The 19th Century Origins of Facial Cosmetic Surgery and John H. Woodbury

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Abstract

John H. Woodbury was an incredibly entrepreneurial, self-trained dermatologist who, between 1870 and 1909, built an empire of cosmetic surgery institutes in 6 states, with 25 physician/surgeon employees and an advertising budget of $150,000/year (1892 data). Under his management, his surgeons, and perhaps Woodbury himself, performed multiple facial cosmetic surgeries, including early versions of browlifts, frown excisions, lower facelifts, mid-face lifts, rhinoplasties, double-chin reductions, and dimple creation. In addition, Woodbury developed a proprietary soap and cosmetic line, which he sold to Jergens for $212,500 in 1901 (retaining a 10% royalty). Woodbury’s story has been unknown until now because this nonacademic concentrated his publishing in articles and advertisements in lay magazines. Woodbury’s life ended in bankruptcy, litigation, and suicide when the corporate practice of medicine and advertising were made illegal. In his legal proceedings, Woodbury conceded that he was not a doctor, although he went by the title. Regardless, his surgical innovations are of major historical significance, as these cosmetic procedures are the first of their kind to be noted in the lay or academic press and predate, by years and even decades, the previously earliest known cosmetic surgeries in the United States.

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Currently, the origin of cosmetic surgery is considered to be early 20th century, because of Charles Miller’s publications on cosmetic surgery in articles and books. In his 1907 book The Correction of Featural Imperfections, Miller introduced numerous cosmetic surgery operations, including lower blepharoplasty, crow’s-feet excision, section of facial muscles to remove lines, cosmetic lip surgery, and cheek-dimple creation. Otoplasty and cosmetic rhinoplasty had been previously performed in 1881 and 1887, respectively.

Beauty surgery and cosmetic surgery advertisements had begun appearing in the lay press in the 1890s. However, most physicians looked down on these “beauty specialists,” and especially on surgical advertising. However, after Miller’s breakthrough work, other pioneers of cosmetic surgery were encouraged in their innovations. Kolle, who wrote the first textbook on plastic and cosmetic surgery in 1911, and Hollander, Passot, and Noel, performed early facelifts (1911), browlifts (1919), and temple lifts (1926), respectively.

However, predating all of these cosmetic surgery pioneers, was a self-trained cosmetic dermatologist who developed numerous original cosmetic surgery operations, his own proprietary soaps, a beauty-product line, and went on to establish multiple institutes of dermatologic surgery. His name, innovations, and his story have been thus far unknown to medical historians.

JOHN HUMPHREY WOODBURY (1851-1909)

John H. Woodbury was born on March 7, 1851, in Salem, New Hampshire to a prominent New England family. During his youth he was troubled by a facial nevus that

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physicians declined to remove. After finally finding a physician to remove it, he noticed an immediate improvement in his self-esteem and decided to dedicate his career to treating facial disfigurements.

Woodbury was a self-trained dermatologist. There is no documentation that he attended medical school or that he had a medical degree. However, he went by the title “Doctor,” was known by the press, and advertised as Dr John Woodbury. Woodbury first opened his practice in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1870. In 1874, he moved his practice to Albany, New York. Over the next 15 years, he designed and patented an arch support that is still in use today, developed his own private label soap and beauty-product line, and began marketing and advertising these products and his practice.

In 1889, Woodbury moved his practice to New York City, incorporated his Dermatologic Institute, and trademarked his logo, “The Neckless Face.” Woodbury’s first descriptions of his cosmetic surgery techniques appeared in an 1892 newspaper article and magazine advertisement. He began to advertise heavily to bring patients into the office and the drugstore to purchase his facial soaps, tonics, and cold creams. Woodbury’s advertising budget was $75,000 in 1891, $150,000 in 1892, and $100,000 in 1898.

By 1893, Woodbury was not only advertising soaps and tonics, he was advertising surgeries to correct protruding ears and pug nose. Woodbury’s new 1892 operation for a pug nose required an external brace for shaping (Figure 1). In 1892, he also described surgical procedures to reduce or enlarge the size of the mouth (Figure 2). Physiognomists and editors commented on the usefulness of these new cosmetic surgeries to change the nose or mouth.

His Dermatologic Institute grew, and by 1894, Woodbury employed 15 physicians in his main New York Dermatologic Institute, and he opened another Institute in Boston, Massachusetts. Subsequently, Woodbury Dermatologic Institutes were opened in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Chicago, Illinois; St. Louis, Missouri; and Washington DC. Ultimately, the total number of employed physicians rose to 25.

