

From the Archives

HAMILTON'S PHYSICIAN: DAVID HOSACK, RENAISSANCE MAN OF EARLY NEW YORK

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IT IS ONE OF THE VAGARIES of historical remembrance that certain individuals who are extraordinarily well known and well connected during their lifetimes can become largely forgotten over time. Such appears to be the case with David Hosack, the physician who attended Alexander Hamilton at his duel with Aaron Burr at Weehawken, New Jersey, in 1804. The bill reproduced on page 52, part of the New-York Historical Society's collections, shows that Hosack charged Hamilton's estate fifty dollars for services rendered during Hamilton's "final illness"—a strange euphemism, given that Hamilton died from a gunshot wound inflicted by the vice-president of the United States. (Tragically, three years earlier, Dr. Hosack similarly tended to Hamilton's eldest child, nineteen-year-old Philip, who also perished after a duel that took place at the same location.)¹

Exactly two centuries later, interest in the Hamilton-Burr duel remains as lively as ever—but how many people today can identify David Hosack, let alone list any of his many accomplishments? The 1947 New-York Historical Society annual report, in which an illustration of Hosack's bill appeared as a new acquisition, identifies a number of items associated with Hamilton as among the highlights of that year's additions to the collections, but the reader would otherwise have no hint of Hosack's importance to the city's early life.² During his lifetime, he devoted his prodigious energies not only to medicine, but also to a far wider range of interests, including

botanical science, mineralogy, art, literature, and the writing and preservation of history. David Hosack was, in short, a well-known and powerful mover and shaker in early New York at a critical time in its development.

A native of the city, Hosack was born in 1769. In 1786, he enrolled in King's (later Columbia) College, where he began a lifelong friendship with the young DeWitt Clinton, who served the city as mayor from 1803 through 1815, and the state as governor, from 1817 until his death in office in 1828.³ Hosack transferred to Princeton, graduated in 1789, and went on to study medicine at what became the Medical School of the University of Pennsylvania. He later traveled to Edinburgh and then to London, where he visited the Linnaean Herbarium, containing the transplanted botanical collection of the famed Swedish botanist and taxonomist, Carolus Karl Linnaeus. This experience greatly influenced Hosack. By 1794, he had settled in New York where he practiced medicine for the rest of his life.⁴

AMONG HOSACK'S BELOVED PROJECTS was his creation of the Elgin Botanic Garden, the first botanical garden in the United States. Today, the throngs bustling through Rockefeller Center's "promenade" between Fifth Avenue and the skating rink probably never imagine that this commercial setting in the heart of midtown Manhattan was once a botanical garden in the countryside.⁵ In 1801, when Hosack purchased the property bordered by today's West Forty-seventh and West Fifty-first streets, and Fifth and Sixth avenues, this area of New York lay far beyond the limits of the settled city and was part of the undeveloped "common lands" that ran north of today's Twenty-sixth Street for approximately four miles.⁶ Hosack named his garden after Elgin, Scotland, his ancestral home, and created an Eden of flowers, medicinal plants, and trees, complete with an elaborate greenhouse for growing a variety of specimens. Unfortunately, the garden was an expensive passion, and in 1811, unable to fund its upkeep, Hosack was forced to sell the property to New York State at the then-staggering loss of \$35,000, after failing to receive the state's help maintaining the garden as an educational resource.⁷ In 1814, the legislature voted to give the land to Columbia College to settle a dispute over an educational lottery, with the plan that the school would move there from its location at Reade and Murray Streets.⁸ The college, in fact, never occupied the site, but it retained ownership, eventually leasing the property to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in the 1920s for the construction of Rockefeller Center.⁹

Charles Bryan Hall
after Thomas Sully.
David Hosack, M.D.
Steel engraving.
Gift of Daniel Parish,
Jr., 1901. (PR 052)



The Elgin Botanic Garden was only one of many of Dr. Hosack's non-medical pursuits. Biographer Christine Robbins describes Hosack's professional life as a demanding one, noting that he was "...tireless in his attendance on critical cases. Among those with whom he spent long hours in their last illnesses were George Cooke, Robert Fulton, Mrs. DeWitt Clinton, Mrs. John Trumbull, and Gouverneur Morris." Indeed, Hosack's patients were a veritable "who's who" of New York society.¹⁰ Nevertheless, his connections with the wealthy and powerful did not blind him to the needs of the less fortunate. The Society for the Relief of Distressed Debtors, founded in 1787, eventually enlisted Hosack's active support along with that of prominent New Yorkers like DeWitt Clinton and John Pintard, the latter a prominent merchant and city inspector, who had once been bankrupt himself.¹¹ In an era when people were still jailed for insolvency, the society initially provided imprisoned debtors with basic necessities, but as time went on, the organization expanded its scope and opened a soup house on Frankfort Street. In 1803, it formally changed its name to the Humane Society.¹²

