

DANCING THROUGH RUTGERS MEDICAL COLLEGE. 1827—1829

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From time immemorial, medical students have had more than academics on their minds and the more than 400 young men who attended the Rutgers Medical College in Lower Manhattan between 1826 and 1830 were no exceptions. Many of them came from rural backgrounds and were exposed to temptations in Olde New York that they'd never experienced back home. The brief but turbulent history of the school is well described elsewhere and what follows here are descriptions of the extra-curricular activities of two high-spirited country bumpkins who studied there as extracted from their correspondence or diary entries.

John Rosencrantz of Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ attended two terms (1826-1827 and 1827-1828) and received an honorary medical degree in 1830 while Asa Fitch of Salem, NY (forty miles from Albany) attended only the 1828-1829 term. Both students were born in 1809 and both were the sons of country doctors who followed in their father's footsteps, albeit with little enthusiasm. Indeed, as we shall see, although each of them practiced medicine briefly after obtaining their licenses, both neophytes abandoned the profession as soon as opportunity permitted.

John Rosencrantz's father Elijah Rosencrantz was one of the few doctors in rural Bergen County during the early 19th century. When his oldest son John was fifteen he was sent to pursue "liberal studies" at an academy that probably was located in New York City. However, apparently because of financial pressure, there was a change of plans and John's, by now, ailing father reluctantly had his son enter the family business. His letters to siblings and friends, which described squirrel hunting, sleighing and hunting, suggest that John was more a typical teenager than a serious scholar. In reply, his brother once complained, "we can scarce read your writing." Letters from Elijah were filled with paternal advice to be respectful of elders, avoid bad company and to write home frequently.

I wish you my son to apply yourself to your studies, take necessary exercise and amusement but let them not intrude on your hours of study....The many inducements to take you from your studies by the practice and customs of the young people in this country give me some anxiety for fear you will give away too much...Exercise and some company is necessary to become acquainted with the world, but I shall still hope that you will not give yourself too much to the pleasures and diversions of customs of this place. It is impossible to apply the mind to study when it is continually intoxicated with the idea of company and those bewitching frolics common to this country. You will not disappoint me I hope of keeping yourself and your desires of company and pleasures of youth under due restraint. (January 30, 1825)

For emphasis, four days later, Elijah wrote again,

Your main object should be knowledge of your intended profession and secondly knowledge of the world which are both indispensably necessary to your becoming useful to yourself and society. ..The field before you is great. Great industry and perseverance is necessary to make your reputation in your profession. This I trust you are sensible of and will not disappoint me. (February 3, 1827)

At the beginning of John Rosencrantz's second term at Rutgers, his father made an uncharacteristic concession:

I had thought to have mentioned it to you before you left home that if you had any wish to go to a dancing school this winter, I would have no objection provided it be respectable and not too expensive, but this you must keep to yourself, let it not be known here. If it be your wish

you may let me know directly and the terms. I do it to meet your wish only, it may be an accomplishment. (November 7, 1826)

Only fragments of their correspondence still exist, so it's not known whether or not John took advantage of his father's offer, but the following year Asa Fitch was more descriptive in his diary. From age 12 until his death at age 70, Asa recorded mundane details of his personal life in journals, including the four month period during the winter of 1828-29 when he came to New York City to study at Rutgers Medical College

Asa Fitch had a strict upbringing and was a virtuous farm boy. As a teenager he scolded himself, "I must not idle away my time....I must do better. I *must* do better." Although he showed aptitude for botany and geology, both his father of the same name and his grandfather were physicians and wished him to enter the family vocation. So after graduation from high school, Asa was apprenticed to a local physician and that winter he entered the Vermont Academy of Medicine. Originally called Castleton Medical Academy, it was the first independent medical school in New England. However, after completing a term in Vermont, Asa chastised himself about his insufficient application to study: "I regret I have not learned more. I have often been too inattentive, and have heard whole lectures, without remembering scarcely an idea which they contained. It is now... too late to repent, and I must make amends in my future application." Opportunity for self-improvement came the next winter when enrolled for a term of lectures and surgical demonstrations at the Rutgers Medical College in lower Manhattan (now Tribeca.)

