

Hyams, Mordecai E. ^[1]

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Hyams, Mordecai E.

by [William S. Powell](#) ^[2], 1988

28 Sept. 1819–16 May 1891

See also: [Oconee Bells](#) ^[3]

Mordecai E. Hyams, botanist and herbalist, was born in Charleston, S.C., a descendant of Solomon Hyams who came to America from Prussia in 1744. Although an obituary notice reports that Hyams "graduated at the University at Columbia," alumni records at the University of South Carolina do not contain his name. In 1861 he was living in Magnolia, Fla., when he was detailed to Charlotte, N.C., to buy medicinal roots, barks, and [herbs](#) ^[4] to be used to produce medicine for Confederate soldiers. Enlisting in the Confederate Army, he was in charge of the medical supply department in Charlotte for about a year, after which he moved to Statesville, a center of the herb trade.

In 1868 Hyams moved to Wilkesboro and formed a partnership with [Calvin J. Cowles](#) ^[5] for the purchase and sale of crude drugs. Because of inadequate transportation facilities there, he returned to Statesville in 1869 and joined the firm of Phifer and Turrentine in the crude drug business. In 1871 the company was sold to Wallace Brothers, and Hyams became botanist and manager. From here large quantities of crude drugs were shipped abroad as well as to new drug manufacturers in the United States. During the next fifteen years the Wallace Brothers Herbarium enlarged the number of varieties in which it dealt from 75 to 300, and by 1890 it was processing over 2,300 varieties. One particularly popular product was ginseng root for which a large market existed in China.

Hyams often went on long expeditions through the southern mountains, sometimes accompanied by his son, Charles, identifying and arranging to buy herbs, [bark](#) ^[6], and roots. It often was necessary for him to train local gatherers. He added 166 new varieties of plants to the identified flora of North Carolina. In 1898 the North Carolina [Agricultural Experiment Station](#) ^[7] published a list of medicinal plants that Hyams's son compiled. The elder Hyams also was the author of "The Crude Drug Industry in the South," prepared for the U.S. Census Bureau, and he arranged exhibitions of botanical specimens sent by Wallace Brothers to the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876 and the Paris Exposition of 1878.

He was an honorary member of the [Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society](#) ^[8] at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[9] and was a delegate in 1882 to the National Forestry Congress and to the American Forestry Association meeting in Cincinnati. Hyams was asked by the North Carolina [Department of Agriculture](#) ^[10] to prepare a new edition of [Moses Ashley Curtis](#) ^[11]'s book on trees, shrubs, and woody vines for which some of his additions appeared in the *Journal of the Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society* in 1885. Failing health prevented his finishing this work, however.

In 1878 Hyams and his son rediscovered the rare *Shortia galacifolia* ^[3] growing in [McDowell County](#) ^[12] along the [Catawba River](#) ^[13]. It had first been reported by the French botanist, [André Michaux](#) ^[14], on his visit to the high mountains in 1794, but the exact location was unknown. Hyams was highly commended by Asa Gray and other well-known botanists for his skill in recognizing and identifying this plant.

In the late 1880s he left the Wallace Brothers' employment because of ill health but worked for a time at another local herbarium. His funeral was held in the local Presbyterian church and he was buried in Oakwood Cemetery, Statesville.

In 1849 in Middlesburg, Clay County, Fla., Hyams married Caroline Ferdinand Sheifler Smith, a native of Wertenburg, Germany. They were the parents of Fred D., Jefferson H., Charles W., George McQueen, and Kate.

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