

STUDENT HI-JINKS AT RUTGERS MEDICAL COLLEGE

From time immemorial medical students had more than academics on their minds and roughly 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. My focus here will be on the extra-curricular activities of two high-spirited country bumpkins. One was **John Rosencrantz** of Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ, who attended two terms at Rutgers Medical College (1826-1827 and 1827-1828) and received an honorary medical degree in 1830. The other student was **Asa Fitch** of Salem, NY (forty miles from Albany) who attended only the 1828-1829 winter term. Both students were born in 1809 and being the sons of country doctors, followed in their father's footsteps, albeit with little enthusiasm. As I'll describe, although each of them briefly practiced medicine after obtaining their licenses, both abandoned the profession as soon as opportunity permitted. But before discussing these two neophytes, a brief explanation would be helpful about what Rutgers' medical school was doing in New York City in the first place. It was all because of this man — Dr. David Hosack.



Below: Rutgers Medical College on Broadway and Duane Street in Lower Manhattan



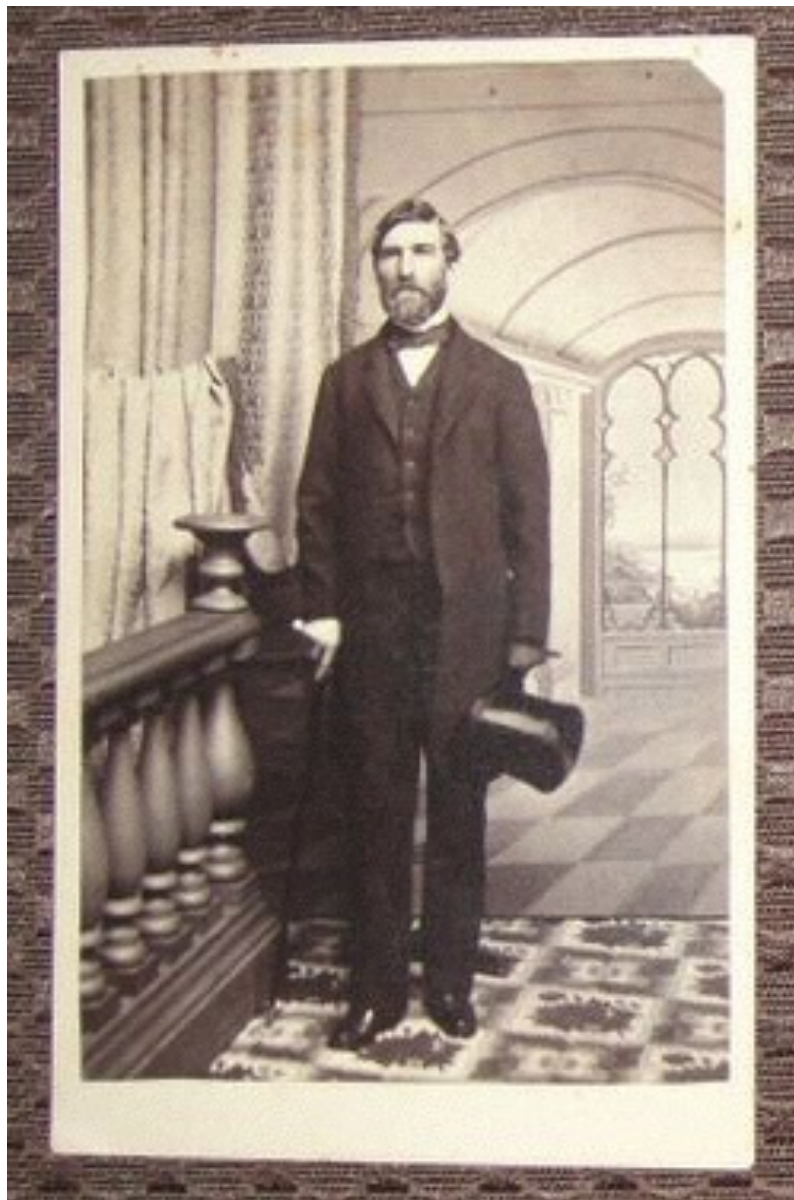
David Hosack's father had come from Scotland to fight in the French and Indian War under Lord Jeffrey Amherst. David was born in New York City in 1769 and studied medicine at Columbia and the University of Pennsylvania, where he boarded with the famous Dr. Benjamin Rush. Later, when studying for two years in Edinburgh and London, Hosack became an advocate of botanical medicine and after returning to America in 1794, he was the local authority and was appointed Professor of Botany in Columbia College. Ambitious to be a society doctor, eventually his practice would include the families of both Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr - more about that shortly.

In 1801 Hosack bought 20 wooded acres of so-called "common land" three and a half miles north of the city limit (between West 47th and 51st Street, Fifth and Sixth Avenues.) In that sylvan setting he built America's first botanical garden, naming it Elgin after his father's native city in Scotland. Friends sent seeds from around the world and more than 2,000 varieties and rare trees. Elegantly dressed couples strolled around the manicured grounds and Hosack held an annual Strawberry Festival to emphasize that exotic fruit's medicinal properties. Regrettably, the Rutgers students were reluctant to take the long trip north of the city limits just to study medicinal plants.

