

# NYSDA

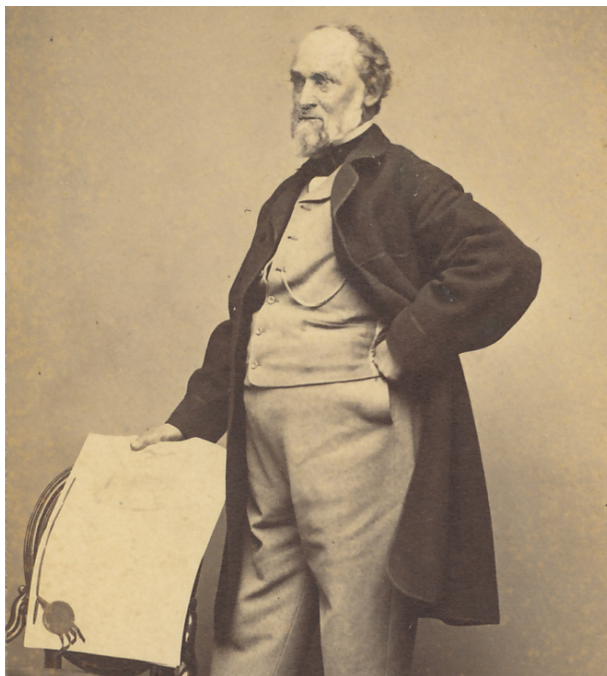
AN OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE NEW YORK STATE DENTAL ASSOCIATION

## news

### Dr. Amos Westcott Inventor, Businessman, Politician and First President of State Dental Association

A renowned and tragic figure, he was brought down by one careless miscalculation.

*William James Maloney, D.D.S.*



Dentistry owes debt of gratitude to Amos Westcott, a complex man with a mixed legacy.

The years after the Civil War were a time of transition. The Industrial Revolution was changing American society on an almost daily basis. It was an era during which outstanding men and women stepped up to become the nation's leaders, inventors and visionaries. There was a great impetus towards change and improvement as these individuals galvanized Americans from all walks of life and shepherded them forward into a new age of progress.

Progress and innovation could be seen in many forms in dentistry as the first dental schools were founded, scientific journals were published and dentistry was organized into an independent and highly esteemed profession. It was certainly appropriate that during a period of national healing that dentistry would assume its rightful place in the pantheon of the healing arts.

On June 13, 1918, at 11 a.m., the 50th annual meeting of the Dental Society of the State of New York was called to order at the Casino in Saratoga Springs by President Amos Rich. The Golden Jubilee was an occasion to look back and to reflect on dentistry's many accomplishments in New York State over the past half century. Dr. Rich, of Saratoga Springs, began his annual address to the gathering by acknowledging the contributions of the early pioneers of dentistry in New York. He continued his presidential address by offering the highest praise for the Dental Society's first president, Amos Westcott of Syracuse, who, he said, must have been "selected by the gods of destiny."<sup>1</sup>



act by the State Legislature to incorporate a state dental society in New York. Their efforts were successful with enactment of a law creating the society on April 7, 1878.

The first session of this new dental society was held on the last Tuesday of June in 1868. Amos Westcott was elected president. W.B. Hurd was elected vice-president; L.W. Rogers, secretary; and B.T. Whitney, treasurer.<sup>2</sup>

Amos Westcott was born in Newport, Herkimer County, on April 28, 1815. He was the youngest of seven boys and grew up on a farm. Throughout his childhood, Westcott exhibited a desire to further the education his parents could afford to provide him. He greatly enjoyed studying mathematics and astronomy and started collecting rare specimens of minerals. He continued this hobby throughout his life and amassed a very impressive collection.

Westcott's interests in botany and mineralogy brought him to Troy, NY, where he entered Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He graduated from RPI with the degree of Bachelor of Natural Science in 1834 and as a civil engineer in 1835.<sup>3</sup>

Westcott never practiced civil engineering. Rather, he became assistant principal at Pompey Academy and lectured to the students on chemistry from 1836 to 1838. During this time, he developed an interest in medicine. He attended lectures at the Medical College at Geneva, NY, and then at Albany Medical College. There he studied under the tutelage of Dr. Aden S. March. He graduated from the medical college in the spring of 1840. The following year, Westcott began practicing medicine and dentistry in Syracuse. His

#### FROM THE BEGINNING

A committee had been formed in late 1867 to procure an

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## Beware of Unscrupulous Marketers Peddling Unnecessary Courses

NYSDA members are warned to be alert to misleading mailings regarding dental HIPAA and OSHA compliance training. The only purpose of this mailing is to sell unnecessary courses under the pretense of heavy fines for failure to comply.

