

Collectors Chronicles II: Mordecai E. Hyams (1819–1891)

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The UNC Herbarium has several dozen specimens collected in the 1880s by Mordecai E. Hyams of Statesville (Iredell County, NC). Born in Charleston, SC, Hyams first taught school in Magnolia, Florida, then joined the 2nd Florida Infantry of the Confederate Army. Because of his botanical knowledge, he was sent to North Carolina, where the Confederates stockpiled roots, herbs, and barks to be processed into drugs. “These articles were concentrated at the Charlotte Military Institute, and were there put up in packages, and many manufactured into solid and fluid extracts, tinctures, pills, powders, ointments, etc., for the use of the army which as deemed an essential substitute for foreign drugs which were difficult to obtain, only through blockade runners.”¹ Hyams never returned to Florida, and he changed careers to botany.

“After the war and its afflictions had subsided,”¹ Hyams went into the crude drug business. At that time, all drugs were derived from plants: tinctures from barks, ointments from roots, teas from berries. By 1871 Hyams was the botanist and manager of Wallace Brothers’ “botanic depot,” a three-story 44,000-square-foot warehouse on South Meeting Street in Statesville. Hyams established a vast network of mountain people who collected in the forests and bartered the herbs to local shopkeepers, who, in turn, shipped the plants to Statesville in return for wholesale goods such as salt and kerosene from Wallace Brothers’ other business ventures. Hyams was crucial in this operation: he went on extensive expeditions to identify plants and to instruct gatherers and shopkeepers on how to preserve, prepare, and ship them to Statesville.^{2,3} In time, the Wallace Brothers’ catalog listed 300 plants for sale, including Adam and Eve orchid root (*Aplectrum hyemale*), haircap moss (*Polytrichum* sp.), wild ginger root (*Hexastylis* sp.), Solomon’s seal root (*Polygonum biflorum*), and of course, ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*).⁴ Consider the quantities of plants that were harvested: 22,000 kg of mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*) in one month, and a single order of *Hepatica* for 13 metric tons!!²

Mordecai Hyams was not interested in just the business of plants. He belonged to the Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society, corresponded with learned botanists of the day, and sent specimens to herbaria at Harvard and UNC. While most collectors are careful to note the location where a plant is collected, most of Hyams’s specimens read simply “Statesville.” Herbarium staff

annotate these specimens with the caveat: “Mordecai E. Hyams was based in Statesville, NC, and collected widely in North Carolina. The ‘Statesville’ on the label should not be taken as a collecting locality. Plants so labeled are probably from North Carolina, but no more definite locality can be determined.”

Hyams retired from Wallace Brothers in the late 1880s. The Panic of 1893, a serious economic decline precipitated by a run on the gold supply, hit North Carolina hard, and Wallace Brothers went bankrupt in 1895.³ With the advent of chemical synthesis of drugs (Aspirin was patented in 1899), the demand for botanicals lessened, though the lively trade in ginseng continues to this day.

Mordecai Hyams and his son, George Hyams (1861–1932), are most famous for discovering *Shortia galacifolia* along the Catawba River (McDowell County, NC) in 1877. *Shortia* was originally found in the mountains of the Carolinas in 1788 by

French botanist André Michaux. Many botanists searched in vain for the plant for 90 years. “We were passing along the road and my attention was called to an elevated hillside that I could not ascend as being at the time rather exhausted, being [almost] sixty years old” said Mordecai Hyams, “so I requested [George] to ascend and bring whatever was in flower.” He did not recognize the plant, so sent it to Joseph Congden

in Rhode Island, who in turn sent it to Asa Gray at Harvard, who recognized it as the long-sought *Shortia*. Gray visited Statesville in 1879, toured the Wallace Brothers herb depot, and accompanied Mordecai and George Hyams to George’s *Shortia* patch.² The UNC Herbarium has several specimens of *Shortia* collected by Mordecai Hyams in April 1879 from this location.

References:

1. Hyams, M.E. 1877. The botanic business of western North Carolina, read before the N.C. State Agricultural Society. “The Charlotte Democrat,” Friday Nov. 23, 1877. 26(1306): [1].
2. Troyer, James R. 2001. The Hyams family, father and sons, contributors to North Carolina botany. *Journ. Elisha Mitchell Sci. Soc.* 117(4): 240-48.
3. Freeze, Gary R. 1995. Roots, barks, berries, and Jews: the herb trade in Gilded-Age North Carolina. *Essays in Econ. & Bus. Hist.* 13: 107-27.
4. Anderson, T. E. 1934. When Statesville was nation’s “yarb” center. *Southern Med. & Surg.* 96: 594.

