

The Discovery of Ether Anesthesia

Jumping on the 19th-Century Bandwagon

IN THE 33rd Congress of the United States, in 1854, a bill was introduced in the Senate, No. 210, entitled, "Act to Recompense the Discoverer of Practical Anaesthesia." The sum of \$100 000 was decided on to honor the designee.¹

However, identification of the individual to whom this title should be awarded sparked a bitter debate that lasted throughout much of the latter part of the 19th century.¹⁻³ The original contenders for the award were Horace Wells, the Hartford, Conn, dentist who used nitrous oxide in 1844 successfully for the extraction of teeth; Charles Jackson, the analytical chemist who suggested the use of ether to the third contender; and William Morton, who, with much publicity, anesthetized patients at the Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, in 1846. The issues became more complicated when added evidence from Senator W. C. Dawson of Georgia suggested that ether was probably first used for a surgical operation in 1842 by Crawford Long, a country doctor in Jefferson, Ga.⁴ Much correspondence and many legal papers and accounts published in recognized journals were carefully examined by contemporaries and still exist for perusal by historians today.¹⁻⁶

History records that Wells' claim was discounted because nitrous oxide is not an anesthetic, that Jackson only off-handedly made his suggestion about ether to Morton, that Morton tried to patent ether as the mys-

tery agent, "Letheon," and that true recognition should be given to Long despite his failure to publish his work in a timely manner. The bill was sent to the House of Representatives and tabled (*Congressional Globe*. 1854, 1, 33, pt 2, p 943) because Long was not one of the individuals initially identified.^{1,2}

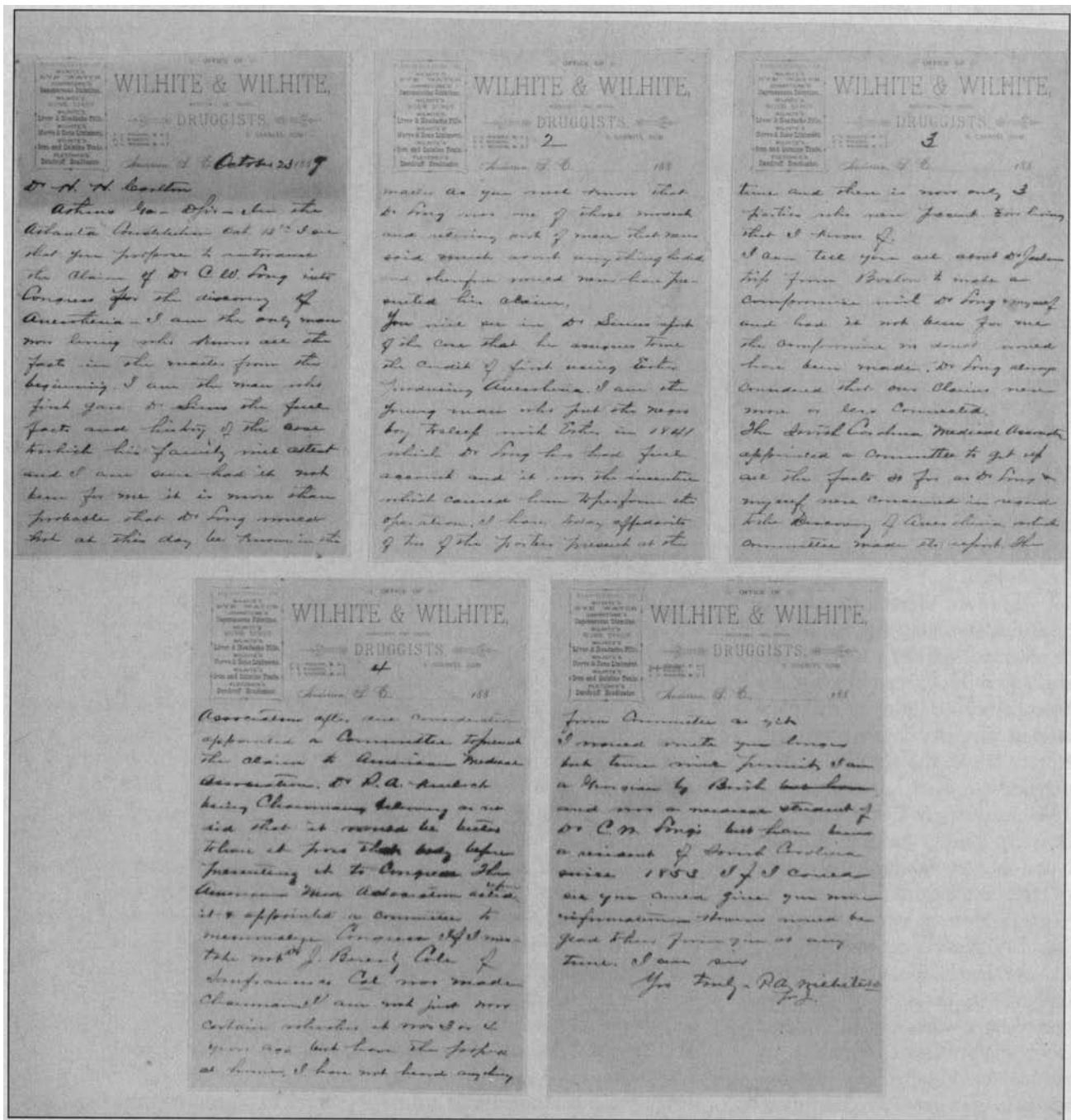
Of particular interest is the recent discovery of a letter written in 1887 by Dr P. H. Wilhite, claiming that he was the first to use ether anesthesia (**Figure**). The letter was given to one of the authors (J.F.C.) by his former chief, Seale Harris, MD, author of a biography of J. Marion Sims. The account is a reply to Dr H. H. Carlton, who had signified his intention in the October 13, 1887 issue of the *Atlanta Constitution* to introduce to Congress the claim of Crawford Long (who had died by this time) for the discovery of anesthesia. Wilhite acknowledges in the letter that he was the only person then living who was present at the first administration of anesthesia in the early 1840s. Wilhite reports that, as a student of Dr Long's at the time, he was the first to anesthetize a child, in 1841, and that this incident was the incentive for Dr Long to use ether. Furthermore, he claims that it was his negotiations with Dr Jackson, who visited Dr Long in 1854, that allowed a compromise between the two adversaries. Wilhite writes that he and Dr Long considered their claims as discoverer of anesthesia to be connected. Finally, Wilhite adds that it was he who drew Dr Marion Sims'

