

Willard Parker / [William Chittenden Lusk].

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WILLARD PARKER

By WILLIAM CHITTENDEN LUSK, M.D., F.A.C.S., NEW YORK

THE nobility of the soul, the loftiness of the ideals, the force of the character and the influences of the life, of an illustrious man of the past, can be vividly portrayed to posterity no more aptly than through the voice of the man's contemporaries. Thus for telling truly and graphically the tale of the distinguished life of Dr. Willard Parker, there have been selected from the memorial address to the latter, delivered before the New York Academy of Medicine by his intimate friend, Dr. William H. Draper,¹ the following passages:

"Nearly six months ago that familiar and honored name, Willard Parker, was blotted from our roll, but in our memories it is so deeply graven that the sound of it will always recall to mind one of the most notable figures in the circle of distinguished men in which he moved for so many years. He filled, perhaps, for a long period, a larger place in popular and professional esteem than any of his contemporaries, not because of his superior genius, nor because of great acquirements, but rather because of a character that somehow grasped at once the affections of his fellow men, and made them trust and honor him.

" . . . and yet there are few perhaps who lived nearer to him than I did for more than thirty years, no one I am sure he inspired with a warmer affection or more exalted regard. . . . I can only crave your indulgence if I seem to exaggerate his virtues or to overestimate the influence which he exerted for more than forty years in this city as a physician and a public teacher.

"The story of Dr. Parker's life is not so remarkable for the incidents or even for the achievements of his career, as it is for the singular power he wielded in his professional relations to his patients, his pupils, and the public through the simple force of his personality.

"He was born with the century, which his life nearly spanned, in the town of Lyndeborough, New Hampshire. . . . He was inspired by his Puritan forefathers with the love of freedom and the dignity of labor. He tilled the soil on his father's farm. . . . He prepared himself for college with the rewards of his own toil, and graduated at Harvard in 1826. His ardent religious nature inclined him to the profession of the ministry, but an incident in his Freshman year happily diverted his thoughts toward a calling in which his mind escaped the fetters of

¹Tr. M. Soc. New York State, 1885, p. 328.

dogmatic theology, and left his religious enthusiasm free to expend itself in practical Christianity. One of his classmates had a strangulated hernia, the local physician called to his aid the celebrated Dr. John Collins Warren, and young Parker was so powerfully impressed with the sagacity and the skill of the surgeon, who speedily reduced the hernia, that he at once resolved to devote his life to the study and practice of the healing art. . . . Shortly after receiving his degree" (Harvard 1830) "he was appointed Professor of Anatomy in the Berkshire County Medical College at Pittsfield, Massachusetts, at that time one of the leading schools in the country.

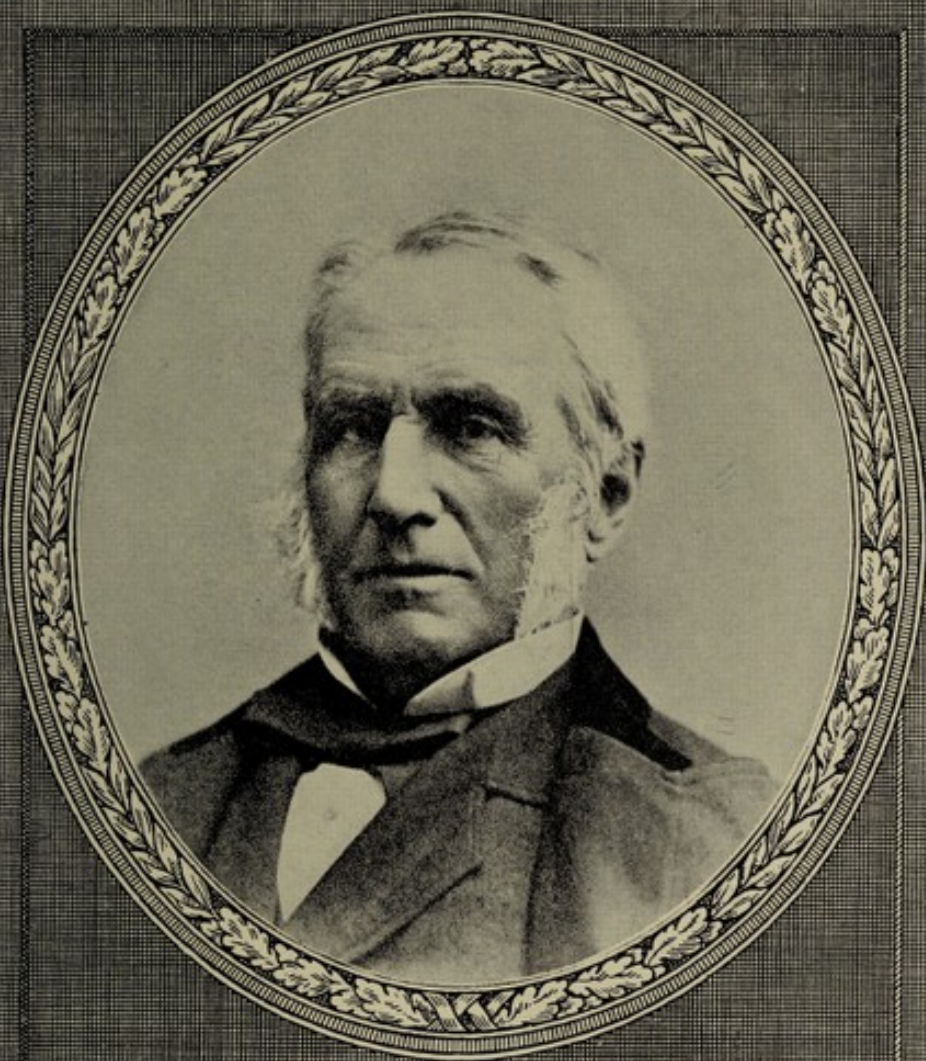
"In 1832 he was appointed Professor of Surgery in the Pittsfield school, and for four years he held both chairs, lecturing twice daily. In 1836 he moved to Cincinnati, where he was called to the Professorship of Surgery in the Cincinnati Medical College. He remained there for three years. It was during this period that he visited Europe and spent some months in observing the methods of the foremost surgeons of that time in England and France. In 1839 he was called to fill the chair of Surgery in the College of Physicians and Surgeons in this city, and here for more than thirty years he labored with unflagging zeal as a teacher of the principles and practice of surgery.

