Written in Granite

A History of the Ether Monument and Its Significance for Anesthesiology

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ALTHOUGH Boston is well known for its place in the history of anesthesiology, many people do not know that a monument in the city exists to commemorate the first public demonstration of ether anesthesia (fig. 1). In fact, in decades past, every Bostonian knew of the monument erected in 1868 to honor the great discovery.1 But today, the structure is often overlooked. There are even some in the field of anesthesia who are unaware of its existence. In the historic Boston Public Garden, the Ether Monument sits with its marble and granite images and inscriptions addressing universal themes: the suffering caused by war, the desire on behalf of loved ones to relieve pain, and the triumph of medical science. It is a declaration of the advancements ether brought to society.

Perhaps no other monument related to the origins of American medicine is so rich in history, controversies, and allegories. Unfortunately, both human memory and "what is written in stone have no necessary permanence unless successor generations can be successfully socialized to view [them] as less evanescent than a flag waving in ever-changing winds."2 The purpose of this article is to present a historical overview of the origins and significance of the Ether Monument.§

Why Build a Monument to Ether?

Imagine the sense of awe and pride when news of William Thomas Green Morton’s (1819–1868) public demonstration spread throughout the world in 1846. This event heralded the end of “a time when surgery was torture, and a serious operation to be dreaded only less than death itself.”3 For centuries, pain prohibited surgical advances and consumed patients. Ether was praised for its ability to monere, or “to mon-
well-being of humanity. In February 1866, John Quincy Adams Ward accepted this commission and signed the contract with Thomas Lee. The Albany Institute of History and Art (Albany, New York) maintains the collection of original letters and documents pertaining to the commissioning and design of the Ether Monument.

With plans to build the monument in the works, Thomas Lee wrote a letter to the Mayor of Boston at the time, Frederick W. Lincoln, Jr. (1817–1898). He described the proposed monument “as an expression of gratitude for the relief of human suffering occasioned by the discovery of . . . ether.”13 Boston notables appreciated the ramifications of the discovery and quickly approved the plans to commemorate the event in the form of a public statue. Bostonian sentiment was expressed on March 19, 1866, when Mayor Lincoln wrote that the monument serves as a “commemoration of the greatest medical discovery of our time—the application of the properties of ether to the alleviation of pain and human suffering. . . . The benefits of ether are for all mankind; it is used throughout the world, wherever scientific medical and surgical treatment is practiced; and while its early history might seem to justify a certain degree of local pride, yet the monument in itself will be an expression of gratitude and thanksgiving.”13 The monument was not only a gift for the people of Boston, but is rather a gift to all of those who would benefit from the discovery’s lasting effects.

Not only were Bostonians proud of the anesthetic, but they understood the far-reaching implications of the demonstration, which proved that the relief of suffering was possible. In his speech at the dedication of the Ether Monument, Dr. Bigelow did not overvalue the importance of ether when he said, “. . . and in grateful and unhesitating recognition of [ether] the entire civilized world simultaneously rose up to hail it with acclamatory welcome.”15

A Gift of Thomas Lee

It was almost 20 years after Morton’s first public demonstration of ether when Thomas Lee, Esq. (1779–1867), commissioned Boston architect Henry Van Brunt (1837–1903), of the distinguished Ware and Van Brunt firm, to build the Ether Monument. Thomas Lee was a private citizen who valued public art. Although Mr. Lee was a friend of Dr. Bigelow and donated funds to Harvard Medical School, there is no indication of any personal experience that might have motivated his commission of the Ether Monument. After much of the basic design was completed, Henry Van Brunt then asked John Quincy Adams Ward (1830–1910), who has been called the “Dean of American Sculpture,” to sculpt the crowning figure of the monument with “some symbol of the relief of suffering, using perhaps the Good Samaritan as the most recognizable type.”12 The monument was intended to symbolize the contribution of ether to the well-being of humanity. In February 1866, John Quincy Adams Ward also designed the four mar-

