

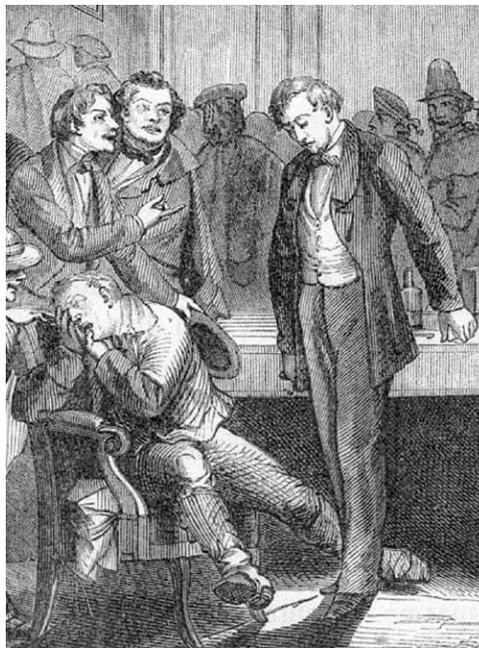
Horace Wells' "Humbug Affair" Occurred at Massachusetts General Hospital? Humbug!

ATENTION: Any readers out there who have ever listened to historical lectures about Horace Wells' nitrous oxide demonstration or about William Morton's ether demonstration. Please page through this month's issue of *ANESTHESIOLOGY* for a fascinating article titled "Horace Wells' Demonstration of Nitrous Oxide in Boston" by Rajesh P. Haridas, F.A.N.Z.C.A.¹

Many of us refer to October 16, 1846 as "Ether Day"—the day that dentist and medical student William T. G. Morton gave the first public demonstration of diethyl ether for surgical anesthesia. Some of us even recall that Morton tried to disguise his ether's odor by adulterating it with essential oil of orange and by renaming his proprietary slurry "Letheon." Convinced that Morton's mixture had successfully anesthetized his patient on that fateful 16th of October, surgeon John Collins Warren announced to spectators in the surgical amphitheater that, "Gentlemen, this is no humbug."²

Most authorities assume that Dr. Warren's choice of "humbug" was a reference to that less-than-successful attempt back in January of 1845 when dentist Horace Wells tried to demonstrate nitrous oxide anesthesia in front of some of Harvard's medical students. Dr. Wells admitted later that he must have mistakenly "withdrawn much too soon" the bag of nitrous oxide gas from a medical student who needed anesthesia for a dental extraction. Because that patient "experienced some pain... several [spectators] expressed their opinion that it was a humbug affair..."³

So how have so many historians and lecturers managed to "get it wrong"—to misinform the rest of us with the wrong location and/or the wrong date for Horace Wells' demonstration of nitrous oxide anesthesia in Boston? **Boldfaced below** are examples of common mistakes made by well-intended authors of historical articles.



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demonstration of nitrous oxide anesthesia in Boston? **Boldfaced below** are examples of common mistakes made by well-intended authors of historical articles.

Confirmation bias. Basic human nature encourages readers and researchers to look for facts that support their preconceived hypotheses. If Morton's demonstration at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) was not a "Humbug Affair," then why not also situate Wells' earlier nitrous oxide event as a "Humbug Affair" ... at MGH?

Confusion of an event's date with a publication date. As Dr. Haridas has suggested, after Wells' January 20, 1845 advertisement (in the newspaper *Boston Bee*) was cited as a reference, some historians may have mistakenly begun accepting that date as when Horace Wells conducted his demonstration.¹ Blithely assigning that same date to the "Humbug Affair," subsequent publications were guilty of **repetition of unchallenged nonprimary sources.**

This is the academic equivalent of social gossip.

Fortunately, historical research is democratic. In other words, all of *ANESTHESIOLOGY*'s readers can attempt to research and write about the history of anesthesia. However, not all of us can be as successful as author Rajesh Haridas. Does he work as an academic anesthesiologist in a sprawling American city? No—Dr. Haridas toils away as a private consultant anesthetist in a small town in Australia. Yet this brilliant historical researcher has garnered "winning" and "honorable mention" David M. Little Prizes in 2011 and 2012, respectively, from the Anesthesia History Association. Yes, historical research may be open to all, but few are as accomplished as Dr. Haridas. Please be sure to read his article on Horace Wells in this issue.¹

As for this reviewer, just one question remains. If an Australian is teaching me about America's anesthesia history,

Image: Adapted from Figuier L. Les Merveilles de la Science ou Description Populaire des Inventions Modernes. Paris, Furne, Jouvet et Cie, 1868, p. 645.

