



American Eden: David Hosack, Botany, and Medicine in the Garden of the Early Republic

Victoria Johnson

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On a clear morning in July 1804, Alexander Hamilton stepped onto a boat at the edge of the Hudson River. He was bound for a New Jersey dueling ground to settle his bitter dispute with Aaron Burr. Hamilton took just two men with him: his “second” for the duel, and Dr. David Hosack.

As historian Victoria Johnson reveals in her groundbreaking biography, Hosack was one of the few points the duelists did agree on. Summoned that morning because of his role as the beloved Hamilton family doctor, he was also a close friend of Burr. A brilliant surgeon and a world-class botanist, Hosack—who until now has been lost in the fog of history—was a pioneering thinker who shaped a young nation.

Born in New York City, he was educated in Europe and returned to America inspired by his newfound knowledge. He assembled a plant collection so spectacular and diverse that it amazes botanists today, conducted some of the first pharmaceutical research in the United States, and introduced new surgeries to America. His tireless work championing public health and science earned him national fame and praise from the likes of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander von Humboldt, and the Marquis de Lafayette.

One goal drove Hosack above all others: to build the Republic’s first botanical garden. Despite innumerable obstacles and near-constant resistance, Hosack triumphed when, by 1810, his Elgin Botanic Garden at last crowned twenty acres of Manhattan farmland. “Where others saw real estate and power, Hosack saw the landscape as a pharmacopoeia able to bring medicine into the modern age” (Eric W. Sanderson, author of *Mannahatta*). Today what remains of America’s first botanical garden lies in the heart of midtown, buried beneath Rockefeller Center.

Whether collecting specimens along the banks of the Hudson River, lecturing before a class of rapt medical students, or breaking the fever of a young Philip Hamilton, David Hosack was an American visionary who has been too long forgotten. Alongside other towering figures of the post-Revolutionary generation, he took the reins of a nation. In unearthing the dramatic story of his life, Johnson offers a lush depiction of the man who gave a new voice to the powers and perils of nature.

American Eden: David Hosack, Botany, and Medicine in the Garden of the Early Republic Details

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of the Early Republic Victoria Johnson**

From Reader Review American Eden: David Hosack, Botany, and Medicine in the Garden of the Early Republic for online ebook

Kathleen says

American Eden is a well-researched, readable, compelling history of the life of David Hosack. His life provides an engrossing narrative including descriptions of botany, medicine and political networks in the young United States.

Karin says

Interesting bio of Dr. Hosack and his goal of establishing a botanic garden in new york. Definitely an interesting lens through which to view early american history, however, it did feel unfocused at times and also some of the material was a bit dry. Worth a borrow from the library, though.

Colleen says

really enjoyed this. Had no idea one of our first botanical gardens was located where rockefeller center is now. Lots of interesting characters and historical events framed in a different perspective, with medicine and botany taking central roles. bit depressing that the garden didnt really get its due, but an enjoyable read

Jerrie (redwritinghood) says

I found the audiobook for this National Book Award non-fiction title on #Hoopla. David Hosack was an important scientist and physician in the early days of the country. He fought tirelessly to establish a botanical garden for medicinal and other scientific purposes in NYC. While very well-researched and well-written, the book is a little unfocused and often goes off on side jaunts into other historical figures of the time period (Hamilton, Burr).

Anna says

In this book, Victoria Johnson has brought to life an American hero who conquered New York with his intellect, imagination, and drive.

Here was a man, witness to the most famous duel in our country's history, who refused to choose political sides. He entreated botanists and medical practitioners alike to look upon the natural world as a helpmeet in the healing arts and the color palette to a more fulfilling life.

David Hosack loved America and believed New York to be the bustling center of arts and sciences that it would eventually become. His work was transformational in getting people to see plants for what they were - our great teacher.

Johnson's writing is engaging, humorous, and educational. As a botanic librarian, I owe many thanks to this author for revealing my new hero and bringing to light his priceless and indelible work.

Carol Evans says

American Eden is the story of David Hosack (August 31, 1769 – December 22, 1835), a botanist and doctor in New York City in the late 18th – early 19th centuries. I admit, I was drawn to the book at first because he was the doctor at the duel between Hamilton and Burr. (I have not seen Hamilton the musical yet, but it's coming to Pittsburgh in January if anyone wants to buy me tickets.) Turns out he was a truly influential man, an innovative doctor, a visionary, but he stayed out of politics which is probably why we don't recognize his name. He knew a lot of politicians however, and we learn some interesting bits about who supported who.

Hosack's loves were botany and medicine and how they intersected. Honestly he seems like a good guy. He wanted to help people, not just the rich and famous, but the regular people too. I'm sad that his gorgeous Elgin Gardens ended up abandoned and eventually plowed. Where it was now stands the Rockefeller Center. I guess there's a plaque somewhere in Hosack's honor, but of course when I was in New York I had never heard of him, so didn't look for it. (Maybe an excuse to go back?)

While we learn about Hosack's life we also learn bits about the other famous men of history, like Jefferson, Hamilton, Burr, and DeWitt Clinton – who was a champion of the Erie Canal which I read about in another book recently. It's an interesting book, part history, part science, well-researched, and enjoyable to read. I actually to the audio, which worked well for me. The narrator blended in to the story well and, in all honesty, it was probably a little easier to listen to some of the plant listings than read them in print.

