

Jacob De La Motta, M.D.: An Early American Jewish Medical Pioneer

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The city of Philadelphia was not only the cradle of American independence, but it was also the birthplace of formal medical education. Up until the latter colonial period, becoming a physician was accomplished by spending several years as an apprentice to a doctor already in practice.¹ It has been estimated that at the beginning of the Revolutionary War, of the thirty-five hundred practicing physicians in the colonies not more than four hundred (immigrants and colonists who had studied abroad and then returned) had a degree from a medical school.²

In 1765 a group of farsighted medical founding fathers, presaging the need to upgrade the quality of medical education with its ensuing improvement in the medical care delivered to the population, established America's first medical school, the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania³). By the end of the century four additional medical schools came into being—the medical departments of Kings College (now Columbia University), Harvard, Dartmouth, and Rutgers–Queens College.⁴ After completing the usual training period of two years the student was awarded a bachelor of medicine degree or, in some of the schools if he chose to study further, a doctor of medicine degree.⁵

A careful review of recipients of the doctor of medicine degree from American medical schools in existence through 1810 revealed Jacob De La Motta to have been the first identifiable American-born Jew⁶ to have earned such a degree (College of Philadelphia, 1810).⁷ This heretofore unrecognized honor is one of the many achievements in the versatile and productive life of Dr. Jacob De La Motta. His eclectic and prodigious involvement in matters professional, religious, and secular clearly indicates a man with broad horizons, multiple interests, and noteworthy talents—all accompanied by a most keen mind. Marcus characterized him as a lover of the arts, a man interested in many branches of knowledge, an apothecary, a botanist, and an amateur *hazzan* who wrote prolifically in a number of fields including medicine, Judaism, and literature. He was also interested in politics and the welfare of the community.⁸ Dr. De La Motta's myriad



Jacob De La Motta
(courtesy American Jewish Archives)



(courtesy American Jewish Archives)

accomplishments during his lifetime, therefore, merit review.

Jacob De La Motta was born in Savannah, Ga., on February 24, 1789, the first child of Emanuel and Judith De La Motta who had migrated from the Dutch West Indies, now known as St. Croix.⁹ His father became active in masonry, an area in which Jacob would become involved at a later date and throughout his lifetime.

Little is known about Jacob's early youth except that his family moved to Charleston when Jacob was about eleven or twelve years old.¹⁰ Jacob graduated from medical school at the University of Pennsylvania in 1810 at the age of twenty-one. While there, the nascent young physician came under the influence of Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the outstanding physicians in the country at the time, as well as a signer of the Declaration of Independence and surgeon general in the Middle Department of the Continental army during the Revolutionary War.¹¹

After a brief stay in Philadelphia (during which time he became a junior member of the Philadelphia Medical Society), Jacob returned to Charleston, where three months after graduation he was elected to the Medical Society of South Carolina.¹² This was the equivalent of being granted a license to practice. Dr. De La Motta was the second Jew to become such a member.¹³

He had been in practice for only two years when the War of 1812 began. Although the war was unpopular,¹⁴ it is plausible that motivated by a strong sense of patriotism, Dr. De La Motta volunteered his services. On July 6, 1812, he was appointed as a surgeon and captain in the Second Regiment of Artillery. His commission was signed by President James Madison (see page 177). A review of early United States Army Medical Corps commissions reveals Captain De La Motta to have been one of the earliest Jewish physicians to have been appointed and serve as a full surgeon in the Army Medical Corps since its inception in 1775.¹⁵

Captain De La Motta initially was stationed in Charleston and subsequently in New York.¹⁶ Following an honorable discharge in 1814¹⁷ he remained in New York in private practice for more than four years.¹⁸ During that time, he maintained his military association by serving as a surgeon in a New York State Infantry militia unit.¹⁹ In 1814 he also joined and soon became a thirty-third degree mason.²⁰ In addition, the doctor joined several New York medical societies. His status as a physician was well established.²¹