I'll say about the garden later, but at this point I should say a few words about the event for which Dr. Hosack was most famous. In the Broadway musical *Hamilton* an actor carrying medical bag represents David Hosack but is not identified by name — and when at the famous duel in 1804 when Alexander Hamilton was killed, Aaron Burr sings ("The World Was Wide Enough") that Hamilton brought "a doctor that he knew," and adds that "the doctor turned around so he could have deniability." That fits the conventional narrative that Dr. Hosack was crouched in the bushes with his back turned so as not to be an eye witness to an illegal event. When shots rang out, he rushed over, only to hear Hamilton gasp "It's a mortal wound, Doctor." The victim was correct.

David Hosack helped carry the stricken Hamilton to the boat that rowed back across the Hudson where he died in agony the next day. The doctor administered smelling salts and pain killers, performed the autopsy, even served as a pall bearer, and later he sent a bill for \$50 for medical services rendered during the "final illness." Hosack also loaned Aaron Burr money for passage on a ship to Europe where Burr lived for several years in self-imposed exile. It's not clear to me whether David Hosack was ever reimbursed for his services to either Hamilton or Burr.

At the beginning of the 19th century American medical education was chaotic and political in-fighting in New York City between Columbia College and P&S was especially fierce. Among the band of rivals, David Hosack may have been the most entrepreneurial and aggressive. Indeed, he's been described as "the stormy petrel of American education." Undaunted by various conflicts of interest, he was on the faculty of both schools and, at the same time, was profitably teaching his own private students. In those days teachers were paid directly by their students, so the more they had, the better. At one time, Hosack held three professorships at P&S but additionally wanted to be appointed professor of surgery which attracted the most students. Thwarted in this, he resigned in fury and opened his own school on Duane Street in what's now the Tribeca section. He siphoned off several faculty members and attracted more than 150 students — among them: John Rosencrantz of HoHoKus, NJ. (below)



This is not the time to relate the quarrelsome history of Rutgers Medical College. Instead, let's consider pleasanter material, so now let's return to our two rather reluctant medical students. First: **John Rosencrantz**.

His father Elijah Rosencrantz was one of the few doctors in rural Bergen County during the early 19th century. A fourth generation American, he'd been a colonel in George Washington's army and was the first of his family to go to college, graduating from Queens College (Rutgers) in 1791. Then he studied theology and was granted a license to preach, but his first sermon in Paramus was so uninspiring that he was unable to find a permanent posting and began to have second thoughts about a career as an itinerant preacher. He wrote that he was so disturbed by "the low state of religion and the neglect paid to ministers in general [that] I prosecuted the study of physic with diligence." Eventually Elijah was granted a medical license, married a rich girl, and in 1807 used her father's money he to buy a 55 acre estate in HoHoKus called The Hermitage. (It was the same place where Aaron Burr had married the widow Theodosia Prevost in 1781. They must have been an odd couple — she was ten years older than he and had five small children in tow, so she must have been a real charmer.)

When Elijah Rosencrantz's oldest son John was fifteen he was sent to pursue "liberal studies" at an academy in New York City but, because of financial pressure, there was a change of plans and his ailing and aging father reluctantly arranged for his son, instead, to enter the family business. Early letters to siblings and friends had described squirrel hunting, sleighing and new clothes, suggesting that John was a typical teenager more than a serious scholar. Elijah reconciled himself so long as his son applied himself and demonstrated "the cardinal virtues of honesty, justice, temperance and prudence."

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.

When John Rosencrantz entered Rutgers Medical College, his anxious father's letters, like Polonius to Hamlet, were filled with paternal advice to be respectful of elders, avoid bad company, write home frequently and legibly. Also, he should attend church regularly but keep his opinions to himself and never enter into arguments about religious subjects. Four days later, Elijah had more to say:

Return my compliments to Dr. Hossack [sic]. You will be very careful and respectful to all the professors [but] particularly to Dr. Hossack....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 in.

To his credit, Elijah was aware that too much study might make John a dull boy and at the beginning of his son's second term at Rutgers, he 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.

Because only fragments of their later correspondence still exist, it's unknown whether or not John Rosencrantz took advantage of his father's offer but, as you'll soon learn, dancing was a popular extra-curricula activity at the Rutgers Medical College.

Now let's consider **Asa Fitch**. He was born and died in the tiny village of Salem in upstate Washington County. From age 12 until his death at age 70, he recorded mundane details of his personal life in daily journals. Asa was a virtuous farm boy who had a strict upbringing and as a teenager he scolded himself, "I must not idle away my time....I must do better. I *must* do better."

Although Asa showed aptitude for botany and geology, both his father (of the same name) and his grandfather were physicians and wanted him to enter the family vocation. So after graduation from high school, Asa was apprenticed to a local physician who'd purchased his father's practice and that winter he entered the Vermont Academy of Medicine. After completing a term there, 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."