David Hosack left his mark on New York history in many other areas as well. In this, the bicentennial year of the New-York Historical Society, Hosack is honored as one of its founders. Once again joined by DeWitt Clinton, Pintard, and other influential citizens, Hosack created a New York City organization dedicated to the preservation of New York and American history. He held a variety of offices in the Society, and from 1820 to 1827, served as president, a position that enabled him to greet an aging Lafayette during his triumphal 1824 tour of the United States.¹³

Apart from these myriad achievements, David Hosack also found the time to promote literature and the arts. A member of the American Academy of Fine Arts, Hosack was pivotal in garnering commissions for the painters Samuel F.B. Morse and Thomas Cole (he personally purchased works from both artists as well) and hobnobbed with the likes of authors Washington Irving and William Cullen Bryant.¹⁴ In addition to writing a steady stream of medical articles, Hosack also penned biographical memoirs, including one honoring his dear friend, DeWitt Clinton.¹⁵

IN FACT, it would appear that Hosack did all things to the utmost, even in his personal life. He married three times, and was widowed twice. His third marriage, to Magdalena Coster, a wealthy widow and mother of seven, made Hosack the father of a combined family of fourteen children.¹⁶ Indeed, Hosack's succession of addresses provides an interesting glimpse of residential living patterns in early New York City. In the late 1790s, Hosack lived on Maiden Lane, and in 1807 moved to 65 Broadway. When he married Mrs. Coster in 1825, he moved into both his wife's "country home" in the Kips Bay area and her townhouse at 85 Chambers Street, later purchasing another townhouse a few doors away, which served as the setting for Hosack's literary and artistic "salon."¹⁷

Not one to slip into his later years without his usual agenda of projects, Hosack engaged in yet another great undertaking involving his love of the field of botany. At one time, he had shared a medical practice with Dr. Samuel Bard, who owned a large estate named "Hyde Park" in Dutchess County. Bard died in 1821, and in 1828, his son William sold the 540-acre estate to Hosack, who engaged in the horticultural pursuits there that had so happily occupied him years before at his Elgin Botanic Garden. He also enlarged the original house, and many eminent authors, artists, and scientists visited Hosack there in his final years.¹⁸

David Hosack died of a stroke (then called "apoplexy") on December 22, 1835, just days after the "Great Fire" that had so dramatically changed his beloved city. Hosack's close friend, the renowned Episcopal Bishop of New York John Henry Hobart, presided over the funeral service at Grace Church, then located at Broadway and Rector Street, on Christmas Day. Hosack was interred in the New York Marble Cemetery, located between East Second and East Third streets off Second Avenue.¹⁹ His descendants transferred his remains to the burial ground at Trinity Church in 1888.²⁰ Perhaps it is fitting that Alexander Hamilton, who spent his last hours in the care of Dr. David Hosack, rests in the Trinity churchyard as well.

Hosack's contributions to the city's medical and cultural development in its early years were significant, far-reaching, and long lasting. And while Hosack's legacy is not entirely without professional controversy, he deserves to be restored to his rightful place in the public remembrance of those remarkable individuals whose indefatigable energy and intellectual vigor helped to create a young New York City.

