

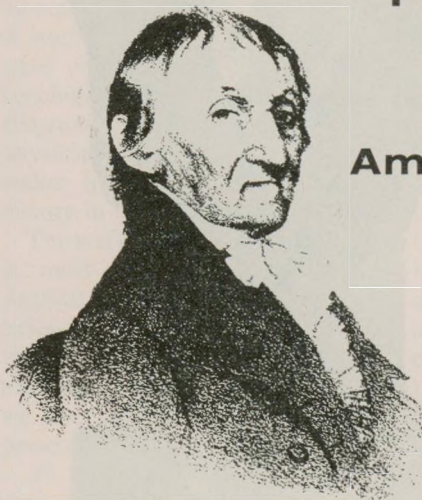
James Thacher, M.D.

Physician Historian

of the

American Revolution

LOUIS H. RODDIS, M.D.



Dr. James Thacher. This, his only known portrait, was taken when he was at an advanced age.

THE best word picture of George Washington has come to us not from the pen of a professional historian but from that of a surgeon in the Continental Army. James Thacher served throughout the entire period of the American Revolution and took part in most of its battles and campaigns. His account of this service is an important contribution to our historical literature.

Thacher was born in Barnstable,

Mass., in 1754. He studied medicine there under a Dr. Abney Hersey, and at the beginning of the Revolution he passed the examination for surgeon's mate in the army with high marks. A year later he was promoted to surgeon. He remained in service until 1783, at which time he married and settled at Plymouth. There he continued in medical practice and literary work until his death in 1844.

Earlier books written by Thacher dealt with pharmacy, medicine, horticulture, apiculture, and medical history. In 1810, his *American New Dispensatory* was a forerunner of the 1st U.S. Pharmacopoeia. His *Modern Practice of Physic* was printed in 1817, with a 2nd edition in 1821. The following year, there appeared his *American Orchardist*; this covered not only the growing of apples, pears, plums, peaches,

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currants, grapes, and various small fruits, but also included the making of cider and wine. This book and another, *A Practical Treatise on the Management of Bees*, make delightful reading today, and they are full of useful information on the subjects of fruit growing and bee-keeping. His *American Medical Biography* has sketches of 163 physicians with 14 portraits; this makes him a pioneer in medical history in this country.

The work, however, for which he is most noted is his *Military Journal during the American Revolutionary War*. Published in 1828, this was based on his daily diary, and gives some of the best accounts we have of important events and personages in the Revolution.

As was natural for a medical man, he devoted much attention to medical matters and the care of the sick and wounded. He writes in one place that of 500 soldiers and their dependents inoculated against smallpox, only 4 died—a very small percentage for that relatively dangerous procedure. He tells of the use of native sources of materia medica such as extract of butternut bark for calomel as a cathartic, and he describes the difficulties in obtaining the small amounts of rice, sugar, molasses, tea, sago, jellies, and wine needed for the sick who often had only the regular ration of bread, beef, and salt pork.

In the first of his celebrated descriptions of Washington, he says that the General "... was tall and well proportioned; his dress a blue coat with buff facings, a rich epaulette on each shoulder, buff underdress (waistcoat and breeches) and an elegant small-sword; a black cockade in his hat."

In 1778, Washington inspected an army hospital of which Dr. Thacher had charge. He conducted the Commander-in-Chief through the wards, and he relates that the General showed the greatest interest in the situation of the sick and wounded and their treatment and comfort. He adds to his former description the following: "He is tall, full six feet, erect and well proportioned. The strength and proportion of his joint and muscles appear to be commensurate with the pre-eminent powers of his mind. . . . His nose is straight and his eye inclined to blue."

Thacher concluded his journal in the year 1783. He added to it biographies of a number of distinguished officers including Putnam, La Fayette, von Steuben, Heath, Knox, and Arnold. His account of Arnold's treason is of much interest, as is that of the execution of Major Andre of which he was an eyewitness. The entire work remains as a valuable document of this period in our history.

4420 Braeburn Road
San Diego 16, California