

"Gentlemen! This Is No Humbug"

Did John Collins Warren, M.D., Proclaim These Words on October 16, 1846, at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston?

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ABSTRACT

The proclamation, "Gentlemen! this is no humbug," attributed to John Collins Warren, M.D., was not identified in any contemporaneous eyewitness report of William T. G. Morton's October 16, 1846, demonstration of ether at Massachusetts General Hospital. The earliest known documentation of the proclamation is in Nathan P. Rice's biography of Morton, first published in 1859. Only three eyewitnesses, Washington Ayer, M.D., Robert Thompson Davis, M.D., and Isaac Francis Galloupe, M.D., reported Warren's alleged proclamation. However, their accounts first appeared in 1896, 50 yr after Morton's demonstration of etherization. Although Warren's alleged proclamation appears plausible, the overall impression from eyewitness statements and publications relating to the October 16, 1846, demonstration of etherization is that it may not have been made. (*ANESTHESIOLOGY* 2016; 124:553-60)

THE declaration "Gentlemen! this is no humbug" is attributed to John Collins Warren, M.D. (1778–1856) (fig. 1), surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, and Hersey Professor of Anatomy and Surgery at Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts. Warren ostensibly made this proclamation on October 16, 1846, after the first public demonstration of ether anesthesia at Massachusetts General Hospital.¹

A cursory review by the author failed to identify this memorable quotation in the initial reports of William Thomas Green Morton's (1819–1868) first public demonstration of etherization. According to Richard Wolfe, the "sole source of Warren's alleged proclamation" was Nathan P. Rice's biography of Morton, *Trials of a Public Benefactor*.² Wolfe did not document any attempt he may have made to confirm Warren's alleged proclamation, now widely known among anesthesiologists, and part of anesthesia folklore.

Eyewitness accounts of the first public demonstration of etherization on October 16, 1846, were reviewed to determine whether the quotation attributed to Warren could be corroborated. Other 19th-century quotations containing the word humbug are also discussed—including several quotations from the early anesthesia literature, and three quotations to illustrate popular usage of the word.

The version of Warren's alleged proclamation used in this article is the one documented by Rice: "Gentlemen! this is no humbug" (fig. 2).¹ In the Rice version, there is an exclamation mark after the word Gentlemen.

Boston, October 16, 1846

Numerous observations and discoveries contributed to the eventual development of general anesthesia in the 1840s;

however, worldwide acceptance of etherization is directly attributable to the events of October 16, 1846, in Boston, Massachusetts. On this day, Morton, a dentist and part-time medical student, administered sulphuric (ethyl) ether to Edward Gilbert Abbott (1825–1855) in the surgical amphitheater, now known as the Ether Dome, at Massachusetts General Hospital. John Collins Warren, M.D. (fig. 1), the senior surgeon at the hospital, successfully operated on a congenital vascular malformation in the neck of his etherized patient. Abbott was sufficiently etherized not to resist the initial incision although he "muttered, as in a semiconscious state"³ during the latter stages of the operation. Abbott stated afterward that he did not experience any pain although he was aware of the operation, "as though the skin had been scratched with a hoe."³ At the conclusion of the operation, Warren, who was just months from retiring from his academic appointment, was convinced that he had finally seen a promising method of alleviating the suffering of patients undergoing painful procedures. Turning his attention to the assembled medical students and physicians, Warren reportedly proclaimed "Gentlemen! this is no humbug."¹ There were evidently no women present.

The Word Humbug

Humbug is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as a hoax; an imposition; a deception, pretence, sham; a person who practices deception; or an imposter or a fraud.⁴ The origin of the word humbug is not known although its earliest usage has been dated to the mid-18th century.⁴ The word does not appear in Samuel Johnson's renowned dictionary, perhaps because it was not widely used in the 18th century.

