The 1850 Webster/Parkman Trial: Dr. Keep’s Forensic Evidence
Arden G. Christen, DDS, MSD, MA
Joan A. Christen, BGS, MS

Shortly before two o’clock on a chilly November afternoon in 1849, the celebrated Harvard physician and surgeon, Dr. George Parkman, left his home on Boston’s fashionable Beacon Hill, expecting to return in a few hours. He was never seen alive again. This account describes Parkman’s brutal murder and explores the dynamics which preceded this crime. It explains how and why Dr. John White Webster, MD, Professor of Chemistry and Mineralogy at Harvard University, killed Dr. Parkman and unsuccessfully attempted to destroy the physical evidence. Webster’s subsequent trial, conviction and ultimate punishment are also detailed. The Parkman-Webster case remains one of the classic murders in the annals of American crime. Compelling dental evidence presented by the famous American dentist, Dr. Nathan Cooley Keep, directly led to the conviction of Dr. Webster. This graphic, ground-breaking case clearly established the viable role of forensic dentistry in legal criminal investigation.

Levi Spear Parmly: Father of Dental Hygiene and Children’s Dentistry in America
David Chernin DMD, MLS
Gerald Shklar DDS, MS, MA

Levi Spear Parmly (1790-1859) was one of the outstanding dental practitioners and teachers in the early part of the nineteenth century, both in America and Europe. He published two highly regarded books, practiced and taught in London for several years, before returning to America, where he became the most eminent dental practitioner in the southern United States. He had great financial success and used his time and money to offer free dental service to children. His major contribution to dental science was the concept that dental caries was caused by external influences related to foreign material on the tooth surface. This was before our knowledge of dental plaque and the action of the oral bacteria. Based upon this concept, he stressed the importance of clean teeth to prevent tooth decay.

The Triumph and Tragedy of James Baxter Bean, MD, DDS (1834-1870)
Arden G. Christen, DDS, MSD, MA
Joan A. Christen, BGS, MS

In 1863, James Baxter Bean, a Southern physician and dentist, invented the interdental splint. This device was used to treat hundreds of Confederate soldiers who had received
gun shot-related facial and jaw injuries during the Civil War. Made of vulcanized India-rubber, the splint provided a dramatic breakthrough in the treatment of maxillofacial wounds. In an Atlanta, Georgia hospital, Dr. Bean utilized his invention by establishing the first ward devoted exclusively to the treatment of jaw fractures. He also invented an apparatus that manufactured and administered nitrous oxide. Additionally, Bean’s groundwork in casting aluminum as a denture base material led to Taggart’s later invention (in 1907) of the casting machine. After the Civil War, Dr. Bean became a highly successful dentist, practicing in Baltimore, Maryland.

In the fall of 1870, at age 36, Bean, representing the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., traveled to Europe to gather geological specimens. A short time after arriving, Bean decided to climb Mont Blanc with ten other men. The entire group perished in a raging 8-day snow storm on the mountain peak. This tragedy, a compelling drama, is legendary in the annals of mountaineering history. After Dr. Bean’s passing, his wife lost her sanity and subsequently died. Later, the death of the couple’s only child, Chapin, sadly ended the family line. Although his life was cut short, Bean’s contributions to dentistry have been significant and far-reaching.

William T.G. Morton and “The Great Moment”
Frank Heynick, M.A., Ph.D. (Med.)

The Great Moment, a Paramount movie released in 1944 about dentist William T.G. Morton’s discovery of ether anesthesia a century earlier, was the odd-man-out among the movies made by the highly acclaimed director Preston Sturges in that period. It failed to attract large audiences and generally received only lukewarm reviews. Several biographies of Sturges have discussed the reasons for this anomaly; but only recently have drafts of the various versions of Sturges’ scripts been published, plus additional background material about the film’s production, revisions and editing. Using all this information, the author analyzes the movie and its history and asks what went wrong – and, more importantly, what went right. The general conclusion is that this little-known film has stood the test of time and is worthy of a revival among enthusiasts of dental history and a serious reassessment by movie critics in general. Despite some flaws in the final version, The Great Moment is in fact a remarkable medical biography, incorporating innovative flashback techniques and themes of inspiration and sacrifice mixed with some humor, while remaining reasonably true to historical facts surrounding dentistry’s greatest triumph.

The First Dental College: Emergence of Dentistry As An Autonomous Profession
H. Berton McCauley, DDS

Old as the ills of mankind, dentistry has been practiced as a specialty of surgery by physicians, surgeons, and artisans, at various times with titles such as barber surgeon, toothdrawer, operator for the teeth, and surgeon dentist. There being universal need for dental services, and lacking enforceable standards of practice and qualification, the
profession was invaded by dubiously prepared pretenders at practice. The unconscionable consequence remained largely unremedied until realization of a philosophically sound basis of professional literature, organization, and education incident to the institution of the first dental college and the American system of dental education that elevated dentistry to the status of a recognized autonomous profession.