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Surgical Leaders

John Chalmers DaCosta (1863–1933): Restoration of the Old Operating Table

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John Chalmers DaCosta was an influential chairman and the first Samuel D. Gross Professor of Surgery at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. He was well known throughout the field as a skilled surgeon, passionate speaker, and exceptional writer. In addition to countless accomplishments during his career, DaCosta was deeply dedicated to the preservation and commemoration of surgical history. This ideology was exemplified when he set out on a mission to recover the old wooden operating table used by many of his iconic mentors including Samuel D. Gross, Joseph Pancoast, and William W. Keen. This table was originally used for surgical demonstrations and anatomy lessons in a lecture room of the Ely Building and later in the great amphitheater of the Jefferson Sansom Street Hospital. It was found forgotten in the basement of the College Building and was promptly refurbished, donned with dedicatory plaques, and returned to its honored position in the medical college. Dr. DaCosta also contributed a detailed article recalling the history of the table and the notable leaders in surgery who taught and practiced on its surface. The old table currently stands proudly in the entranceway of the Department of Surgery where it will remain as a cherished symbol of the early beginnings of surgical practice and education.

IN THE MIDDLE of the 19th century, surgery was a rapidly developing discipline within the field of medicine with new advances in anesthesia, sterile technique, and methods to treat, alleviate, and cure an increasing number of diseases through surgical intervention. In Philadelphia, Samuel D. Gross was at the forefront of this exponential growth in the field, giving didactic anatomy lectures, writing textbooks, and operating in surgical amphitheaters. During his interactive teaching sessions, Dr. Gross relied on a necessary platform in the operating room to provide the stage on which he performed. This was a free-standing wooden operating table, uncomplicated in design yet elegant in its simplicity, purpose, and legacy. This intricate relationship between surgeon and his operating table would later become a major subject of interest in the life of Dr. John Chalmers DaCosta, the first Samuel D. Gross Professor of Surgery at the Jefferson Medical College.

Dr. DaCosta (Fig. 1) was an influential figure in the field of surgery and became a frequent narrator of surgical history through his writings as well as his

public lectures. Affectionately known as “Jack,” John Chalmers DaCosta was born in Washington, DC, on November 15, 1863.¹ After the Civil War, the DaCosta family relocated to Philadelphia where young Jack embarked on a path toward surgery at an early age. When he was nine years old, an unfortunate accident in which a pinecone struck him in the right eye brought Jack under the care of Dr. George Strawbridge, an ophthalmologist at the Wills Eye Institute. Although he suffered from loss of vision in this eye, DaCosta was strongly influenced by the surgeon’s gentle mannerism and compassion. From that point on, DaCosta was fascinated with surgery and frequently borrowed his mother’s hairpins, reconstructing them into makeshift surgical instruments. In 1880, DaCosta began his undergraduate education at the University of Pennsylvania where he majored in chemistry; however, he continued to seek out lessons in surgery. He attended clinics at the Philadelphia General Hospital where he observed operations and lectures by Samuel D. Gross, David Hayes Agnew, and Joseph Pancoast. He later recounted his first impressions of Dr. Gross in a biographical article: “[I] saw the embodiment of surgical learning, dignity and distinction, and felt that fifty years of American surgery were speaking through his lips.”²

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FIG. 1. John Chalmers DaCosta, MD. Thomas Jefferson University Archives and Special Collections. http://jeffline.tju.edu/sml/archives/exhibits/notable_alumni/john_chalmers_dacosta.html.

DaCosta entered medical school at the Jefferson Medical College in 1882 to continue his quest toward becoming a surgeon. He graduated as the valedictorian of his class in 1885 and then stayed in Philadelphia as a faculty member at Philadelphia General Hospital and later as a clinical Professor of Surgery at Jefferson beginning in 1895. Here he joined his predecessor and mentor, Dr. William W. Keen, and he subsequently became the first Samuel D. Gross Professor of Surgery and Chair of the Department at Jefferson Medical College in 1910. As his surgical renown grew, DaCosta was committed to preserving the history of surgery through the written word as well as through instruction to the students of the medical college. This facet of DaCosta's career is epitomized through the crucial role he played in the renovation of the old clinic operating table, on which many of his mentors, colleagues, and students practiced and perfected their craft.