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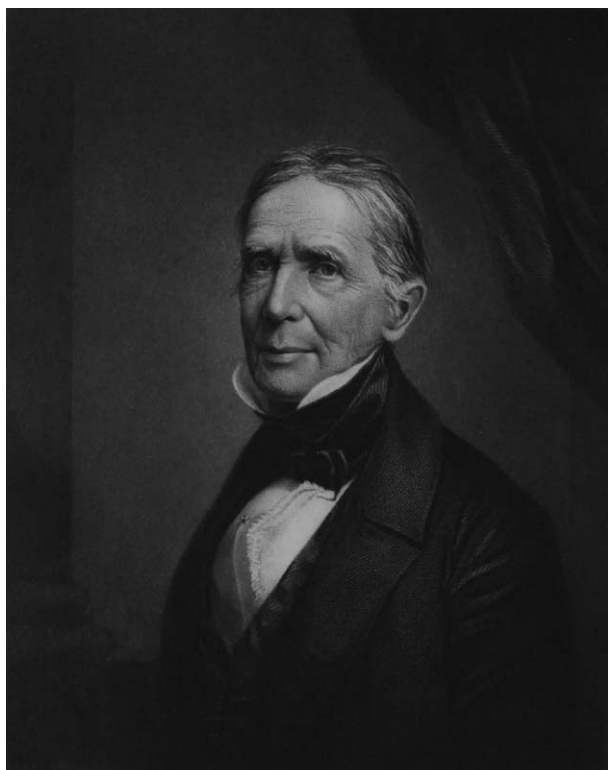


Fig. 1. John Collins Warren, M.D. (1778–1856), surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, and Hersey Professor of Anatomy and Surgery, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts. Engraving by H. W. Smith, from a daguerreotype by Whipple. Reprinted, from *Memoir of John C. Warren, M.D.*

At length the operation was finished, and the blood having been washed from his face, the patient was gradually allowed to come from his anæsthetic state. When fully restored to consciousness and able to answer questions, he gave the triumphant and gratifying intelligence, "I have experienced no pain, but only a sensation like that of scraping the part with a blunt instrument." This arose from the fact that as the operation had taken rather longer than anticipated, Dr. Morton had several times removed the inhaling instrument from his mouth.

With the patient still lying like a log upon the table, Dr. Warren turned to the audience and said slowly and emphatically "Gentlemen! this is no humbug."

Fig. 2. The earliest known documentation of John Collins Warren's alleged proclamation. From Nathan P. Rice's biography of Morton, *Trials of a Public Benefactor* (1859, page 93).¹

With the aid of a readily available online resource, the Google Books Ngram Viewer, it can be demonstrated that the greatest usage of the word humbug, as reflected in published books, occurred during the second half of the 19th century. A book titled, *Humbug: A Look at Some Popular Impositions*, appeared in print in 1859⁵ (the year Rice's biography of Morton was published¹), while Phineas T. Barnum (1810–1891, American showman, circus owner, and "Prince of Humbugs"), published *The Humbugs of the World* in 1866.⁶

Trials of a Public Benefactor

Morton's authorized biography, *Trials of a Public Benefactor*, by Nathan P. Rice, M.D. (1829–1900), was first published in 1859.¹ Although written to enhance Morton's reputation, and support his campaign for recognition, this biography now serves as a historical record of his accomplishment. Morton died 9 yr later while in New York—his sanitized biography and other schemes had failed to secure any financial reward or official (government) recognition for his claimed discovery of etherization. Morton's hucksterism before his career in dentistry was generally unknown until Wolfe's appropriately titled biography, *Tarnished Idol*, was published in 2001.²

In describing the momentous operation on October 16, 1846, at Massachusetts General Hospital, Rice wrote (fig. 2):

With the patient still lying like a log upon the table, Dr. Warren turned to the audience and said slowly and emphatically "Gentlemen! this is no humbug."¹

Morton was undoubtedly the primary source of information for Rice's biography. Rice's age (he would have been 17 in 1846), and the fact that he graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1853, appear to exclude him as a witness of Morton's first public demonstration of etherization. It should be noted that Rice reported, incorrectly, that the patient was on an operating table.¹ Was Rice's error regarding the operating table attributable to Morton's inaccurate recollection of the operation, or was Rice exercising artistic (narrative) license in his description of the momentous occasion? Because the first part of Rice's description (fig. 2) is known to be erroneous, failure to confirm Warren's alleged proclamation would suggest that Rice's statement may be entirely false. Warren's death in 1856, 3 yr before the publication of Rice's biography of Morton, deprived us of a response from the surgeon to confirm or deny making the alleged proclamation.