In 1816, while in New York, this twenty-seven-year-old southern physician was accorded a special recognition of honor and respect when chosen to deliver the eulogy at the funeral of Gersom Mendes Seixas, the nation's leading Jewish clergyman. Services were held at the Shearith Israel Congregation on July 2, 1816. The address was a measure of De La Motta's talent for rapid composition and marked his full emergence into prominent American Jewish life.²²

Dr. De La Motta returned to Savannah in 1818 and became a partner with Dr. Moses Sheftall, an important physician in the city and a member of a prominent Savannah Jewish family.²³ Aside from his private practice he became an attending physician at the Savannah Poor House and Hospital²⁴ and a member of the Georgia Medical Society, where he served as treasurer.²⁵ The multifaceted doctor exhibited further skills by becoming a gifted orator and after dinner speaker.²⁶

In Savannah he was unsuccessful in his efforts to enter the field of politics. Two attempts at running for city alderman in 1818 and 1820 failed. However, he rose to even greater heights in masonry with his election to a number of important positions within the organization.²⁷

Dr. De La Motta's participation as a man of deeds in Jewish affairs was solidified when he became one of the main forces in the plan to erect a synagogue in Savannah. He delivered the dedication address at the consecration of Congregation Mikve Israel in July 1820, expressing his "awareness and appreciation of the climate of equality of acceptance Jews enjoyed in the United States." Also in his discourse he mentioned the use of organ music, which gave a "fine effect to the Psalms selected."²⁸ This is first recorded instance in American Jewish life in which music was played during services.²⁹

Several weeks later Dr. De La Motta initiated a personal correspondence with the man who had signed his commission during the war. In August he sent James Madison a copy of his sanctification speech. The former president's response was warm and in all likelihood reassuring to the congregants when he reaffirmed the American principle of tolerance as well as laws protecting equal rights.³⁰ A copy of the speech was also sent to Thomas Jefferson, who responded in a similar manner.³¹

In 1823 De La Motta returned to private practice in Charleston,³² where he would spend the remainder of his life. He was elected secretary of the state medical society³³ and in 1833 was appointed as a

trustee of the Medical College of South Carolina, the first medical school in the South.³⁴ In addition, he became a junior honorary member of the Charleston Medical Society of Emulation—where he delivered an address and participated in three debates that year³⁵—a corresponding member of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Paris, and the assistant commissioner of health in Charleston.³⁶ He established the South Carolina Institute for Correcting Impediments of Speech at 68 Wentworth Street and ostensibly cured a patient of stammering in less than two hours.³⁷

It was not unusual in the eighteenth century for physicians to also practice as apothecaries.³⁸ They often grew their own plants which they used to treat patients. Though a few minerals were used, the main medicinal component of their therapeutic armamentarium was derived from the plant kingdom.³⁹ Such was likely the case with Dr. De La Motta, who for a number of years grew his own medicinal herbs and plants. De La Motta probably sold some of them in his pharmacy, Apothecaries Hall.⁴⁰ In 1830 his status as a pharmacist became such that he was chosen as a South Carolina delegate to the national convention in New York for revising the U.S. pharmacopoeia.⁴¹

Dr. De La Motta continued to give scientific papers on a wide range of subjects including spurred rye, which he spoke about before the South Carolina Medical Society, the philosophy of botany, and the silkworm.⁴² The latter two were presented before the Literary and Philosophical Society, an organization in which he held the post of secretary for eight years until 1840.⁴³ He also became an honorary member of the Georgia Historical Society,⁴⁴ a corresponding member of the Lyceum of Natural History of New York,⁴⁵ and commissioner of the Charleston Poor House.⁴⁶ Ongoing activities in masonry resulted in his attaining the highest office in Scottish Rite Masonry—grand commander of the Supreme Council at Charleston in 1844.⁴⁷