Most of the entries in Asa Fitch's journal described the attractions and temptations of city life: how he walked wide-eyed along Broadway, the Bowery and in Greenwich Village; how he ferried across the East River to visit the Brooklyn Navy Yard; how whenever a fire bell rang out, he'd dash off after the engines to watch the show; museums and theater provided entertainment and he

often attended book auctions. His strict religious background was tested as he visited various churches, seemingly more out of curiosity than religious fervor.

Surely the highlight of Asa's social life in New York, which occupied a major portion of his journals, were dancing classes for men that were given in a hall in the 11th Ward, a rowdy section noted for its multitude of beer saloons. At first he was shy and clumsy, but diligently practiced the steps in his room at night after it was too dark to read or write. After twenty-three lessons, he became self-confident and comfortable in "gallanting" the young ladies at cotillions. He learned to bow and shake hands according to current etiquette and mastered the "art of conversation." After all, he wrote, "The profession I have chosen requires an ability to conduct myself in all grades of society with ease and propriety." Also, he was beguiled by young women – but with some reservations:

Previously, I'd delighted to look on beautiful features and to contemplate the fair sex with admiration [but] my natural diffidence and bashfulness forbade my forming any acquaintance except when circumstances made it unavoidable...[but] New York is no place for [feminine] beauty. All the paraphernalia of art will never supplant this defect. I have not since I arrived here, seen looks so fascinating to me, as those of the country fair ones, where the tyrant fashion has not so [held] sway.

On Christmas Eve Asa was homesick and, longing for companionship, went partying with a few like-minded friends. They drank hot whiskey punch, Holland gin cocktails and cognac slings and before long the giddy group was full of "life and animation...felt a glow of thought...[their conversation] frivolous and risable." The drunken students stumbled through their dance routines, sang off-tune and staggered home very late. Inevitably, this was followed by morning-after sickness, self-recrimination and vows not to repeat the debauch – at least not for a few days.

Asa Fitch's four months in Manhattan was the longest time he'd ever been away from home and by the end of February he was eager to return to Salem. Before leaving he purchased a medical bag, lancets, chemicals and books and as the end of the term approached, he was pleased that he'd made "rapid strides toward the age of manhood." On his last night he put on his finery and his "blackened and shining boots," resolved that "this shall be the happiest, sweetest, liveliest evening I have yet known in New York. I will let out one notch." At the cotillion, while changing to his dancing pumps, he mused:

When shall I wear them again? I know not, but hope the folks in Salem do not think dancing the awful thing which they have for a few years past. Where is the harm in dancing? I have not yet found it out. I have not yet experienced the least ill consequence from it. Nor does my conscience tell me it's wrong or sinful."....I have now come to a room where many an evening for the last three months I have witnessed the manners and customs of city life, the gayety and frivolity – where many an hour has been passed "treading the steps of the giddy dance, on the light fantastic toe." Ah, they were happy hours – hours of enjoyment. And with this evening they terminate forever.

That night Asa led some of the quadrilles, proudly holding his head "as straight and stiff as a dandy." He knew that when he returned to his sober up-state community, both family and church leaders would reprimand him for frivolous behavior, especially his dancing but, undaunted, he had derived great pleasure from the manners and customs of city life and vowed never to return to "say-nothing-to-nobody-ness"; never again to be an "ill-bred booby."

I am not prepared to renounce it [dancing]...my determination at the outset was to rid myself of the extreme diffidence, timidity, tongue-tiedness...This would never do for me when I was a doctor...I was resolved to cure myself of it....I can now go into company, yes, polite

company, and feel myself at home...I have danced, I have played, I have kissed rosy cheeks, I have won maidens' smiles. Yet I do not think I have gone astray, or opened the wounds of my Saviour...or sinned against my God....And if dancing is to be condemned from the vicious habits to which it leads, I can aver that I have not felt this tendency. I have not gambled. I have not squandered away money. I have had no illicit connections. I have not even had any such inclinations. Never, no never.