Other Descriptions of Morton's First Public Demonstration of Etherization

Accounts of Morton's demonstration of etherization on October 16, 1846, were reviewed for any reported proclamation by Warren at the conclusion of the operation on Edward Gilbert Abbott. There are, surprisingly, few contemporaneous eyewitness accounts of the historic demonstration of etherization. Most eyewitness accounts or statements were published years or decades later.

Henry Jacob Bigelow, M.D.

Warren's alleged "no humbug" proclamation was not reported by Henry Jacob Bigelow, M.D. (1818–1890), in his well-known initial report of insensibility induced by Morton's preparation,³ or in Bigelow's subsequent publications on anesthesia, all of which were published posthumously in a single volume in 1894.⁷ Bigelow was appointed as a surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital in the same year as Morton's demonstration of etherization at the hospital. Three

years later, he was appointed professor of surgery at Harvard Medical School.

The significance of Morton's demonstration of insensibility was immediately apparent to Bigelow, who became the first physician to take an active interest in Morton's new process. Bigelow observed the administration of ether in Morton's office, conducted trials of ether and similar compounds, and administered ether at the hospital after Morton's initial demonstrations of etherization. It explains why Bigelow published the first substantive account of etherization in a medical journal despite having no direct role in the proceedings of October 16, 1846. Thus, Bigelow can be regarded as one of the first physician anesthesiologists of the modern era of clinical anesthesia, and he would become one of Morton's strongest supporters.

Charles Frederick Heywood, M.D.

Charles Frederick Heywood, M.D. (1823–1893), house surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital (he was appointed in August 1846), is usually remembered for writing the invitation to Morton to administer his “preparation” at the hospital.⁸ Heywood did not report Warren's alleged proclamation in two written statements pertaining to Morton's administration of ether on October 16, 1846. Heywood wrote a brief statement on October 22, 1846, that he was present at the operations under ether on October 16 and 17; however, he did not disclose any information on the two operations.⁸ On January 14, 1853, Heywood wrote to the U. S. Senate Select Committee investigating claims relating to anesthesia. Having observed the controversy regarding anesthesia for just over 6 yr, Heywood commented on the relative merits of the various claims and gave Wells credit for conceiving inhalational anesthesia.⁹

William Thomas Green Morton, M.D.

Morton did not report Warren's alleged statement in his publications on etherization. Morton's earliest publications were circulars, titled *Morton's Letheon*. The first circular may have been a single page handbill. By May 1847, when Morton published the 5th edition, the circular was 88 pages long.¹⁰ The word humbug appears once in the 5th edition of the circular, in relation to mesmerism: “the old humbug mesmerism.”¹⁰

In his July 1847 “memoir” to the French Academy of Sciences, Morton wrote, “When the operation closed, the patient described his state, and Dr. Warren announced his belief that there had been insensibility to pain, my feelings may be better imagined than described.”¹¹ Morton was seeking recognition for his alleged discovery, yet he failed to recall any emphatic pronouncement to highlight his great triumph and promote his cause.

The word humbug appears once in Morton's “memoir”—in reference to Wells' unsuccessful demonstration of nitrous oxide. Describing a conversation with Charles Thomas Jackson, M.D. (1805–1880), Morton wrote:

He [Jackson] smiled and said that was a good story, but added, in a graver manner, that I [Morton] had better not attempt such an experiment [deceiving a patient by using a gas-bag with no gas to control pain], lest I should be set down as a greater humbug than Wells was with his nitrous oxide gas.¹¹

In 1850, in a 24-page treatise on the superiority of ether over chloroform, Morton penned a brief description of the October 16 operation without reporting Warren's alleged proclamation.¹²

Edward Warren

Although Edward Warren did not witness of the first etherization at Massachusetts General Hospital, he is discussed here because of his role as a spokesman for Morton. Edward Warren's identity has not been definitively established. He was not related to John Collins Warren, M.D. Edward Warren should not be confused with the physician Edward Warren, M.D. (1804–1878), brother and biographer of John Collins Warren, M.D.¹³

