



The New York Herald's Very First Report on Dr. Horace Wells's Arrest and Suicide—An Original Article Found in New York City Public Library☆☆☆



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ABSTRACT

The accounts of Dr. Wells' personal life, particularly those of his tempestuous final days, have remained somewhat speculative. On January 24, 1848, a troubled Dr. Wells raced outside of his home and practice on Chambers Street and threw sulfuric acid (vitriol) on two alleged "loose" Broadway girls. We were able to find an original copy of an article published by the *New York Herald* in the New York City Public Library describing the events of Well's final days.

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Dr. Horace Wells was an American dentist who was among the first to use nitrous oxide as a form of analgesia in the field of dental medicine. After recognizing the analgesic properties of nitrous oxide early in his career, Dr. Wells used the agent in numerous patients in his dental clinic in Hartford, CT.¹ Although Dr. Wells' professional achievements are well documented, his achievements were accompanied by equally notable personal controversies.

It could be argued that Dr. Well's unfortunate descent started with his failed demonstration of nitrous oxide as an analgesic for dental procedures in Boston, MA, in January 1845. During his demonstration to gathered medical students, Dr. Wells hoped to prove that nitrous oxide was effective by successfully performing a routine tooth extraction devoid of pain.² To the misfortune of Wells, however, the patient cried of pain during the extraction. This was met with negative sentiments from audience members who shouted insults at him. After his failed demonstration, Dr. Wells would temporarily abandon the field

of dentistry to work as a traveling salesman and thereafter as an art dealer in Paris.^{3,4}

Less than a year later, Dr. Wells returned to the United States to resume his dental career, opening a new practice in Manhattan, NY. His move in December 1847 was abrupt and unexpected. It was at this same time, however, that Dr. Wells began to face personal challenges. Having left his wife and son, Wells developed depression and began abusing chloroform.⁴ Research into Dr. Wells' life reveals that his misfortunes may have been in part to his suffering from major depressive disorder characterized by prolonged periods of severely low mood. Dr. Wells' abuse of chloroform may have exacerbated his condition and caused periods of mania leading him to the unfortunate events of his last days.¹

It all started on January 24, 1848, when a troubled Wells raced outside of his home and practice on 120 Chambers Street⁵ and threw sulfuric acid (vitriol) on a woman. Wells was apparently under the influence of chloroform at that time. He was arrested and brought to the local police precinct where he attempted to lie to officers, citing his name as "Jonathan Smith." Wells was then taken to the New York's Tombs prison, in Lower Manhattan. There, he became lucid and, after realizing the act he committed, requested that a police officer take him to his home to pick up a shaving kit. After returning to prison, Wells would use a razor blade to slit an artery in his leg, inhaling chloroform once again to minimize the pain.⁴

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MORNING, JANUARY 25, 1848.

City Intelligence.