attention to Dr Long's work, allowing the noted surgeon to focus the eyes of the world on Dr Long in 1877.

According to these sweeping statements a mistake was made—the teacher stole the ideas and works of a student who, true to the last, supported and defended his mentor.

However, more research disclosed other facts. "Quilting" parties had long been popular in the United States, especially in the Southern states.^{7,8} As part of these social events, it was common practice to inhale ether at the end of the evening to induce merriment. In the fall of 1839, Wilhite, who was 17 years old at the time, attended such a party at the home of Mr Ware (Long's grandfather) in Athens, Ga. A young black boy who had witnessed the antics of the teenagers was caught and held by the group while Wilhite forced the boy to breathe ether until he became unconscious. Terrified, Wilhite ordered horses to be saddled so that they could escape while others went for help. The local general practitioner, Dr Reese of Athens, managed to arouse the boy with physical stimulation and cold water.

Crawford Long graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in 1839. He then spent 18 months "walking the wards" in New York before returning to Jefferson, Ga.¹ In December 1841 or in January 1842, itinerant entertainers introduced the subject of the inhalation of nitrous oxide. The youth of the town asked Long's assistance in procuring the gas. As the doctor had no apparatus to



A letter written in 1887 by Dr P. H. Wilhite, claiming that he was the first to use ether anesthesia.

make it, he suggested ether as a substitute.¹ He himself had used ether at the University of Pennsylvania for recreation and had often noticed that he and his friends had sustained injuries that were unnoticed while under the influence.⁹ An acquaintance of his, James Venable, had two tumors on his neck. Venable had often inhaled ether and was probably present at the unfortunate episode

concerning the black boy in 1839. Crawford Long, after frequent discussions with his friend and patient, suggested that ether be used as an anesthetic.⁴ Witnessed by Dr E. S. Rawls, A. T. Thurmond, and W. H. Thurmond, the operation was performed successfully with the patient under ether anesthesia on March 30, 1842.⁴ Wilhite was not present. In fact, the first apprentice to Long, J.

F. Groves, did not enter Long's office until January 1845, when he witnessed an interesting experiment in which Long amputated two burned fingers from a young boy—one while the boy was under the influence of ether and one while he was awake—to prove that insensibility to pain was due to the agent. Groves records that Wilhite was apprenticed to Long late in the spring of 1845.^{1,4}

On March 8, 1854, at the request of Mr Davison, US Senator from Georgia, Charles Jackson visited Long to examine the latter's claims. Jackson, threatened by the claims of Morton, hoped to convince Long to align with him against the Boston dentist.^{1,2} He maintained that he had used ether on himself in 1838 and recognized its efficacy, but, like Long, had not published his findings. Later Long wrote, "I did not admit to him that he was the first to make the discovery—leaving to me its practical application: and when he proposed to me to unite our claims—he to claim the discovery and I to claim its first practical use in surgical operations—I positively refused."⁴ The only recorded witness to the meeting in Athens is a judge, C. W. Andrews. There is no mention of the presence of Wilhite in the writings of either Andrews or Long's daughter, Frances Taylor.^{1,10,11}

Dr Jackson went from Athens to the Dahlonega gold mines, and, as he had to pass through Jefferson on his way, Long gave him names of physicians who knew of his work a few years previously. One of them may have been Wilhite, as an affidavit is still in existence. It reads:

State of South Carolina,
Anderson District.