In October of 1894, an article titled “Made to Order Mouths” was published in The Sun and described lip reductions (Figure 3). In another article in December of 1894, Woodbury illustrated an early version of a browlift and direct frown-line excision. This article also described Woodbury’s various cosmetic surgeries of the face, including reduction of a large lower lip, earlobe reduction, otoplasty, rhinoplasty, and creation of cosmetic dimples (considered an important sign of beauty in the Victorian era).

In early 1895, newspaper articles and advertisements promoted multiple Woodbury cosmetic surgeries: triangular skin excisions in the temple to improve crow’s feet (Figure 4), direct excision of the double-chin skin to improve the neckline (Figure 5), excision of posterior-auricular neck skin to improve the flabby double chin (Figure 6), and an ellipse excision from the upper eyelid to lift “a tired appearance” (Figure 7).
In addition to promoting his surgical techniques, Woodbury advertised electricity as a painless plastic surgery beauty treatment. He also utilized celebrity advertising as he took credit for the rapid recovery of boxing champion Robert Fitzsimmons due to static electricity treatments received at Woodbury’s Dermatologic Institute in 1897 (Figure 8). Woodbury’s first self-published beauty booklet, What Dermatology Has to Do with Beauty: How to Remove All Imperfections of the Skin, came out in 1888. The 1895 or eighth edition, was updated to include his newly developed cosmetic surgery procedures. An updated title explicitly included the words “Plastic Surgery”: Beauty: The Diseases, Injuries and Disfigurements that Blemish and Destroy It, and How They May be Cured and Corrected by Dermatology, with the Aid of Plastic Surgery (Figure 9). This 1895 bound booklet illustrated cosmetic surgeries by providing a drawing of Woodbury’s face (“The Neckless Face Chart”) that diagrammatically mapped out the surgical areas and incisions for 10 of his operations for the brow, frown line, upper eyelids, crow’s feet, cheek dimples, and double chin, as well as hair grafting for traumatic alopecia.

The 10 operations described (in his words) include (Figure 10)

1. “removes wrinkles from the forehead”;
2. “removes crow’s-feet and wrinkles from beneath the eyes or around the nose”;
3. “contracts the skin back of an extended ear and causes it to lie close to the head”;
4. “is the inner operation in the nose for the cure of catarrh”;
5. “reduces the bagginess of the double chin and makes it clear cut”;
6. “reduces nostril partition, gives proper shape and changes character of expression”;
7. “removes the hump on the nose, which is unsightly and annoying”;
8. “takes the ‘slack’ out of the drooping eyelids and brightens up the countenance”;
9. “straightens a crooked or ill-shaped nose-wall”;
10. “produces a dimple in the cheek.”


Figure 4. Woodbury in 1895 designed triangular excisions in the temple to improve the appearance of crow’s-feet, similar to the early temple lifts by Miller and Noel in the 1920s. From: The Sun. New York: Benjamin Day; January 13, 1895:3 Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 5. Direct excision of the double chin. From: A New Wrinkle: Science Tells How to Remove the Old Ones. The World. New York: Joseph Pulitzer; 1895:8 Courtesy of the Library of Congress.
In this booklet, Woodbury also remarked that the browlift was one of the most astonishing operations for permanent removal of wrinkles (Figure 11). He correctly described the browlift technique as the excision of an ellipse of skin at the hairline to remove brow wrinkles. Those in the habit of scowling were advised to undergo a direct excision of the frown lines (Figure 12). Torn earlobe repairs were also illustrated (Figure 13).

Woodbury continued to advertise throughout his career and included illustrations, etchings, before and after photos, and educational articles and tables. One remarkable advertisement in 1895 was a set of before and after photos of a female patient’s rhinoplasty. The improvement in the aesthetics of her nose after removal of a prominent dorsal hump is dramatic (Figures 14-15). Another before and after photograph used in Woodbury’s advertising was “facial wrinkle surgery,” which, unfortunately, does not state the type of wrinkle surgery performed (Figure 16).

Generally, prices were not shown in Woodbury’s advertisements, but they could be found in his 1897 pamphlet (Figure 17).

