

CHAPTER III
THE EVOLUTION OF THE
AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY

BY FRANK WIGGLESWORTH CLARKE

In August, 1873, the American Association for the Advancement of Science met at Portland, Maine. At that time the Association was divided into two sections: Section A, devoted to the mathematical and physical sciences; and Section B, which covered the biological or natural history sciences. Chemistry, of course, fell in Section A, and was not strongly represented at the Portland meeting. The retiring president of the Association was, however, a chemist—J. Lawrence Smith—who, unfortunately, was not present at the meeting. His retiring address was read by the secretary, F. W. Putnam.

Apart from that, only six distinctively chemical papers were read at the Portland meeting; four of them related to the chemistry of soils; and two to industrial chemistry. Among the few chemists present I recall the following names: G. F. Barker, F. W. Clarke, E. W. Hilgard, T. S. Hunt, S. W. Johnson, S. P. Lattimore, William McMurtrie, C. E. Munroe, R. B. Warder, and H. W. Wiley. There were probably others, but of that I am not sure.

On the evening of August 25, 1873, a small group of these chemists met together to discuss the possibility of a better representation for chemistry in the American Association. Professor Lattimore acted as chairman, with C. E. Munroe as secretary. It was decided to ask the governing body of the Association for permission to form a subsection of chemistry within Section A, and that permission was granted. A first step toward the organization of American chemists had been taken.

It is only fair, however, to admit that there were much earlier attempts to form chemical societies in the United States, but the results were not permanent. The Chemical Society of Philadelphia was founded in 1792, and seems to have existed for about

seventeen years. It was apparently revived in 1811 as the Columbian Chemical Society of Philadelphia, and in 1821 the Delaware Chemical and Geological Society was organized at Delhi, Delaware County, New York. These societies, small and feeble as they were, are interesting as having antedated all the distinctively chemical organizations abroad. The Chemical Society (London) was founded in 1841; the Société chimique de France in 1857; the Deutsche Chemische Gesellschaft in 1867; and that of Russia in 1868. The foreign chemists were, of course, represented by membership in organizations such as the British Philosophical Society and other European academies which were much older than our small attempts in behalf of chemistry alone. In America there were also organizations in the interests of science in general, such as the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Sciences, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in which chemists took an important part.

In 1874 two more forward steps were taken. In August, 1774, Priestley discovered oxygen—one of the greatest discoveries in the history of chemistry. Driven out of England by persecution, he came to America and settled at Northumberland, Pennsylvania, where he spent the remainder of his life.

It occurred to Dr. H. Carrington Bolton that it would be well to celebrate the centennial of Priestley's discovery; and it was further suggested by Miss Rachel Bodley, herself a chemist, that the celebration might most properly be held beside Priestley's grave. These suggestions were adopted, and on August 1 seventy-seven pilgrims assembled at Northumberland. Some of Priestley's descendants who lived at Northumberland took part in the meetings, which, if I remember rightly, lasted three days.

On one of these days Dr. Persifor Frazer suggested that the time was ripe for the formation of an American chemical society; and this proposition led to some discussion, pro and con. The writer, however, called attention to the proposed subsection of chemistry within the American Association, and urged that further action should be deferred until the subsection, which was soon to have its first regular meeting, could be given a chance to establish itself. Coöperation, not competition, was desirable. This suggestion was approved, and before the month was out the American Association met at Hartford, with the new subsection as one of its most successful features. Its chairman was Prof. S. W. Johnson; there was a large attendance; and a fair number of papers were presented. The ball, thus started, kept on rolling, year by year, with the subsection of chemistry a recognized feature of the

Association, until 1881 when it was made a full section, Section C, presided over by a vice president, who that year was the late Dr. H. Carrington Bolton.

