

SUSAN DIMOCK • Pioneering Female Surgeon • Boston 1872–75



The Committee recommended that the petition be informed that no provision has been made, or now exists, for the education of women in any department of the University.

Susan's rejection letter from Harvard, 1867

The Surgeon

Susan Dimock was among the first female physicians in the United States recognized as a surgeon. Apprenticed at the age of eighteen to Dr. Marie Zakrzewska at the New England Hospital for Women and Children, Susan was recognized as exceptionally talented. Wanting her to receive the best medical education possible, Dr. Zak and her colleagues encouraged her to apply to Harvard Medical School; she was denied on the basis of sex in 1867. Learning that the medical school at the prestigious University of Zurich was admitting a small number of women as an experiment, Susan applied, was accepted, and graduated with honors in three years. Following an internship in Vienna, where she was inspired by surgeon Theodor Billroth, Susan returned to Boston to become Resident Physician at the NEHWC. During her three years there, she professionalized the first formal nurses training program in the nation, established a busy private clinical practice, and supervised both the care of patients and the education of students at the hospital.

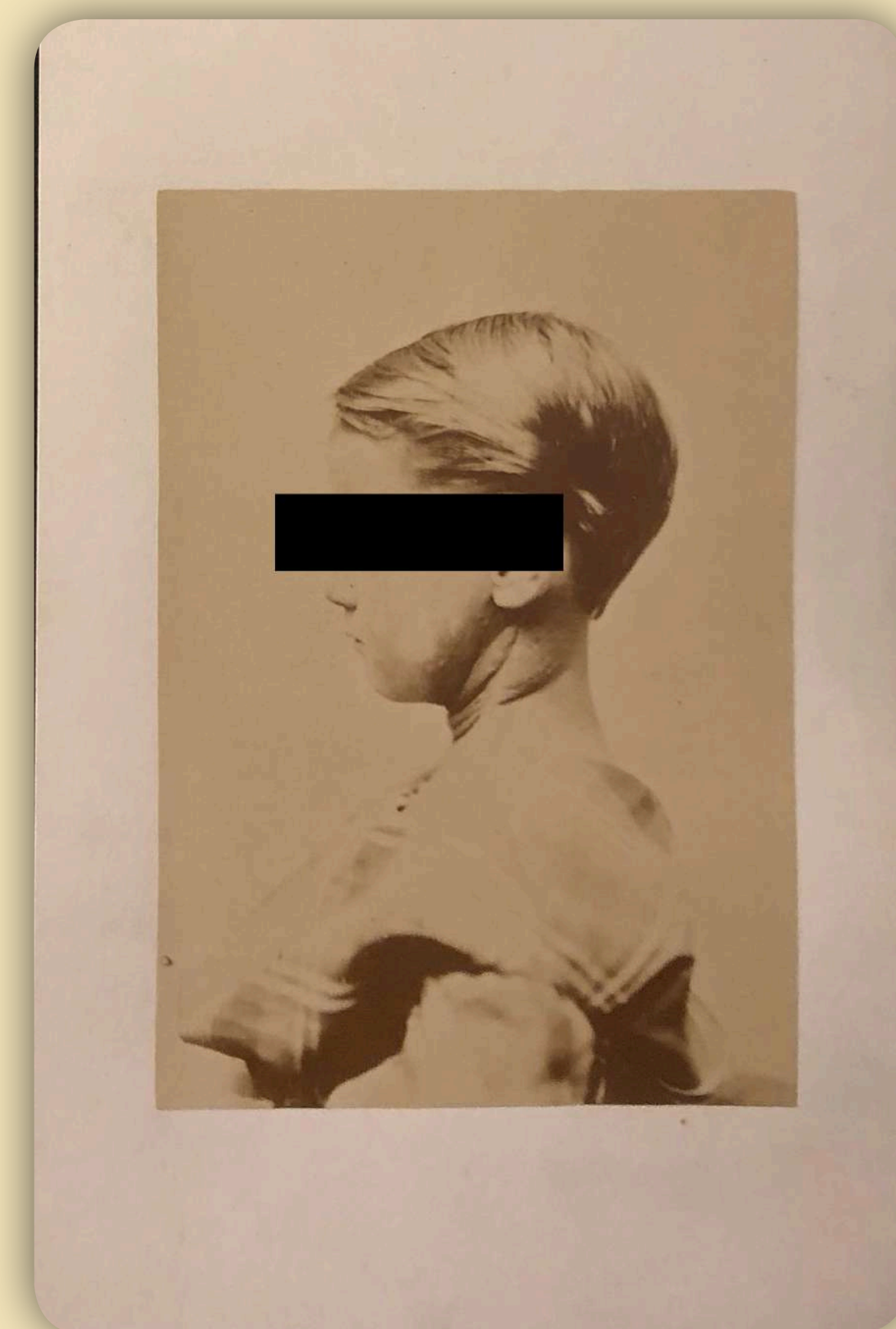
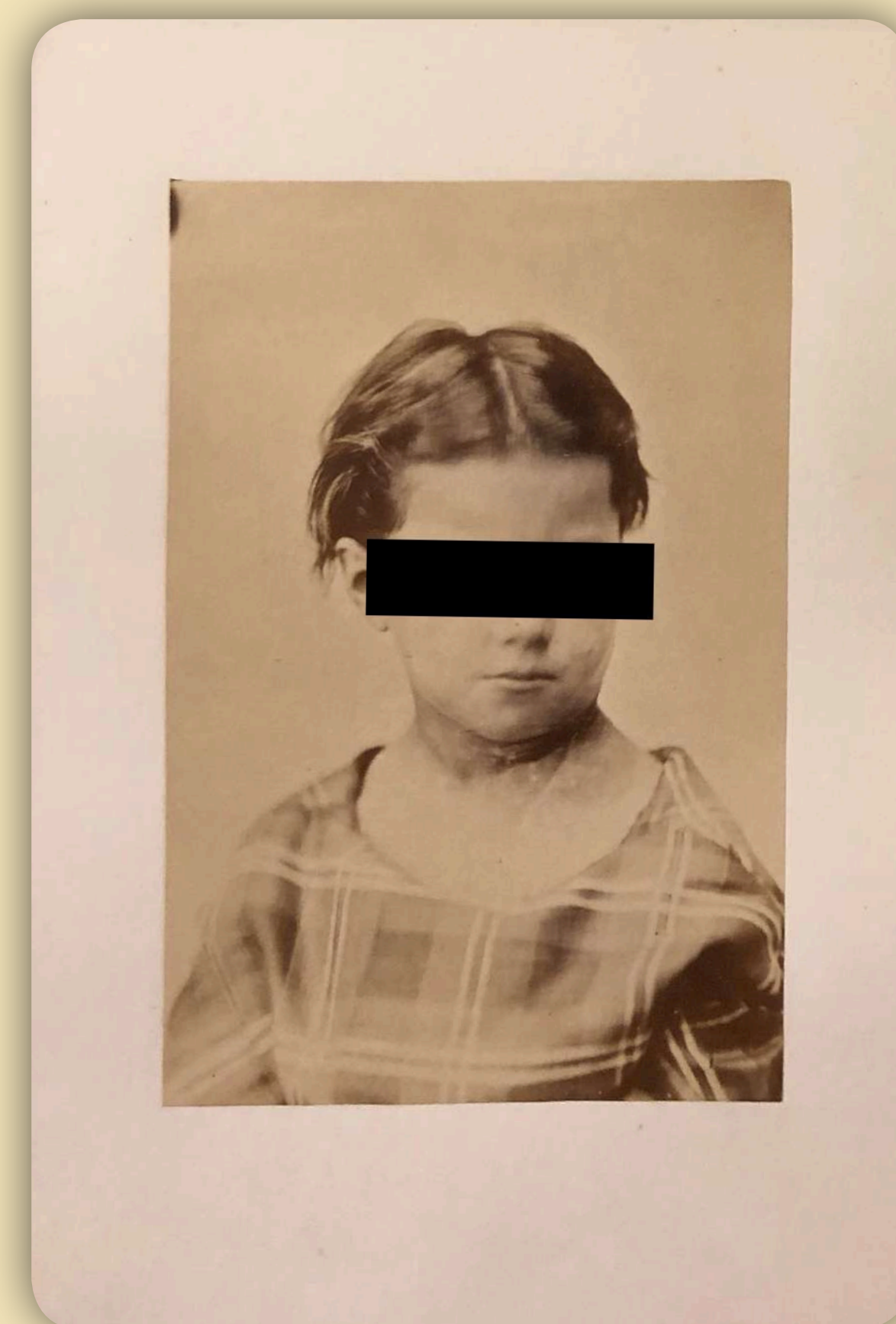
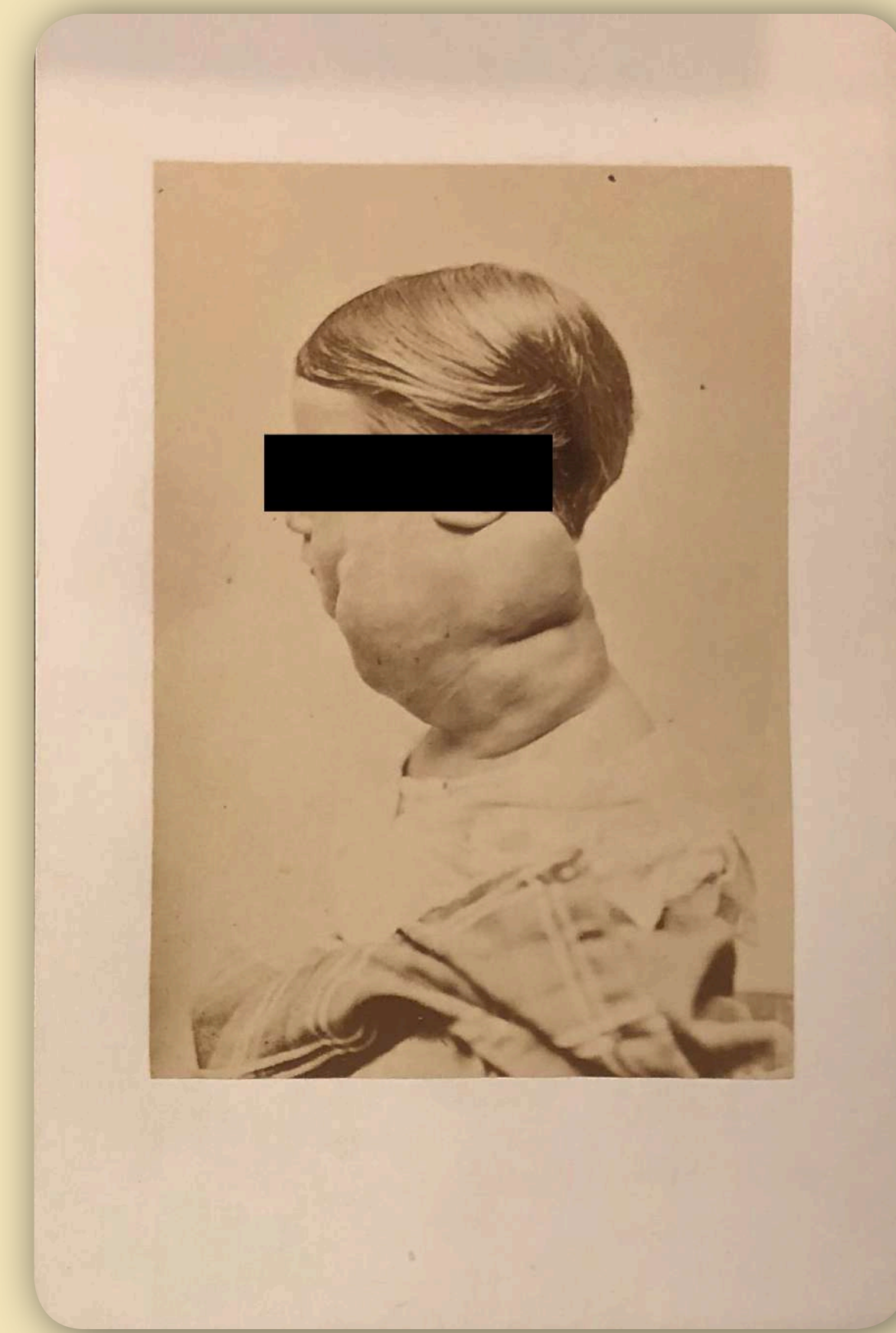
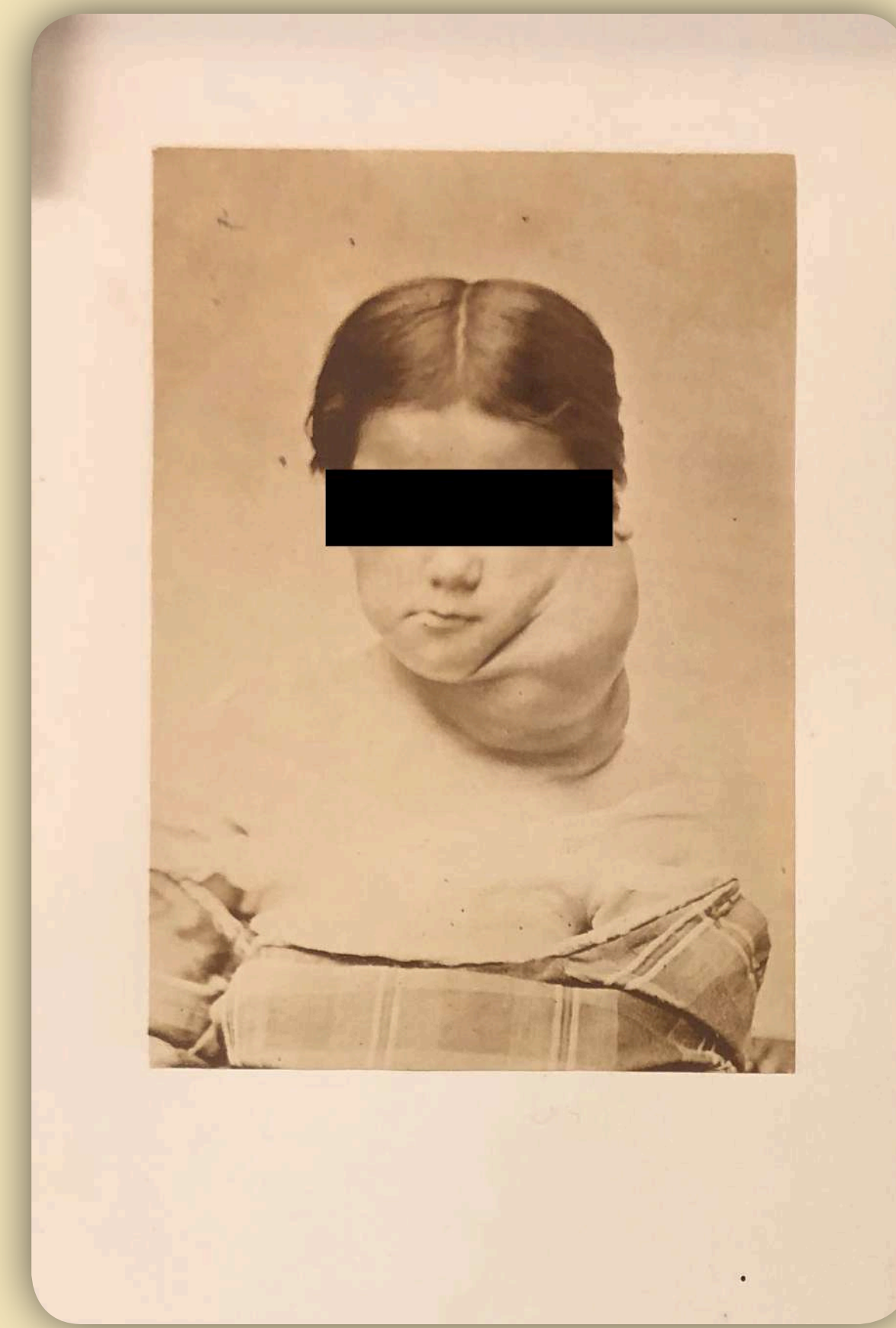
S. Dimock.



