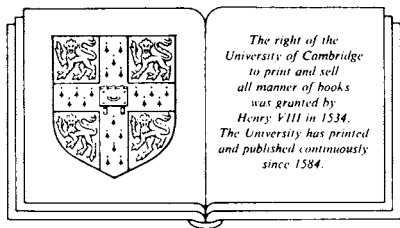


Preserve Your Love for Science

LIFE OF WILLIAM A. HAMMOND,
AMERICAN NEUROLOGIST

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Introduction

“You cannot afford to set yourselves above the world and to be utterly regardless of the demands of society,” William A. Hammond told the medical students at Bellevue Hospital in 1867. “You must therefore sacrifice something on the altar of expediency if you wish to be successful in a material point of view. Only take care,” he warned, “that you preserve your love for science, and that you pay no more tribute to the elegancies and the frivolities of life than will suffice to make society regard you as one of themselves, and show you the respect which you have right to claim.”¹

Hammond’s own love for science developed early. He patterned his first original research, done in the 1850s, on French and German scientific traditions, notably Justus von Liebig’s sweeping program for physiological chemistry. As surgeon general of the United States Army during the Civil War, Hammond did what he could to marshal his limited resources for the cause of scientific research. But, as historian Robert Kohler has noted, “particular scientific styles flourish only where intellectual priorities are congruent with institutional goals.”² Physiology in the United States before the Civil War had virtually no institutional base. Among the physicians of Hammond’s generation, only John Call Dalton (1825–89) could gratify his passion for scientific research in a university position that made medical practice unnecessary. But Dalton, America’s “first professional physiologist,” was a bachelor, and rather undemanding of the amenities of high society.³ S. Weir Mitchell (1829–1914) struggled for years – with Hammond’s support – to obtain a professional appointment that would afford him the leisure to pursue physiology. But the call never came, and Mitchell had to “work as hard as ever at practice,” as he

wrote to Jeffries Wyman in 1868, taking advantage as best he could of “the little time I can give to science.”⁴

As a neurologist Hammond sacrificed a bit more on the altar of expediency than did Mitchell, whose roots were securely entrenched in Philadelphia medical society. Financial success counted for a great deal in Gilded Age New York society, and Hammond’s high-toned and pricey specialty practice was indeed successful in a material point of view. And if laboratory physiology could not flourish within this institutional context, Hammond’s widely read and original intellect easily imagined other scientific pursuits that could. His biography is, to a large extent, a story of one man’s struggle to find a viable place for science in the medical context of nineteenth-century America, and to understand his society in terms of this scientific outlook.

THE EDUCATION OF AN AMERICAN MEDICAL SCIENTIST

On August 28, 1828, Sarah Pinckney and Dr. John Wesley Hammond of Annapolis, Maryland, produced baby William, their second son. The young family was not wealthy, although its lineage is well documented on both sides. William Alexander Hammond’s great-grandfather had bought property in Anne Arundel County in 1764. His father had graduated in 1825 from the Medical College of the University of Maryland (at the age of twenty-one), but had not immediately settled down to establish a practice. Many Marylanders of the day were migrating northwest into the Susquehanna River valley and then west toward the Ohio. John Hammond, M.D., followed this route. He took his family in 1832 to Somerset County, Pennsylvania, south of Johnstown, then moved again two years later to the town of Williamsport (later Monongahela City), Washington County, in the southwestern corner of the state. After the gubernatorial election of 1836, William’s father returned to Harrisburg as chief clerk of the state auditor general’s office. He became one of the town’s leading citizens, respected for his “urbanity, integrity, and intellectual ability.” It is not clear to what extent he actually practiced medicine.⁵ Half a century later, the coal country of Dauphin County provided the setting for a minor novel by William A. Hammond, *On the Susquehanna* (New York, 1887).