"His fame as a brilliant lecturer and an accomplished surgeon, his noble presence and the wonderful charm of his manner, soon achieved for him all the success to which the highest ambition could aspire, and amid all the temptations of personal popularity and pecuniary ease, he never lost his enthusiasm or abated his labors in behalf of the object which was always nearest his heart, the elevation of the standard and the improvement of the methods of medical education.

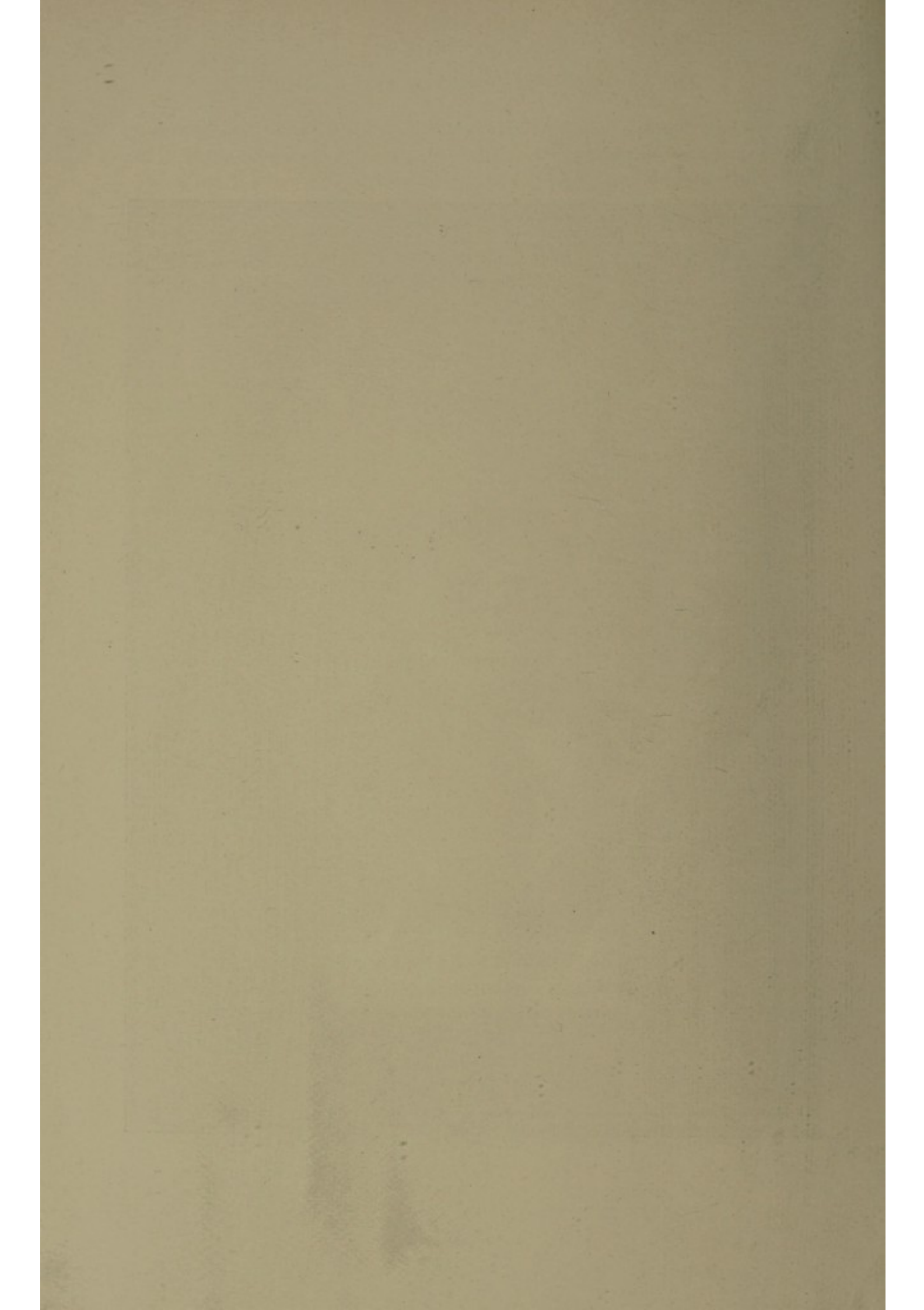
"In connection with the late James R. Wood, he reorganized the old Almshouse at Bellevue into a Hospital, and served there for many years as one of the attending surgeons. He was appointed an attending surgeon of the New York Hospital in 1856. . . . On the establishment of St. Luke's, the Roosevelt and the Mt. Sinai Hospitals he was made a member of the staff of consulting surgeons in these institutions. Indeed he was so identified with the growth of charitable enterprises, in the way of hospitals and dispensaries in this city, that he was associated with the organization of almost all of them. He was one of the first, and for many years one of the most active members of the Pathological Society and of the Medical and Surgical Society. His deep and abiding interest in this Academy is known to you all. He was one of its honored Presidents.

