

Mid-Atlantic Medical Museums

The mid-Atlantic region offers an unusually large number of museums dedicated to preserving and disseminating the history of medicine. These museums range from the tiny, self-guided displays of the two-room Pest House Museum, located in the midst of a historic cemetery in downtown Lynchburg, VA, to such major institutions as the Smithsonian Institution and the National Institutes of Health, both in Washington, DC.

For those interested in Civil War-era medical practices, this region is a bonanza with the National Museum of Civil War Medicine in Frederick, MD, and the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington, DC, displaying major collections from that era. The Clara Barton National Historic Site (Glen Echo, MD) and a smaller collection at the Fort Ward Museum (Alexandria, VA) also help tell the story of medical care at that time.

Sobering to physicians and tourists alike, these museums are essential reminders the responsibility of caregivers to protect both body and dignity. But, as a visit to the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, PA, surely points out, people visit medical museums also to remember the awe-inspiring diversity and frailty of one's own flesh.

What follows is a list of these strange and wonderful collections. All of these museums offer surprises. Of particular note are the tiny dentures of Lavinia Warren, the woman who became Mrs. Tom Thumb, at the National Museum of Dentistry in Baltimore, MD. Clara Barton's Red Cross headquarters in Glen Echo, MD, with its efficient storage of relief supplies, gives the impression of a ship ready for a long voyage. But it is the human specimens that pull most strongly: the murderer's brain preserved in a glass bottle at the Mütter, for example, or the shattered leg bone at the National Museum of Health and Medicine, which the wounded soldier carefully preserved to place it personally in the museum's care (on the anniversary of the amputation, according to the accompanying label, the soldier returned to the museum to visit his leg bone every year for the rest of his life).

John Q. Adams Center for the History of Otolaryngology

American Academy of Otolaryngology—
Head and Neck Surgery
Alexandria, VA

Online: www.entnet.org/museum

The museum collection features hearing aids, surgical instruments, and rare books. Highlights include ear trumpets, electro-therapeutic devices from the late

1800s (used in the mistaken belief that they could cure deafness), and a variety of beautiful medical illustrations in several media.

Center for the History of Foot Care and Foot Wear

Pennsylvania College of Podiatric Medicine
Philadelphia, PA

Online: podiatry.temple.edu/shoe_museum/shoe_museum.html

The museum collection features 250 pairs of shoes, including celebrity footwear and extreme styles through the centuries. Highlights of the collection include 200-year-old French sabots (the wooden shoes that gave birth to the expression "sabotage"), miniature salesman samples, and the size 18 shoes that once belonged to a circus giant. Open by appointment only.

Clara Barton National Historic Site

Glen Echo, MD

Online: www.nps.gov/clba

A historic house museum—the first headquarters of the American Red Cross and the home of Ms. Barton until her death in 1912. The home served as a warehouse and headquarters for the Red Cross, combining domestic and business functions in one handsome building.

Colonial Williamsburg Pasteur and Galt Apothecary

Williamsburg, VA

Online: www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/Almanack/places/hb/hbpast.cfm

The reconstructed 1775 apothecary shop still stands on its original site. Costumed interpreters give information and demonstrations. The collections include British Delft drug storage jars, antique implements, medical books, and a jar of live medicinal leeches.

Didusch Center for Urological History

American Urological Association
Linthicum, MD

Online: www.auanet.org/about/didusch.cfm

The museum's collections feature drawings, texts, and urologic memorabilia, including historic cystoscopes, operating resectoscopes, and microscopes. Displays on the development of treatment and research change annually, timed to coincide with the association's annual meeting.

Elmer H. Grimm Sr. Pharmacy Museum

University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy
Pittsburgh, PA

Online: museum.pharmacy.pitt.edu/museum/default.html

The Grimm Museum is a small room packed with old-fashioned pharmaceutical machinery, medicines, and other concoctions dating back to the early 20th century. The University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy also maintains a display case with artifacts documenting Jonas Salk's discovery of the polio vaccine.

Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site

Alexandria, VA

Online: oha.ci.alexandria.va.us/forward/

Fort Ward is the best preserved of the ring of Union forts and batteries built during the Civil War to protect the capital. The accompanying museum collection features a permanent display on medical care for the Civil War soldier. Highlights include an amputation kit with several bone saws, a rare leg splint with its original label, and photos documenting the town of Alexandria's use as a major hospital center for the Union Army.

The Franklin Institute

Philadelphia, PA

Online: www.fi.edu

Collections of this science museum include a giant walk-through human heart, originally built in 1954 and renovated in 2004. At two stories, it is the largest walk-through heart in the country and would be the accurate size for a person 220 feet tall.

Museum of Nursing History

Friends Hospital
Philadelphia, PA

Online: www.nursinghistory.org/index.htm

This archival museum of donated memorabilia (books, documents, letters, photos, scrapbooks, caps and uniforms, medals, and military artifacts) commemorates the progress of nursing. The museum was started in 1974 as a bicentennial project in which nurses from across the United States were invited to contribute.

Museum of Small Town Life

Dover, DE

Online: www.destatemuseums.org/information/small_town_life.shtml

Housed in a former Presbyterian Sunday school, this museum recreates a 19th century wood plank Main Street with five shops common to most small towns.

In addition to the print shop, woodworking shop, general store, and post office, the collection includes a pharmacy with samples from seven different apothecaries throughout Delaware. The pharmacy displays patent medicines, show globes, and devices used to mix drugs and make compounds.