SUICIDE OF DR. HORACE WELLS.—Quite an excitement was created yesterday morning at the Tombs, in consequence of the self-destruction of Dr. Horace Wells, dentist, No. 120 Chambers street. It appears that Mr. Wells was detected on Friday night last, in the act of throwing vitriol upon the dress of a young woman, in Broadway, near the Astor House, when he was arrested and conveyed to the 3d Ward station house, and the next day conducted to the Police-office; and, after the testimony in his case had been taken before Justice Osborne, he was committed to prison. No suspicion was entertained by the keepers, of any intention of self-destruction, as Mr. Wells appeared to be rather cheerful on Sunday, conversing freely, and, while out of his cell on the corridor, appeared to pay particular attention to the sermon delivered by the Reverend gentleman who preaches every Sunday to the unfortunate and abandoned creatures confined in the Tombs. The principal subject of the discourse related to the ill effects arising from the early and constant association with disreputable females, and seemed to throw Mr. Wells into a deep meditation, and when it was concluded, he retired to his cell and requested the keeper to bring him some letter paper and a candle, which was done. Between six and seven o'clock that evening, the last time that Mr. Wells was seen alive, the keeper locked the cell door, and he was then occupied in writing. On the following morning, (Monday,) Mr. Jackson, one of the deputy keepers, opened the cell door, between 8 and 9 o'clock, and was astonished to find Mr. Wells, in a sitting position on his bunk, with his head resting in one corner of the cell, his right leg hanging over the side of the bunk, and the left lying straight on the straw mattress. Between his legs, on the mattress, lay an empty vial, labelled "Pure Chloroform," a razor, and a penknife. The razor was fixed with a slip of wood running from the back of the blade along the handle, made fast with a piece of wire, and some threads drawn from the sacking of his mattress. The left leg of this unfortunate man exhibited a most horrible sight, from a desperate gash, evidently inflicted by the razor. This wound was made about the center of the thigh, severing the femoral artery; penetrating nearly to the bone, and some six inches in length, from the effects of which he bled to death. On his mouth he had placed a silk handkerchief, bunched up, and another passing on the outside and tied on the top of his head, on which he had placed his hat. This handkerchief was supposed to have contained the chloroform, which he inhaled just before he inflicted the fatal wound. In one corner of the cell laid his gold watch, together with the annexed letters, and a small piece of candle, about three inches in length, which he had evidently extinguished before perpetrating the awful deed.

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Fig. 2. Enlarged part of the page, describing Dr. Wells' arrest and suicide.

Dr. Wells deeply regretted his acts. Prior to his suicide, Dr. Wells penned letters, which illustrated his sorrow and depicted a man suffering from a deep depression. He wrote to his wife, "I feel that I am fast becoming a deranged man, or I would desist from this act. I cannot live and keep my reason, and on this account God will forgive the deed. I can say no more." The words portray a man in a deep despair. He also wrote proclaiming, "Because I have done this one act in a moment of delirium, I must bear the brunt of the whole." His words demonstrate that his abuse of chloroform may have worsened his condition. In another letter, he writes, "God knows I am not one. O, my dear mother, brother, and sister, what can I say to you? My anguish will only allow me to bid you farewell. I die tonight, believing that God, who knoweth all hearts, will forgive the dreadful act. I shall spend my remaining time in prayer." From these words, it does seem that Dr. Wells felt remorse and felt haunted by his actions. Lastly, in his final hours, Dr. Wells writes, "My brain is on fire before 12 o'clock this night I am to pay the debt of nature. Yes, if I was to go free tomorrow, I could not live and be called a villain. God knows I am not one."^{6,7}

The *New York Herald* was previously identified as the first to publicly report Dr. Well's misfortunate events and his suicide.³ The original copy, to the best of our knowledge and research, was never presented. We were able to find and would like to present an original copy of an article accounting the events of Well's final days published by the *New York Herald* found in the New York City Public Library (Figure 1). James Gordon Bennett, Sr, founded the paper, and the first issue was published on May 6, 1835. The paper was based in New York City and was published from 1835 to 1924. The *New York Herald* had a very large circulation and was widely distributed, making it one of the most profitable daily newspapers in the United States.⁸

The *New York Herald* reported: "Quite an excitement was created yesterday morning at the Tombs, in consequence of the self-destruction of Dr. Horace Wells, dentist, No. 120 Chambers Street. It appears that Mr. Wells was detected on Friday night last, in the act of throwing vitriol upon the dress of a young woman, in Broadway, near Astor House, when he was arrested and conveyed to the 3rd Ward Station house" (Figure 2). The paper also reported on his suicide, saying:

“Between six and seven o'clock that evening, the last time that Mr. Wells was seen alive, the keeper locked the cell door and he was then occupied in writing. On the following morning, Monday, Mr. Jackson, one of the deputy keepers, opened the cell door, between 8 and 9 o'clock, and was astonished to find Mr. Wells in a sitting position on his bunk. . . . The left leg of this unfortunate man exhibited a most horrible sight, from desperate gash, evidently inflicted by the razor.”⁹

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