Unceasing involvement in Judaism continued to remain an integral part of De La Motta's life. He had joined the Hebrew Orphan Society of Charleston at age eighteen and remained a lifelong member.⁴⁸ Since childhood he had attended services at Charleston's Kahal Kodesh Beth Elohim where, as an adult member, he served as president and lay minister when called upon.⁴⁹ In 1824 when a segment of the congregation formed the Reform Society of Israelites, the first reform Jewish religious group in the country, De La Motta remained loyal to the Orthodox faction. A number of years later,

however, while a new synagogue was being built in 1840 following a fire, a majority of members voted to incorporate instrumental music into the services. The Orthodox affiliates of the congregation, of which Dr. De La Motta was a leader, seceded and formed the more traditional Shearith Israel. De La Motta's attitude regarding the use of organ music during religious services had become contrary to his previous feelings on the subject. No reason has been given for the reversal of his sentiments. His group, nonetheless, still regarded him highly, since they elected him their first president and permitted him to assume the role of lay minister until an ordained rabbi could be engaged.⁵⁰ Subsequently, much friction ensued within the Jewish population regarding the form of Judaism to be followed.⁵¹ This included the female members of his family who sided with the newer Reform branch and resulted in De La Motta's self-curtailement from the contentious situation.⁵²

In 1834 he became involved in politics once again. This time it was as a candidate seeking election to the House of Representatives as a member of the Union and Anti-Test Oath Party.⁵³ He differed with the majority of his fellow South Carolinians who were in favor of secession from the Union and thus lost his bid for Congress.⁵⁴ Although never elected to a public office, De La Motta finally did achieve some political success. As a reward for his loyalty to the Whig Party, President William Harrison appointed him receiver general for South Carolina in 1841.⁵⁵

Little has been written about his personal life. At the age of forty-six he married Charlotte Lazarus, the daughter of a veteran of the Revolutionary War and a member of a prominent Charleston Jewish family. They had four children, Jacob Emanuel, Julia, Juliet, and Isabel.⁵⁶

French artist Augustin Edourat created a full-body silhouette of De La Motta in 1844.⁵⁷ On viewing it one is left with the distinct impression of a trim, well-poised, well-groomed individual who had the bearing of a self-assured gentleman of dignity and status.

Jacob De La Motta died on February 13, 1845, just prior to his fifty-sixth birthday, and is buried in Charleston.⁵⁸ His epitaph appropriately reads in part:

The faithfulness and integrity with which he performed the duties and various public trusts, won for him the confidence

of his fellow citizens. He was highly respected as a physician in the army of the United States, and subsequently in his private practice. He was scrupulous in the observances of his religion, just and charitable in all the relations of life.⁵⁹

Although Dr. De La Motta and most of his family in all likelihood were gratified by his many achievements and successes, it appears that this fulfillment did not extend to his mother-in-law, who outlived him. In her will she acrimoniously bequeathed one thousand dollars to daughter Mrs. De La Motta "in consequence of the inadequate support left by Dr. De La Motta for his family."⁶⁰

Despite the sentiments of his wife's mother and her failure to appreciate her son-in-law's attainments, it was the caliber of a man such as Jacob De La Motta, M.D. that the sages had in mind when they wrote that, "a good name is better than precious oil."⁶¹

Appendix: Document

Commission of Captain Jacob De La Motta (from the collection of The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives).

The PRESIDENT of the UNITED STATES of AMERICA

To all who shall see these present Greeting:

Know Ye, that reposing special Trust and Confidence in the Patriotism, Valour, Fidelity and Abilities of Jacob De La Motta I have nominated and by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, do appoint him a Surgeon in the 2nd Regiment of Artillery in the service of the United States: to take the rank of such from the sixth day of July, 1812. He is therefore carefully and diligently to discharge the duty of Surgeon by doing and performing all manner of things thereunto belonging. And I charge and require all Officers and Soldiers under his command to be obedient to his Orders as Surgeon.