Mütter Museum

The College of Physicians of Philadelphia
Philadelphia, PA

Online: www.collphyphil.org/mutter.asp

The museum's collections feature wet and dry human biological specimens and medical models used as teaching tools. Highlights include a plaster cast of Chang and Eng Bunker (the original Siamese Twins), the preserved body of the "Soap Lady," the tallest skeleton on display in North America, and the Chevalier Jackson Collection of Swallowed Objects. The museum's accurate motto is: "Disturbingly Informative."

National Institutes of Health (NIH)

US National Library of Medicine
Bethesda, MD

Online: www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/about/exhibition/index.html

NIH features changing exhibitions on the history of medicine. While NIH does not have a permanent collection, on-staff scholars create new and original multimedia exhibits and display borrowed artifacts on a range of diverse topics. Exhibits are typically displayed for two years at a time. The current exhibit, "Visible Proofs: Forensic Views of the Body," will be open through 2008. Films and lecture programs as well as web displays accompany each exhibition.

National Museum of American History

Smithsonian Institution, Division of
Health and Medicine

Washington, DC

Online: americanhistory.si.edu

The museum will be closed to the public from Labor Day 2006 through sometime in 2008. However, most items are still available for viewing by researchers and specialists by appointment. Collections include one of Wilhelm Roentgen's X-ray tubes, penicillin mold from Alexander Fleming's experiments, Jonas Salk's original polio vaccine, the first artificial heart implanted in a human, artificial limbs and implant devices, bloodletting and dental instruments, beauty products, veterinary equipment, and the contents of a medieval apothecary shop and an 1890s drug store.

National Museum of Civil War Medicine

Frederick, MD

Online: www.civilwarmed.org

Renovated and expanded in 2000, this museum illustrates the experiences of surgeons, medical support staff, and patients on both sides of the conflict. Collections include medical equipment, photographs, camp re-creations, and memorabilia from Civil War hospitals. Panels throughout the museum highlight the military career of Union Private Peleg Bradford. Other exhibits focus on medical school education, evacuation of the wounded, field hospitals, and embalming. A second museum site, the Pry House Field Hospital Museum, is located on the grounds of Antietam National Battlefield.

National Museum of Dentistry

Baltimore, MD

Online: www.dentalmuseum.umaryland.edu

The museum's collections include "Iron Mouth" circus exhibits, Andy Warhol's prints of St. Apollonia (the Patron Saint of Dentistry), historic dental tools and toothbrushes (including some gold-plated ones owned by Queen Victoria), and four sets of George Washington's false teeth.

National Museum of Health and Medicine

Building 54, Walter Reed Army Medical Center
Washington, DC

Online: nmhm.washingtondc.museum

Collections focus on the history and practice of American medicine, military medicine, and current medical research. Highlights include the bullet that ended Lincoln's life, extensive Civil War anatomical specimens, microscopes from the past 400 years, exhibits on front-line wartime practices, and an enormous hairball removed from the stomach of a 12-year-old girl.

The Pest House Medical Museum

Old City Cemetery

Lynchburg, VA

Online: www.gravegarden.org/pesthouse.htm

One of four small house museums on the grounds of the Old City Cemetery, the tiny two-room Pest House preserves Lynchburg's first hospital. The collection includes an intact 1860s medical office and a re-creation of a quarantine room for patients with contagious diseases.

The Physick House Museum

Philadelphia, PA

Online: www.philalandmarks.org/phys.aspx

The museum is a federal townhouse that was home to Philip Syng Physick, MD, the "Father of American Surgery," from 1815 through 1837. Collections feature Dr. Physick's pioneering stomach pump and other surgical instruments he designed or modified. The house includes period rooms, a medical museum on the second floor, and a large city garden with a grotto and statuary. One of the foremost surgeons of his time, Dr. Physick's patients included Dolly Madison, Benjamin Rush, MD, Chief Justice John Marshall, and President Andrew Jackson.

Stabler-Ledbeater Apothecary Museum

Alexandria, VA

Online: www.apothecarymuseum.org/

The museum is an apothecary shop in its original location, which operated from 1792 through 1933. Collections include pill rollers, mortars and pestles, drug mills, carboys and medical glassware. The apothecary served the George Washington family, James Monroe, and Robert E. Lee, among others.

Stonestreet Museum of 19th Century Medicine

Rockville, MD

Online: www.montgomeryhistory.org/stonestreet.html

This 1852 one-room Gothic Revival physician's office documents the developments in medical science during the career of Edward E. Stonestreet, MD, which spanned from 1852 to 1903, and is administered by the Montgomery County Historical Society. Collections include a Civil War amputation kit, a real display skeleton, and patent medicines. A costumed interpreter portrays Dr. Stonestreet on the second Sunday of every month.

University of Maryland School of Nursing Living History Museum

Baltimore, MD

Online: nursing.umaryland.edu/offices/development/museum/history.htm

The museum preserves the history of the school (founded in 1889), and chronicles the ongoing evolution of nursing. Docents are retired nurses and school alumni. Collections include an array of nursing uniforms, medical equipment, photographs, letters, and documents.

For more information about the mid-Atlantic medical museums, please contact Kim Roberts at beltway.poetry@juno.com. ✨

Kim Roberts

Editor

Beltway Poetry Quarterly