Abolitionist, physician, and proponent of public health, was born to Nathaniel Bowditch, the prominent mathematician, and Mary (Ingersoll) Bowditch at Salem, Massachusetts. Bowditch attended a private grammar school in Salem until the family relocated to Boston in 1823. He studied there for two years at Public Latin School. In 1825
was arrested, Bowditch was one of three men who organized the Latimer Committee to protest this action. The committee issued a newspaper for several months and so swayed Massachusetts public opinion that a state law was adopted that forbade state authorities to aid in the return of fugitive slaves. Afterward, Bowditch continued to aid these slaves.

When the Civil War broke out, Bowditch became a fervent supporter of the Union cause. In 1862 he volunteered his medical services on the Virginia front. He was appalled by conditions there, especially the lack of an adequate ambulance service to remove wounded men from the battlefield. He began lobbying vigorously for the creation of an army ambulance corps but encountered resistance in the Senate. In 1863, when one of his sons died as a result of wounds received in battle, Bowditch issued a pamphlet. Citing his son’s sufferings, he pleaded for the creation of an ambulance corps. The publication had a sufficient effect on public opinion to lead to the establishment of such a corps.

This was but one of Bowditch’s efforts to improve public health. In 1862 he provided the Massachusetts Medical Society with a report on the distribution of tuberculosis in the state. Based on extensive research, the report linked the disease to poor housing conditions and suggested that the sickness was contagious. Aware of the influence of the environment on public health and believing in the importance of preventive medicine, Bowditch worked for the establishment of health boards at the national, state, and municipal levels. The Massachusetts State Board of Health was organized in 1869, in large part because of his efforts. He was appointed chairman and served in that position until 1879. Under his leadership the board worked to control disease and improve sanitation in the state. Bowditch also served on the National Board of Health, created by Congress in 1879.

Bowditch belonged to the American Medical Association, working actively within it to stimulate interest in public hygiene. Because of his efforts he was elected president of the AMA in 1879. He also supported medical training for women, something few other doctors then did. As Bowditch explained his position, “I am always ‘lugged in’ and have to bear the brunt of battle for an unpopular idea. I can’t help it; I cannot sit by and see an honest cause abused and spit upon without at least protesting.”

From his boyhood on, Bowditch was devout. He was associated with the Warren Street Chapel until 1842, when he left in protest over the refusal of his fellow officers to permit sermons on abolition. Afterward, he seldom attended church services, finding the ceremonies uninspiring and preferring to focus his efforts on improving public health and aiding the disadvantaged.
to spend the Sabbath outdoors. In 1880 Bowditch's health began to fail. After the death of his wife, Olivia (Yardley) Bowditch, whom he had married on July 17, 1838, he declined badly. He died on January 14, 1892, at the age of eighty-three.