And he is to observe and follow such Orders and Directions from time to time as he shall receive from me or any future President of the United States of America or the General or other superior Officers set over him according to the Rules and Discipline [*sic*] of War. This Commission to continue in force during the Pleasure of the President of the United States for the time being.

Given unto my hand in Washington this twenty third day of July in the

Year of our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and twelve and in the thirty seventh Year of the Independence of the United States.

By Command of the President
of the United States of America
W. Eustis

James Madison

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NOTES:

1. William Frederick Norwood, *Medical Education in the United States Before the Civil War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), 32.

2. *Ibid.*, 10.

3. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), 230.

4. Joseph M. Toner, *Contributions to the Annals of Medical Progress and Medical Education in the United States Before and During the War of Independence* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1874), 106; and Nathan S. Davis, *History of Medical Education and Institutions in the United States of America* (Chicago: S. C. Giggs, 1851), 9–10.

5. Norwood, *Medical Education in the United States*, 63–64.

6. *Ibid.*, 140.

7. *Ibid.*, 94.

8. *Ibid.*, 128.

9. *Ibid.*, 125–26.

10. The various schools had their own specific requirements. See Norwood, *Medical Education in the United States*.

11. Malcolm Stern, *First American Jewish Families* (Baltimore: Ottenheimer Publishers, 1991), 54. Each American medical school which was or had been in existence in the country was contacted and all of the medical degree recipients (all of whom had been listed by year of graduation) were compiled and alphabetized. In addition, I prepared indices from a series of books and papers dealing with early American Jews. Finally, I checked every graduate's name by his year of graduation against each of the prepared indices until the first positive Jewish identification was made. During the investigation it was theoretically possible that one or more Jewish individuals remote from the Jewish community could have graduated, but this would

have been virtually impossible to determine. Thus, the term “identifiable” Jew is used in this paper. Jacob R. Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776–1985*, 4 vols. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993); Jacob R. Marcus, *Colonial American Jew, 1492–1776*, 3 vols. (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1970); Stern, *First American Jewish Families*; Nathan Koren, *Jewish Physicians—A Biographical Index* (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1973); Morris Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States 1654–1875* (New York: Citadel Press, 1950); Edwin Wolf and Maxwell Whiteman, *A History of the Jews of Philadelphia From Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975); Harry Simonhoff, *Jewish Notables in America* (New York: Greenberg, 1956); Harry Friedenwald, *The Jews and Medicine* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1944); David de Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952); James N. Hagy, *This Happy Land: The Jews of Colonial and Antebellum Charleston* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993); Saul J. Rubin, *Third to None* (Savannah: Congregation Mikve Israel, 1983); Barnett A. Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1905); and Solomon R. Kagan, *Jewish Contributions to Medicine in America* (Boston: Boston Medical Publishing Company, 1934); Leon Huehner, “Jews in the Legal and Medical Professions in America Prior to 1800,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 22 (1914): 147; Natalia Berger, ed., *Jews and Medicine: Religion, Culture, Science* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 221–37.

12. *University of Pennsylvania General Alumni Catalogue* (Philadelphia: Alumni Association of the University of Pennsylvania, 1922), 485.

13. Marcus, *United States Jewry*, 1, 445.

14. Malcolm H. Stern, *Americans of Jewish Descent* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1960), 22, 39.

15. Thomas J. Tobias, “The Many Sided Dr. De La Motta,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 52 (1961–62): 203.

16. Correspondence of Office of Adjutant General, 1812. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

17. Robert G. Ferris and Richard E. Morris, *The Signers of the Declaration of Independence* (Flagstaff: Interpretive Publications, 1982), 125–26.

18. Membership roll, Medical Society of South Carolina, Library of the Charleston Medical Society.

19. *Ibid.* The first member of the medical society was Dr. Levi Myers in 1791. He was a graduate of the University of Edinburgh Medical School.

20. Samuel E. Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People*, vol. 2 (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 107.

21. T. H. S. Hamersly, *Complete General Army Register of the United States of America* (New York: T. H. S. Hammersly, 1888), 351.

