T. G. Morton to Boston where they set up an office. It also proves that he stayed in Boston

for at least two weeks, but approximately four weeks later he wrote Morton from Hartford declaring his intention to give up the partnership and suggested "..... let us give it up and jog along here at home as usual;"⁶

It is interesting to note that Dr. Wells states in the letter here reproduced, "we have also succeeded in getting the certificate of the most celebrated chemist and geologist in the country in relation to my invention . . ." (italics not in original). This invention was a gold solder with which Miller⁷ credits Morton. The celebrated chemist and geologist, Dr. Charles T. Jackson, was later to be one of the claimants for the title of discoverer of anesthesia.

Letter of Oct. 28, addressed to Mrs. Dr.
Horace Wells, Hartford, Ct.

Boston, Oct. 28, 1843

Saturday eve

Dear Wife:

This is the first leisure time that I have found since my departure from Hartford. By the way, in the first place I ought to bid you and Charley good bye, for I came off in such a hurry that I was deprived of that privilege. I expected as a matter of course I should have time to come down to "Aunt Bays" to bid you and all others good bye, but the time was past before I was aware of it, thus much for the preface, now for the journal. Well then I arrived at Springfield in due time but we were greeted by a most disagreeable snow storm; in fact, we had it immediately after leaving Hartford. When we arrived at Springfield the cars from the west had not arrived, and did not arrive until after dark, in consequence of an accident on the road. We, therefore, had a night job of it. We have been engaged ever since in procuring a room for our office and have just succeeded to our perfect satisfaction, indeed, we have one of the finest rooms in the City, which we obtained by mere chance it is on No. 19 Tre-

⁶Archer, W. Harry. Chronological History of Horace Wells, Discoverer of Anesthesia. *Bulletin of The History of Medicine*, Vol. 7, No. 10, December, 1939.

⁷Miller, A. H. Two Notable Controversies: Over the Invention of the Electric Telegraph and The Discovery of Surgical Anesthesia. *Annals of Medical History*, New Series. Vol. 6, No. 2. Pages 110-123, 1934.

mont Row, the most fashionable place in the City, and one man told us that he had been waiting 2 years to obtain a room in this location and had not succeeded yet, such is the demand for rooms in this location you will readily perceive therefore that we were fortunate in this respect. We have also succeeded in getting the certificate of the most celebrated chemist and geologist in the country in relation to my invention which will undoubtedly secure a first rate business to the office. His name is Dr. C. T. Jackson which you have undoubtedly heard of before, he expressed himself in the highest terms of admiration respecting the improvement, and he spent 3 days in analysing the gold to see if it was as it appeared to be; he has made his report in writing and has given us permission to publish it, which we shall do next week. Any statement coming from such an eminent man must have a wonderful effect, in short we have succeeded thus far in our preliminary arrangements beyond our most sanguine expectations. We shall be ready for business on Monday or Tuesday and as soon as our advertisements come out I will send you papers containing them. I shall probably remain here about 2 weeks longer and I wish you to write me as soon as you receive this and inform me of your health and how Charley comes on and all others.

Write often say every other day. You don't know how much I prize letters when I am absent from home—

Your Hus—
Horace

Horace Wells has been described by some of his contemporaries as follows: "With unusually refined and sensitive feelings and retiring manners, he seldom sought general society. . . ."⁸ With this and other descriptions about his "serious mien", it was somewhat surprising to find him joking and acting as "dan cupid" as he did in the following letter:

Letter of June 9, 1844 addressed to Dea. Ira Wells, East Windsor, Scantic Village, Ct.

Hartford June 9, 1844

Dear Uncle

This letter is on business of much importance and I hope you will attend to it in a "business like manner". It is no more nor

⁸Smith, Hon. Truman: *An Inquiry Into the Origin of Modern Anesthesia*. Brown and Gross, Hartford, 1867.

less than the making up of a match between a gentleman of this City and Miss Hannah Potwine of your place—in short Mr. Hender my wife's Uncle who is about 60 years of age has just got a bill of divorce from his wife who resides in the West Indies, and having heard myself and wife speak of Miss Potwine, formerly, he has taken it into his head that he would like an introduction to her. He has accordingly requested me to write you on this subject in order to ascertain whether an introduction would be in accordance with her wishes if so he will call at your house and ask of you the favor to introduce him. You can state to her that he is about sixty years of age has about twelve or fifteen thousand dollars. He would like to have you see her as soon as convenient and if she wishes an introduction to state what day would be most convenient and to inform me forthwith.

