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Note from the Director

The most fun that a curator and historian can have is to go on a treasure hunt. In February, Gary Gerlach (our fabulous volunteer curator), Bill Tharpe (board member and curator of the Alabama Power Archives and Museum) and I were invited by the new owners of the Thomas Jefferson Hotel to search through the building for items of historical interest among the decay of 30 years of neglect.

The building is being restored and turned into 100 apartments. I am happy to report that the new owners, Talbot Realty Group of New Orleans, are very aware of the historical importance of the building and are committed to restoration of some of the building’s unique elements. While we did not find much on our treasure hunt (see below and pages six and seven) it was fun to make the effort. In the words of L. Frank Baum, of Oz fame, “Knowledge is the best and safest treasure to acquire.”

Artifact of the Month – Thomas Jefferson Hotel Items

In a staff closet on the third floor of the Thomas Jefferson Hotel, the BHC expedition found several paper items including luggage and check room tags, staff room service memos (to control inventory), a menu from the Carriage House Restaurant located in the hotel, and various items of hotel stationary. Much of the rest of the building has been picked clean by intruders, but what has been found will be preserved in our collection.

As the foremost interpreter of metropolitan Birmingham’s history, we will enable the public to understand more about the city’s past and present and to shape its future.
Our Favorite Medical History Stories

Now known across the country for its medical establishments, Birmingham and Jefferson County actually has a rich medical history. It is remarkable that the first documented case of a medical patient in Jefferson County turns out to be Davy Crockett, the famous frontiersman. In 1816, Crockett visited the area and became ill. He was taken to the home of an early settler, Jesse Jones, where he was nursed back to health. Mrs. Jones gave him a whole bottle of Bateman’s Drop, a mixture which contained about 50% alcohol and 2 grams of opium per ounce. Crockett recovered.

Davy Crockett

The great cholera epidemic of 1873 that almost destroyed the City of Birmingham would have been a lot worse except for the few dedicated doctors, like James B. Luckie and Mortimer Jordan, who stayed in the city to tend to the sick and dying. Dr. Jordan was the first to suspect cholera when he tended to its first victim, known to history only as Mr. Y. Dr. Luckie and city alderman Francis P. O’Brien became so sick that caskets were ordered and obituaries were posted in the newspaper. Only half of the city’s population remained but the city survived.

Doctor Mortimer Jordan

We will recognize our responsibility to help build a better future—locally, regionally, nationally, and globally—through history. We will bring a credible and authoritative historical perspective to bear on civic issues, and we will help to shape the future by fostering historical scholarship and understanding.
Dr. Lloyd Noland established a groundbreaking public health, sanitation and medical care system on behalf of the Tennessee Coal Iron and Railroad Company in Jefferson County in the early 20th Century. Hired by TCI in 1917, Noland was instrumental in reducing malaria, typhoid, smallpox, and dysentery that had been rampant among local workers. The $750,000 system he designed and implemented for TCI was a pioneering model for industrial healthcare in the United States. In 1919 a massive new employees' hospital was constructed in Fairfield and placed under Noland's control. There he created a pioneering training program in anesthesiology.

Dr. Lloyd Noland

Dr. Judson D. Dowling, health officer, was able to get ordinances passed prohibiting the sale of milk with high bacterial counts. Regular inspection was also required. This forced pasteurization since it was difficult to get a low colony count without it. One night, in 1921, Dr. Dowling was kidnapped by masked vigilantes, flogged, and told to leave town within 30 days. This so enraged the community that laws were passed making it illegal to lure anyone out of their house or business under false preferences, or to wear masks in public or parades. By 1923, 80% of milk was pasteurized and the rate for typhoid was down. In 1948 all sales of raw milk was prohibited.

Doctor Judson D. Dowling

Every museum needs help to achieve its vision. Fortunately, we are not alone in wanting to help people make meaningful and personal connections to history. Throughout greater Birmingham, there are many who share this passion. We need their help.
Hillman Hospital opened in 1888 on Birmingham’s Southside to provide medical care for the poor, regardless of race or gender. It remains as the oldest hospital in the city. It was named for benefactor Thomas Hillman in 1896. It is now a part of the UAB Medical Center.

Obstetrician Thomas Boulware performed many new treatments at Hillman which were "firsts" for Alabama, including the state's first pregnancy test in 1929 and the first "bikini" Caesarean in 1932. He also oversaw the state's first OB/GYN residency in 1934 and opened the county's first indigent maternity clinic at Hillman in 1935. As the city's first hospital open to all races, Hillman fulfilled a crucial role in treating African Americans. Ku Klux Klan victim Judge Aaron was treated at Hillman in 1957, as were many of the victims of the 1963 bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church.

Forty years ago in Birmingham, air pollution from the steel industry and other sources regularly caused a thick toxic yellow haze over downtown and surrounding areas. It was literally making people sick. Although the steel mills are long gone and the air quality is much improved, Birmingham’s air quality still ranks as the fifth worst in the country for particle pollution.

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The Thomas Jefferson Hotel opened in 1929, one month before the stock market crash. It had 350 rooms, an ornate marble lobby and a large ballroom. The ground floor incorporated space for six shops and the basement included a billiard room and barber shop. The ballroom and dining rooms on the second floor opened out onto roof terraces from which the main tower rose.

The building’s unique exterior feature was the dirigible mooring mast on the roof, the last such structure in the world. Its luxury status made the Thomas Jefferson a prime spot for celebrities visiting the city, including Mickey Rooney and Ethel Merman. U.S Presidents Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover and singer Ray Charles have also stayed at the hotel.

In 1972, the hotel was renamed the Cabana Hotel. When the BJCC complex was finished much of the hotel traffic in Birmingham went to the Hyatt House Birmingham Hotel (now Sheraton Birmingham) and the Holiday Inn Civic Center. By 1981, the Cabana was a second-rate, $200-a-month apartment building with fewer than 100 residents. The hotel was shut down on May 31, 1983, by city health officials after it was declared uninhabitable on account of "bad plumbing, insufficient lighting, some inoperative smoke detectors and failure to upgrade to city fire codes". A proposal by the Leer Corporation to convert the building to apartments in 2005 was delayed and then abandoned.

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Clockwise from top left: Pacific Steel Boiler, Dirigible Tower, First Floor Staircase, Second Floor Terrace, View from the Roof, Bear Brant Suite 17th Floor.
The Birmingham History Center is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit formed in 2004 by a group of preservation-minded citizens who wanted a repository and exhibit platform for artifacts of local history. Thanks primarily to a bequest from the Thomas E. Jernigan, Sr. foundation and other donors, the History Center operates from offices at 1807 Third Avenue North in Birmingham, adjacent to the Alabama Theatre.

Mission Statement

The Birmingham History Center seeks to educate and entertain the general public by collecting, preserving and presenting the comprehensive history of the Birmingham region.

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