

This Day in History... November 1, 1815

Birth of Crawford Long

Crawford Williamson Long was born on November 1, 1815, in Danielsville, Georgia. Long became the first person to use ether on a patient in surgery and the publication of his findings lead to its widespread use among other doctors.

The son of a senator, merchant, and planter, Long was named after Georgia statesman William H. Crawford. By the time he was 14, Long graduated from a local academy and applied to the University of Georgia in Athens. After receiving his AM degree in 1835, Long went on to study at Transylvania College in Lexington, Kentucky. While there, he studied under surgeon Benjamin Dudley. In this capacity, Long witnessed many surgeries and was concerned about the effects of operating without anesthesia. After just a year, Long transferred to the University of Pennsylvania, where he got to work first-hand with modern medical technology before graduating with his MD in 1839.



Crawford Long stamp from the Famous American Scientists issue



Pictures a reproduction of Sir Luke Fildes's painting, The Doctor.

Long then did an 18-month internship in New York City before returning to Georgia. Once there, he opened a medical practice in Jefferson. On March 30, 1842, Long was preparing to remove a tumor from the neck of his patient, James M. Venable. He had been bothered by the physical and psychological effects of surgery without anesthesia and chose to give his patient ether. He did so by putting some ether on a towel and having him inhale it. Using the ether seemed to help, so Long continued to perform his surgeries in this way over the next few years.

In spite of his success, Long didn't immediately publish his findings, though he shared his experiment with others. Soon other doctors were using ether, and some claimed they had been the first. Long then began collecting patient accounts and petitioned Congress to give him credit as the first to use ether, though that wouldn't happen during his lifetime.

In the meantime, Long married then fathered 12 children. He and his brother opened a private practice and pharmacy. He joined a militia unit during the Civil War but wasn't called upon to fight, though he did perform surgeries for soldiers from both sides of the conflict. Long died on June 16, 1878, shortly after delivering a baby.

In the years since his death, March 30, the date Long first used ether on a patient, has been celebrated as Doctors Day. Long County, Georgia was named in his honor as well as a hospital in Atlanta. There's also a Crawford W. Long Museum in Jefferson, Georgia and his childhood home is on the National Register of Historic Places. Long was also selected as one of the two people from Georgia to be honored with a statue in the US Capitol's National Statuary Hall Collection.

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