Like his father, William obtained much of his early education from private tutors. The most notable was a successful middle-aged Harrisburg physician, Edmund W. Roberts, who had studied at the prestigious medical school of the University of Pennsylvania.⁶ William studied the classics with him, learning and liking them enough to retain interest and facility throughout his life. He also became interested in medicine. Still too young for medical school, however, he was sent back to Annapolis to pursue general studies at St. John's College. He thus arrived in New York City in 1844 with an intellectual background far surpassing that of the average medical student of his day.⁷

The tall, gangly sixteen-year-old, who stammered badly over his b's, p's, and t's, entered the New York medical office of William Holme Van Buren, his new preceptor.⁸ Only nine years older than Hammond, Van Buren had himself just settled in the city after five years in Florida and on the Canadian frontier as an assistant surgeon in the United States Army. The slow pace of his small practice must have left his awkward young student with ample time to read and to attend lectures at the medical colleges. Van Buren only recorded about \$50 per month in income between November 1844 and December 1846, and most of his early patients were apparently inmates of either an unnamed convent or a similarly anonymous "academy." An office practice probably supplemented this, but it is unlikely that he ever collected the full amounts recorded in his account book.

But Hammond was studying under one of the rising lights of New York medicine. Van Buren, who married the daughter of the eminent surgeon Valentine Mott, became Mott's protégé and assistant as well. By the spring of 1847, as Hammond was completing his first formal course of lectures at University Medical College, Van Buren was beginning to record receipts from students' fees as well as greatly increased receipts from his family practice. His total income – at least on paper – then approached \$3,000 a year.⁹ Van Buren was to exert a continuing influence over Hammond's professional career. It was widely reported that he was responsible for Hammond's appointment, fifteen years later, to the position of surgeon general of the United States Army.

University Medical College had been founded only five years before Hammond enrolled. Its *Annual Announcement* of 1846 pointed out that New York City was becoming a medical center

for the entire nation. The faculty's goal was "the building up [of] a national school worthy of the country and the age." To this end, it had recently incurred the "heavy expense" of "a Chemical and Philosophical Apparatus of the best description." But pressures for reform in medical education were mounting from the new American Medical Association. The professors were thus somewhat sensitive about the shortcomings of their typical two-year ungraded curriculum. While clinical work was encouraged, for example, it was not required. The introduction to the *Annual Announcement* of 1848, in which Hammond's name was listed among the recent graduates, consisted mainly of a defense of the existing state of affairs. The school stressed the proximity of hospitals and dispensaries where "every facility is enjoyed for studying [diseases] collectively or as specialties."¹⁰

To Hammond, the most important of his teachers at University Medical College were probably Martyn Paine, the idiosyncratic professor of the "institutes of medicine and materia medica," and John William Draper, the professor of chemistry. Paine's influential textbook *Institutes of Medicine* first appeared in 1847. "Should you . . . be inclined to follow those inquirers who have been guided by the light of truth," he told Hammond and his classmates in his introductory lecture to the session of 1847-48, "you will find . . . that physiology, in its connection with organization [i.e., anatomy], lies at the foundation of pathology and therapeutics."¹¹ Hammond was definitely so inclined. Paine touched on the ways in which the "effects of life" could be modified "by the mind itself," a notion Hammond would explore in his medical thesis (now lost) on "The Etiological and Therapeutical Influence of the Imagination." Paine also impressed on his students his fervent belief in the "vitalist" school of experimental physiology, which he counterposed to the physical and chemical orientations then more in vogue.¹²

The years 1847-48 were perhaps the high point of "organic physics," the reductionist physiology of the "1847 group" that centered around Carl Ludwig, Hermann von Helmholtz, Ernst von Brucke, and Emil Du Bois-Reymond.¹³ At the same time, Justus von Liebig's books *Organic Chemistry in Its Applications to Physiology and Pathology* (1842) and *Familiar Letters on Chemistry* (1844) were popularizing a chemical approach to medical science.

University Medical College had as professor of chemistry the

eminent scientist John William Draper. He tried earnestly to convey the excitement of the age to his students. "There is hardly a book of science that comes across the Ocean which does not bring with it new facts, the coordination of which with those that are known, remains to be made," Draper lectured. "The formative process is beginning; a few years will give us a science, which will bring more revolutions in medicine, than that changeable science has even yet witnessed." He promised to instruct them on all available applications "of physical science to medicine, – it matters not whether it be Hydraulics, Pneumatics, Astronomy, or any thing else." Draper made a special point of demonstrating experiments in such a way as to make them repeatable by the students themselves in the expensive new laboratory.¹⁴ Hammond took full advantage of the opportunity, absorbing enough of the spirit and technique to be able to carry out original experiments on digestion a few years later, under far more primitive laboratory conditions.

