

OCCASIONAL NOTES

Edward Gilbert Abbott: Enigmatic Figure of the Ether Demonstration

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ONE of the memorable advances in the relief of suffering took place in Boston on October 16, 1846. It was justly celebrated as the first public demonstration of the use of ether for anesthetization during the course of a surgical operation. As a result, the innovator and anesthetist, William Thomas Greene Morton, a dentist, achieved lasting renown. Likewise, a surgeon at the Massachusetts General Hospital, John Collins Warren, professor of surgery at the Harvard Medical Institution and its quondam dean, reaped the rewards for the surgery. Despite the controversy engendered by those who sought credit for this epoch-making oc-

casion, the patient in the drama has received surprisingly little attention. Indeed, his identity has remained cloaked in mystery for well over a century. Known since the operation as Gilbert Abbott, even though his given name was Edward, he has repeatedly been called a painter rather than the printer and editor he actually was.

Edward Gilbert Abbott was born in Cambridgeport (West Cambridge), Middlesex County, Massachusetts, on Friday, September 2, 1825, the only child of Samuel and Harriet Ann. The genealogy¹ does not further identify his mother, but his father, born in Lincoln on March 22, 1798, was a lineal descendant of George Abbott of Rowley (d. 1647). The couple were married in Cambridge on January 26, 1823. Both succumbed to phthisis at an early age: Samuel on January 5, 1831 at the age of 33 years, and Harriet a year or so later. According to the Cambridge city records, in August of 1843 the remains of Joseph (?) Abbott and his wife were taken from the original site of interment to an unknown place, possibly a stranger's burial ground. Samuel's name may have been confused with that of his brother, Joseph, a lamp manufacturer of Cambridgeport, born on April 19, 1791.

Edward Abbott's subsequent existence must be construed as a constant struggle against poverty (and illness). This is suggested by documents relating to the appointment of a guardian and the subsequent disposal of a meager estate.

On the 9th day of February, 1836, a document was issued by the Court of Probate at Concord, Commonwealth of Massachusetts:

Bela Jacobs of Cambridge in the County of Middlesex, appointed guardian of Samuel [sic] Gilbert Abbott a minor under the age of fourteen and a son of Samuel Abbott, late of Cambridge, shall within 12 months return a perfect inventory of the real estate goods, chattel's rights and credits belonging to said minor.

Were the inventory and appraisal necessary to pay off residual debts? Apparently, the property had been seized. How soon after this directive the inventory was compiled is uncertain, but the pitiful list of items retrieved gives some inkling of the Abbott family's existence during Edward's childhood:

An inventory of the Estate of Samuel Abbott of Cambridge Port in the county of Middlesex Labourer, deceased. Appraised upon oath by us the subscribers being duly appointed to that service by the Hon Saml P. P. Fay Esq. Judge of the Court of Probate for the said county. To that —

one bed and bedding	7"00
eight common chairs	1"50
one bureau	4"00
table	2"50
two stands	"75
one iron pot one dish mettle one skillet	1"00
1 copper kettle and tea	1"00
fire dogs & shovel & tongs	"75
four (?) flat irons	"50
set (?) tin ware	"50
6 teaspoons silver	1"00
one table ditto	"75
1 1/2 set crockery and glass ware	2"00
2 set tin ware	"50
set of 3 buckets 2 sugar	"50

1 bedstead	1"50
4 — \$1"50 2 chests \$1"15	2"65
2 wash tubs	"37
1 tin	"50
wearing apparel	5"00
one axe and hoe	"75
one looking glass	"25
3 mats	"25
bellows	"33
whitewash brush & tub	"35

36"20

Samuel Cutler
Ebenezer Kimball
Abm Grant Appraisers

Another directive from the probate court appeared on August 13, 1844:

Guardian's sale — will be sold by public auction on Monday the 23rd day of September next at 4 o'clock on the premises a certain [lot] of land with a dwelling thereon situated at the Corner of Auburn and Canal Streets in Cambridgeport containing about six thousand two hundred square feet.

Said property is the property of Samuel (?) G. Abbott a minor and is to be sold by virtue of a — from the Judge of Probate in the County of Middlesex.

[Notification of the sale appeared in the *Boston Courier* at least once, on 13 August 1844.]

On 23 September, 1844 — An inventory of the Estate of Samuel G. Abbott of Cambridge in the County of Middlesex a minor — is seized and possessed

Situated in Cambridge containing about six thousand and two hundred square feet of land with the building on the same appraised at Twelve Hundred Dollars, 23 September, 1844.

?Niz Real Estate
Nathan Fiske
Jos. A. Holmes
William Hovey, Jr. Appraisers

The property formerly belonged to John P. Wiswell.

We have little idea of the pursuits of Edward Abbott in the interval after his parents' deaths. In view of the family's circumstances, he must not have attended private school. Probably, he had some schooling but was apprenticed to a printer at an early age, as suggested by his later career.