In 1898, the author of an article in New York’s The Sun touted Woodbury and his chief surgeon visiting Paris and London as “astonishing surgeons” with his “featural operations” and wrinkle procedures. In 1902 the Derma-Featural company was incorporated in England, which

Figure 6. Retroauricular excision to improve the face. This excision would be too low, but the text clearly states that this procedure was to improve the jowls. From: A New Wrinkle: Science Tells How to Remove the Old Ones. The World. New York: Joseph Pulitzer; 1895:8 Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 7. Woodbury’s operation to lift the drooping eyelid. Upper eyelid skin excisions go back to antiquity, however this procedure was clearly for cosmetic improvement. From: A New Wrinkle: Science Tells How to Remove the Old Ones. The World. New York: Joseph Pulitzer; 1895:8 Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 8. The first 3-division boxing heavyweight champion, Robert Fitzsimmons received whole body static electricity treatments by John Woodbury for speedy physical rejuvenation before his fights. From: Derih, N. A Few Cases in Facial Surgery. Metropolitan Magazine: September Supplement. New York, 1895. p 4.
referenced Woodbury’s New York Institute as “an establishment for improving people’s features by means of minor operations in plastic surgery.” Photographs in the 1902 article demonstrated surgery to remove wrinkles under the eye with the text stating the loose skin must be carefully dissected out and the edges drawn together (Figure 18). This lower blepharoplasty description predated Miller’s by 4 years.1

**THE SALE OF WOODBURY SOAPS TO JERGENS**

In 1895, Woodbury first outsourced his soap and cosmetics manufacturing to Andrew Jergens & Company.45 In 1901, Woodbury sold the soap and beauty line, as well as the trade name, “Woodbury Soaps,” to Jergens for $212,500. Additionally, the transaction included Jergens gaining 50% interest in the Woodbury Institutes, and Woodbury relinquishing his role as President, although retaining a 10% royalty.17,45,46 Jergens continued selling the Woodbury soap and cosmetic line through both World Wars and into the 1950s and 1960s.

After Woodbury’s sale to Jergens, he went on to establish the Facial Cultivation Company and the Woodbury-McGrath Company, which by 1906 was designing and marketing “Woodbury’s New Skin Soap” and other beauty products under the same name.47

Over the subsequent years of his practice, Woodbury had multiple legal challenges and lawsuits (Table 1). In 1891, Woodbury had come to the attention of the New York Medical Society for practicing medicine without a license and to the County of New York Registrar for
Figure 10. The Woodbury “Neckless Face Chart” diagramming ten of his cosmetic facial surgeries. From: Woodbury, J. H. Beauty: The Diseases, Injuries and Disfigurements That Blemish and Destroy It, and How They May Be Cured and Corrected by Dermatology, With the Aid of Plastic Surgery. 8th ed. New York: John H. Woodbury, 1895. Page 129.

Figure 11. Woodbury described the browlift in 1894, 25-years before Passot. Woodbury considered the results from browlift to be “astonishing.” From: Woodbury JH. Beauty: The Diseases, Injuries and Disfigurements That Blemish and Destroy It, and How They May Be Cured and Corrected by Dermatology, With the Aid of Plastic Surgery. 8th ed. New York: John H. Woodbury; 1895: p 109.
failure to register with the county clerk. Between 1898 and 1907, he had multiple wrongful termination and malpractice lawsuits. In 1906, Jergens sued over the use of the Woodbury name for the “New” beauty line. The courts ruled it a trademark infringement, as Woodbury could not sell his name and then continue to use it. In 1907, the new President of the Dermatologic Institute was arrested for the corporate practice of medicine and medical advertising. As a result, the Woodbury Dermatologic Institutes went bankrupt.

Figure 12. Direct excision of the frown lines “for those in the habit of scowling.” Woodbury’s original description was in 1894, 32 years before Hunt’s description in 1926. From: Woodbury JH. Beauty: The Diseases, Injuries and Disfigurements That Blemish and Destroy It, and How They May Be Cured and Corrected by Dermatology, With the Aid of Plastic Surgery. 8th ed. New York: John H. Woodbury; 1895: p 110.

Figure 13. Cleft earlobe repair in 1895. From: Woodbury, J. H. Beauty: The Diseases, Injuries and Disfigurements That Blemish and Destroy It, and How They May Be Cured and Corrected by Dermatology, With the Aid of Plastic Surgery. 8th ed. New York: John H. Woodbury, 1895. p 111.
At least 3 of Woodbury’s lawsuits set legal precedence as landmark cases for physician practice today: that one may not sell their trademarked name and then continue to use it, that corporations may not employ licensed professionals to practice medicine nor advertise without being a registered physician, and that physicians may not use a patient’s photo without their permission.