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◆ This Editorial View accompanies the following article: Haridas RP: Horace Wells' demonstration of nitrous oxide in Boston. *ANESTHESIOLOGY* 2013; 119:1014-22.

should I now reciprocate by feverishly ferreting out historical details about the history of anesthesia “down under?”

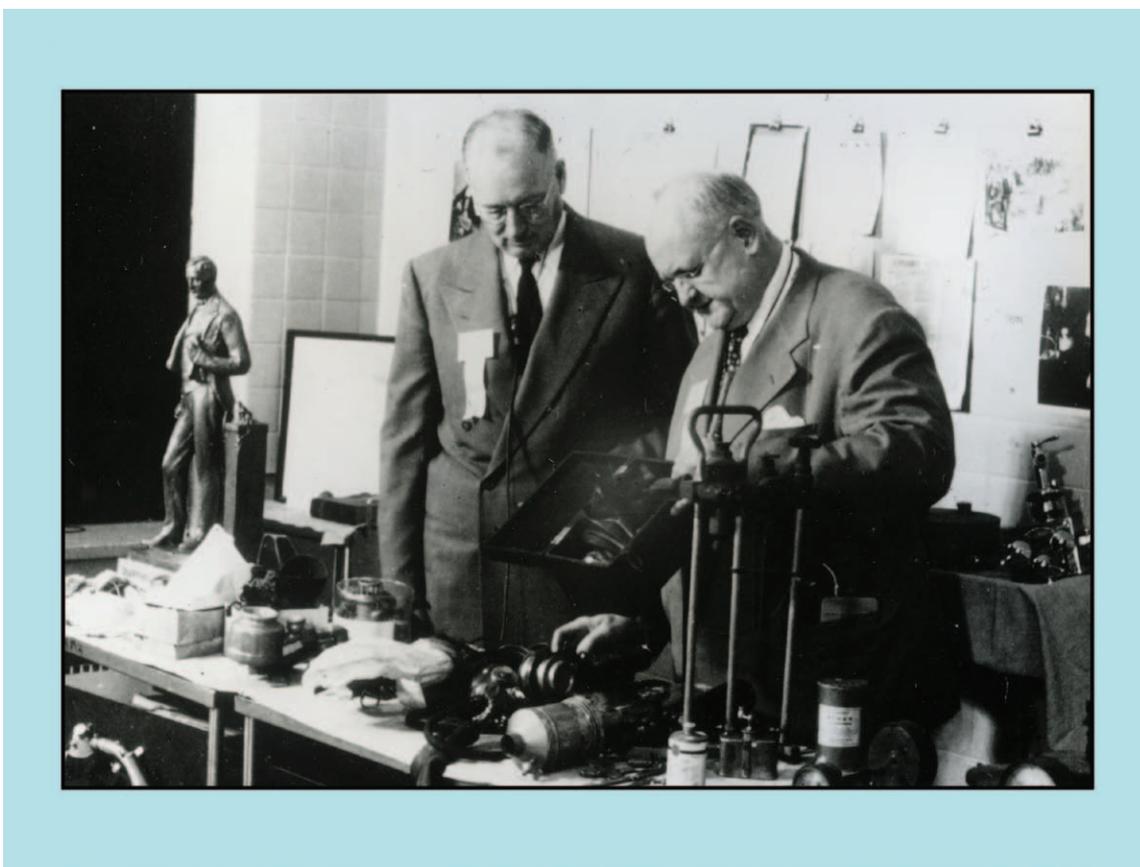
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1. Haridas RP: Horace Wells' demonstration of nitrous oxide in Boston. *ANESTHESIOLOGY* 2013; 119:1014–22
2. Ayer W: The discovery of anesthesia by ether; with an account of the first operation performed under its influence at the Massachusetts General Hospital, and an extract from the record-book of the hospital. *Occidental Med Times* 1896; 10:121–9
3. Wells H: [Letter dated Dec 7, 1846 to the Editor]. *Hartford, Courant*, December 9, 1846, pp 2

ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

Drs. Lewis Wright and Paul Wood Examining Apparatus



Although Dr. Paul Wood (*right*) was above average in height, he was dwarfed by one of his best friends in medical antiquing, Dr. Lewis Wright (*left*). Theirs was a collectors' camaraderie. The two men are pictured examining vintage objects on a table, including (*left-to-right*) a plaster maquette of Crawford Long, a Waters To-and-Fro Canister, and a Lung Motor. At each Annual Meeting of the American Society of Anesthesiologists, the now deceased friends are reunited—at least in name—when the Lewis H. Wright Memorial Lecture is sponsored by the (Paul M.) Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology. Commemorating the 50th anniversary of Dr. Wood's passing, the 2013 "Wright Lecture" was titled, "Fair Recollections of Paul Meyer Wood, M.D.: A Towering Pioneer of Anesthesiology." (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists, Inc.)

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