Edward Warren, who described himself as an acquaintance of Charles Thomas Jackson, M.D., for over a decade, was not convinced of Jackson's claim as the discoverer of etherization. For unknown reasons, most likely to be financial, Edward Warren became a spokesman, and later an agent for Morton. In 1847, Edward Warren, published three editions of a pamphlet in defense of Morton's claims.^{14–16} Because Edward Warren was advocating Morton as the discoverer of etherization, he would in all probability have seen and heard all potentially useful information in support of Morton's claims. The word humbug appears six times in the 2nd edition of Edward Warren's pamphlet; however, John Collins Warren's alleged proclamation was not reported.¹⁵

John Collins Warren, M.D.

Not unexpectedly, John Collins Warren, M.D., did not record the quotation attributed to him when he published his book on etherization in 1848.¹⁷ Although Warren was aware of his pivotal role in this extraordinary advance in surgery, and he had subsequently retired from his professorship at Harvard Medical School, his book on etherization was not written as a means of self-promotion or publicity for himself, but as a “dispassionate judgement [*sic*] of its value” and to promote the practice of etherization in the United States.¹⁷

Warren's description of the historic October 16, 1846, operation under ether was limited to two pages of his book on etherization.¹⁷ He was greatly surprised by Abbott's initial insensibility to the incision of the skin of the neck. Warren had reservations toward the end of the procedure when Abbott “began to move his limbs, cry out, and utter extraordinary expressions.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, Warren was reassured after the operation when Abbott denied suffering any pain.

Warren's journal entries were probably made retrospectively, but the entry for October 16, 1846, offers some remarkable insights into his attitude to the newly discovered

technique of preventing pain during surgery.¹³ The journal entry for this memorable day begins with comments relating to one of his pursuits in natural history, the skeleton of a mastodon, which was a frequently discussed topic in his diary around that time. Only thereafter does Warren make a rather indifferent statement regarding the operation:

Oct. 16. In the morning, went to the Medical College to make some experiments on the renovation of decayed bones with glue. White glue gives, in some cases, a beautiful appearance; and the black gives great strength.

Did an interesting operation at the Hospital this morning, while the patient was under the influence of Dr. Morton's preparation to prevent pain. The substance employed was sulphuric ether.¹³

Years later, Edward Warren, M.D., used the following quotation, from an article published by Warren in December 1846, to illustrate his brother's "habitual caution"¹³:

Let me conclude by congratulating my professional brethren on the acquisition of a mode of mitigating human suffering, which may become a valuable agent in the hands of careful and well-instructed practitioners, even if it should not prove of such general application as the imagination of sanguine persons would lead them to anticipate.¹⁸

In summary, the relatively minor operation on Abbott, and his appearance of suffering during the operation, regardless of his subsequent denial of experiencing any pain, does not appear to be a demonstration that could be considered unequivocally successful, or warrant an emphatic proclamation of success. Although the use of ether for the operation on Abbott was a major advance on existing methods of controlling pain during surgery, the most important trial of etherization was considered to be a "capital" operation, such as the above knee amputation, which was performed 3 weeks later. In addition, Warren was described by his brother as habitually cautious.¹³ Six weeks after the operation on Abbott, Warren expressed reservations regarding the general applicability of etherization.¹⁸ This impression of Warren, although circumstantial, does not suggest that he could have uttered the alleged "no humbug" proclamation.

Statements, 1853: Gould and Townsend

In 1852–1853, extensive statements on the ether controversy were prepared for submission to the U.S. Congress.¹⁹ Warren, Bigelow, and two other eyewitnesses of the first public demonstration of ether, Augustus Addison Gould, M.D. (1805–1866), and Solomon Davis Townsend, M.D. (1793–1869), testified under oath and were cross-examined by lawyers.

Gould was specifically asked about Warren's remarks after the operation on October 16, 1846 (fig. 3).¹⁹ According to Gould, "Dr Warren seemed pleased, but said it would require further trials to settle its value."¹⁹ Gould did not report any bold or dramatic proclamation by Warren; just a cautious acknowledgement from the esteemed senior surgeon and

23d. Did Dr. Warren make any, and what remarks, to those present, in Dr. Morton's presence, after the experiment?
Ans. He made some inquiries of the man as to his having suffered pain, and he replied that he had felt something like scraping with a knife, during the operation. Dr. Warren seemed pleased, but said it would require further trials to settle its value.