The New England Hospital for Women and Children, late 19th century.

Authors

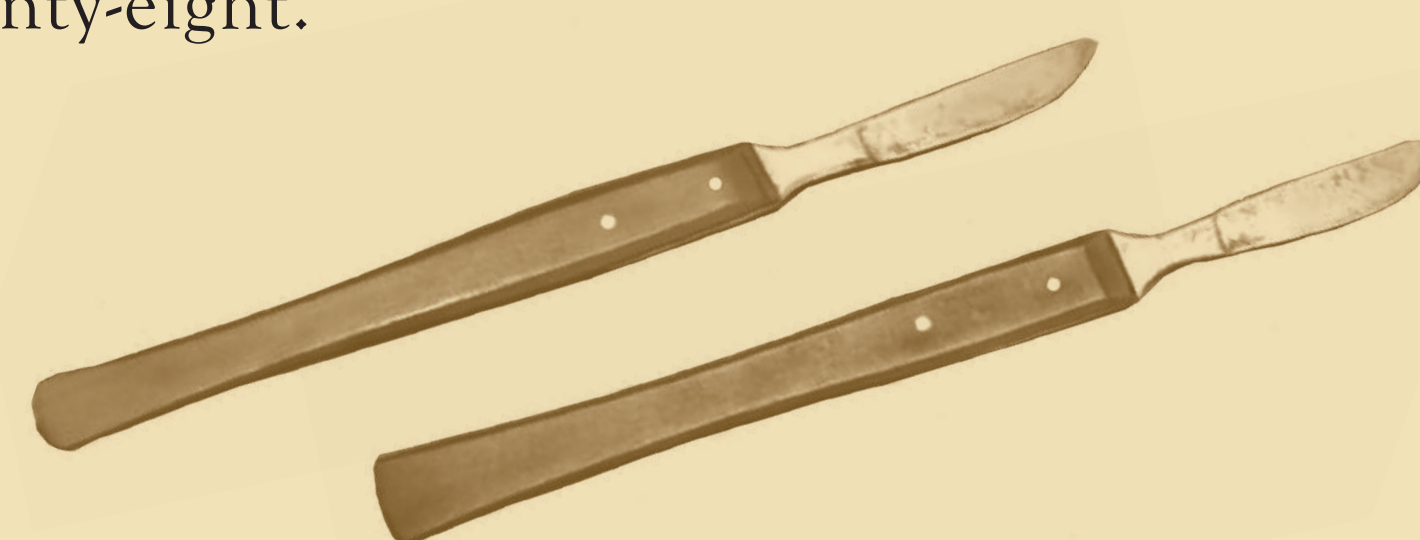
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The Surgery

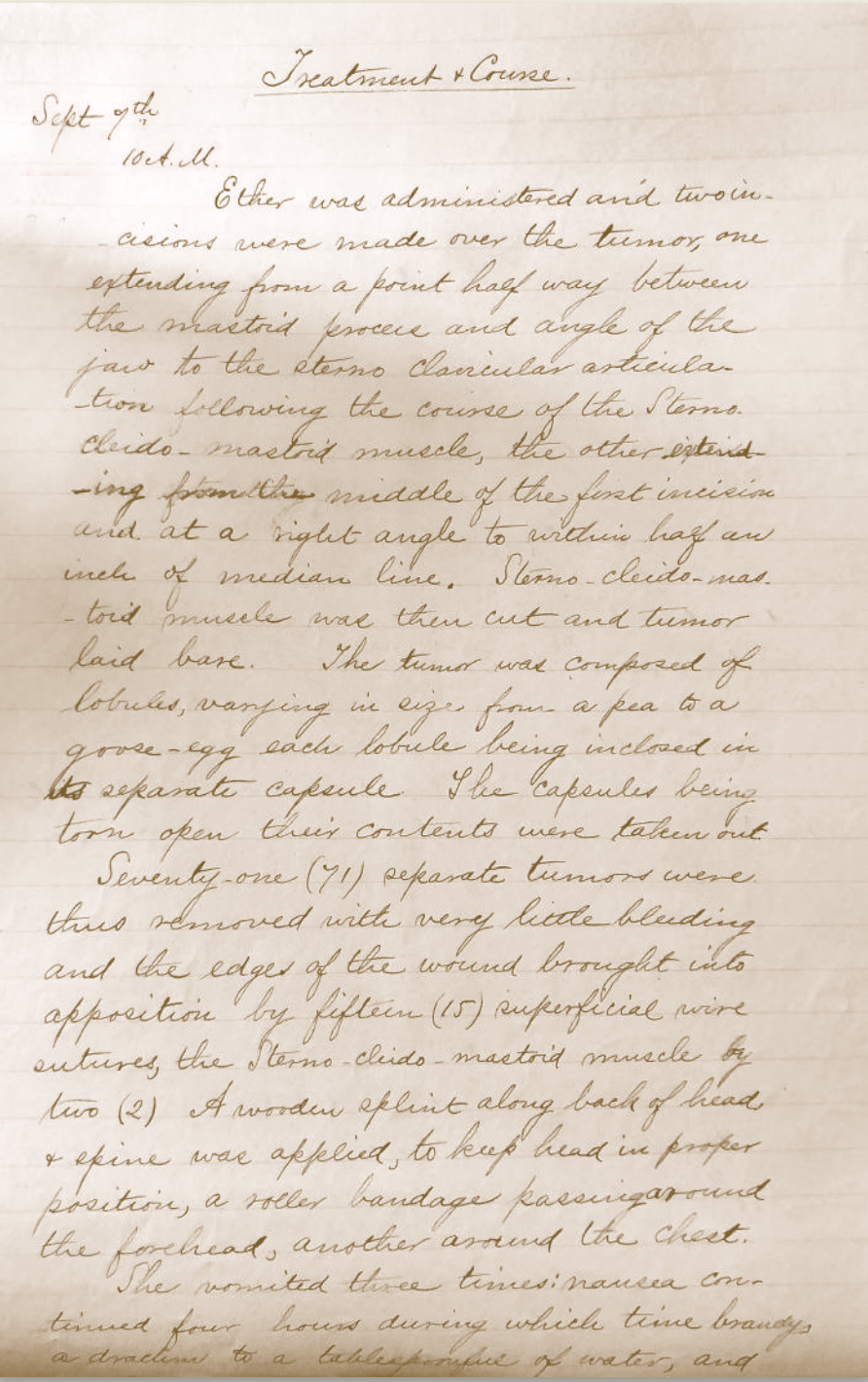
In September of 1873, a seven-year-old girl from Nantucket was admitted to the NEHWC. Two years earlier, she had been struck by a hand cart on the side of her neck, an inch below and behind her ear lobe. Her neck had subsequently swollen, resulting in a large tumor. Using ether as anesthetic, Dr. Dimock performed an operation to remove the tumor. A T-shaped incision was made over the tumor, and the sternocleidomastoid muscle cut to expose the tumor itself, which was composed of lobules varying in size from "a pea to a goose egg." Each lobule was enclosed in separate capsules, which were evacuated one by one. A total of seventy-one tumors were removed with little bleeding. The significance of the operation was attested to by the fact that a photographer was hired to do both pre- and post-operative images.