Yours truly H. Wells

Mrs. Wells writes to her brother Joseph Wales, and Horace Wells adds two paragraphs. Having been told that he (Wells) "seldom sought general society,"⁽⁸⁾ I was surprised when he wrote about joining the Odd Fellows. Note again his joking reference to himself:

Letter of Sept. 20, 1846: (no address.)

Sept 20th, 1846

My dear brother:

I have nothing to write about but as you are so anxious to hear from Hartford I will say a few words. I have had a short visit from Livia this week, she started for Alabama last Thursday. (Sept 17/46) She did not expect to leave before October. Her Mother is feeble, her complaint is a disease of the heart, she may live years and may not a month. I am expecting a visit from brother Charles this week, we are not in a very inviting plight for visitors but they must take what they can get. Cattle Show and Fair comes on soon and we have engaged Ann Morse to stay a few days. I suppose the folks from the country will favor us with a call, and that lovely critter must be waited on, *but I dont do it*. Do you hear anything from Lem and family. Horace has opened his old office and is now engaged in dentistry. Mr. Gill has given up business here and is going into business in Boston. Edward Cooke of N. Y. died at our insane Retreat a day or two since. I must say Good Night and give room for Horace I believe Aunt Ba has a letter commensed to you.

Your aff. sister E W

he sent to England some time since, and probably you would have had a special request to visit among our former glories if you had not been so fortunate as to get away, but I forget it has not as yet touched the Wales family. Our Hartford friends are getting quite interested about the gas war. Mrs. Ellsworth has promised me the reading of the medical papers, one came last evening but I have not got it yet. Bigalows peice is copied in the Courrent of this week. "Now comes the tug of war" and we will see who wins. I beleive Uncle is as much interested as any one, in having you win. From what I hear it seems she is determined to set him against us, and I know he is pretty well tied up. We will see what two or three years will do. I predict he will get his eyes open by that time. Your friend Dr. Terry is quite kind and attentive, poor soul, he told me speaking of your leaving for such a long voyage, that his wife was unwilling he should be absent one night. Charley has stood here waiting to write you, till he has got out of temper and gone to bed. He has a vacation this week and that with the Christmas party has about upset him. I gave him two books and confectionary and he was "so happy". He intends to do wonders before you return and when you write answer his letters or he will be quite indignant. I get quite laughed at when I tell our friends I shall not hear from you for 40 or 50 days they say you have stretched it. I must say Good night and give my eyes a little rest. Pleasent dreams.

Dec. 28th

How do you do this evening! I wish you would answer me, I imagine I could hear you. To day old Mr. Whitman has been buried the old gentleman who has been so long with Mr. Robins in the Institute. He was buried in the old yard back of the Centre Church. Mr. Johnson is quite feeble threatened with the lung fever and three or four of the family are also sick. Do you know it is just one week today since you left us, Charley cannot realise you being away so far. He commenced learning to write to you today and ended by making St. Nicholas with a little round belly which shook when he laughed like a bowl of jelly. He says that as Aunt Ba has, I shall leave him space to speak for himself, here he comes.
My dear father

I want to tell you about Mrs. Browns party. We had candies wrapped up in fringed paper and cakes with little round sugar plums on them. We played blind mans buff and drop the handkerchief.
CHARLES.

I think they had a jolly time. I heard they numbered 57 . . . (section torn out of letter) . . . the same time. Dr. Hawes attended. Mrs. Ellsworth has just told me, that the Dr. says there is nothing important in the jour-

nal of this week, no answer to either peice but some accounts of more operations performed. He is waiting for an answer to your peice or his. Now Horace I wish you would be punctual and write as often as possible. Dont think me foolish. I have as much courage as possible during your absence. Your letters will do me more good than you are aware. Even writing this has done me much good. Our folks say I have acted today as if I had a load off my heart. If you are sick let me know. It will be better than suspense. Now mind what I say. Terry has just called and left two papers from Joe. I shall send with this the Philadelphia paper. He sends love. Charley lies here fast asleep on the sofa, he has been brimful of mischief today. Your aff wife.

Elizabeth W.

Written on margin of last page: Can you study now without being bothered or will this long epistle interrupt your machinery.

The following letter by Mrs. Wells with an addition by Dr. Wells is mostly concerned with the controversy then raging between Morton, Jackson and Wells over the right to be called the discoverer of anaesthesia. Dr. Wells had just recently returned from Europe (March 1847) and more recently (April 1847) from New York where he had gone "with his attorney—to the Customs House to get the paintings purchased in Paris."⁶ The book referred to is "History of the Discovery of the Application of Nitrous Oxide Gas, Ether and other Vapors to Surgical Operations," by Dr. Horace Wells, published March 30, 1847 by J. Gaylord Wells, Hartford.