Meanwhile, during the years covered by the preceding statements, three distinctively chemical societies were organized in America: the AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY in 1876; the Cincinnati Chemical Society in the early eighties; and the Chemical Society of Washington in 1884. The AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY, the nucleus from which the present SOCIETY has developed, was incorporated under the laws of New York; and its headquarters were in the city of that name, where, until 1890, most of its meetings were held. It started with fifty-three resident, and eighty non-resident members, the latter group being pretty well scattered from New England to California. At the first meeting the President of the SOCIETY was J. W. Draper of New York, and the Vice Presidents were J. Lawrence Smith, of Kentucky; F. A. Genth, of Philadelphia; E. W. Hilgard, of California; C. F. Chandler, of New York; J. W. Mallet, of Virginia; and Henry Morton, of New Jersey. J. L. Smith, S. W. Johnson, T. Sterry Hunt, F. A. Genth, J. W. Mallet, J. C. Booth, A. B. Prescott, C. A. Goessmann, H. B. Nason, G. F. Barker, and G. C. Caldwell, all non-residents, served in the order named as Presidents of the SOCIETY.

So far the SOCIETY was national in character, but as the monthly meetings were held in New York, many chemists, who lived at great distances and therefore could not take active part in the meetings, looked upon the SOCIETY as practically local, and lost all interest in it. Although the SOCIETY published a journal, that was not enough to attract a distant membership. The best American contributions to chemistry were published elsewhere. This was not a satisfactory state of affairs, but what could be done to amend it? Should more local societies be organized in different parts of the country, with small memberships and inadequate means of publishing their proceedings; or might not some form of coöperation be found which would answer all reasonable demands?

In order to answer these questions various plans were proposed. There was much discussion and some rather selfish inertia on the part of a few chemists who were so situated that they felt no need of increasing the number of their associates. The dwellers in some of the larger and older scientific centers were indifferent or even opposed to the creation of a truly national chemical society. But the advocates of coöperation were in earnest and ignored all adverse criticism.

The first result of the agitation in favor of a national organization was to stimulate the existing AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY into greater activity. It had the name and the charter, of which it could not be deprived, but its leaders saw that there was room and need for improvement. Accordingly, they adopted the plan of holding annual meetings in cities other than New York. The first of these was held at Newport, Rhode Island, on August 6 and 7, 1890. The chemists of Rhode Island at once formed a local section of the parent SOCIETY, and the membership of the latter began to increase rapidly, although it had been steadily decreasing. The accounts of the first general meeting of the SOCIETY at Newport and of the founding of the first local section in Rhode Island are given in Chapter IV by Charles E. Munroe.