Fig. 3. Transcript of part of the testimony of Augustus Addison Gould, M.D. From a manuscript comprising statements and testimony in support of Morton's claims, submitted to the U.S. Congress in 1853 (page 268).¹⁹

distinguished professor of surgery. Gould's reply is perhaps the strongest indication that Warren may not have made the "no humbug" proclamation. Gould, a respected Boston physician and conchologist, does not appear to have taken sides in the controversy over the "discovery" of etherization. Gould assisted Morton in designing the ether inhaler that was used on October 16, 1846.

Townsend, a senior surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital, did not report any proclamation by Warren.¹⁹ It is surprising that Warren's emphatic "no humbug" proclamation was not recalled by any eyewitness during the first years of the protracted public controversy regarding the origins of anesthesia.

1890s and Later

The 50-yr anniversary of Morton's first administration of ether at Massachusetts General Hospital prompted the publication of a number of reminiscences by surviving eyewitnesses.^{20–27} Not surprisingly, the 5-decade interval since the operation ensured that there were some flawed and inconsistent recollections. Two authors, Benjamin Eddy Cotting, M.D. (1812–1897),²⁰ and Charles Vose Bemis, M.D. (1816–1906),²¹ were physicians when they witnessed Morton's first public demonstration of etherization. Moreover, Cotting and Bemis have not been previously identified by anesthesia historians as witnesses. Six eyewitness accounts were published by four physicians who were medical students in Boston in 1846.^{22–27} In 1906, another eyewitness, Tappan Eustis Francis, M.D. (1823–1909), made a few remarks at an Ether Day commemoration at Massachusetts General Hospital.^{28,29}

Warren's alleged proclamation was eventually reported by three eyewitnesses who were medical students when they observed Morton administer ether (figs. 4–5).^{23–27} Washington Ayer, M.D. (1823–1899),^{23–25} Robert Thompson Davis, M.D. (1823–1906),²⁶ and Isaac Francis Galloupe, M.D. (1823–1909)²⁷ reported nearly identical statements—the only difference in their quotations was Galloupe's use of italics for the word *this*.²⁷ It should be noted there is no exclamation mark in their reported statement: "Gentlemen, this is no humbug."^{23–27}

Discrepancies and errors in eyewitness narratives suggest that reports of Warren's alleged proclamation may not have been derived exclusively from recollections of the historic October 16 operation. The conflated narratives include memories of other operations which were attended

no pain. Dr. Warren then turned to those present and said, "Gentlemen, this is no humbug." "The conquest of pain had been achieved." Surgery was robbed of its terror, and the surgeon greatly assisted in his operation.

Fig. 4. John Collins Warren's alleged proclamation, reported by Washington Ayer, M.D., in 1896.²³

As Dr. Warren was about to begin the operation, Dr. Morton came in, out of breath, and red in the face from hurry. He immediately commenced to give the ether from the glass inhaler then used. In three or four minutes he turned to Dr. Warren, and said, "Your patient is ready"; whereupon the operation was done without a sign of pain that I could see. Dr. Warren then stood facing the class, and said, "Gentlemen, this is no humbug." We were thunderstruck. Dr. Warren was a tall, straight man, dignified and rather solemn in manner, with supreme self-control, laconic in speech, using the fewest words possible and never repeating them (resembling the Duke of Wellington); yet there were tears glistening on his face when he uttered those words.

Fig. 5. Description by Isaac Francis Galloupe, M.D., of the October 16, 1846, operation at Massachusetts General Hospital.²⁷

and information from secondary accounts of the history of anesthesia. Several eyewitnesses stated that Abbott lay on an operating table.^{21,23–25} In addition, some surgeons were incorrectly identified as being in attendance at the operation on October 16, 1846.^{21,26,27}

Daniel Denison Slade, M.D.