Constructed sometime between the years 1850 and 1855 by an unknown manufacturer in America, the operating table spent many years in use as the platform on which countless patients entrusted their lives and well-being to a surgeon in hopes of alleviating their illness. It is made of solid walnut, fashioned into a basic rectangular top with hinged leaves at either end measuring $34.5 \times 65.25 \times 24.25$ inches (Fig. 2). The central plank of the table is also equipped with a pocket side panel, which allows for a sliding leaf to be inserted inside, increasing the width of the table. The



FIG. 2. The operating table positioned in the alcove of the Gross Conference Room of the College Building at Jefferson Medical College. Reprinted from Berkowitz JS. College Clinic Operating Table. Adorn the Halls: History of the Art Collection at Thomas Jefferson University. 1999:183.

entire top portion swivels on a hexagonal base fastened with brass brackets on each corner.³ The actual form and shape of this table differs from the depiction by Thomas Eakins in his masterpiece *The Gross Clinic*, the famous rendition of Dr. Gross in his prime as he lectures to the medical students and demonstrates the technique and intricacies of an operation for osteomyelitis of the leg.^{3, 4} The table in this masterpiece is illustrated as having legs at all four corners rather than the single central base of the operating table, which stood in the clinic amphitheater during Dr. Gross' time.

The original home for the operating table was in the upper lecture room of the Ely Building of the Tenth Street College Hospital. Here it served as the epicenter for education during surgical clinics, anatomy lessons, and obstetrical lectures.⁵ When the Jefferson Sansom Street Hospital opened in 1877, the table was relocated to the surgical amphitheater, referred to by students and professors alike as "the pit" (Fig. 3). Over the years, like with many original prototypes, the operating table was gradually replaced in favor of the latest modern counterparts and eventually retired altogether from its place of honor. For years, it was lost and forgotten without an inquiry into its whereabouts until Dr. DaCosta initiated a campus-wide search to find this historical piece of carpentry. During the investigation, DaCosta discovered the table in the basement of the College Building, abandoned and demoted from center stage in the operating room to a storage shelf for oil cans and various other undesirable objects. He remarked fondly on his impressions of the table in an article entitled *Facts Concerning the Old Operating Table*: "An old wooden table! It is not artistic or dainty but rather solid



FIG. 3. The operating table in the Upper Amphitheater of the 1898 Medical College Building on the corner of 10th and Walnut Streets in Philadelphia. Dr. DaCosta is seated closest to the head of the table, ground level, third from the left in a gray suit. Reprinted from Upper Amphitheater. Photograph. TJU Archives Art/Photograph Collection, Philadelphia. University Archives and Special Collections. Thomas Jefferson University. Web. November 8, 2011.

and capable. It was made for grim practical uses and not for show. . . an old scarred veteran, retired after years of active service to end its days of vivid experience in the familiar surroundings of a bull pit.”⁶ Dr. DaCosta commissioned the Jefferson medical students to have the table repaired and restored to its rightful place of veneration within the college. To further honor the artifact, the classes of 1916 and 1917 each dedicated bronze tablets to opposite ends of the table that cite lists of surgeons who were known to have operated on it. These lists include John Chalmers DaCosta himself along with other notables such as Samuel D. Gross, Joseph Pancoast, Samuel W. Gross,

John H. Brinton, Richard J. Levis, Joseph Hearn, and William W. Keen.⁵

For a number of years, the operating table was positioned in an alcove of the Gross Conference Room in the Surgery Department of the College Building. It has since been relocated to the entranceway of the main surgery offices where it stands behind velvet roping. In this new home, it has returned to its proper place of surgical education. Here, a constant stream of students, residents, and faculty pass by it daily so that they may recall the early years of surgery at Jefferson and appreciate the evolution from its humble beginnings. DaCosta recognized the meaningful message projected by the operating table and relays his intentions for its future with this quote: “It is evident that this table has had the closest association with some of the greatest men who ever adorned the surgery of the last three quarters of a century, and it should be held, cherished, and cared for as a precious relic as long as the school shall stand.”⁶

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