On September 25, 1846, Edward Abbott presented himself for medical evaluation at the Massachusetts General Hospital. It is not clear whether he feared cancer, sought cosmetic correction of a deformity, or was trying to discover the reason for recurrent bouts of illness. The hospital admission note gives a detailed description; the entry is the first in the record on that date²:

366.	Gilbert Abbott	aet 20
1846	Single Printer	Boston
Friday	"Tumor on Face"	Congenital
Sept 25		

This man had from birth a tumor under the jaw on the left side. It occupies all the space anterior to neck-bound on the inside by median line — on outside is even c̄ edge of jaw — below on a level with Pomum Adami — and in front tapers gradually as far as anterior edge of jaw — Integuments not adherent to it — skin smooth & of natural color — It is uniformly soft, except in centre where a small hard lump can be felt, corresponding in size & situation c̄ Submaxillary Glands — Can be made to disappear by compression, but seems rather to be displaced than emptied — The edge of the lower jaw bone can be felt thro' the tumor to be irregular

On examination of inside of mouth find a soft smooth tumor — a hemisphere about 5 lines in diameter — of a livid color — on the left lobe of tongue about an inch behind tip

That portion of the organ in front & underneath the tumor is of a dark purple color —

This tumor is readily emptied by slight pressure, but fills again in one or two seconds but not sooner when pressure is made simultaneously upon the external tumor

For the distance of 5 lines from angle of mouth on Rt side the lower lip is of a livid hue — this seems to be a continuation of a stripe, similar in appearance which extends from angle of jaw on R't side about on a level c̄ lower teeth — it is about 4 lines wide and is slightly raised — its color seems to depend upon small spots, like granulations, of a livid color set on mucous membrane of ordinary appearance.

He reports, that he never has p'n, except when he has taken cold, & then, he perceives the centre of the external tumor to be larger & harder than usual.

Patient has a slovenous appearance — is tall and slim — Both parents died of Phthisis — Has no reason to think that any of the appearances that have been described are hereditary — Has always been weak and sickly — Has been obliged frequently to give up work on account of ill health — but has never had any acute disease — has frequent colds c̄ sore throat — Cervical glands never enlarged — Never cgh of any note —

A contemporary surgeon has identified the tumor as being, unmistakably, a congenital vascular malformation.

Excision of the cervical mass did not take place until October 16. Was Abbott retained in the hospital for the very reason that he might become the subject of an experiment involving ether? Surely, he was not critically ill, and in those days there was little reason to perform an operation for the lesion he had. To all outward appearances, it was not cancerous, it had not enlarged, and it did not seem to cause great discomfort. Its size and color do not suggest that it was offensive in appearance, and apparently it did not affect his speech. Could he have been concerned about the possibility of tuberculosis? At the time, not having a private patient of his own, surgeon John Collins Warren might have induced the callow youth to undergo the operation. From what we can surmise about Abbott, he might thus have been easily persuaded.

The operation was originally planned for Wednesday, October 13, but it was delayed until the 16th. Possibly, Abbott was still undecided or the anesthetist, William Thomas Greene Morton, was still perfecting the breathing apparatus.

Psychologically and physically, Abbott was an almost ideal candidate for induction of anesthesia. Just before application of the inhalation mouthpiece,

Morton took the man by the hand and he spoke a few encouraging words to him assuring him that he would partially relieve if he did not entirely prevent all pain during the operation, and pointing to Mr. Frost [brought along especially for the assurance], told him that there was a man who had taken it and could testify to its success. "Are you afraid," he asked? "No," replied the man, "I feel confident and will do precisely as you tell me." In four or five minutes he lay quietly and soundly asleep as any child, in that curious state which is —

"Twixt gloom and gleam,
with Death and Life at Each Extreme."³

Since a description of the operation has been published,⁴ as well as J. C. Warren's journal,⁵ these items are not included in the present narrative. Unfortunately, there was no photograph made of the performance, since Josiah Haynes, daguerreotypist, lost heart and failed to appear at the appointed time. In a steel engraving (Fig. 1) reproduced in *Trials of a Public Benefactor*³ the principals are clearly recognizable. Abbott is seen semirecumbent and relaxed, his visage that of a young man of the expected age, more robust than expected, but tall and thin, legs dangling over the edge of the operating chair. He had curly dark hair, a rather bulbous nose, and somewhat thick lips. The tumor is revealed on the left side of the neck, anteriorly. This helps to fill out the image of him, including his none-too-fashionable clothing.