I was listening to the book the other day when I was taking a walk. Happily no one saw me, because Hosack's death had me in tears. He was truly admired by his contemporaries, which shines through in the book. I like that at the end Johnson ties Hosack's accomplishments to the modern day, both through his medical advances and his students', but also through America's love of gardening, including household gardens.

I would absolutely recommend this to anyone who enjoys biographies of historical figures. Johnson brings the people, places, and plants to life. Even though there's a lot of information, it's easy to read.

JQAdams says

This is a straightforward biography of David Hosack, a mover and shaker in New York City in the decades after the American Revolution. He led an interesting life -- a friend of Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, among other early-American leaders, a pioneering doctor and surgeon, a leader in civic organizations regarding everything from history to painting -- but Johnson is most interested in his interactions with plants, in particular his role in establishing Manhattan's short-lived Elgin Botanical Gardens. Hosack was clearly interested in plants and botany, but it was never really clear whether it dominated his thoughts and life to nearly the extent this biography presents it: it seemed plausible that it was just one of many interests of comparable intensity that Hosack sustained, but that Johnson unduly emphasizes it.

I'm glad I read the book, and am always appreciative of books focusing on people in history rather than the ones everyone writes about. Still, I have no idea what qualified this for the longlist for the National Book Award in nonfiction: it was interesting, but did not notably stand out over lots of other books out there.

Maryellie says

American Eden is the story of Dr. Hosack a doctor who believed botany and the study of plants would help medicine. In the late 1700's and 1800's he created a garden in what is now Rockefeller Center. He was doctor to A Hamilton and A Burr. This biography is well worth reading.

Gaby Chapman says

The birth of a nation and one New York City botanist/doctor who dedicated his life to putting medicine and botanical science on a par with the Old World

Kate McDowell says

I listened to this book on a long road trip this week, and I was vacillating between giving this 3 or 4 stars. I found the story delightful and profound, and learned so much about plants, history, and the creation of the United States as we know it; however, it was pretty meticulously executed and drawn out in ways I cannot imagine getting through without the intonations of my audiobook narrator. If you love history, science, stories of our founding fathers, and the Latin names of plants (lots and lots of Latin names), definitely give this book a read, or in my case, a listen.

Shelley says

This is a great view of medical science/practice/botany/pharmacology in the early Republic, and to illustrate how important science was to the founding and next generation. You know, before willful ignorance became popular.

Laurie says

This is a lovingly told story of New York City history, the history of botany in the early years of the United States, the early history of Columbia Medical School and, above all, the life story of David Hosack.

Never heard of him? Well, neither had I till reading the review in the NY Times. Immediately this seemed like a book that would be interesting, not only to me but also to my husband. Turns out I was right on both counts, for look what we both borrowed from the library!

Victoria Johnson writes with respect and delight about David Hosack. Sometimes she veers towards the hyperbolic, but ultimately that did not bother me; I simply smiled to see her admiration on display. David Hosack's life story cannot be told without also telling the tales of an early New York City, American politics, medicine, philanthropy, exploration, botany, all while weaving in historical figures from abroad, our

interactions with England, and the history of France.

Johnson has taken David Hosack, a person who otherwise might have remained unknown, at least in my household, and with a story teller's love of subject painted him in all the realms upon which he labored. I was sad to reach the end of his story, having come to quite like him. I developed appreciation for his optimism, determinism and boundless energy and thirst for knowledge. He was a mover and shaker in many areas of the developing New York City, and it seems most appropriate that he has been given his due.

Erika says

My father enjoyed and suggested I read this biography of a doctor and botanist in the early republic of the USA.

Anna says

If you are into history especially medical history. This is the book for you. I learned so many fascinating facts about American medicine from this book. I've never actually taken the time to consider how medical advances are made but this book explains a lot about what was happening in the early 1800s in the medical field.

Robert Walkley says

American Eden by Victoria Johnson is about a long forgotten American hero of the early Republic. David Hosack (1769-1835) was both a scientist and a dreamer. He was also an indefatigable doer and a practical man, in most respects. He studied botany and medicine and though he wasn't overtly political, he knew the leading politicians of his day, including Rush, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Burr. (He was a "second" at their duel.) He also knew Charles Willson Peale and his children Rembrandt, Raphaelle and Titian! Hosack also knew explorers such as Alexander von Humboldt and William Bartram It often seems as though anyone who was anyone knew David Hosack back then. He not only knew all these people (all right, men), for many he was also their doctor. In short (the book isn't short) he was a man of many talents and accomplishments.

This bio is clear and straightforward. It's a by-the-book bio, pretty much traversing a birth-to-death timeline. And Johnson is right to try and restore Hosack's name, if not luster. And yet the book most comes alive whenever someone like Hamilton or Burr shows up. I would gladly shelve reading about Hosack's quest for a botanical garden in America in exchange for more pages devoted to Aaron Burr!

This book is especially valuable to those who like to read about Early America, about the history of New York City (30 Rock now sits on where Hosack laid out his Elgin Botanic Garden), and about the roots of the environmental movement.

This bio got me to thinking about the contest between New York City and Philadelphia for early America's soul. Would our country be different today if Philly had won that battle?