Professor Paine, in contrast, was vehemently "against chemistry when hunting for laurels in the field of physiology, of pathology, and of therapeutics." He denounced "this interference of the laboratory which has shaken so extensively the foundations of medicine, and which so cruelly debases the science."¹⁵ Chemistry in medicine tended, he said, "to the subversion of physiological science, and therefore of pathological and therapeutical principles and, as another necessary consequence, of rational practice."¹⁶ Paine, influenced by the Naturphilosophie movement and a member of several German medical societies, struggled doggedly against chemical and physical reductionism. He considered these doctrines self-contradictory, heretical, materialistic, and (ironically) "old-fashioned."¹⁷

Like many followers of romantic biology, Paine attached great significance to the nervous system. Its ailments, he said, showed that disease was caused by altered "vital properties," not "altered functions," as he understood the doctrines of Xavier Bichat.¹⁸ He also singled out the physiology of digestion as the arena where "the physiologist must raise his principal defense against the invasions of chemistry." There can be little doubt that Hammond chose his research problems in response to (and perhaps in reaction against) Paine's lectures on physiology.¹⁹

William A. Hammond, M.D., emerged from University Medical School in March 1848, in spite of a formal requirement that graduates be at least twenty-one years old. He immediately en-

rolled as a resident medical student at the Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia. Here he performed a wide variety of tasks, honing his skills on the charity patients in the free beds. Such valuable clinical experience was an exceptional opportunity for a young physician. There was also the chance to mingle with Philadelphia's medical elite, many of whom were in close contact with outstanding European practitioners and researchers. Among the attending physicians and surgeons at the Pennsylvania Hospital were William Pepper, a student and friend of Pierre Louis; George W. Norris, whose Parisian teachers had included Guillaume Dupuytren, A.-A.-L.-M. Velpeau, and François Magendie; and W. W. Gerhard, the most distinguished of the American students of Louis and perhaps the most careful medical researcher of the United States in his time.²⁰ Hammond also had access to the best medical library in the country, although there is little indication that he used it often. Although Hammond did not refer explicitly in later years to his hospital experience, it clearly marked him as one of the most promising young physicians of his generation.²¹

MEDICAL SCIENCE AND THE U. S. ARMY

His formal medical training completed, Hammond spent the next few months in Saco, Maine, about twenty miles southwest of Portland. He may have been vacationing there, or avoiding the cholera, or he may have attempted to set up a medical practice, as older biographical accounts suggest. Meanwhile, the twenty-one-year-old doctor began the application process for a post as assistant surgeon in the United States Army. This was the course his preceptor Van Buren had followed, and suggests an early distaste for the prospects of traditional family medical practice.

In a letter to President Zachary Taylor dated March 8, 1849, William Johnston of Harrisburg, a friend and political contact of the Hammond family, requested the appointment. "Dr. Hammond is a graduate of the University of New York and has been employed in the Almshouses and Hospitals of New York and Philadelphia. He is an excellent and worthy man," Johnston wrote in conventional phrases, "free from all bad habits, and eminently deserving of the situation he solicits." Hammond received his commission on July 3 and married Helen Nisbet, daughter of a Philadelphia attorney, the following day. On July 8 the young

couple left from Carlisle Barracks, near Harrisburg, heading southwest to remote New Mexico Territory.²²

Hammond remained in the Army as an assistant surgeon for eleven years, spending most of this time at frontier posts in New Mexico and Kansas Territories. His position enabled him to participate in two of the major projects of contemporary American science, the natural history surveys of the Smithsonian Institution and of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. At the same time he began experimental research into problems of physiological chemistry. These were of less immediate interest to most of his countrymen but were consistent with the work being carried out in the German and French laboratories already so admired by the American medical elite.