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NOTES

1. Christine Chapman Robbins, *David Hosack: Citizen of New York* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1964), 134; Richard Brookhiser, *Alexander Hamilton: American* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 198–200.
2. *Annual Report of The New York-Historical Society for the Year 1947*, 49–51. In 1954, in recognition of the Society's 150th anniversary, a lengthy series of articles appeared in the *Quarterly* examining the various Society presidencies. See R.W.G. Vail, "The Society Grows Up," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 38, no.4 (1954): 384–477. The articles were republished as R.W.G. Vail, *Knickerbocker Birthday, A Sesqui-Centennial History of the New-York Historical Society* (New York: New-York Historical Society, 1954).
3. Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 245, 560. Clinton was appointed mayor in 1803 and was reappointed every year until 1815, except in 1807 and 1810.
4. David Hosack was a professor at Columbia Medical School until 1811, and also taught in the College of Physicians and Surgeons until 1826, when he helped to found the Rutgers Medical School. He was also a founder of Bellevue Hospital in 1820. Hosack was one of the first physicians in America to use the stethoscope and to advocate vaccination. Robbins, *David Hosack*, 26–30; Barbara A. Chernow and George A. Vallasi, eds., *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 5th ed., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 1588; Dumas Malone, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Scribner's, 1932), 9:239–40.
5. Set midway down on a low wall of Rockefeller Center's channel gardens is a plaque that commemorates David Hosack, which reads, in part, "In memory of David Hosack...Man of Science/And Citizen of the World/On this site he developed/The famous Elgin Botanic Garden/1801–1811." The Rockefeller Center visitor's brochure available today makes note of Hosack and his garden, pointing out that "Hosack gathered specimens from around the world in a greenhouse that stood near this plaque. The gardens here today are a fitting tribute to Hosack's legacy." *Rockefeller Center Visitor's Guide*, [n.d.]
6. Kenneth Andrews, *Dr. Hosack's Garden* (New York: Rockefeller Center, 1938), 7.
7. Andrews, *Dr. Hosack's Garden*, 10. Christine Robbins estimates Hosack's loss at \$28,000, still a sizable figure. See Robbins, *David Hosack*, 84.
8. *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers Project Guide to 1930s New York* (1939; repr. New York: New Press, 1992), 386.
9. *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, 1015.
10. Robbins, *David Hosack*, 134.
11. *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, 906.
12. Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 381–82. According to Burrows and Wallace, during the especially cold winter of 1804–5, the Society's Frankfort Street soup house, coupled with a second soup house on Division Street, distributed eighty-four hundred gallons of soup to those residing in the poorest wards of the city. See also Raymond A. Mohl, "The Humane Society and Urban Reform in Early New York, 1787–1831," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1970): 30–52. Mohl gives 1798 as the year in which Hosack joined the group.
13. R.W.G. Vail, "Elegant Dinners and Eloquent Diners," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 38, no.3 (1954): 234–35. In a speech at a dinner marking Lafayette's honorary membership in the Society, Hosack effusively remarked, "Long, long, Sir, may you live to enjoy the homage so justly due and spontaneously offered from the hearts of a free and grateful People for the services you have rendered to this Nation, to the World, to Liberty...."
14. Burrows and Wallace, 468–69. N-YHS collections contain correspondence, exhibitions records, and other papers of the Academy indicating that Hosack was an active member.
15. William Smith, *The History of the Late Province of New-York, from its Discovery to the Appointment of Governor Colden in 1762*, 2 vol., (New York: New-York Historical Society, 1829–30). A "Notice" at the beginning of the first volume lists David Hosack as one of the three members of the "Committee of Publication."
16. Robbins, *David Hosack*, 165–66. Magdalena Coster was a cousin of Philip Hone, the diarist and one-time mayor of New York City.
17. *Ibid.*, 39, 85, 165–66. Hosack's salon was mentioned by William Cullen Bryant in correspondence dated 1825.
18. National Park Service, *Historical Handbook: Vanderbilt Mansion*, 1–6; see also www.nps.gov/vama. According to the National Park Service, the name of the original early eighteenth-century land patent was "Hyde Park"; in 1821 the newly formed town of Hyde Park took its name from that source. Christine Robbins describes Hosack's tract as comprising 700 acres. See Robbins, *David Hosack*, 172–73. After several transfers of ownership, in the 1890s, Hosack's property became the site of Frederick W. Vanderbilt's mansion that is open to public today.
19. Tina Kelley, "Marble Walls, Roomy, But No Place to Live," *New York Times*, May 22, 2000. Instead of tombstones, New York Marble Cemetery contains walls of Tuckahoe marble on which vault numbers and associated names are chiseled; individuals are buried in vaults. Although the cemetery's website, www.marblecemetery.org, lists David Hosack as the original owner of vault 52, his family sold or transferred ownership of his vault.
20. Robbins, *David Hosack*, 191–92. Unfortunately, the date of Hosack's birth on his Trinity tombstone has two numbers transposed and is erroneously given as "1796."