Hartford, CT (April 2013) – If you think that a dentist drill is painful now; imagine it without anesthesia or other pain relief! In 1844, Horace Wells, a Hartford, Connecticut, dentist, had the idea to use nitrous oxide (laughing gas) for painless tooth removal. This procedure began a revolution in the practice of dentistry and medical surgery, as the discovery of anesthesia signaled an end to much of the physical pain people had endured for thousands of years.

This Won’t Hurt a Bit! A History of Pain Relief is an exhibition that explores the ways pain has been managed over time, paying particular attention to Horace Wells’ discovery of anesthesia. This Won’t Hurt a Bit! is on view from April 26 to September 28, 2013 at the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS).

The discovery and use of anesthesia for pain relief was truly a break-through in the medical fields. Visitors to the exhibit will see instruments and inhalers used to administer chloroform, nitrous oxide, and ether to patients and learn about the progression of anesthesia as new chemicals were, and continue to be, developed. In this context, the story of Horace Wells’ and others’ pioneering work are explored, including controversies about who deserved credit for anesthesia’s discovery. The exhibit draws on CHS’s collection and those of the Hartford Medical Society, Cushing/Whitney Medical Library at Yale University and dentists and the types of pain relievers—physical, homeopathic, and chemical—that were used to soothe or eliminate pain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The exhibit also features some eye-opening, cringe-inducing displays of early American medical instruments. Surgeons’ kits from the 18th and 19th centuries contain amputation saws, bloodletting instruments, and knives for eye-surgery. Dental tools include pliers, forceps, “tooth keys,” and a 19th-century foot-powered drill. Medical books from the CHS collection graphically illustrate painful conditions like tumors and dislocated limbs.

Prior to the discovery of anesthesia, people sought pain relief in many ways. This Won’t Hurt a Bit! will also look at pain remedies used by Native Americans, colonial Americans, and others throughout history. On display is New England Rarities Discovered, an English book written in 1672, which lists the medical properties of plants and animals found in the New World. Witch hazel twigs, a leech jar, and cocaine and aspirin bottles all demonstrate the variety of pain relievers employed from ancient times to today. After visiting the exhibit, an impending visit to one of today’s dentists won’t seem quite as bad.

This Won’t Hurt a Bit! A History of Pain Relief is made possible by the Connecticut State Dental Foundation, the James McManus Fund of the Hartford Dental Society, Inc., The Horace Wells Club, and the Connecticut State Society of Anesthesiologists. CHS is located at 1 Elizabeth Street in Hartford. For more, visit www.chs.org.

This Won’t Hurt a Bit! A History of Pain Relief
April 26-Sept 28, 2013
Connecticut Historical Society
One Elizabeth Street, Hartford, CT 06105
www.CHS.org
About the Connecticut Historical Society (@ConnHistSoc):

Founded in 1825, the Connecticut Historical Society is a non-profit museum, library, research and education center. CHS strives to inspire and foster a life-long interest in history and ignite a passion for learning about history through research assistance, exhibitions, tours and programs for all ages. Visit www.chs.org or call 860-236-5621.