22. Correspondence of Office of Adjutant General, 1812. National Archives, Washington, D.C.

23. War of 1812 Records, Recorder’s office, University of Pennsylvania.

24. Tobias, “Many Sided De La Motta,” 205.

25. *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, Miscellaneous Items Relating to Jews in New York, Extracts from the Notebooks of Reverend J. J. Lyons, 27 (1920): 398.

26. Samuel H. Bayard, Jr., *History of the Supreme Council 33^o*, Northern Masonic Jurisdiction, vol. 1 (Boston, 1938), 201.

27. Tobias, "Many Sided De La Motta," 205.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 205–6.
30. Columbian Museum and *Savannah Daily Gazette*, October 22, 1818.
31. Columbian Museum and *Savannah Daily Gazette*, October 30, 1819.
32. Victor H. Bassett, M.D., *Voices From the Past*, (Savannah: n.p., 1937), 27.
33. Tobias, "Many Sided Dr. De La Motta," 208.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Discourse delivered at the consecration of Mikve Israel at the city of Savannah, Ga., in 1820. A copy is in the collection of the American Jewish Historical Society, New York.
37. Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews*, 155.
38. William J. Bennett, *The Spirit of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 333.
39. Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews*, 157.
40. Tobias, "Many Sided De La Motta," 211.
41. Minute Books, Medical Society of South Carolina, 1825–35.
42. *The Georgian*, Savannah, Ga., October 19, 1833.
43. *Second annual report of the Proceedings of the Charleston Medical Society of Emulation* (Charleston, 1827). A copy is in the library of the Medical College of South Carolina, Charleston.
44. Barnett A. Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina, From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1905), 180.
45. Ibid.
46. Tobias, "Many Sided De La Motta," 212.
47. James E. Gibson, *Dr. Bodo Otto and the Medical Background of the American Revolution* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1937), 48.
48. Judith M. Taylor, "Physicians and Botanists in Colonial New York," *New York State Journal of Medicine* 77 (May 1977): 995.
49. Tobias, "Many Sided De La Motta," 212–13.
50. Minutes, Medical Society of South Carolina, December 13, 1830. A pharmacopoeia is an authoritative listing of various therapeutic agents, their preparation, characteristics, and uses.
51. Minutes, Medical Society of South Carolina, February 16, 1830; Elzas, *Jews of South Carolina*, 180; Tobias, "Many Sided De La Motta," 213.
53. Tobias, "Many Sided De La Motta," 213.
54. Ibid.
55. Certificate of Appointment, Library of Supreme Council, 33° Scottish Rite Masonry, Washington, D.C.
56. Jacob De La Motta, *An Oration on the Causes of Mortality Among Strangers During the Late Summer and Fall* (Savannah, 1820). A copy is in the library of the surgeon general, Washington, D.C.
57. Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina*, 180.
58. *The Freemason Monthly Magazine* (Boston), February 1, 1845.
59. Thomas J. Tobias, *The Hebrew Orphan Society of Charleston, South Carolina*, (Charleston, 1957), 34.
60. Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina*, 147.

61. Tobias, "Many Sided De La Motta," 215–16.
62. *Ibid.*, 216.
63. *The Occident* 3 (1845), 60.
64. *The Georgian* (Savannah), October 15, 1834.
65. *Ibid.*, October 18, 1834.
66. *The Courier* (Charleston, S.C.), April 12, 1841.
67. Stern, *Americans of Jewish Descent*, 39, 54, 108.
68. The silhouette is reproduced in Hannah R. London, *Shades of my Forefathers* (Springfield, Mass.; 1941), 147.
70. Stern, *Americans of Jewish Descent*, 39.
71. Barnett A. Elzas, *The Old Jewish Cemeteries in Charleston, South Carolina* (Charleston, 1903), 56.
72. Charleston County, South Carolina, *Will Books*, vol. 44, 261–67.
73. *Ecclesiastes*, chap. 7, line 1.