After the Institute’s bankruptcy, Woodbury began his final downward spiral. Disorderly conduct, assault, and other lawsuits followed. Perhaps due to the cumulative legal and emotional stressors, or other vicissitudes, Woodbury committed suicide in 1909, using 2 bullets, as the first missed. Woodbury died without a will, and his estranged wife Cora and his sister Sarah T. Woodbury fought over his estate.54,55
CONCLUSIONS

John H. Woodbury, 1851-1909, was the first cosmetic surgery entrepreneur and an innovator of numerous cosmetic surgeries.

Because the descriptions of Woodbury’s various surgeries were published in the lay literature, knowledge that these surgeries existed, and were successfully done by Woodbury and/or surgeons under his direction, has been lost to medical historians.

The historical significance of Woodbury’s surgical techniques is best evaluated by comparing the date of the innovation of the procedure by Woodbury with the subsequent date of the innovation by later physicians (Table 2). In 1894 and 1895, Woodbury illustrated early versions of a browlift and direct frown-line excision. Up until now, the creator of the first browlift has been attributed to Passot in 1919,10,56 and the first frown excision has been credited to Hunt in 1926.56 Also in 1894, in Godey’s Magazine, Woodbury described dimple creation (along with multiple other cosmetic procedures). Currently, the first dimple creation has been attributed to Miller in 1907.2,4

In 1895, Woodbury described triangular excisions behind the temple hairline to improve crow’s feet and provide
Figure 18. Removing wrinkles from the lower eyelid. Probably the first description of cosmetic lower eyelid surgery. From: Owen, B. A Beauty Hospital for Men: Where Natures Errors Are Corrected to Order. The Harmsworth London Magazine: Harmsworth Brothers, 1902:266-270.

Table 1. Woodbury’s legal troubles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Legal Difficulty</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>Practicing without registering with the County of New York</td>
<td>Lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>St. Louis wrongful termination of physician</td>
<td>Lost $1160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Rhinoplasty malpractice</td>
<td>Lost $100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Kolle/Woodbury malpractice paraffin injection</td>
<td>Lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>Using patient photograph without permission and false patient testimonial</td>
<td>Lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>Corporate practice of medicine and advertising</td>
<td>Lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>Bankrupt institutes</td>
<td>Lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Trademark infringement with Jergens over the name Woodbury</td>
<td>Lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Disorderly conduct for parading around scantily clad</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Assault and defamation</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>Broken pledge on drinking</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>No will</td>
<td>Post mortem</td>
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</table>

Table 2. Operations Performed by Woodbury

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operations Performed by Woodbury</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Historical Attribution</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hair Electrolysis</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td>Michel 1875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pug nose improvement</td>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Roe 1887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing or enlarging the oral commissure</td>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Miller 1907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otoplasty</td>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Ely 1881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing a prominent lip</td>
<td>1894</td>
<td>Miller 1907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Browlift</td>
<td>1894</td>
<td>Passot 1919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frown line excision</td>
<td>1894</td>
<td>Hunt 1926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmetic skin upper blepharoplasty</td>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Sushruta 2000 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double chin reduction</td>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Passot 1919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posterior auricular excision for jowls</td>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Hollander 1912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasal hump reduction</td>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Roe 1891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of cosmetic cheek dimple</td>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Miller 1907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair transplant for traumatic alopecia</td>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Dieffenbach 1822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submandibular wrinkle excisions</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>Covey 1905</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve puffiness under eyes</td>
<td>1902</td>
<td>Miller 1907</td>
</tr>
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</table>
mid-face support. Nearly 3 decades later, Miller in 1924 and Noel in 1926 illustrated similar triangular excisions behind the temple hairline for facial improvement. 11,58

Also in 1895, Woodbury described a posterior auricular/neck excision to improve “flabbiness of the skin,” which can be considered an early version of the lower facelift. Facelift procedures have been generally credited to Hollander, who described his approach to facelift in 1912, although Hollander later recollected that he first performed this surgery in 1901. 9,58

Woodbury’s place in the history of plastic and cosmetic surgery is that of a remarkable early innovator. His innovative cosmetic operations were developed and performed years, and in some cases decades, before other surgical innovators. His achievements are especially remarkable since he was completely self-trained as a physician and surgeon.

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44. Owen B. A beauty hospital for men: where natures errors are corrected to order. The Harmsworth London Magazine. Harmsworth Brothers; 1902;8:266-270.