After his winter sojourn at Rutgers Medical College, Asa Fitch returned to Salem and apprenticed again with a local doctor. In August 1828 he returned to Castleton as an advanced student and attended the same lectures as during his first term there. Of course, life in rural Vermont was not comparable to what he'd experienced in New York. He dutifully attended church services, participated in the debating society and sought opportunities to meet young ladies; the highlight of the year was the arrival of a "caravan of animals" – a travelling circus. But he was restless and eager to strike out on his own: "Oh, may it ever be my lot to be contented – to be happy, in whatever sphere I may be placed, nor pine away my life, with needless gloomy thoughts, when at best there is sorrow enough." Having completed a second course of lectures at the Vermont Academy and receiving credit for his studies at Rutgers, Asa had to defend his dissertation, "Natural Sciences and Their Importance to Medicine" and then pass a three hour oral examination. Finally, with diploma and medical license in hand, he married a local girl, as he said, attracted more by her mind than her beauty. He practiced in her hometown of Stillwater for six years, but his various experiences left Asa with a "cordial distaste" for the life of a country doctor; he regarded himself as too honest to compete with the quacks and charlatans in the profession because of his resolve to give medicine only when needed and only in necessary doses.

In truth, Asa Fitch's passion always had been for -- insects! Since early childhood he habitually crawled around on hands and knees collecting all manner of creeping things in his "bug net." Neighbors called him "The Bug Catcher." In 1838

he gave up medical practice for good, returned to Salem to attend his ailing father's business and remained on the family's 600 acre farm for the remainder of his life. In 1855 he was appointed as New York State's first professional entomologist and, in time, was recognized as America's leading authority, his fourteen voluminous reports "The Noxious and Other Insects of New York State," recognized as classics in the field.

John Rosencrantz assisted his father until Elijah died in 1832. In a letter to a younger brother, he complained of "the dull monotony of life...[how] unrelenting routine is one of the greatest antidotes to sentiment and the busy imagination of youth...There is no room for fancy in the reality of this world." Evidently, there was no time for dancing either. Indeed, much of his time was taken with getting paid for his travail. He described how "the people around here are an infernal set with few exceptions. They don't care to pay bills. We must call for it [even] if it is five miles – earning it twice."

Although I am the son of a country physician and brought up in the country, yet I know no more of the life and the perplexities of one who practices here and lives by it, than a new born babe....[in a postscript] It is a Monday morning and I have just come in and have not a cent...Hell and dander – I wish the profession was in oblivion.

Several years after Elijah Rosencrantz died in 1832, John gave up medical practice and moved to Philadelphia where he worked for the large Ripka textile mills. He married the owner's daughter, and since there were no other young males in the family, he became involved in running the Ripka business. His journals provide insights about the maturation of an unsophisticated country boy exposed to big city life. Although his medical career was short-lived and undistinguished, Asa went on to achieve distinction as a prime mover in developing entomology as a profession in America. Similarly John Rosencrantz's letters provided a vivid description of student life early in the 19th century.

Although both men went on to lead successful non-medical careers, it's fair to presume that neither of them regretted the frolics of their student days; indeed, their eyes were opened there to new delights and, no doubt, dancing days and nights in Manhattan were among their fondest memories.

SOURCES

Much more about the history of Rutgers Medical College can be found in my book *Meanderings in New Jersey's Medical History*, chapter 4 "The Stormy Petrel of American Medical Education." The Rosencrantz correspondence is also described there in Chapter 3, "You've Got Mail." The story of Asa Fitch appears in detail in *Still More Meanderings in Medical History*, chapter 10, "Diary of a Rutgers Medical Student." His collected journals were found in Asa Fitch Papers (MS 215) Manuscripts and Archives at Yale University's Sterling Memorial Library. The Rosencrantz letters are contained in the archives of The Hermitage, Ho-Ho-Kus, New Jersey.