NATHAN COOLEY KEEP: The Nation's First Dental School Dean, and a Pioneer of Obstetric Anesthesia

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Nathan Cooley Keep was a Boston doctor and dentist who was a pioneer in the use of anesthesia and was the first to administer obstetric anesthesia in the USA. He was born in Longmeadow, Massachusetts in 1800. He attended Harvard Medical School and graduated as a Doctor of Medicine in 1827.

William Morton, later to be made famous by his demonstration of ether anesthesia at the Ether Dome in Massachusetts General Hospital, wanted to build his dental practice and paid Nathan Keep for his trade secrets and knowledge. William Morton was allowed access to Nathan Keep’s laboratory and it was here that Nathan Keep saw the effects of ether in the hands of William Morton. After the Ether Dome exhibition on October 16 1846 Nathan Keep and William Morton formed the world’s first anesthetic partnership, which was subsequently dissolved after a few weeks!

On April 7th 1847 Nathan Keep entered history as the first American to administer obstetric anesthesia and the first to administer “anesthesie a la reine” which was the technique of intermittent inhalation of vapor later made famous as the anesthetic technique administered to Queen Victoria in 1853. The recipient was Fanny Appleton Longfellow who was the wife of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Dr Keep administered the anesthesia at Fanny’s Brattle Street home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for the delivery of her third baby. Fanny had high regard for the ether anesthesia and called ether “the greatest blessing of this age.” Keep described how the “ether was administered intermittently in synchronism with the recurrent pains.” This technique “greatly mitigated” Fanny’s pain and “no unpleasant symptoms occurred.” He was judicious in the amount of ether administered and was aware that too much ether could produce unconsciousness or retard labor. Henry Longfellow was so impressed with the ether anesthesia that had a tooth stump extracted under ether anesthesia, given by Keep, the following day.

We can read from Fanny’s personal journal of her experience and her knowledge that many didn’t agree with her use of anesthesia: “I am very sorry you all thought me so rash and naughty in trying the ether…. I had a very expeditious labor for me (only two hours), relieved by ether, and got up remarkably well, never before with so little nervous weakness.”

In 1867 the Harvard Dental School was established. Dr Keep became the first Dean of the first university affiliated dental school in the country and remained in this position until he resigned in 1871. Nathan Keep was a truly remarkable man who was a pioneer of obstetric anesthesia.