

City of Medicine:
Paris as the Medical Mecca of the 1800s

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FINA-159-F1
8 December 2017

Innovation has changed the views and thought processes of every person on this globe, whether it be acceptance of the ever-changing reality of the world or denial of this truth. This is most true in the fields of science, where medicine acts as the mercurial mascot with new discoveries being published daily. Probably one of the most prolific moments in medical history took place in nineteenth-century Paris, as American students “went to Paris for advanced medical training and came home ardent disciples of Pierre-Charles-Alexandre Louis, leader of the French school that derived its eminence from expert auscultation and careful correlation of bedside and autopsy findings” (Felts 539). Three students of the same master—Jonathan Mason Warren, Henry Ingersoll Bowditch, and Oliver Wendell Holmes—made notable impacts on the medical world that are still seen today. Though they all specialized differently, as did the dozens of other medical immigrants of the time, they all shared a very similar experience. The “new life that now dawned upon [them] was like a kaleidoscope compared with the dull surroundings of [their] native town[s]” (Arnold 74). The lives of these men exemplified the American experience in Paris at this period, and their time in Paris has demonstrated the importance of the city, this importance being amplified by the impact and weight their names carry as three titans of American medicine.

Medicine in the United States, however, was primitive at best, “[y]et these years saw American medicine pass from a botanico-humoral practice to one firmly grounded in the emerging disciplines of pathology, physiology, and physical examination” (Felts 540). To understand why these Americans went to Paris, the social aspects of the period must be briefly mentioned. France, at this time, was much more liberal with the sciences, which were held back by social barriers in America. The medical school in Paris, *École de Médecine*, was leaps and bounds above the “schools” in America, where institutions were scarce and understaffed. Most

American physicians learned through the process of apprenticeship, much like a blacksmith or other trade worker. Here is the fundamental flaw in this: Their “masters” were poorly trained themselves, so no lucrative skill or intellect was being passed down, only basic and marginal knowledge (McCullough). The great French instructor Pierre-Charles-Alexandre Louis was “as ill at ease as a teacher and awkward when lecturing. Yet he had a power” (McCullough 123). If Americans were studying medicine in Paris, they would encounter this man on nearly a daily basis. He was the most influential professor of the time, preaching the need for evidence and facts to treat patients, obtained by “exact observation” and taking the patient’s words into account. His use of the stethoscope laid the groundwork for examinations today, but as Holmes would comment, it was “almost a novelty in those days. The microscope was never mentioned by any clinical instructor I listened to while a medical student” (qtd. in McCullough 124). His four star pupils were Bowditch, Warren, Holmes, and James Jackson Jr., who would die of typhoid fever in Boston and leave the rest truly heartbroken. Yet the remaining three would become some of the most well-trained medical professionals in America, passing on Louis’s teachings to their own students, pioneering American medicine, and following in their master’s footsteps.

Following these footsteps most closely was Ingersoll Bowditch, concentrating on diseases of the chest, the same specialization as Louis. As George Weisz mentions in his article, “The Emergence of Medical Specialization in the Nineteenth Century,” “specialized private instruction was part of the experience of American doctors studying in Paris” (541). All three men learned to speak and write French at an alarming rate, Bowditch especially so, taking on the task of translating Louis’s *Anatomical, Pathological and Therapeutic Researches upon the Disease Known under the Name of Gastro-Enterite* (Felts 542). Bowditch made many

contributions to ameliorate the American medical school system and published multiple works on techniques and concepts he had learned in France. These would go toward reform efforts, which he advocated both in the medical and political fields. Eventually he would have a son who would also go to Paris to study medicine. The words of wisdom he offered his son summarize perfectly the experience in Paris: “I want you to see all you can of art and music” (qtd. in McCullough 136). He could not go a day without remembering the sights and grand views of the Louvre, the Paris Opera, and so many other great experiences. The education was only half of what Bowditch valued most about the city; the remainder was the experience that Paris provided, teaching him about the human condition and empathy (McCullough 135).

The same experience was had by his two friends, Holmes and Warren. The three men learned and lived together, remaining friends for the rest of their lives—a brotherhood bonded by their scientific father, Louis. Holmes, too, would reminisce of his time in Paris and what he loved most about the city: art, music, poetry, and conversation. He had issues coping with human suffering, and as a result, focused on teaching rather than his own practice. The students he taught liked him well, making him the spiritual successor to Louis in that regard. He published many papers as well as poetry, which he fell in love with in Paris. His most notable attempt to reform the American education system was admitting one woman and three African American men to Harvard Medical School, resulting in a scandalous trial and the rejection of all four students. He was able, however, to transfer the one man to Dartmouth, making a small impact in breaking down the racial barrier (Felts 543). This sentiment was likely developed in Paris, as he walked the tolerant streets filled with unfettered ideas.

The streets these brothers in science walked were best documented by Jonathan Mason Warren, who wrote frequent letters and kept the most detailed journals. His memoirs recount his

time in the Latin Quarter, where most students and even professors lived in proximity to the schools. He recalls, “It was a centre of human oddities and unbridled indulgence of every taste and whim; a motley gathering of every human vagary, stimulated by the contagion of kindred spirits...” (qtd. in Arnold 76). He described the neighborhood and streets as filthy, the buildings resembling jails more so than homes. His biggest obstacle, and that of his companions, was to learn the French language. Before becoming literate in French, however, he coped with his studies because no knowledge of the language was needed to watch surgeries. He would later specialize in surgery, take on a large and successful practice, and make many surgical firsts, including performing the first pediatric operation done under ether, a revolutionary new anesthetic (McCullough 133). He was not alone in his struggle with the language barrier, for most of his fellow students, of which there were more than 8,000 over the course the nineteenth century, were in the same situation. This was a key part in the American experience at the time. The Americans grew closer together with a strong sense of community as they all learned together. His journals document the busy life they all shared. Despite the stress of medical learning, Warren noted, “In Paris...Sunday is considered a holiday, and every person enjoys himself as he best can” (qtd. in Arnold 126). The leisure activities were hard to afford, many of the students finding themselves with only two francs to spare each day. Yet he did not dwell upon the hardships in his memories of the city. He would return to Paris after great bouts of depression and leave feeling well refreshed and able to pursue the next goal, as did Holmes and Bowditch.

The three men lived a life mirrored by many over the decades—struggling in pursuit of their passions in Paris. Their lives exemplified the American experience in the city, driven by perseverance, ambition, and hardship. Juxtaposed to this were the joys and memories they made

in the city. Without the environment the city nurtured, medicine would not be where it is today. The bonds they made with each other and their professors were some of the strongest imaginable as their community progressed together. The methods and advances would have developed at a much slower pace, and these men would never have achieved what they had. Luckily, Paris was there. All of them could agree on this fact. As David McCullough writes in *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris*, “the life they had known as ‘medicals’ in Paris had been what James Jackson Jr. ... said then—the happiest life” (136).

Works Cited

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