Toward the end of his stint in the army, Hammond spent some time on sick leave in Philadelphia. There he associated with other scientifically inclined young physicians, including Joseph Leidy, Henry Hartshorne, and S. Weir Mitchell. Together they attempted to establish a "biological" society in which such medical science could be institutionalized and coordinated. These short-lived efforts are important to an understanding both of Hammond's conception of scientific medicine and of the social constraints under which the aspiring scientist worked. Hammond's military experiences and scientific experiments in the antebellum years are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

The chief constraint was Hammond's need to support his family, which by the fall of 1860 included two toddlers. He resigned then from the army to accept a position as professor of anatomy and physiology at the University of Maryland Medical School. Typical of the times, the medical school did not provide full-time support for its faculty, so Hammond started a practice in Baltimore. This arrangement lasted barely six months. When the Civil War began Hammond reenlisted as an assistant surgeon, returning to the bottom of the seniority list. His experience was recognized, however, in his assignment: the organization of desperately needed military hospitals in Baltimore, Hagerstown, and Frederick, Maryland, and at Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. He was promoted in March 1862 to the position of inspector of hospitals, but had barely undertaken these new responsibilities when, a month later, President Lincoln appointed him surgeon general of the Medical Department. It was an unprecedented honor for a man

of his age (thirty-three) and previous rank (assistant surgeon). It was also an unprecedented task. Hammond's accomplishments in a year and a half as surgeon general were, by themselves, sufficient to ensure him a place in the history of American medicine. His innovations prefigured and served as a model for developments that, while rooted in prewar American medicine, would accelerate rapidly in the decades following the Civil War. These are examined in Chapters 4 and 5.

Hammond's departure from Washington officialdom was still more dramatic than his arrival. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton had opposed Hammond and his backers on the United States Sanitary Commission almost from the start. In August 1863 he sent the Surgeon General on a western tour of inspection, delaying his return until long after this task was accomplished. With Hammond safely away from his desk, Stanton initiated a special investigation of the Medical Department. Hammond naively demanded a formal court-martial to clear his name of the suspicion he felt had been cast upon it. And a court-martial he received, on charges based mainly on the violation of protocol in the purchase of a lot of blankets and in the assignment of several medical officers. But he was shocked to be found guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman, summarily dismissed from his post, and enjoined from again holding office under the United States government.

THE MAKING OF A NEUROLOGIST

Hammond's standing among prominent American and foreign physicians was not substantially injured by this verdict, which was eventually overturned by Congress after a special investigation in 1878-79. But his immediate attempts to vindicate himself exhausted his modest financial resources.

"When I was dismissed from the service," Hammond told a *New York Tribune* reporter in 1879, "I resolved to go to the biggest place in the world and live it down. . . . I had nothing and was obliged to borrow money from whosoever would loan it to me in order to support myself. There were times when I really did not know how I was to get my next meal."²³ "Nothing" meant less than \$500 in assets, some household goods, and his precious

books. Fortunately, Hammond – like the hero of his 1867 novel *Robert Severne* – had loyal and affluent friends. Dr. J. H. Douglas, with whom Hammond had become intimate through the Sanitary Commission, helped him find the house at 162 West 34th Street in New York from which he would launch his practice. Douglas and the publisher J. B. Lippincott each loaned the destitute physician \$2,000 for the down payment, and Douglas provided another \$3,500 over the next few months toward expenses. Edward Olmsted, Hammond's brother-in-law, took up a subscription among friends and raised \$2,000 more as a Christmas gift "to aid him in his pecuniary embarrassment."²⁴

Douglas also arranged for Hammond to earn at least small amounts by writing popular articles on scientific and medical topics for the new weekly magazine *Nation*. These essays appeared anonymously and reflected the author's interest in what he called "social science." "The Humors of the Anthropologists" defended Hammond's white countrymen from European charges of race degeneration. "Poisoning as a Science" promoted the science of toxicology. His "Few Words About Cholera" added little novelty to the spate of articles on the impending epidemic, while "Slaughterhouses and Health" decried the sickening miasmas of those enterprises.²⁵ Even with this supplementary income, added to a total of about \$1,200 from his practice, the impatient and ambitious Hammond "began to think [he] should never get along."