The Allegories of the Monument

Because the Ether Monument stands to recognize the impact of anesthesia on society, the details of the monument also serve as symbols of the medical profession and the intended use of ether. At the base of the monument, a series of lion-faced fountains feed into a large basin. Mayor Lincoln likened this basin to the pool of Bethesda, a Biblical place where the sick waited to be cured of their diseases. Similarly, at the crest of the monument stands the figure of the Good Samaritan, from the Gospel of Luke (10:25–37), which encompasses the notion of helping a neighbor in need or bestowing mercy on others (fig. 2). The artists left no written interpretations of the allegories used in the Ether Monument, except for Henry Van Brunt’s suggestion to John Quincy Adams Ward to use the Good Samaritan motif. John Quincy Adams Ward also designed the four mar-

Fig. 1. The Ether Monument in the Boston Public Garden.
ble reliefs that were set on each side of the monument. The reliefs facing north, south, east, and west depict a wounded soldier in a field hospital (fig. 3), a patient undergoing an operation in a civic hospital (fig. 4), the Angel of Mercy descending to relieve suffering humanity (fig. 5), and the Triumph of Science (fig. 6), respectively.

At the time the Ether Monument was commissioned, memories of the Civil War were still fresh. Therefore, the reliefs facing the north and south address the significance of general anesthesia during wartime. In fact, the first anesthetic in a military conflict was administered 6 months after Morton’s demonstration. In the spring of 1847, Edward H. Barton, M.D. (1790–1859), gave anesthetic relief to an injured teamster whose legs had been shattered by the accidental firing of a loaded musket during the Mexican-American War. At that time, however, ether was not universally used because of accounts of exsanguination and poisoning and a belief that ether in the war setting was “universally injurious.” It took the American Civil War, beginning in 1861, to propel the widespread use of anesthesia. Fifteen years after Morton’s demonstration, he was authorized by the Surgeon General and General Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885) to deliver anesthesia in the battlefield. In fact, Morton is considered to be among the first military anesthetists, because he dedicated himself exclusively to administering anesthetics during the war. Contrary to the concerns regarding ether in the Mexican-American War, the number of anesthetic mishaps during the Civil War, in which both ether and chloroform were used, was remarkably low. Despite the flammability of ether and its danger on the battlefield, only 43 deaths were reported out of 9,000 cases where the specific anesthetic agent used was known. Most of these cases were attributed to the use of chloroform. Civic hospitals were often also filled with wounded soldiers on whom anesthesia was used in the surgical theater, which is depicted in the

Fig. 2. The Good Samaritan sculpture crowns the Ether Monument.

Fig. 3. Wounded soldier in a field hospital.

Fig. 4. A patient undergoing an operation in a civic hospital.

Fig. 5. The Angel of Mercy descending to relieve suffering.
south-facing relief of the monument. Considering how much pain and suffering were alleviated during war, it would be unthinkable to return to the period of preanesthetic surgery when “the band was ordered to play, so that the lamentations could not be heard.”

More abstractly, the allegorical base-relief on the east-facing side of the monument depicts the Angel of Mercy descending upon humanity to relieve suffering. The inscription below reads “neither shall there be any more pain” from Revelation 21:4. Another allegory of the benefit to society is shown on the west-facing side of the monument, which portrays a female figure in classical robes to personify the Triumph of Science.

