The Apothecary - Introduction

The Moravian Apothecary had been in continual existence, in one form or another, from 1743 until 1952 and represents what is left of the oldest continually operated drug store in the United States. Let’s put this time period in perspective. The Apothecary opened when Handel created his musical masterpiece called Messiah and George Washington was a boy of 11 and closed around the time that “Singing in the Rain” was a popular hit in the early 1950s and Dwight Eisenhower was elected President of the United States.

Although this building dates only to the mid-1800s, portions of this room that houses the Apothecary collection itself (floor, fireplace and possibly parts of the walls) were originally part of the 18th century apothecary laboratory building that was incorporated into this 19th century structure. (We are standing in the rear of the Moravian Book Shop and adjacent to the beautiful terraced church green and the historic Central Moravian Church.)

Medical practices

The practice of medicine was completely different in the 1700s than it is today. Can you imagine being sick when there was no pain-free surgery, no sterile conditions, no antibiotics? In the colonies at this time, very few physicians held medical degrees; it is estimated that out of the 3,000 – 4,000 doctors, only about 400 held medical degrees.

(Background: No American medical degrees until Medical of College of Philadelphia established in 1765, and King’s College in New York City in 1768 offered medical degrees)

In many areas of the United States in 1800, the life expectancy for women was 36 and 34 for men; 50% of children died before reaching 10 years of age.

The true causes of illness and disease were not known.

Bethlehem was not typical of other communities. Medical treatment in Moravian Bethlehem was in the hands of trained doctors from Europe who tended to be conservative in their treatments. Only accredited physicians were permitted to practice here in this community. They avoided the excessive therapies commonly employed and relied on herbal medicines, special diets, cleanliness, fresh air, exercise, and appropriate rest for their fundamental management of patients, permitting nature to heal the sick. Surgery was performed by trained physicians, not barber surgeons. Only trained officially appointed midwives attended women during childbirth.

Dr. John Meyer, physician, minister and pharmacist, came to Bethlehem from the Moravian settlement called Herrnhut in present-day Germany to help organize this fledging community in 1742 shortly after the settlement was founded. His wife Mary Dorothea was to join him a few months later, but sadly she died on the voyage and was buried at sea.

Dr. Meyer established his office in the Gemeinhaus, organized the care of the sick, set aside a room in the Gemeinhaus for sick women; a nearby small log structure behind the Gemeinhaus was constructed
to care for sick men. There were 15 trained medical assistants (8 male nurses and 7 female), a forerunner of the hospital concept, perhaps the earliest hospital in America.

The 1741 Gemeinhaus, a National Historic Landmark located just behind Central Moravian Church, was home to the entire community for a few years. It is believed to be the largest 18th Century log structure in continuous use in the United States. (Hope you take time to visit the Gemeinhaus)

The apothecary was opened in 1743 with the arrival of Dr. John Frederick Otto from Germany. At first, it was housed in a small room which still exists as a bathroom on the second floor of the Gemeinhaus, where it came to be referred to as “Dr. Otto’s Closet”. In 1750, his brother Dr. John Matthew Otto, came to assist.

The physicians and the nurses held regular meetings to discuss medical subjects and functioned as a hospital medical staff. They discussed the care of their patients and emphasized preventative care recommending exercise, moderation in diet, and isolation of sick children and adults to prevent the spread of disease.

Regular medical conferences were held in Bethlehem. In 1745 twenty-two doctors, nurses, attendants, assistants under training and members of the clergy attended one of them. The minutes of some of the conferences (known as Krankenwarter Conferenz) have been translated from the original handwritten German script.

Comments from various conference minutes:

The prices in the Apothecary Shop …… should not be fixed too low, for this suggested the bungler or the quack.

1756 Too many greens in the food of patients is not good.

Boys in the school should split wood for ½ hour each morning and ½ hour each afternoon in order to give them exercise.

Paul Hennig is getting a bad thumb; he should not eat sour (acidic) foods.

1757 The diet is determined by the doctor who will let the cook know what the menu should be.

1758 …too fatty food is more harmful than useful; the same is true with overheated rooms.

In 1752 a dwelling and store, a one-story stone building with a red tile roofed laboratory, was built for the Apothecary on what was to become Main Street. A second story was added in 1764. (We are standing in a portion of the original laboratory.)

The apothecary supplied medicines not only for Bethlehem but also for the surrounding areas; it developed into one of the most successful enterprises for the Church. The doctors traveled into the countryside, many miles on horseback, to care for the sick and bring medicines. The brothers Drs. Otto traveled as far as Lancaster to the southwest, across the Blue Mountains and Lehighton to the northwest, and east into New Jersey.