In 1892, Daniel Denison Slade, M.D. (1823–1896), published an article titled, *The first capital operation under the influence of ether*, an eyewitness account of the November 7, 1846, amputation under ether.²² Slade provided limited information on the October 16, 1846, demonstration of ether, without reporting Warren's alleged proclamation. Clearly, Slade did not intend to describe the operation on Gilbert Abbott in detail, and there was no assertion in his article that he witnessed the operation. Nevertheless, in 1897, Bemis identified Slade as a witness.²¹

Washington Ayer, M.D.

Early in 1896, Washington Ayer, M.D. (1823–1899), addressed a meeting of the San Francisco Medico-Chirurgical Society on the discovery of anesthesia. A report of Ayer's address was published in March 1896 in the *Occidental Medical Times*.²³ According to Ayer (fig. 4), Warren said, "Gentlemen, this is no humbug."^{23–25}

One error in Ayer's narrative is his statement that Gilbert Abbott "placed himself voluntarily upon the table, which was to become the altar of future fame."^{23–25} Thus, Ayer's account of Warren's alleged proclamation may not have been derived exclusively from his recollections of the operation on Abbott.

Ayer believed he was possibly the only living witness of the first operation under ether at Massachusetts General

Hospital.^{23,24} He was undoubtedly mistaken in this regard—there were at least seven other surviving witnesses of the historic operation when its 50th anniversary was commemorated in October 1896.^{20,21,26–29} Since a substantial number of witnesses have not been identified, the actual number of surviving witnesses was almost certainly higher.

Robert Thompson Davis, M.D.

In October 1896, Robert Thompson Davis, M.D. (1823–1906), speaking at the semicentennial of anesthesia in Boston, noted that he was one of the few surviving witnesses of the historic operation.²⁶ According to Davis:

The exhibition of the anesthetic was admitted by those present to be a complete success. The operating surgeon expressed his satisfaction in these emphatic words: "Gentlemen, this is no humbug."²⁶

Davis incorrectly placed the surgeon George Hayward, M.D. (1791–1863), at the operation on Gilbert Abbott.²⁶ Hayward testified in 1853 that he did not witness the operation, and Warren had later informed him that Morton's preparation had been used with "partial success."¹⁹

Benjamin Eddy Cotting, M.D.

Benjamin Eddy Cotting, M.D. (1812–1897), a graduate of Harvard Medical School in 1837, reported that there were some failures and doubts after Morton's first demonstration at Massachusetts General Hospital: "There were sceptics who declared the whole thing a sham, a hazardous humbug."²⁰ Cotting did not report Warren's alleged proclamation.²⁰

Charles Vose Bemis, M.D.

In 1897, Charles Vose Bemis, M.D. (1816–1906) wrote, "the operation was completed quietly and without special incident."²¹ Bemis did not report Warren's alleged proclamation.

According to Bemis, the patient was on an operating table.²¹ Bemis identified five persons who were present: Henry Grafton Clark, M.D. (1814–1892), George Henry Gay, M.D. (1823–1878), Abel Lawrence Peirson, M.D. (1794–1853), Daniel Denison Slade, M.D., and William Williamson Wellington, M.D. (1814–1896).²¹ However, it is apparent from Peirson's testimony in 1853 that he did not witness the operation on Abbott.¹⁹

Isaac Francis Galloupe, M.D.

Isaac Francis Galloupe, M.D. (1823–1909) was identified by Wolfe as a witness on the basis of a newspaper report, "The First Use of Ether," which was found in the Abel Lawrence Peirson papers in the Boston Medical Library.³⁰ This report was believed to date from 1904 although the name of the newspaper was not known to Wolfe.³⁰ This newspaper report has now been traced to the *Boston Evening Transcript*, November 22, 1905. A hitherto unknown article by Galloupe in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*²⁷ confirms that he was present on October 16, 1846, at the operation on Abbott.

Galloupe reported that Warren said, "Gentlemen, *this* is no humbug" (fig. 5).²⁷ Warren was described as "rather solemn in manner, with supreme self-control, laconic in speech, using the fewest words possible and never repeating them." Galloupe then embellished his narrative with a contradictory statement that Warren had "tears glistening on his face when he uttered those words."²⁷ Clearly, Galloupe was attempting to convey the magnitude of the extraordinary demonstration by stating that the usually serious and somber surgeon was reduced to tears. Galloupe was the only eyewitness to report that Warren had become tearful.