Ironically, although religious symbolism is used to memorialize the demonstration of ether, at the time when ether was introduced, there was initial religious and moral uncertainty regarding the relief of physical pain. Some people believed that eliminating pain was the work of Satan because historically pain was considered a manifestation of salvation and a means of divine punishment for sin. In the 1840s, the opponents to anesthesia greatly anticipated that without pain, the fear of God would vanish and humankind would sin. Even William Henry Atkinson (1815–1891), the American Dental Association’s first president, strongly resisted the use of ether when he remarked, “I think anesthesia is of the devil, and I cannot give my sanction to any satanic influence which deprives a man of the capacity to recognize the law! I wish were there no such thing as anesthesia! I do not think that men should be prevented in their work of Satan because historically pain was considered a manifestation of salvation and a means of divine punishment for sin. In the 1840s, the opponents to anesthesia greatly anticipated that without pain, the fear of God would vanish and humankind would sin. Even William Henry Atkinson (1815–1891), the American Dental Association’s first president, strongly resisted the use of ether when he remarked, “I think anesthesia is of the devil, and I cannot give my sanction to any satanic influence which deprives a man of the capacity to recognize the law! I wish were there no such thing as anesthesia! I do not think that men should be prevented in their work of creating Eve. It must be noted that although early and widespread religious opposition to anesthesia is frequently mentioned, there is scant evidence supporting this claim. The religious antagonism may have been exaggerated and has been referred to a “myth of historiography.” In any event, the bulk of controversy came to an end in 1853 when John Snow, M.D., L.R.C.P. (1813–1858), administered chloroform to Queen Victoria (1819–1901) during the birth of Prince Leopold (1853–1894). Afterward, it was considered entirely proper and socially acceptable to treat obstetric pain. By the time the Ether Monument was erected, the use of anesthesia was no longer considered religiously abominable, and inscribed on the western face of the monument is a quote from Isaiah 28:29 that reads, “This also cometh forth from the Lord of Hosts.”

The Current State of Affairs

Although the monument itself and its inherent philosophies and ideals conjured up some controversy, it was accepted by the City of Boston with pride. On the day of its dedication, Mayor Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, M.D. (1810–1874), promised that the Ether Monument “shall be watched with care and protected from injury.” He expressed his hope that “this elegant structure long remain unimpaired by time—a memorial of the greatest boon ever vouchsafed to suffering humanity, and a monument of the gratitude of one of Boston’s most worthy citizens.” Despite these early sentiments, the monument has deteriorated over the years. This meaningful piece of public art has not been wholly maintained because of insufficient funding.

During the late 1970s, the late Leroy Vandam, M.D. (Professor Emeritus, Department of Anesthesia, Harvard Medical School; 1914–2004), and others recognized the monument’s misfortunes and led a restoration effort with donations from private individuals and professional anesthesiology organizations. Enough money was raised to restore the fountain’s broken water line. At that time, Henry Lee, a descendent of Thomas Lee, stated that once more the “monument looked bright” (written communication, Henry Lee, President, Friends of the Public Garden, Boston, Massachusetts, January 2006). Nevertheless, it was only a matter of time before the monument again deteriorated without upkeep. Soon, the water line broke, and the fountain needed a new pump. The “Bethesda pool” became a refuge for litter and stagnant rainwater. Therefore, in the mid-1990s, a new generation of anesthesiologists initiated another fund-raising campaign for the monument’s restoration, which will be contributed to current restoration efforts. Recently, the City of Boston has committed to the monument’s complete restoration, including reengineering the fountains, reconditioning the surface, and adding illumin-
tion for night viewing. There is renewed enthusiasm since the municipal government has allocated funds for the restoration project, which is scheduled to be completed in the fall of 2006.

However, the Ether Monument must be routinely maintained to preserve its majesty for future generations. It has become increasingly clear that past restoration efforts, although commendable, have only been palliative treatments to periodic crises. Since its erection, the Ether Monument has endured a vicious cycle of neglect and periodic crises before money is raised for restoration. The Heritage Preservation of Washington, D.C., a national historical conservation organization, states that this kind of intermittent care results in the further loss of original material and necessitates more expensive stone treatments. The Parks Department of the City of Boston has allocated approximately $250,000 for the renovation of the Ether Monument and will reengineer the fountains, recondition the granite and marble surfaces, and add lighting for night viewing. The Solomon Fund, the Massachusetts Society of Anesthesiologists, the Friends of the Public Garden, Anesthesia Associates of Massachusetts, and private individuals have also committed to continuing the endeavor to preserve the Ether Monument by dedicating significant resources. An endowment has been created to ensure the continuous maintenance of this symbol for anesthesiology. The Ether Monument commemorates a universal appreciation for the relief of suffering with the introduction of anesthesia, now common practice, but it also symbolizes community and altruism, enduring ideals that will hopefully be long preserved in granite.

References


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