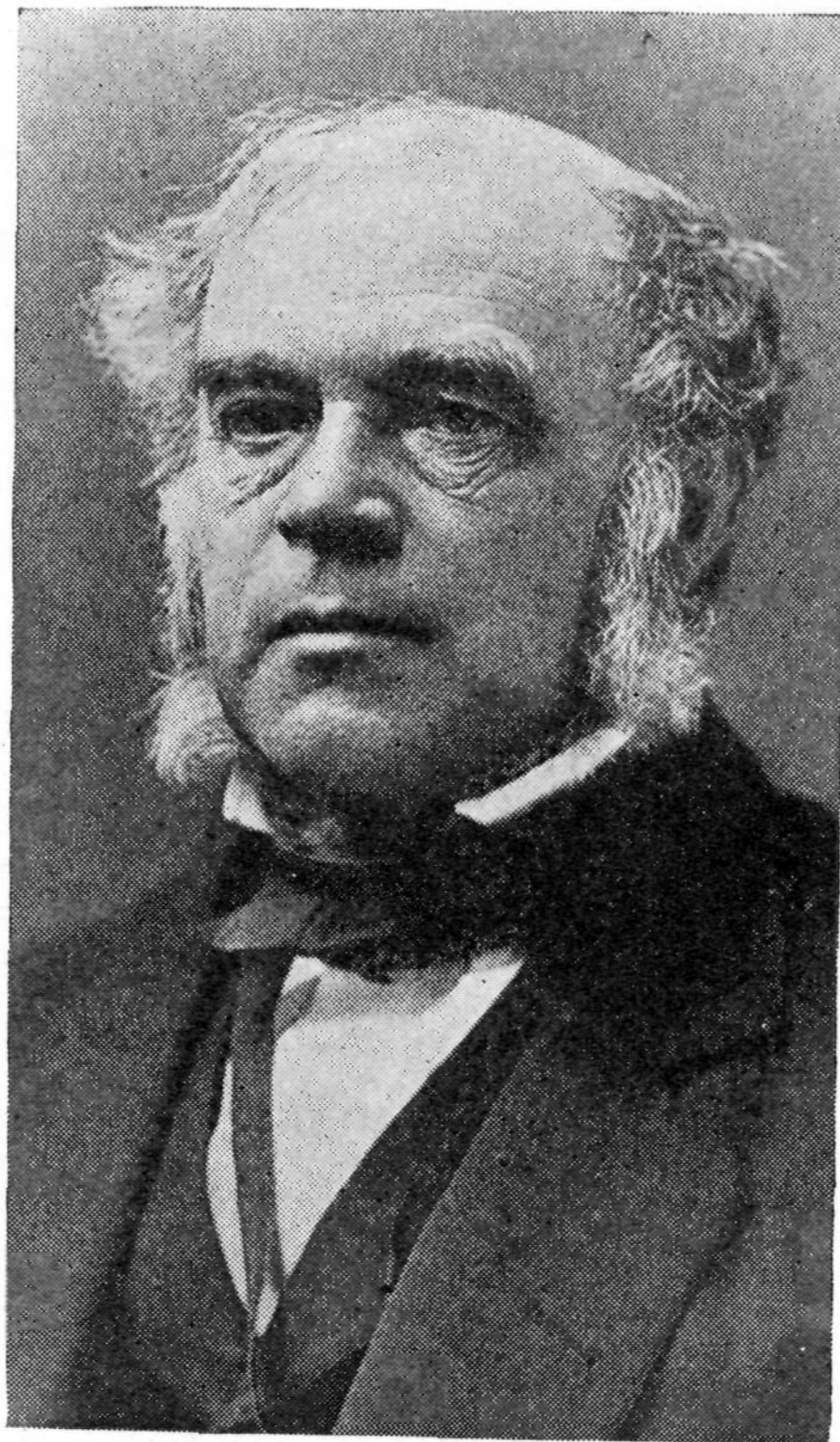
In the attempt to develop a more general organization of American chemists, the Chemical Society of Washington was especially active, and in August, 1891, a workable plan was proposed. A meeting of delegates from existing societies was held in Washington, and at this conference it was decided that the problem might be solved if the several existing organizations would unite as local sections of a national society. The name and charter of the New York Society was to be retained, with the business offices in New York. On December 9, 1891, the Board of Directors of the AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY appointed a committee to revise its Constitution and By-Laws, in conformity with the plan developed at the Washington conference. After several meetings a final report of the committee was presented, and a new Constitution was adopted on November 4, 1892. Suitable By-Laws were adopted on October 27, 1893. After several revisions the present Constitution was adopted in April, 1901.

The reorganized AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY made a promising start with four local sections; namely, New York, Rhode Island, Cincinnati, and Washington. Others were soon organized, and now the local sections number seventy, fairly covering the whole area of the United States. These sections hold their own monthly meetings, but general meetings, for the transaction of general business, are held twice a year, but seldom in the same place.