The next winter opportunity for self-improvement came when Asa Fitch enrolled for a term of lectures and surgical demonstrations at the Rutgers Medical College in lower Manhattan. When Asa arrived in November, 1828, it was the school's third year of operation and at the opening ceremony, the faculty of six professors entered to great applause and stamping feet from "at least 200 present." President Hosack discussed political opposition to the school and sarcastically described how their enemies "were glad to bite, but fortunately had no teeth." Hosack was held in awe and students crowded his lectures and copied down every one of his authoritative words in their notes. But the chief's prickly personality could be off-putting. Although he had a reputation as a brilliant speaker, he usually read from notes and once when he droned on for nearly three hours, many in the audience snuck out before he wound down.

On New Year's Day, Dr. Hosack invited the students to his elegant home in Kipp's Bay for warm punch and cake. A servant showed them around the grounds, but the great man seemed more interested in talking with the state's Lieutenant Governor about the prospects of the Legislature chartering the school. He boasted that Rutgers had the largest enrollment in New York and disparaged his rivals at Columbia as being mere "amateurs." Asa and his friends exited as soon as possible and went off to celebrate in more congenial surroundings. Like other youth of the day, they not only enjoyed alcohol

and smoking, but experimented inhaling nitrous oxide and ether or resorted to liberal doses of opium in order to “excite the ideas.”



Asa Fitch (1809-1879)

Most of the entries in Asa Fitch's journal described attractions and temptations of city life: how he walked wide-eyed along Broadway, the Bowery and 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 his strict religious background was tested as he visited various churches, seemingly more out of curiosity than religious fervor.

Undoubtedly 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 Asa was shy and clumsy but he 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, as he wrote, he mastered the "art of conversation." After all, "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, although 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...[and their conversation was] 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 that he'd ever been away from home and by the end of February he was eager to return home. 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 Fitch 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 rural community both family and church leaders would reprimand him for frivolous behavior, especially his dancing but he had no regrets. 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." As Asa wrote...

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.

You may wonder what became of our two fledgling doctors after their brief sojourns in the Big City. After his single winter term 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 he had during his first term there. Naturally, life in 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 traveling circus.

But Asa 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." He married a local girl — as he wrote, "attracted more by her mind than her beauty" — and practiced in her hometown (Stillwater) for six years. But his various experiences there 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," were recognized as classics in the field and he was acknowledged to be a prime mover in developing entomology as a profession in America.

And what of John Rosencrantz? He assisted his father in his medical practice in HoHoKus until Elijah died in 1832. In a letter to a younger brother, John complained about "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." Certainly there was no time for dancing because much of his time was taken with getting paid for his travail.

Dr. John 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 his father died, John Rosencrantz gave up medical practice altogether 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 and never looked back.

The written accounts of these two spirited young men provided a vivid description of student life early in the 19th century and, although each of them went on to lead successful non-medical careers, it’s fair to presume that neither of them regretted the frolics of their student days. Their eyes had been opened to new delights, especially days and nights spent dancing in Lower Manhattan.

Although David Hosack, “the stormy petrel of American education,” continued his battles with the medical establishment, it was a losing battle. No classes were held at Rutgers after 1830, but he pursued his struggles in the Supreme Court and the state legislature until in 1835 he finally threw in the towel. His days were numbered anyway. He’d already retired to his 700 acre estate in Hyde Park where he died after a stroke at age 66. He’d been a mover and shaker on the city’s cultural scene as well as a founder of Bellevue Hospital and decades later, his Hyde Park estate was sold to the Vanderbilt family — still later, their next door neighbor Franklin Roosevelt arranged to have it designated as a national park. Rutgers reopened a medical school in New Brunswick in 1966 and the history of its modern version was almost as complicated, but far less contentious, than the original in what’s now Tribeca.

You may wonder whether there's any evidence remaining of the brief presence of Rutgers Medical College in Olde New York? The original building is long gone but there is a small vestige of Dr. Hosack’s pride and joy, the Elgin Botanic Garden.



Elgin Garden had been too expensive for one man to manage alone so Hosack arranged through political friends to sell the property by public lottery. In 1811 the garden was purchased by the state at a considerable financial loss to Hosack, but under government ownership it was neglected. After a few years the state passed the property to Columbia University in order to settle a debt and it was said that the college accepted the gift "with apprehension." They failed to develop it for more than a century until in 1929 it was leased to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and it became Rockefeller Center. The lease between the Rockefellers and Columbia was renegotiated several times and in 1985 the school was bought out for \$400 million. There were several later sales until in

2000 the property was sold to a group headed by Goldman Sachs for \$1.85 billion! The only evidence that still remains of Elgin Garden is a small plaque that's located midway along the promenade between Fifth Avenue and the skating ring. It reads in part:

In memory of David Hosack, 1769-1835, botanist, physician, man of Science and Citizen of the World, on this site he developed the famous Elgin Botanic Garden, 1801-1811, for the advancement of medical research and the knowledge of plants.



(The full story was wonderfully told in Victoria Johnson's book *American Eden* that was published in 2018.)

