

"THE OLD RED BRICK": INSIGHT FOR THE LIVING

The Civil War was one of the most devastating periods in American history. The maiming and destruction of human life left both armies medically unable to cope with soldiers' wounds and resulting infections. Without antibiotics, infection and the accompanying disease were untreatable. Once gangrene set in, there was little option but to amputate. As a result, more soldiers died from post-wound infection and disease than from injury itself.

William A. Hammond, Surgeon General of the Army, realized the need for organized military medical research and in 1862 formed the Army Medical Museum. How else best to study war wounds than in a laboratory setting? His directive to all medical personnel stated:

"As it is proposed to establish in Washington an Army Medical Museum, Medical Officers are directed diligently to collect and to forward to the Office of the Surgeon General all specimens of morbid anatomy, surgical or medical, which may be regarded as valuable; together with projectiles and foreign bodies removed; and such other matter as may prove of interest in the study of military medicine and surgery. These objects should be accompanied by short explanatory notes...."

Anatomical specimens, packed in barrels of confiscated whiskey, were sent to Washington.

In 1862 the concept of a "museum" was very different from today. Museums were Institutes where specimens were collected for original research, just as the Smithsonian was created for the purpose of the "increase and diffusion of knowledge...." Museums were not initially showcases to educate the public. In fact, many of our current

fields of study had not been established or were in their infancy. For example, there was no organized field of pathology. The causes of disease were as much unknown as were the antibiotics with which we now cure them. The Army Medical Museum was established to document the causes and processes of disease; only later did it become a public showcase.

Although occupying several homes during the late 1800's (including Ford's Theater after Lincoln's assassination), the Army Medical Museum was situated on the Mall for 80 years where the Hirshhorn Museum sits today. It was on the Mall that the Museum became so familiar to Washington residents and visitors, averaging one million visitors per year, and becoming affectionally known as "the Old Red Brick."

Throughout its early history, the Medical Museum's pioneering research contributed to our current knowledge of



disease and to our nation's history. It was Army Medical Museum physicians who attended Lincoln as he died and who performed his autopsy. Surgeon J. J. Woodward was the first in the United States to take photomicrographs, while Curator J. S. Billings put together the world's most comprehensive collection of microscopes (dating to the 1600's) documenting their evolution. The Museum was one of the first United States institutions to use the x-ray clinically, just months after Roentgen's discovery. In 1908, the first mass inoculation in the United States took place within the museum's rotunda. As curator, Walter Reed discovered the causative agent of yellow fever. In later years, the Museum gave rise to the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, while its library became the nucleus of the National Library of Medicine.

Because the Smithsonian Institution decided to build a museum of modern art on the Mall, the Army Medical Museum was moved, in 1969, to the grounds of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. There, the specimens collected during the Civil War and the years following remain available for study, and many are still on exhibit.

At the Museum, one can see nearly all the organs of the human body and many diseases affecting them. Exhibited are specimens of heart disease; tumors of the brain, heart, colon, and lung; congenital anomalies; elephantiasis; syphilis; gall stones; a stomach occluded with hair; coal miner's lung; fragments of Lincoln's skull; and John Wilkes Booth's vertebrae. Also displayed are specimens depicting embryonic and skeletal development, bone fractures, plastic surgery, as well as a large collection of medical instruments. As one reporter stated, the Museum offers a place where disease, deformity, and death are straightforwardly presented. Here, one is able to comprehend his or her own mortality.

Several educational programs for school groups benefit teachers. Guided tours may be arranged, which include a medical film on a topic of your choice. Teachers are advised to prepare a questionnaire for their classes before a tour or to request one available from the Museum. Otherwise, students may take only gory memories with them rather than an understanding of the medical significance of what they have seen. Every visitor to the Museum hopefully will gain an appreciation of the importance of maintaining his or her own best health.

To obtain tour information, receive a film list, or schedule a visit, write: Tour Coordinator, Armed Forces Medical Museum, Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, Washington, D.C. 20306; or call (202) 576-2348.

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