I, Phillip A. Wilhite, do state that in the month of October, 1844, I entered the office of Dr. C. W. Long of Jefferson, Jackson county, Georgia, where I continued some eighteen months. That very shortly after I entered his office and not later than the beginning of the year 1845, I heard the said C. W. Long speak of having used sulphuric ether by inhalation to prevent pain in surgical operations, he referring to a period of time before I entered his office at which it had been used. Among other instances of which mention was made he had used sulphuric ether by inhalation in cutting off tumors from the neck of James M. Venable, of which I heard Dr. Long and many others who had witnessed the operation frequently speak, and my impression is that I heard Venable himself speak of the operation as having been performed without feel-

ing any pain. My recollection is distinct that the use of sulphuric ether by inhalation in such cases by said C. W. Long about the latter part of 1844 and early in 1845 was public and notorious about the town of Jefferson, from the mention so frequently made of it in my presence.

[signed] P. H. Wilhite, M.D.

Sworn to and subscribed before me
4th February, 1854.

R. S. Vandiver, N.P.¹

J. Marion Sims published an article on "The Discovery of Anesthesia" in the *Virginia Medical Monthly* in 1877.¹² Sims himself was a Southern gentleman who practiced in New York and met P. A. Wilhite professionally in 1876. At that time he operated on Wilhite's daughter. Ether was used and Sims learned from Wilhite that this drug was not used for the first time in Boston. Apparently, Wilhite embellished his account of the history of the discovery of ether and his part in it. After reading Sims' article, Long wrote to both Sims and Wilhite as follows:

Athens, Ga. May 20th, 1877.

Dr. H. P. Wilhite,

[apparently Long confused the initials]

Dear Sir:

I received Dr. Sims' article on anaesthesia yesterday, and find several mistakes. Dr. Sims states that yourself, Dr. Groves, Dr. J. D. and Dr. H. R. J. Long were students of mine, and witnessed the operation performed on Venable in 1842. Your recollection failed you at the time. As it was several years, at least two, before either entered my office, you will see that you were mistaken in giving this information. You also made a mistake in saying that the first inhalation in Jefferson of ether for its exhilarating effects was before the same persons. I wrote to Dr. Sims informing him of the errors, and asking him if he considered the mistakes of sufficient importance to be noticed.

[signed] C. W. Long^{1(p10*)}

Dr Wilhite replied as follows:

Anderson, S.C. June 27th, '77.

Dr. C. W. Long,

Dear Doctor: Yours of the 22nd. inst. is at hand, and I have just received a letter from Dr. J. M. Sims, which I will answer today. In my statement I did make a mis-

take in regard to my being present at the first or second operation, which mistake I will correct. But if you still prefer I will send a certificate.

Let me know and I will give you any information or assistance in this great matter.

Yours truly, etc.

[signed] P. H. Wilhite.

Sims sailed for Europe shortly after publication of the article and Long died a few months later. Wilhite's statements went unchallenged for several years until they were questioned by Dr L. B. Grandy of Atlanta in the *Virginia Medical Monthly*, October 1893.^{1(p106)}

In contrast to Wilhite's statement, Long's claims were never investigated by the American Medical Association. Rather, many minor societies, the Eclectic Medical Association, and the Southern Medical Association (not the South Carolina Medical Association) passed decrees in his favor. The most notable is from the Georgia Medical Society:

Resolved, That this society is of the opinion that Dr. Crawford W. Long was the first person who used sulphuric ether as an anaesthetic in operations, and as an act of justice to him individually and to the honor of the profession of our own state, we most earnestly recommend him to present at once his claims to priority in the use of this most important agent to the consideration of the American Medical Association at its next meeting.¹

In reviewing the evidence, it appears that Dr P. H. Wilhite was a man of conveniently short and somewhat inaccurate memory. By 1887, Long, Wells, Morton, and Jackson had all met early and tragic deaths. The prize of \$100 000 had still not been awarded. The evidence was not presented to the American Medical Association. No doubt the druggist from Anderson, SC, felt he still had a chance at wealth and fame.

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Material for this article was taken from many sources. Statements were included only when they could be cross-referenced.

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