Two years after the successful operation, both the patient and Dr. Dimock died—the patient from "dropsy" and the surgeon in a shipwreck en route to Europe, where she planned to connect with colleagues and purchase medical equipment. Susan Dimock had just turned twenty-eight.



The Learned Observation

Mary Putnam-Jacobi, MD, herself a pioneering woman doctor, visited Dr. Susan Dimock in Boston in 1874. She wrote that Dimock had "already won herself a deserved reputation among some of the best surgeons in the city" and "already performed many important surgical operations." Then she proceeded to comment on this difficult neck tumor surgery.



"Last fall, while on a visit to Boston, Dr. Dimock showed me photographs of another hospital patient, from whose neck she had removed a large sarcomatous tumor. The operation had been performed in the presence of the students of the hospital and of Dr. [Samuel] Cabot, consulting surgeon. After reading the record of the case, I mentioned a precisely similar operation that I had seen performed by Richet in the Clinique at Paris, and the lecture, in which he described the great difficulty of removing a tumor so deeply embedded in so dangerous a locality. The Professor had seemed not a little proud of his own success in coping with these difficulties, and had taken care that a numerous auditorium should witness his triumph.

"At this Dr. Dimock laughed, and said, 'I was asked why I had issued no invitations, but I had forgotten all about them.' She added, 'Indeed I have too little personal ambition to care who sees, when I am once assured my work is well done.' The remark was characteristic of the modesty and simplicity that distinguish the young surgeon."

The Significance in the History of Surgery

In the three years that Dr. Dimock practiced in Boston, she came to be highly regarded. Her early death led to an outpouring of sympathy from both the female and male medical communities, not only in Boston and her hometown of Washington, North Carolina, but throughout the U.S. and Europe as well.

Her funeral and subsequent burial at Forest Hills Cemetery were covered by the press and resulted in accolades and condolences from around the world. In 1884, the street alongside the hospital was named for Dimock, the same year the first woman was admitted to the Massachusetts Medical Society—an honor for which Dimock's work paved the way. In 1969, the New England Hospital for Women and Children became the Dimock Community Health Center.

The photographs and the complete medical record of Dimock's neck tumor surgery, held at the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine at Harvard University, provide a unique window into the skills and accomplishments of this remarkable woman surgeon.

The New England Hospital's Surgical Legacy

The first five women surgeons admitted to the American College of Surgery in 1913 were all affiliated with the New England Hospital for Women and Children.

Photo Credits

Patient photos, medical records, and Harvard rejection letter courtesy the Boston Medical Library in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts.

Photos of Susan Dimock, the Zakrzewska Building of the New England Hospital, and medical instruments are from the private collection of author Susan Wilson.

The Book

This study originated in research being done by Susan Wilson for her work-in-progress, a full-length biography of Dr. Dimock. The working title is *Women and Children First: The Remarkable Life of Dr. Susan Dimock*.