

# Dr. Willard Parker - Pioneer in surgery

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Chelmsford has the distinction of being the home town of a world renowned surgeon who was the first in America to operate successfully upon an abscessed appendix and in whose honor a New York hospital was named.

Willard Parker, M.D., although born in Lyndeborough, N.H. (September 2, 1800), was a descendant of Joseph Parker, one of the five Parker brothers who settled here in 1653 or 1654 and can truly be considered a native son of Chelmsford. His father was Jonathan Parker who had moved to New Hampshire when he was a young man but he returned to Chelmsford when Willard was five years old, taking up his residence on the knoll at 155 Boston Road. This was across the street from another Jonathan Parker who lived in the stately brick end house at 134 Boston Road.

Having two men, both with the same name, living so close together could have been confusing but their friends solved the problem with nicknames. Jonathan was frequently shortened to "Jock" in those days so Willard's father, who lived on the high ground was called "Hill Jock" Parker. His neighbor had been a trooper in the Revolutionary War so he was called "Trooper Jock."

Willard "received his primary education in a rural school" according to one reference, an honest appraisal of Chelmsford's elementary schools in the early 19th century, "and obtained an A.B. degree from Harvard in 1826, having supported himself during his years at college." Part of his income was derived from teaching in the "old brick schoolhouse" (probably the 1802 schoolhouse located in Forefathers' Burying Ground but it might have been the original South Row School which was brick and was located across Mill Road from the present Senior Citizen's Center) during the winters of 1821, '22, and '23.

For a while he gave serious consideration to entering the ministry but was influenced to switch to medicine by the noted Dr. John Collins Warren, professor of surgery at Harvard University. Studying under Dr. Warren, he was awarded an M.D. degree by Harvard in 1830.

Dr. Parker held a succession of titles in various schools during the next eight years: professor of surgery and anatomy, Clinical School of Medicine, Woodstock, Vt. (1830-33); professor of surgery, Berkshire Medical Institution (1833-36); professor of anatomy, Geneva, N.Y. (1834-36); professor of surgery, Cincinnati (1836-37). He received a second doctorate

of medicine from Berkshire Medical Institution. He then spent a year in Paris visiting the wards of the great hospitals and observing the work of the famous French clinicians of that period.

Upon returning to this country in 1839, he was appointed professor of principles and practice of surgery at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City, a post he held until 1870, the year that a degree of LL.D. was conferred upon him. In New York he developed a large practice in the field of general surgery and became influential in public affairs. In surgery he was courageous and successful. He is credited with having performed cystotomy for irritable bladder (1850), with having tied the subclavian artery for aneurysm on five occasions (1864), and with having been the first in America to operate on an abscessed appendix, unaware that a similar operation had been performed in London. Dr. Parker was also an inspiring teacher, lecturing many years before crowded classrooms on the principles of surgery. He was president of the New York Academy of Medicine (1856) and was affiliated with some of the largest New York hospitals.

Some of his notable non-surgical accomplishments included obtaining the necessary legislation to reorganize the City almshouse into what is now Bellevue Hospital, and his efforts in procuring legislation to create the New York City Board of Health of which he became a member. The Willard Parker Hospital for Infectious Diseases in New York was built and named in his honor.

In 1859 a group of local citizens organized the Chelmsford Monument Association for the purpose of erecting the granite monument that stands on the Center Common in tribute to the Chelmsford men who fought in the Revolutionary War. Dr. Willard Parker was chosen president of the Association. He also gave the principal address at the dedication of the monument on September 22 of that same year.

Although his professional career prevented his making his permanent residence here, Dr. Parker always retained his interest in Chelmsford. He kept the old homestead until near the close of his life when the care of it became burdensome. He expressed his feelings for the town in a letter written in 1879, in which he said, "I love it as my old home, and where my parents lived, worked hard, and died."

Dr. Parker married twice. There were two children by his first wife, Caraline Sarah Allen, and three by his second marriage to Mary Ann (Bissell) Coit. He died on April 25, 1884.