



DEPARTMENT OF ANAESTHESIA

MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL

23 FEBRUARY 1991

PETITION TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS

Who should get the credit for the discovery or introduction of surgical anesthesia? How should that person or persons be recognized and rewarded? Those were the questions put to the United States Congress 140 years ago. The claimants for priority were Charles T. Jackson, William T.G. Morton, and Horace Wells. Later Crawford W. Long also made his claim. Each person had some reason to be involved in the ether controversy and to advance his claim of priority. Each person had also garnered the support of many individuals and groups. There were 'public trials' in newspapers, tracts and books. Claims and counterclaims were abundant over a period of many years.

How could the Congress handle such a controversial problem? Why of course, refer it to a committee! And now which one?

Even the Massachusetts General Hospital had its own interest at stake. Most of the people at MGH and the Massachusetts Medical Society supported the claims of William T.G. Morton. To advance the cause of their position, the petition in the centerfold was drafted and sent to Washington. A few lithograph copies of the original petition exist. One of them is in the office of Richard J. Kitz, M.D. at the Massachusetts General Hospital. A second copy, from which this reproduction was made, is in the Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology in Park Ridge, Illinois.

Among the numerous petitioners were many prominent people who held great reputations around the world. John C. Warren was the first signer and was the surgeon on October 16, 1846 when Gilbert Abbott received sulphuric ether from Morton for his operation at Massachusetts General Hospital. Clearly such important people petitioning the Congress should prevail in their claim, which was that "William T.G. Morton first proved to the world that ether would produce insensibility to the pain of surgical operations... Wherefore, they respectfully ask a recognition by Congress of his services to his country and mankind." But their petition, presented at the Second Session of the Thirty-Second Congress, did not carry the day.

The controversy had been referred to the Committee on Military Affairs but could not be resolved. Legislators debated and considered referring it to the Committee on Patents as requested by a committee member, the Honorable Truman Smith, Connecticut. This request was flawed by a conflict of interest since he was counsel to Elizabeth W. Wells, widow of Horace Wells. Morton had obtained a patent for his secret compound he called "Letheon" but under pressure revealed it to be sulphuric ether. Wells had not obtained a patent for nitrous oxide.

To the Honorable, the Senate & House of Representatives
of the United States in Congress assembled.

The undersigned hereby testify to your Honorable
body that in their opinion Dr. William F. S. Morton first proved
to the world that ether would produce insensibility to the pain
of surgical operations, and that it could be used with safety.
In their opinion his fellow men owe a debt to him for this
knowledge. Wherefore they respectfully ask a recognition by
Congress of his services to his country and mankind.

Mass. Gen. Hospital

Surgeons

Physicians

John B. Warren
Geo. Hayward.
J. D. Townsend
J. Mason Warren
J. Parkman.
Henry W. Bigelow
Henry G. Clark.

Jacob Bigelow
Oliver W. Holmes
Henry L. Bowditch.
D. Humphreys Ames.

W. S. Perry

Consulting

Board of Mass. Gen. Hospital

James Jackson.
Geo. C. Shattuck
John Jeffries
Edward Reynolds

Mass. Charitable Eye & Ear Infirmary

Edward Reynolds
R. W. Hooper
George A. Bethune

Chelsea Naval Hospital
J. M. L. Fox Surgeon.
U. S. N.

Members of Massachusetts Medical Society.

Walter Canning
John B. Parsons Pres
Suffolk District Medical Society.
L. B. Adams
John B. Bayden
John Ware
Ephraim Bush
George Bartlett.
Joseph A. Lane
Anderson Hooker
Henry Dyer.
Augustus A. Gould
Charles Gordon
Joseph L. Jones
Samuel Kirkland Jr
J. Fletcher Baker.
Geo. Hubbard
Chas. W. Moore
Richard H. Salter
Fletcher Edward Olwin
M. J. Dale
Mrs. Dale
James W. Stone
B. W. Newell
Francis A. Willard
Wm. Hawes
Charles Chaffin
Thos. A. Lytton
Aaron P. Richardson.
Henry Howard
Wm. Bown Morris.
James B. Beeson
W. W. Woodland.
M. C. Greene
Horace Stacy
Franklin F. Patch
Samuel L. Abbot
John H. Ayer
James Ayer
Jos. J. Fales
J. M. Brand
Gregory Bartlett.
J. A. Jackson
James Hyndman.
Henry Lee
C. W. Cleveland
John Stevens

Sam. M. Mill
Sias Durkee
Geo. Stevens Jones
Jesse Chichering
J. A. Tarbell
Thos. Dymane
Henry W. Williams
Randolph Lincoln
George Derby
Warren J. Whitney
Francis Elmer
D. D. Seager
W. E. Townsend
John B. Alley
Geo. A. Gay
Luther Parks Jr.
Wm. M. Wheeler
F. H. Gray
James M. Harlow.
George Russell
Thos. E. Mann
E. W. Blate
Edw. H. Clarke
Samuel Gregg
Edmund
C. G. Putnam
Chas. A. Phelps.
John Oden Jr.
Joseph R. Smith
Geo. Hayward Jr
Henry Wood Stone.
G. Newton Thomson
J. M. Phipps
Abner Phelps.
Josiah Curtis
E. D. G. Palmer
Dan. V. Folio
R. L. Hinckley
J. W. Hinckley
M. B. Edwards
T. E. Mully
Henry Bryant
Cyrus Buckingham
J. W. Warren Jr.

A. S. Smith

George Tower
William Black
J. W. W. Jones
Constantine B. O'Donnell M. D. C. P. E.
John S. H. Fogg
Edmund T. Eastman

Irish. Tobie.
J. E. W. W. W.
N. C. Stevens
Enoch C. Kolfel
Henry Willard
A. Alexander
D. W. Town

Political pressures caused Congress to consider re-referral to the Committee on Military Affairs. However, there were now so many legislators who had taken strong positions that the President of the Senate appointed a "Special Committee to consider the subject of the discovery of anaesthetic agents." Among the members was Truman Smith!

Delay followed delay and the Thirty-Second Congress adjourned on March 3, 1853. Morton did not receive his long sought recognition but had spent enormous sums defending it. The proposed reward of \$100,000 had vanished from his grasp forever.

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