Galloupe named six surgeons who were present: J. Mason Warren, M.D. (1811–1867), Solomon Davis Townsend, M.D., George Hayward, M.D., Samuel Parkman, M.D. (1816–1854), Henry Jacob Bigelow, M.D., and Abel Lawrence Peirson, M.D.²⁷ However, it is clear from published statements and testimony that J. Mason Warren, Hayward, and Peirson did not witness the operation at Massachusetts General Hospital on October 16, 1846.¹⁹ Furthermore, a lack of reliable evidence has meant that Parkman has only been considered as a possible witness.³⁰ Considering the errors in Galloupe's account, his inclusion of Parkman cannot be regarded as confirmation that Parkman witnessed the extraordinary operation on Abbott.

Tappan Eustis Francis, M.D.

Tappan Eustis Francis, M.D. (1823–1909), was a medical student when he witnessed Morton's first public demonstration of ether. Although Francis is not known to have published any recollections of that historic day, some of his remarks at an Ether Day commemoration at Massachusetts General Hospital on October 16, 1906, have been documented.^{28,29} Warren's alleged proclamation was not reported in an extended article on the commemoration, which appeared in the *Boston Evening Transcript* on the same day,²⁸ or in a report published in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*.²⁹

Other Eyewitnesses

The remaining eyewitnesses of the operation on Abbott comprise a small number of identified witnesses, who are not known to have made public statements regarding the operation, and an unknown number of unidentified witnesses. In the former group is Ebenezer Hopkins Frost (1824–1866), the first person to receive ether for a dental extraction in Morton's office. An unknown number of eyewitnesses, comprising medical students, physicians, and ward attendants, have not been identified because they have not made statements that could have placed them at the Massachusetts General Hospital on October 16, 1846.

Newspaper Articles

In 1993, Wolfe noted, incorrectly, that there were no newspaper accounts of Morton's first public demonstration of etherization.³⁰ [Wolfe corrected his error in *Tarnished Idol*,

his biography of Morton.²] It was then pointed out by Wollman³¹ that Viets³² had identified several newspaper accounts of the October 16, 1846, administration of ether, of which the account in the *Christian Watchman*, October 23, 1846, was considered to be from an eyewitness. The anonymous author of the article in the *Christian Watchman* provided brief descriptions of the operations performed under ether on October 16 and 17, 1846.³² The newspaper articles do not contain any quotation attributed to John Collins Warren, M.D.

Horace Wells' "Humbug Affair" in Boston

In January 1845, Horace Wells (1815–1848, dentist, Hartford, Connecticut) failed to convince observers (mainly medical students) in Boston of the anodyne properties of nitrous oxide.³³ Nearly 2 yr later, after Morton's successful demonstrations of ether at Massachusetts General Hospital, Wells wrote to the editor of the Hartford *Courant* that his demonstration of nitrous oxide in Boston was considered a "humbug affair." Wells' letter was published in the Hartford *Courant* on December 9, 1846,³⁴ and reprinted by Archer in 1960.³⁵ The words "humbug affair" were also used in the title of an editorial on Wells' abortive demonstration of nitrous oxide in Boston.³⁶

In 1847, Wells published his only pamphlet on anesthesia.³⁷ In this, he quoted a statement attributed to Jackson: "No; nor Morton either, nor any one else. *It is a humbug*, and it is reckless in Morton to use it as he does."³⁷ Jackson was replying to a question regarding whether he knew that ether could produce insensibility and allow surgery to be performed painlessly.

Thus, the statements made by Wells^{34,35} and Jackson^{11,37} with the word humbug, notwithstanding its popular usage in that era, may have prompted Morton or Rice to devise Warren's alleged "no humbug" proclamation to counter the rival claims of Wells and Jackson.

Other Quotations with the Word Humbug

Three quotations containing the word humbug are presented here to illustrate the popular use of the word.

The best-known "humbug" quotation is from the novel, *A Christmas Carol*, first published by Charles Dickens (1812–1870) in 1843: "Bah!" said Scrooge, "Humbug!"³⁸ Scrooge was replying to his nephew who had just wished him a merry Christmas.