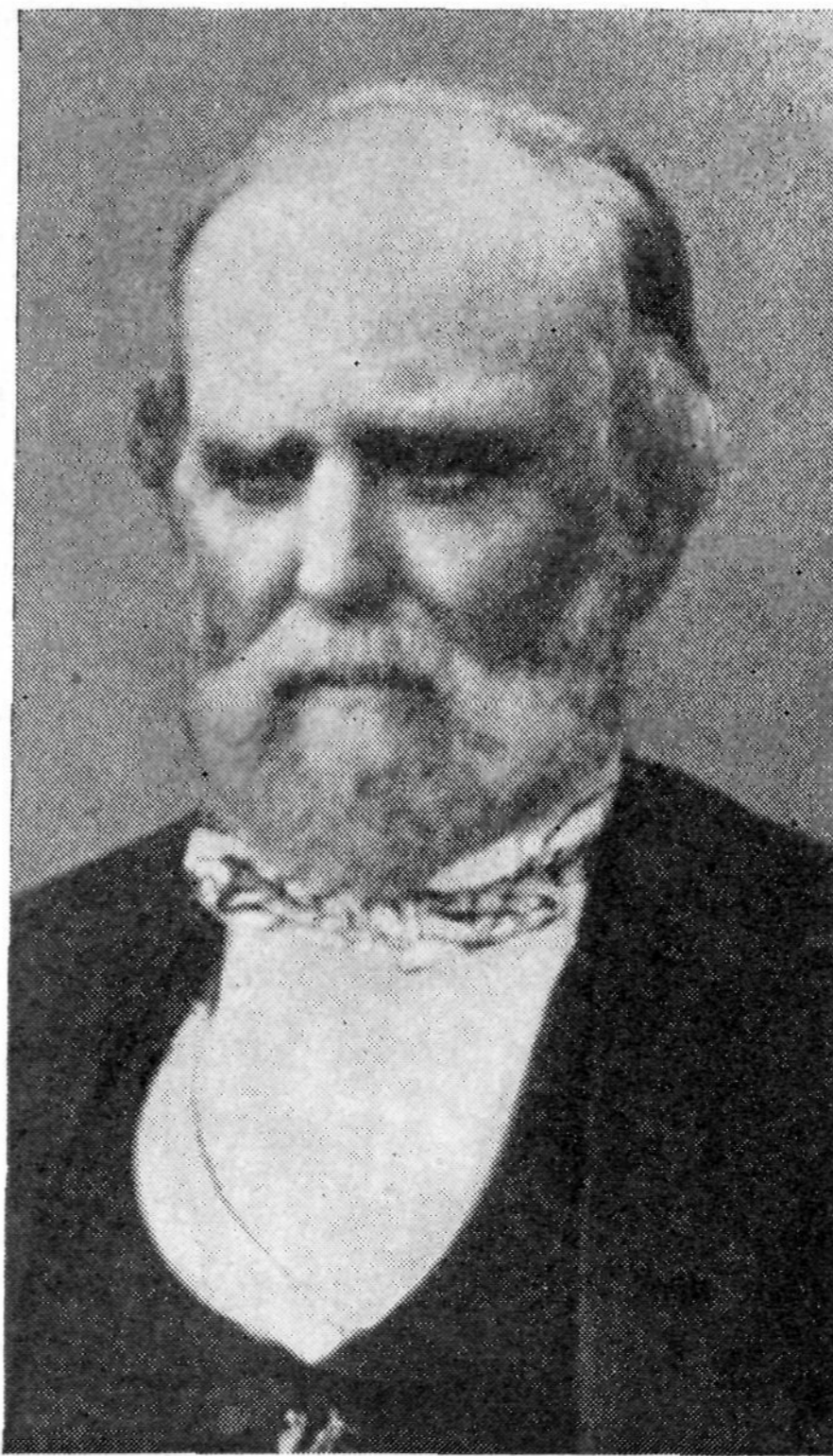
Up to this point the organization of American chemists was nearly, but not quite, complete. Section C of the American Association was still to be considered. It was active and prosperous, but independent of the AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY with which it could not be consolidated. Coöperation, however, was possible, and after much discussion and some opposition a

very simple plan was adopted. The two organizations became loosely affiliated, Section C retaining its independence, but joint meetings were held in which neither party sacrificed anything, but instead gained in strength. Section C became for several years the largest section of the American Association. The first of these joint meetings was held in Washington in 1891, with Professor Barker presiding. After some years, however, the partnership was broken up, partly because of the growing size of the AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY and the difficulty of finding places to accommodate the members of the two organizations, and partly because a large number of chemists found the time of the meeting of the Association, in late summer, inconvenient.