"He resigned the active duties of his Professorship in 1870, and was made Emeritus Professor of Surgery. . . He was made a Doctor of Laws by Princeton College in 1870.

"He was essentially a broad man with an unbounded faith in the possibilities of the science of healing and an enthusiasm that disappointment never abated and failure could not quench. He could not be called a learned man, but



WILLARD PARKER
1800-1884



he was what some learned men never become, a wise man. He acquired his art mainly at the bedside, and it was there that he displayed most conspicuously the qualities which gave him his high claim to distinction as a physician and surgeon. He was always self-possessed, no emergency disconcerted him, no difficulties appalled him. He was uniformly calm and master of the situation. He was a keen and comprehensive observer. . . . He was sagacious in diagnosis. . . .

"No one who has ever seen him enter a sick room can forget the magical influence of his alert and cheerful presence. It was as if he brought with him the talisman of health. It banished fear and inspired hope.

"It was in his character, however, as a public teacher that Dr. Parker impressed himself most powerfully upon all who came within the sphere of his attractions. He loved to teach. . . . There was something about his enthusiasm that was contagious. . . . He was the pioneer in introducing clinical lectures into the college instruction. . . . When he entered the amphitheatre his presence seemed to fill it; he riveted attention. . . . His glance was an inspiration and his voice like the voice of a prophet. His manner toward his patients commanded confidence and assured sympathy.

"He never lost an opportunity to impress upon his pupils the limitations of the cure of disease as contrasted with the ever-widening possibilities of its prevention.

"It is to be regretted that Dr. Parker was not gifted with a faculty for literary work. . . . He was singularly free from prejudices and ever ready to acknowledge that new ideas and new methods might be better than the old.

"Dr. Parker may be said to have originated the operation of cystotomy for irritable bladder," . . . and "the operation for perityphlitic abscess," . . . the latter in 1864 which "it is certain that he was not aware that Mr. Hancock, of London, had done. . . . successfully in 1848.

"He was a man of public spirit. He was interested in all great social questions. The public health was to him a subject of the deepest concern. . . . To him and the late Dr. John O. Stone we owe the reorganization of our Health Board.

"He recognized in the reckless use of alcoholic stimulants one of the chief causes of physical degeneracy, as well as of the poverty and crime, in our times, and he showed by his denunciation of intemperance his exalted conception of the duty of a physician as the conscientious and uncompromising guardian of health. He was for some years the president of the Inebriate Asylum at Binghampton.

"He was generous, truly, to a fault; he was quick to recognize merit and encourage it. He loved to do a kindly act and to speak or write a friendly word. . . . He was conspicuously the friend of young men.

"We are impressed chiefly by his ardent love for his calling, by his entire devotion to its high behests and by the singular purity and nobility of his per-

sonal character. To these he owed his eminent success in his profession, his title to rank high as a physician and teacher, and his acknowledged position in the community as one of its most valued citizens. He dedicated himself to his work with his whole heart and mind and strength. He never wearied in his efforts to augment its usefulness, to maintain its honor and to exalt its claims to public confidence.

"He was always aspiring to a clearer vision, he was free from the fetters of jealousy and conceit, and untrammelled by the clogs of self indulgence. He served his fellow men; he strove to be a lamp unto their feet and a light unto their paths."

Dr. Parker died in 1884. A portrait of him hangs in the Surgeon-General's Library at Washington. The Willard Parker Hospital for contagious diseases of the Health Department of New York City was erected in his memory.

This record of accomplishment and of influence exerted by Dr. Willard Parker, furnishes a striking example of the capacity of a single individual to do good by a well-spent life. Lives like this one, so rich in kindness and love for one's neighbor coupled with force of character directed for good, can well be kept before the public mind down through the ages, as an inspiration to all in every walk of life.