There is no special training required by either federal OSHA or HIPAA regulations. The current mailing is from a company called "Medical Compliance" in Washington, DC. The official-looking notice warns: "This notice is a reminder that HIPAA and OSHA training is due May 15, 2018," and "failure to comply with these annual regulations may result in fines up to \$75,000 per violation." Neither the training requirements nor the May 15 deadline exists.

#### WHAT ACTUALLY IS REQUIRED?

OSHA mandates offices conduct annual training for employees during each calendar year. This is a requirement that every office review its OSHA policies and protocols with staff annually, document that such training occurred and provide the names of staff trained. All new employees must

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interest in dentistry soon caused him to abandon the practice of medicine in order to devote all of his energies to the nascent profession of dentistry.

Dr. Westcott joined the faculty of the Baltimore College of Dental Surgery in 1846. Three years earlier, the college had awarded him an honorary degree. From 1846 to 1849, Westcott served as the chairman and professor of operative and prosthetic dentistry. He returned to Syracuse to found the New York College of Dental Surgery in 1852, on 6 Salinas Street. Here, Westcott served as dean and professor of theory and practice of dental surgery and dental technology. The school ceased operations only four years later, when it was destroyed by fire. Later, the school's charter was transferred to New York City and, in 1892, became incorporated into the New York College of Dental and Oral Surgery.<sup>4</sup>

### A MAN OF MANY TALENTS

Westcott made vital contributions to many dental organizations. He was a member of the Fifth District Dental Society of New York, the Onondaga Medical Society and the Onondaga Historical Association. He was an associate editor of the *American Journal of Dental Science*, with Dr. Chapin Harris, from 1844 to 1850.<sup>5</sup>

Westcott ran successfully for mayor of the city of Syracuse as a Republican in 1860, the same year another Republican, Abraham Lincoln, was elected president of the United States. In February of 1861, President-elect Lincoln was traveling by train from Springfield, IL, to the nation's capital for his inauguration as this country's 16th president. Mayor Westcott energetically prepared for Lincoln's momentous visit to Syracuse. He had a large speaker's platform, regaled with patriotic bunting and flags, constructed in anticipation of hearing a few sage words from Lincoln. He invited the people of Syracuse to come and see their next president, and they gathered with much anticipation as the train pulled slowly into the station. The tall, distinctive figure of Lincoln appeared at the back of the train. Lincoln admired Mayor Westcott's fine decorations but said he had neither the time nor the energy to make a speech.<sup>6</sup> The train then departed Syracuse carrying Lincoln to Washington and the rigors and horrors of the Civil War. Four years later, on April 26, 1865, 30,000 Syracusans gathered at the city's Vanderbilt Station as the slain president's funeral train stopped for approximately 10 minutes while en route back to Springfield.<sup>7</sup>

Among Dr. Westcott's many contributions to dentistry were significant innovations in orthodontics. In the 1840s, he placed chin cups on patients with Class III malocclusions. In 1859, he documented his use of a telescopic bar in the maxilla to correct a crossbite.<sup>8</sup> Dr. Westcott also invented a finger drill in 1834, one of the first drills in North America that could achieve a speed of 80 rpm. He designed many early dental instruments and was among the first dentists to use adhesive gold foil.<sup>8</sup> His talents and achievements were recognized with his appointment as editor of the *Journal of Dental Science*.

Dr. Westcott's prodigious professional contributions to the dental literature garnered him much national and international acclaim. Among his publications were "Amalgam Fillings," "Dissertation on Dental Caries," "Arsenic for Destroying Nerves," "Transplantation of Teeth," "Sulphuric Ether," "Teeth Destroyed by Saleratus," "Forceps," "Extraction Key," "Gold Foil," "Operative Dentistry," "Irregularity of the Teeth" and "Exposed Nerves."

Dr. Westcott was, at first, vehemently opposed to the use of amalgam in dentistry. In 1844, he wrote an



Stone man thought to be "America's Greatest Hoax" lies in state at Farmer's Museum in Cooperstown.