In the fall of 1865, however, he received a commission to accompany Eugene Langdon, an ailing and undistinguished grandson of John Jacob Astor, on a six-month voyage to Europe, leaving his own family behind. The work was not onerous. Hammond was able to catch up on the latest developments in medicine and in hospital organization in London, Paris, Rome, and Florence, while enjoying neighboring resorts as well. For this he received the very generous sum of \$10,000 in gold, in addition to \$7,000 for his own travel expenses. When he returned to New York in June 1866 he had \$9,000 remaining with which to pay off his debts and make a new start in private practice. It was probably at this time that he decided to limit his practice exclusively to "neurology." Although his receipts for the remainder of 1866 amounted, he later declared, to about \$40, business soon improved. His annual income rose from \$2,225 in 1867 to \$9,600 in 1868, and soared to over \$60,000

ten years later.²⁶ This was nothing short of phenomenal: a survey of physicians' income around 1900 found that the wealthiest fifty then averaged \$45,000 annually.²⁷

New York City was already the medical center of the country in the late 1860s, as the congested and unhealthy metropolis was also a financial, commercial, and cultural center. Physicians were numerous and unfettered by government control. There was one doctor (of some sort) for every five hundred inhabitants, and these physicians vied with pharmacists, lay advisers, and the continuing reliance of many on self-help. Competition among doctors was intense, and a large gap separated the most and the least successful. A small but powerful elite, centered on the Medical and Surgical Society, dominated the medical schools, the hospital and dispensary positions for attending staff, and most of the city's medical organizations. While many in this group interested themselves in the latest advances in medical science, even contributing to it themselves, there were many more physicians who knew little and probably cared less.

The family practice was still central to the work of nearly all physicians, organized around the home visit and the formal consultation. Office practice, conducted on a cash basis, was financially useful but professionally somewhat suspect. The flexible etiological and pathological theories that were still overwhelmingly employed underlined the importance of a physician's knowledge of the family and history of the patient, and fit well with the largely traditional methods of diagnosis and therapeutics. But instabilities already existed which would provide the basis for the sweeping changes in medicine that characterized the period of Hammond's New York practice.

Hammond's career in neurology, the subject of Chapters 6 through 11, balanced precariously on the crest of this new wave. He never belonged to the Medical and Surgical Society, nor even to the far more inclusive New York Academy of Medicine. However, he maintained close ties with such members of the "inner circle" as his preceptor Van Buren and his colleagues on the faculties of New York's three leading medical colleges. When he first arrived in New York, the impecunious scientist joined only the Medical Journal Association, probably to gain access to its large collection of contemporary medical literature. A few years later he

joined and became active in the County Medical Society, which many other intellectual leaders of the profession did not.

Hammond also maintained contact with the rank and file of the profession through such groups as the O.A.E. Society of Bellevue Medical College and his own Alumni Association of the Medical Department of the City of New York. He directed a much larger share of his seemingly inexhaustible energy, however, toward new specialty societies. He joined the Medico-Legal Society soon after its incorporation in 1869, and initiated the New York Neurological Society in the early 1870s. Hammond also played a central role in the foundation of the American Neurological Association. This organizational work earned him more lasting recognition than any other aspect of his career with the major exception of his surgeon generalcy.²⁸

By far the most distinctive feature of Hammond's new practice was his decision to treat only patients suffering from diseases of the nervous system. By 1865 it was already fairly common for well-educated doctors to take a special interest in a particular class of diseases. In Europe, a few physicians had already become exclusive specialists. But in the United States, virtually every respectable physician maintained a general family practice, together with consulting work. It was rare to limit one's practice to a particular specialty or to emphasize office work. And neurology had not yet achieved even the recognition of separate attention in medical school lectures or separate hospital wards. By the turn of the century, the picture had changed considerably. Through Hammond's career it is possible to trace in detail the emergence of neurology as a specialty, and to gain a deeper understanding of the process of specialization in American medicine.²⁹

Neurology, as it was defined by the work of New York physicians such as William A. Hammond, George Beard, and Edward C. Spitzka, represented the convergence of a complicated set of theoretical and practical considerations. For a time, the result fit rather neatly into the dominant trends of New York medicine. It was both scientific and profitable, "high-toned" in its reliance on the latest in medical knowledge and technology while offering welcome advice to the general practitioner. In later years, however, there were increasing tensions between Hammond's sort of neurology and the laboratory-oriented scientific medicine that was

coming to define the self-consciousness and public image of the profession. Younger neurologists, especially, became less willing or less able to overlook the many weaknesses and inconsistencies of Hammond's work, which he had extended to include psychology, psychiatry, and even morality. Hammond gave up his New York neurological practice in 1888, none too soon in the eyes of many, and moved to Washington, D.C., with his second wife, Esther D. Chapin of Providence, Rhode Island.

