

# Bell(wether) of Psychiatry

By Walter E. Barton, M.D.

Luther Bell, an 1826 graduate of DMS, was one of the founding fathers of psychiatry and a leader in establishing the precepts of the specialty.

When Luther Bell came to study medicine at Dartmouth in the 1820s, he was not yet 20 and the course of medical instruction was barely 25 years old. But the youthful program provided young Bell with a background strong enough to forge a place in medical history. A founder of the oldest national medical organization in the United States, he is remembered for his leadership in shaping the emerging profession of psychiatry and in influencing the care of the mentally ill.

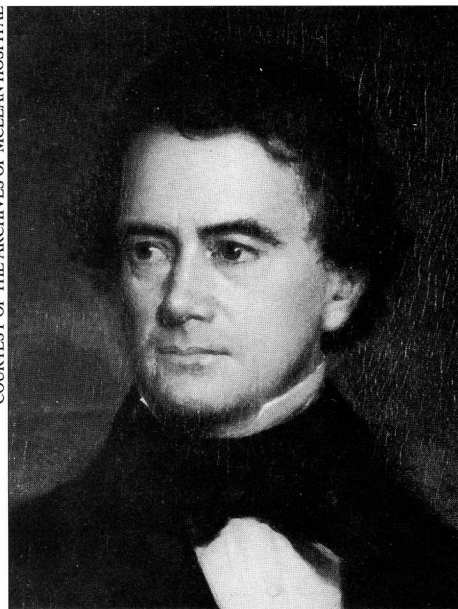
Dr. Bell was an outstanding clinician, an able administrator, an expert in medicolegal matters, an authority on heating and ventilation for hospitals, and an adviser to social reformer Dorothea Dix.

Luther V. Bell was born in Frances-town, N.H., on December 20, 1806, into a distinguished family. His grandfather had been a New Hampshire state senator, and his father, Samuel, Dartmouth class of 1793, served in both houses of the New Hampshire legislature, as governor and chief justice of New Hampshire, and as a U.S. senator. One brother, Samuel, became chief justice of New Hampshire; another brother, John, was a professor of anatomy at the University of Vermont; and his brother James was a U.S. senator.

Luther entered Bowdoin College a few months before his 13th birthday and graduated in 1823. Among his fellow students

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COURTESY OF THE ARCHIVES OF MCLEAN HOSPITAL



Luther Bell, DMS 1826, as depicted in an 1857 portrait painted by Moses Wight.

and close associates in college were Franklin Pierce, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry Longfellow. He then began the study of medicine at Dartmouth.

When Nathan Smith founded the medical school at Hanover in 1797, the curriculum consisted of one series of lectures delivered between August and December, and Dr. Smith constituted the entire faculty.

By 1811 a medical education building had been constructed on the Dartmouth campus, and just a few years before Bell arrived in Hanover the medical faculty was enlarged and organized into four separate chairs: anatomy and physiology; theory and practice of physic, materia medica, and botany; surgery, obstetrics, and medical jurisprudence; and chemistry, mineralogy, and the application of science to the arts.

However, the Medical School still had no hospital and provided no training in the specialties. All graduates were general practitioners. The course of didactic instruction was followed by practical experience gained as an apprentice under the pre-

ceptorship of a faculty member or a practitioner elsewhere.

After Dr. Bell graduated from Dartmouth, in 1826, he practiced for a short time in Brunswick and for six years in Derry, N.H. During this period, he served in the New Hampshire legislature and participated in founding the state asylum in Concord. During his years in general practice, Dr. Bell also wrote a dissertation on dietetics that won Boston's Boylston Prize in medicine. In the paper, he opposed the vegetarian diet of Sylvester Graham and advocated a substantial and nutritious diet for the New England laborer. In succeeding years he wrote other papers, including one on smallpox and one on "External Exploration of Diseases."

When he was invited in 1837 to become superintendent of McLean Asylum for the Insane (later McLean Hospital), Dr. Bell accepted the position. McLean, a prestigious institution associated with Massachusetts General Hospital and located in Somerville, had been founded in 1818 as the first asylum for the insane in the northern United States. The asylum, though private, served the entire Boston community. Those who couldn't pay for their care had their expenses paid from the endowment. Later, when pressure for admission increased, the number admitted was limited to what the endowment could support.

Dr. Bell proved to be an outstanding administrator as well as an excellent clinician, and he served with distinction at McLean until 1856. At the time of his resignation, the number of patients had trebled and several new buildings had been constructed. During his nearly two decades of service 2,696 patients were treated, 62 percent of them successfully.

In 1840, three years after he took over at McLean, Dr. Bell went to Europe to update his knowledge of the care of the mentally ill. He reported on his experiences in McLean's annual report for the year 1841.