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article, published in the *American Journal of Dental Science*, in which he listed as his evidence against the use of amalgam that "salination" was a common complaint, that "oxyd" formed on the outer surface of amalgam restorations and that amalgam caused destruction of "gold fillings and plate." Westcott believed that the mercury in amalgam precluded its use in all cases.<sup>9,10</sup> He later accepted amalgam as a safe and effective dental material.

### A GIANT MISTAKE

Amos Westcott did not limit his penchant for inventing to dentistry. He was a businessman, usually with very successful outcomes, except for one business venture that would go down in history as among the greatest hoaxes ever and lead in part to his ultimate demise.

David Hannum was a wealthy and successful entrepreneur who lived in the village of Homer. He was one of the largest landowners in Cortland County. Westcott's and Hannum's wives were sisters. As a result of this relationship, the two became very close friends and business partners. Hannum, working with a John Rankin, had developed a modified butter churn. He urged his talented friend and brother-in-law, Amos Westcott, to refine his invention. Westcott's

improvements were so effective that the three men sold the patent rights to the butter churn and earned over \$20,000.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Westcott's relationship with Hannum eventually led him to become involved in a controversial business adventure, which in retrospect was very uncharacteristic of the otherwise careful and thoughtful professional. This was a period in which pseudo-science, which belied popular scientific literacy, was popular. It was the golden age of hoaxes, when new scientific theories challenged long-held religious beliefs and when there were plenty of unscrupulous people willing to take advantage of the gullible.

George Hull was a businessman from Binghamton who was always looking for a way to make quick and easy money. He was also an atheist. During a business trip to Iowa, he argued with a revivalist minister about a biblical passage in Genesis that states, "There were giants in the earth in those days, and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bore children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown."<sup>12</sup>

Hull soon envisioned a money-making scheme that would play on the scientific and religious beliefs of the public.<sup>13</sup> He hired a stonemason from Chicago, Edward Burghardt, to carve a statue of a giant petrified man out of a block of Iowa gypsum. In November 1868, Hull had the statue transported to the farm of his cousin William Newell. Newell planted the statue on his Cardiff farm. A year later, in 1869, he hired two laborers, Gideon Emmons and Henry Nichols, to dig a well. Newell directed the men to dig in the spot where he had planted the 10-foot statue. After digging only three feet, they unearthed a poorly executed statue, which would become the center of one of the biggest hoaxes in American history.<sup>13</sup>

Word soon spread of the petrified man found buried in the village just south of Syracuse. There were many different opinions regarding the veracity

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of the find. One theory was that it was a statue created in the early 17th century by a Jesuit priest. State geologist James Hall said it was an ancient statue, while others truly believed it was an ancient man from the race mentioned in the Old Testament. Thousands of people flocked to Newell's farm to view this purported archaeological phenomenon. Hull and Newell were making a fortune from ticket sales.

Hull soon decided to sell his interest to a consortium of five wealthy Syracuse businessmen, headed by David Hannum. Dr. Westcott was one of these investors. A spectacle ensued as P.T. Barnum offered to purchase what by then was known as the Cardiff Giant. When Hannum and Westcott's group spurned Barnum's offer, Barnum decided to make his own giant. A lawsuit followed, which eventually led to Hull confessing to the

press on December 10, 1869, that the Cardiff Giant was a hoax. The petrified man can be found today in the Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown, where it has been since the museum purchased it in 1947.<sup>13</sup>

#### A GREAT MAN FELLED

During his life, Westcott had been known as a man of strong will and countenance, constantly writing and experimenting in an effort to bring pride and grand stature to his beloved profession of dentistry. However, by 1871, his health began to decline. It was thought that a trip to Europe could be a cure for his poor health. But the trip did not restore his well-being, and Westcott returned home absent of hope. His once sprightly frame and radiant smile were replaced with a bent posture and a face given to expressions of anxiety and pain.

The citizens of Syracuse and the international dental community were saddened to awake on a quiet Sunday morning, July 6, 1874, to the shocking news that Dr. Westcott had taken his own life by shooting himself through the neck.

Dr. Amos Westcott was viewed by his contemporaries as a man who gave freely of his knowledge to his colleagues and a man of logic with an aggressive nature and immense energy. Today, we remember him with gratitude for laying the solid foundation for dentistry in New York State. ☼

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