

## **Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 14\_)**

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

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **Jacob De La Motta, M.D.: An Early American Jewish American Medical Pioneer** by Theodore Cohen, American Jewish Archives Journal, vol. 53, 2001, pages 175 – 186.

#### **Introduction**

“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. 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. 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.

“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.<sup>12</sup> This was the equivalent of being granted a license to practice. Dr. De La Motta was the second Jew to become such a member.”

#### **Military Service**

The War of 1812 began two years after Dr. De La Motta had begun practicing medicine. Despite the fact that this war was unpopular, he volunteered his services to the Army, probably due to his strong sense of patriotism. Captain De La Motta was appointed to the Second Regiment of Artillery on July 6, 1812. He was one of the first Jewish physicians to have been appointed and serve as a full surgeon in the Army Medical Corps since its inception in 1775. Captain De La Motta was initially stationed in Charleston and subsequently in New York.

## **Return to Civilian Life**

Following his honorable discharge in 1814, he practiced medicine New York for more than four years. During this time his status as a physician became so well established that he was welcomed as a member of several New York medical societies.

While living in New York Dr. De La Motta, who was an observant Jew, was an active member of Congregation Shearith Israel, and “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 Gershom 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.”

## **Savannah, GA**

“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. Aside from his private practice he became an attending physician at the Savannah Poor House and Hospital and a member of the Georgia Medical Society, where he served as treasurer. The multifaceted doctor exhibited further skills by becoming a gifted orator and after dinner speaker.

“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.’”

## **Charleston, SC**

In 1823 Dr. De La Motta opened a private practice in Charleston, SC, where he would spend the rest of his life. It was not long before he was elected secretary of the SC Medical Society. “In 1833 he was appointed as a trustee of the Medical College of South Carolina, the first medical school in the South. 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 year, a corresponding member of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Paris, and the assistant commissioner of health in Charleston.

“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. 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. 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.”

In 1835 at the age of forty-six he married Charlotte Lazarus, who was 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. Jacob De La Motta died on February 13, 1845, just prior to his fifty-sixth birthday, and was buried in Charleston.

The first issue of the third volume (April 1845) of Isaac Lesser’s **Occident** carried the following obituary, which quoted in part:

### **Obituary.**

#### **Dr. Jacob De La Motta.**

As our last number was going to press, we received the melancholy announcement of the death of Dr. Jacob De La Motta, who died at Charleston, on the 13th of February, aged about 56. We were ever since in hopes that some one of his personal friends and relatives on the spot would give us an account of his life for publication; but failing in this, we cannot permit the present number to go forth without some tribute from our pen, imperfect as this necessarily must be. Dr. De La Motta, was regularly educated as a physician, and graduated in Philadelphia; if we recollect rightly. At an early age he entered the United States Army as surgeon, and served during the whole or a part of the late war with England. When the army, at the conclusion of peace, was reduced, the Doctor of course, with many others, lost his post. He was however offered the station of a surgeon’s mate, which he respectfully declined. This tender of office proves conclusively that he must have given entire satisfaction in the discharge of his duty. He then returned to Charleston, but removed some years later to Savannah, where he was the means of erecting a Synagogue, and organizing anew the small congregation of Israelites. The Doctor was not of those who because they love science despise the faith of their fathers; on the contrary, true to the martyr spirit of his ancestors, he honoured their professions by his practice, and thus consecrated his time to the service of his religion, and both in Savannah and Charleston he officiated as minister and preacher, gratis, for several years. Occasionally too, when at the north, he assisted at our Synagogue, and thus many persons in different places can bear testimony to the efficiency of the Doctor in affairs of our religion. Even when no longer acting as minister, the affairs of the Synagogue always enlisted his care, and for many years, when he had again returned to Charleston, we find him in the post of president of the old congregation, or otherwise usefully active. When the unfortunate separation took place, about four years and a half ago, Dr. De La Motta was made president of the so-called orthodox party, and acted in that capacity as well as minister, for rather more than two years. Since then he had in a measure withdrawn from public life, and from the unpleasant contentions which agitate the Israelites in Charleston. We are not going to praise or censure him for the part of non-interference which he took

latterly; no doubt he gave offence to those who had acted with and under him; but perhaps his declining health admonished him to rest from strife, more particularly as his female relatives were attached to the new order of things. But now he has gone to a place of rest, where contention and strife are unknown, and where he will be judged by his Maker according to his deeds.

“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.”