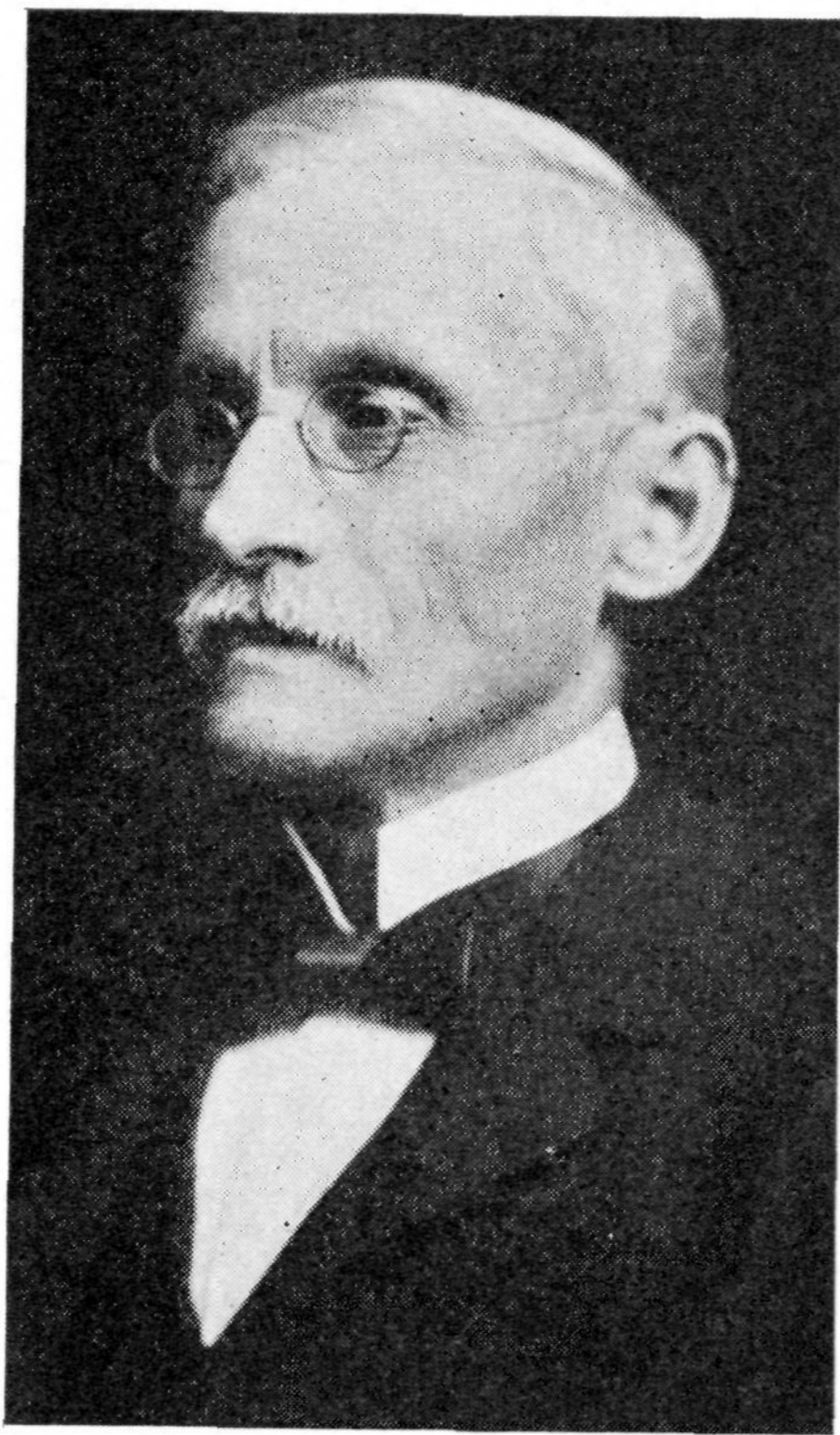
A full account of the organization and development of the Chemical Section of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and of its relations with the AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY is given by Marcus Benjamin in the Twenty-fifth Anniversary Number of the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, published in 1902. A complete history of the publications of the AMERICAN CHEMICAL SOCIETY, of its growth in membership, and of its numerous activities is given in Chapter V by the Secretary, Charles L. Parsons.



JOHN W. DRAPER
(1811-1882)
President 1876



J. LAWRENCE SMITH
(1818-1883)
President 1877



SAMUEL W. JOHNSON
(1830-1909)
President 1878



T. STERRY HUNT
(1826-1892)
President 1879, 1888

J. W. Draper, S. W. Johnson, and T. S. Hunt were also Charter Members; J. L. Smith and T. S. Hunt attended the Priestley Centennial in 1874. The portrait of J. L. Smith, taken from D. H. Killeffer's "Eminent American Chemists," is an enlargement from the group on page 4.