The postoperative hospital stay was a lengthy one, although no hint of the then-prevalent infection, "hospitalism," appears in the account.²

438. Oct. 17 Remained thro P.m. and n't very comfortable — This mg' dressings were removed and the wound filled with Potassa & Calce — Very soon after this application bleeding commenced and continued 3 or 4 hours when it was checked by means of lint pt'ce & compression with sponge — Haemorrhage was venous
- " 18 Was kept very quiet thro' day — Slept well — Is now comfortable
Dressings have been removed & scraped lint & Cerate pledget applied & moderate compression — appetite good
May have Broth §VI & Soaked Toast 2 t.d. —
- " 19 Reports comfortable — Potassa with Calce sprinkled over wound this mg' & covered with Cerate pledget — Appetite very good
May have Broth §IX 2 t.d.
- " 20 No haemorrhage from Caustic — apply Poulitice to remove Lint and Slough — Increase Diet —
- " 21 Potassa & Calce again applied
- " 23 Potassa Fasa was used today —
- " 24 Poltice till slough is removed
- " 28 Slough had come away — Surface is healthy & granulating. Potassa Fasa was again sprinkled upon it — Poulitice —
- " 31 Slough has separated — Surface is healthy — Dress & Lint dipped in W. Water and covered with pledget & Cerate — Touch & Nitrate of Silver to keep down granulations —
- Nov 11 Doing well —
- Dec 7 Cicatrix perfect Tumor of same size as on Entrance but no vessels to be detected in it — Tumor on Tongue not altered — nor is the appearance on inside of Rt cheek — Gen^l health m. improved.
Discharged
Well

After Abbott was discharged from the hospital on December 7, 1846, with little evident change in the size of the tumor, his life style seems to have improved considerably, possibly because of reassurance that the lesion was benign. We know little of the day-to-day existence of Abbott. He must have achieved a degree of affluence, since in 1850 he married Mary Dunbar Fuller of Osterville. The wedding probably took place in the bride's home community — a considerable journey from Boston in those days. The daughter of David and Olive (Bragg) Fuller, Mary had been born on



Figure 1. The First Public Demonstration of Etherization at the Massachusetts General Hospital, October 16, 1846.

Physicians around Edward Gilbert Abbott are reputed to be, from left to right: H. J. Bigelow, A. A. Gould, J. Mason Warren, J. Collins Warren, W. T. G. Morton, Samuel Parkman, George Hayward, and S. D. Townsend. From a steel engraving.³

April 17, 1826, so she was 24 and Abbott was 25 at the time. They went to live in the Maplewood section of Malden, Massachusetts, and not too long thereafter, became the parents first of a son, then of a daughter: Edward Wellington Abbott, born March 27, 1852, and Mary Olive Abbott, delivered in Boston on February 24, 1855. Mary was to have a sad life, for her father would die of consumption when she was merely nine months old.

At various times after the operation, Abbott was a journalist in Philadelphia, in New York City, and in Worcester, Massachusetts, probably all these assignments occurring before his marriage. On his return to Boston he became an assistant editor of the *Boston Herald* and a compositor on the *Boston Bee*.¹ He is said to have written the first article advocating the reduction of letter postage from 5 to 3 cents. The first issue of *The Cambridge Mercury*, for which Abbott was both proprietor and editor, appeared on Friday, July 16, 1852. Twelve issues were published, presumably weekly, and this five-column sheet was well supplied with news. The main editorial thrust was opposition to a prohibitory liquor law about to go into effect. In fact, the editorial comments were quite intemperate in language and argument. The name of the paper was changed to the *Middlesex County Mercury* on Friday, October 8, 1852, and an enlarged tract was published. Editorially, it denied being simply a campaign sheet in that it favored for reelection a ticket headed by Governor Gifford. The fourth issue of the *Mercury*, appearing on Friday, October 29, 1852, carried a notice of the death of Daniel Webster, which had occurred on the previous Sunday. The fifth and last issue probably came out on Friday, November 5, 1852, at approximately the time of the election in which Governor Gifford was a candidate.

Abbott may also have been proprietor of a juvenile newsletter. Unfortunately, no copies of any of these periodicals are extant; the information provided above

was derived indirectly. One wonders about the short tenure of these papers, none too successful, perhaps influenced by the poor health of the progenitor, who died in Maplewood from consumption on Tuesday, November 27, 1855, at the age of 30.

In the November 27th issue of the *Boston Herald*, there is no reference to Abbott's death, but notice is given of the publication of Longfellow's poem, "Hiawatha." However, on Saturday, December 1, 1855 (at the time, General Lafayette was reported to have been in a boat wreck en route from Nashville, Tennessee, and the publication of "Hiawatha" was again noted), the death report appeared: "Death of a Printer. Edward G. Abbott well-known printer and editor died at Maplewood, Malden on Tuesday of consumption. He was thirty years of age and leaves a widow and two children."

We have a portrait of a youth struggling against great odds to become a respectable member of the fourth estate, husband of an admirable woman, father of an unfortunate little girl (who died at 11 years of age) and of a colorful son who lived to escape the familial scourge of tuberculosis. How different the account might have been today, when the recipient of a transplanted liver or kidney or even an artificial heart receives widespread publicity and financial support, as well as public sympathy. Facing the first surgical operation performed with the aid of anesthesia, Edward Gilbert Abbott would have been in those ranks.

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Additional information on Edward Gilbert Abbott, compiled by J.A.A. and L.D.V., may be found in the archives of the Boston Medical Library.

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