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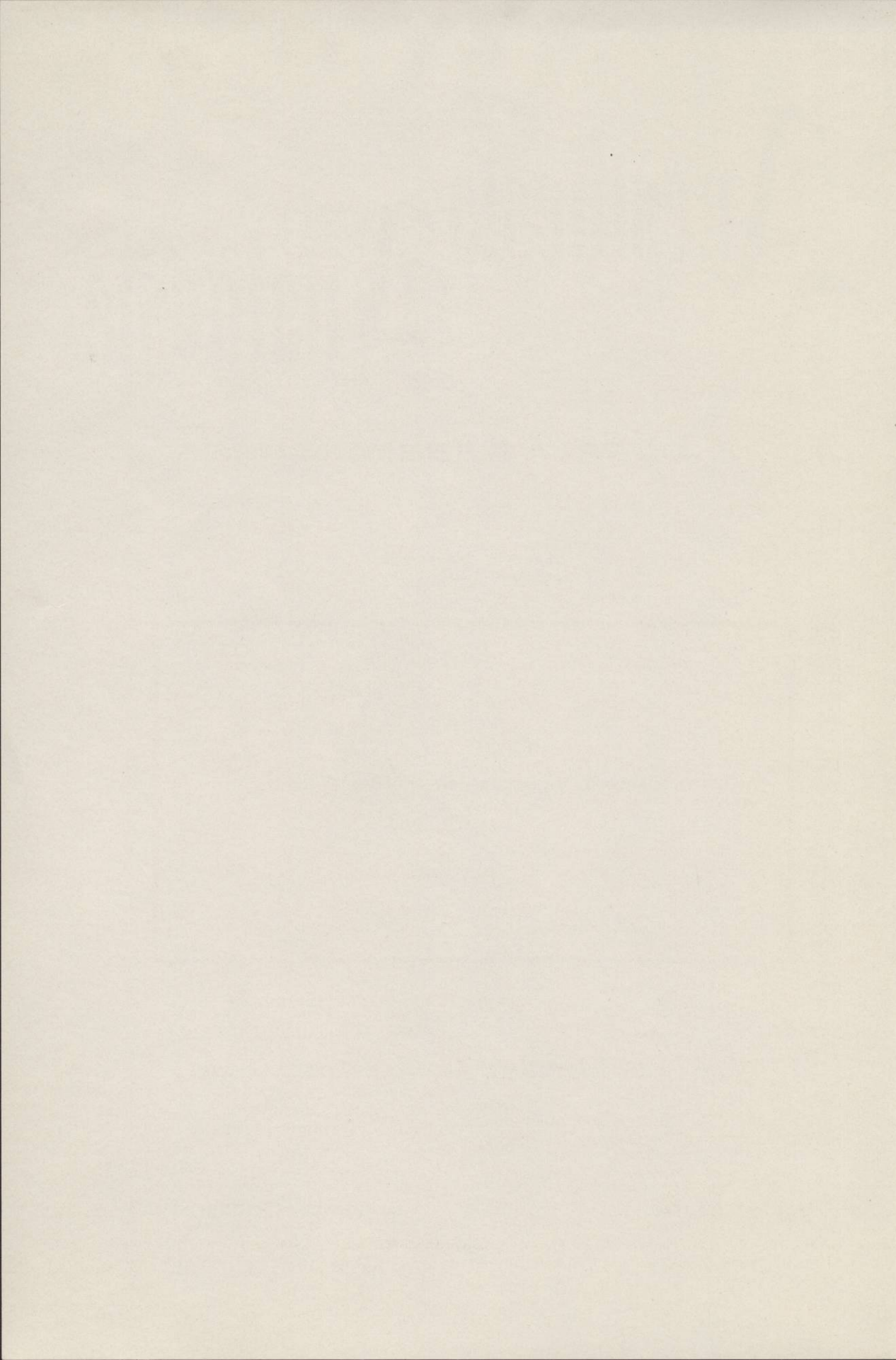
Historical Vignettes—Dr. Horace Wells

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Dr. Horace Wells (1815-1848)

HISTORICAL VIGNETTES

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HISTORICAL anesthesia is replete with tragedies. Three of those associated with the discovery, Morton, Jackson and Wells died in unhappy circumstances. Of these, Wells's short life was the most pitiable.

Horace Wells (frontispiece) was born in Hartford, Vermont, in 1815. He studied dentistry and moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he founded a successful dental practice.

Dr. Wells early became interested in the narcotic effects of nitrous oxide. He had observed that one of the participants in a popular demonstration of laughing gas struck his shins and bruised them severely, without giving evidence of pain. Wells had one of his own teeth extracted in 1844 while under the influence of the gas, and he experienced no pain. Dr. Wells then learned how to manufacture and to administer the gas, and he soon was extracting teeth from several patients, none of whom experienced pain. He then journeyed to Boston to make known the discovery. There he called upon Dr. William T. G. Morton and other dentists and physicians, explaining his discovery.

In 1845, Wells was granted permission to speak before the class in surgery of Dr. John Collins Warren in Boston. A patient was brought out and Wells administered nitrous oxide to him. But Wells attempted

to extract the tooth before anesthesia was complete, and the boy cried out in pain. Some students watching the demonstration derided him and Wells returned to Hartford, deeply humiliated.

After the anesthetic effects of ether had become recognized, Wells made some unsuccessful attempts to prove that nitrous oxide was a better anesthetic agent. Some surgeons did carry out major surgical operations with the aid of nitrous oxide anesthesia. Finally, on April 27, 1848, Henry J. Bigelow, at the Massachusetts General Hospital, removed a carcinoma of the breast with the patient under the influence of nitrous oxide. The state of prolonged asphyxia produced by the gas nearly proved fatal, and Bigelow quickly recognized that for protracted operations of this type nitrous oxide was inferior to ether.

Wells meanwhile had died. In the winter of 1847-1848 he had opened an office in New York, where he hoped to introduce the use of nitrous oxide. He also began to experiment with chloroform. While under the influence of chloroform, on January 21, 1848, he created a disturbance for which he was arrested and jailed. Distraught and wretched, he wrote a long letter to the *New York Journal of Commerce*, published in the issue of January 25, 1848. Then he killed himself by slashing his thigh with a razor. He was just thirty-three years old.

HISTORICAL VICINETTES

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Dr. Horace Wells (1815-1848)

Horace Wells, a dentist, was born in Ferrisburgh, Vermont, in 1815. He studied law at Middlebury College, Vermont, and then moved to Ferrisburgh, Vermont, where he practiced law. He was elected to the Vermont Legislature in 1840.

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