Edmond de Goncourt (1822–1896) and Jules de Goncourt (1830–1870) were French siblings who coauthored their diaries and novels. The Goncourt journals, regarded as one of the masterpieces of 19th-century literature, provide a vivid chronicle of French literature, arts, and society. Since 1903, the Académie Goncourt, founded with a bequest of Edmond de Goncourt, has awarded the Prix Goncourt, the foremost literary prize in French literature. In a diary entry, dated January 7, 1857, the Goncourt brothers used the word *blague* (French for joke or trick), later translated into English

as “humbug.”³⁹ One hundred fifty years later, this commentary by the Goncourt brothers seems just as compelling:

There has never been an age so full of humbug. Humbug everywhere, even in science. For years now the scientists have been promising us every morning a new miracle, a new element, a new metal, guaranteeing to warm us with copper discs immersed in water, to feed us with nothing, to kill us at no expense whatever and on a grand scale, to keep us alive indefinitely, to make iron out of heaven knows what. And all this fantastic, scientific humbugging leads to membership of the Institut, to decorations, to influence, to stipends, to the respect of serious people. In the meantime the cost of living rises, doubles, trebles; there is a shortage of raw materials; even death makes no progress—as we saw at Sebastopol, where men cut each other to ribbons—and the cheapest goods are still the worst goods in the world.³⁹

General William T. (Tecumseh) Sherman (1820–1891), a Union general in America’s Civil War, wrote in a letter to his wife (letter dated June 2, 1863), “Vox populi, vox humbug” (The voice of the people, *i.e.*, public opinion or sentiment, is the voice of humbug).⁴⁰ Sherman is usually remembered for leading a destructive military campaign through Georgia, USA—from Atlanta to the port of Savannah. His “March to the Sea” is considered to be an example of economic and psychological warfare that changed modern warfare.

Conclusion

A review of eyewitness reports of Morton’s October 16, 1846, demonstration of ether at Massachusetts General Hospital failed to identify any contemporaneous report to substantiate Rice’s account of Warren’s alleged proclamation, “Gentlemen! this is no humbug.” Abbott’s appearance of suffering pain during the relatively minor operation on his neck, together with Warren’s initial reservations about the success of the etherization, do not suggest that Warren could have made an emphatic proclamation regarding Morton’s accomplishment. In addition, Edward Warren, M.D., noted the “habitual caution” of his brother.¹³

However, Morton’s failure to utilize the emphatic proclamation in his publications, and Gould’s failure to recall the proclamation when directly questioned about Warren’s remarks after the operation (fig. 3),¹⁹ are considered the foremost indications that Warren may not have made his alleged “no humbug” proclamation. Rice’s biography of Morton is the earliest known record of Warren’s alleged proclamation.¹

Three eyewitnesses, Washington Ayer, M.D.,^{23–25} Robert Thompson Davis, M.D.,²⁶ and Isaac Francis Galloupe, M.D.,²⁷ reported Warren’s alleged proclamation in 1896, 50 yr after it was ostensibly made. A number of errors were identified in their reminiscences. Although Warren’s alleged proclamation was reported by three eyewitnesses, the 50-yr interval and availability of Rice’s biography of Morton confound the issue. Thus, the accounts by Ayer,^{23–25} Davis,²⁶ and Galloupe²⁷ cannot be considered as strong supporting evidence for Warren’s alleged proclamation.

There are three possible explanations for Warren’s alleged proclamation: Warren made the proclamation and it was correctly reported by Rice, that Rice was reporting an incorrect statement provided to him by Morton, or Rice was using artistic license in describing the historic first operation under ether at Massachusetts General Hospital.

Although Warren’s alleged proclamation appears plausible and is generally assumed to have been made, it could not be corroborated by contemporaneous eyewitness reports. It is possible that Morton and/or his biographer, Rice, knowing that Warren was deceased, took artistic license in attributing the “no humbug” proclamation to Warren. The overall impression from eyewitness statements and publications relating to the October 16, 1846, demonstration of etherization is that Warren’s alleged proclamation may not have been made, that is, it may be fictitious.

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Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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