April 12th letter:

Monday eve April 12th 47

Dear Joseph,

I suppose you think yourself quite forsaken, but I have been so busy that you must excuse me. Horace has just returned from New York, received the great letters of Dr. M's and today is writing an answer.

Thomas Day, Putman's brother has written to H and volunteered to assist him. So you can get all information. What do you think of the book, have you seen any in Boston. The Express took on a bundle to distribute, also to N. York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, & Albany. A large bundle went by steamer to

London & Paris. Hartford folks are wide awake and say Horace will get it. He had a letter from the Army and Navy committee making enquiries concerning the gas. I suppose you are aware that Dr. Jackson petitioned Congress for one hundred thousand dollars, & our Mr. Dixon stopped the whole and gave the claim to H. I have stopped writing to look at some beautiful oil paintings which have arrived today. They are beautiful in the real sense of the word. We cannot get any of the letters which are written for our side. Horace goes to the office but they are gone. I have not seen Dr. Brewsters or Burritts.

Aunt says tell Joseph I have been trying to write and intend to write soon. Isaac Norton was here to day trying to get a situation, he says Edward is worse and they some expect Livia home this fall. I must bid you Good bye as tea is ready and will write again soon. We are making up a bundle of clothing for Ireland, Humphrey & Leyms, and Ed Parsons receive all that is to be sent.

Good night

your sis Lib

Brother Joseph—I have written an answer to Morton's piece in the "Post" which will undoubtedly appear in the course of two or three days, I wish you would keep watch and when it is published buy me 4 or 5 papers and send them to me as I wish you would also send me as many papers containing Mortons piece for if he has sent it out to Europe I wish to send the papers containing his article with my reply which will knock him into a cocker hat—yours in haste

N.B. Buy all the papers containing "gas" and send them to me—Keep an account of the cost including postage—H.

Dr. Wells' reply to "Mortons piece" did appear in the Boston Post, April 22, 1847, Vol. 30, No. 95, Page 1.⁽⁶⁾

Five years after the suicide of Dr. Wells the battle in Congress for the \$100,000 and the title of the discoverer of anesthesia still raged. Truman Smith, Senator from Connecticut, was Horace Wells' Champion.

The following letter having been received from Joseph Wales' daughter, it can be surmised that it was written to him. Mr. Wales was very active in advancing the claims of his brother-in-law.

Washington city Feb 13th 1853

Dear Sir

Dr. Riggs is here. I learn with infinite regret that the experiment at the Hospital yesterday proved a failure, tho Dr. Riggs says Dr Mott remarked the gas had not had a fair trial. I fear this will do us infinite mischief. I am astonished you should go forward with an experiment without Riggs or Ellsworth to assist who know how to administer the gas. Riggs says there was not gas enough! How could this be. Unless you manage better we are ruined irretrievably What do you propose to do! Are you to try again. If so I beg you to have the thing done right—

Yours truly
Truman Smith

P. S. Let me hear from you. Had you not better see Professor Parsture and take his advice—Dr Mott should attend any future experiment—you should—(indecipherable).

Dr. Riggs thinks you should get Mr Colton to prepare the gas and should take care to have a good supply on hand. On the whole I think it will not do to stop where you are—You must demonstrate the efficiency of the gas in N. York.

Dr. Riggs was a former student of Horace Wells and was the man who extracted Dr. Wells' tooth on December 11th, 1844 at the first public demonstration of anesthesia.⁽⁶⁾ He continued to use it in his practice of dentistry. Mr. Colton was Gardner Q. Colton, the chemist who gave the exhibition and lecture, Dec. 10, 1844, "On chemical phenomenon where the idea of inhalation anesthesia crystallized in Wells' mind,"⁽⁶⁾ and who brought a bag of gas to Wells' office the next day where the first inhalation anesthetic for an operation was administered. Dr. Mott was Dr. Valentine Mott of New York whom Horace Wells visited during the summer of 1846 "and made the fact known . . . of the influence of Nitrous Oxyd or Sulphuric Ether to obliterate all consciousness of pain in surgical operations. . . ."⁽⁹⁾

⁹Smith, Hon. Truman. An Examination of the Question of Anesthesia arising on the Memorial of Charles Thomas Wells. Gray, New York, 1859.