Hammond had an elegant private sanatorium built to his specifications on Columbia Heights, overlooking the city that he had left in disgrace a quarter of a century earlier. He again plunged into his work with an enthusiasm undiminished by his sixty years. Here he made his last foray into scientific research: investigations of the effects of so-called animal extracts. He engaged, meanwhile, in the profitable business of their manufacture and sale. Hammond doubtless saw nothing wrong in this combination of activities. But to many of his contemporaries the implausibility of his scientific results, superadded to the outright commercialism of the sanatorium, provided a particularly graphic illustration of what medicine ought not to be. Chapters 12 and 13 explore this last phase of Hammond's long and varied career.

MEDICAL PRACTICE AND PUBLIC LIFE

In his prime, William A. Hammond, M.D., was an imposing figure. He was "of leonine appearance, tall and stout," and "confident and assertive in manner," recorded the New York diarist James H. Morse, who thought Hammond "the picture of good-natured self-confidence."³⁰ He stood six feet, two inches tall, carrying over two hundred pounds of weight with a military bearing. His receding hairline emphasized a high forehead, and the full beard and sideburns he sported could not conceal a strong-featured face. His opinions were tenaciously held and often idiosyncratic, issued forth in a booming voice. To subordinates and antagonists he sometimes appeared to be intolerably arrogant.

As a New Yorker, Hammond took an active part in civic affairs. He served on the "Citizens' Committee Upon the Nuisances of New York City" formed in the summer of 1877 to force action against the "stench-factories" responsible for "the sickening smells pervading the city."³¹ He was a leading candidate for the post of

health officer of the port of New York in 1870 and again in 1878. Despite his outstanding credentials, however, Senate confirmation would have been impossible for a proscribed ex-surgeon general.³² This episode may have prompted the move to have his case reopened and the decision reversed.

A broad range of scientific organizations also drew his attention. He joined or spoke before the American Social Science Association, the American Anthropological Association, the American Geographical Society, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He helped to found a short-lived "National Institute for Letters, Arts and Sciences," based in New York, in 1868. The literary public knew him as the author of half a dozen novels, and, in his last year, a rather contrived and melodramatic play. All this activity served to publicize his name (generally but not always in a favorable context), extend his contacts, and promote his medical career. But there is no reason to doubt his sincere enthusiasm for these diverse pursuits.

Hammond was known among affluent New Yorkers as one who particularly enjoyed society and its amenities. His gala receptions, often held in honor of the participants in some scientific gathering, were frequently noted in the medical press and in the columns of the daily newspapers. He was especially fond of the pleasures of the table. We are told that "mottoes illustrative of gastronomic matters" in various languages were worked in amid other decorations along the ceiling and walls of his dining room.³³ He showed little patience with proposals for restrictive sumptuary laws or the "mischievous ice-pitcher," which he found to be ruinous of stomach and palate. On finding himself once in the "dry" state of Rhode Island, he wrote himself a prescription for *vini campaniae* to be taken *p.r.n.* In the midst of the depression of the 1880s he was openly scornful of those ignorant of haute cuisine. His own dinner parties were elaborate, correct, and enlivened by his wide-ranging and fluent conversation. They earned for him a reputation as an excellent host.³⁴

Hammond's tastes were sufficiently idiosyncratic to draw attention even amid the excesses of the Gilded Age. His family moved in 1873 into a large house at 43 West 54th Street, which also served as his private office. The hallway contained a statue of the Buddha, which (he said) he had repainted whenever he needed extra good fortune. The study in which he received patients was lined with