During the American Revolutionary War, Dr. Matthew Otto introduced inoculation to prevent a smallpox epidemic in the 1770s in Bethlehem. This practice was not commonly accepted until the mid-
1800s. In 1776 the General Hospital of the (Revolutionary) Army was removed to Bethlehem and following Washington’s retreat from New York about 500 casualties arrived in Bethlehem. In 1777 following the Battle of Brandywine more wounded arrived, including the Marquis de Lafayette who was treated for a wounded leg and released.

Dr. Eberhard Freytag, a trained physician and pharmacist from Herrnhut, Germany to Bethlehem in 1790 and purchased the apothecary from the Moravian Congregation. *(Do not know the cost)* From that time it was under private ownership. A few months after his arrival, he married Catherine; they had one son. She died only 5 years later. He then married Christina who was a teacher at the Young Ladies Seminary and had two daughters. She died in 1818. He then married Salome Fetter in 1819.

In 1839 for the sum of $1,500 *(app. $42,000 in today’s dollars)*, Dr. Freytag sold the Apothecary to his apprentice, Simon Rau, a pharmacist not a physician, who was the first to operate it as a separate concern from the medical profession. From then on, the apothecary was run by pharmacists not physicians. *(show copy of Simon Rau’s handwritten memoir)*

In 1862, Rau tore down the 1752 building housing the apothecary and a portion of the laboratory. He retained the compounding hearth of the laboratory and parts of the early walls and tile floor and created around it the structure that we see today.

This was the only pharmacy in Bethlehem until 1844. By the 1890s, 17 drug stores existed in Bethlehem.

In 1934 in order to create the Church green, the entire apothecary building was moved on skids 27 ft to the north to its present location. H.E. Stoudt was the contractor and he had never moved a building before. Accordingly, a job that should have taken a few days, took two weeks. They used old elevator cables from NYC skyscrapers to drag the building. Unfortunately, the drum that they wound the cables around was too small in diameter for the project. A lot of cables snapped hindering progress. The drugstore remained open the entire time.

*(On the north side of the Church was Church Ally which also was incorporated into the green. Show photo of move. This story was told by Robert Smith, the son of Robert A. Smith, the pharmacist who owned the business at the time.)*

The apothecary business continued until 1951 under a succession of proprietors. It became a museum in 1955.

**Making Medicines**

In front of the Apothecary’s entrance is a small herb garden, which replicates a portion of the one that was laid out behind the Single Brethren’s House in 1747. The garden contains many of the medicinal herbs that were grown for the laboratory and pharmacy.

One of the first tasks performed by the settlement’s medical staff was to explore the surrounding wilderness for plants from which medicines could be made. In 1742 they compiled a collection of the most valuable household remedies known by the women of the community and these medicinal herbs became part of the therapeutic source for the physicians being supplied by the Apothecary.
More than fifty recipes are recorded in the Doctor’s Book of 1743 including remedies for toothache, belching and flatulence, rheumatism and other illnesses.

In this era, the physician compounded (mixed) the medicine he prescribed. Medicines were made of several ingredients which were mixed together.

There were 104 items in the Apothecary – not all of which were derived from local plants. The cinchona bark (quinine) to treat fevers came from South America.

The apothecary would triturate (mix) the ingredients thoroughly with a mortar and pestle often for half an hour to ensure that all the ingredients were evenly dispersed (mixed). *(This was way before blenders).*

Once the ingredients were thoroughly blended, they were made into different forms of medicine for dispensing (or giving) to the patient.

There were powders, pills, tinctures (mixtures with alcohol), ointments (with oils), syrups (with sugar and water).

This is how medicine was made before the age of the large pharmaceutical companies.

**Apothecary collection**

Above the original counter on the shelves are old blown glass bottles, mortars and pestles.

Early mortars and pestles were metal. Later ones were of Wedgwood type ceramic and became the sign or logo of the apothecary. *(Point out some of the mortars and pestles)*

In the center of the shelves is an impressive brass scale made by the Lehman Brass Foundry, which also made the gold washed copper baptismal pitcher and bowl used in Central Moravian Church.

*(You can see a portrait of Ernest Lehman and his French horn in the Gemeinhaus. His brass foundry was once located near the corner of New and Market Streets.)*

One of the highlights of the collection, possibly the largest in the United States, is a series of Delft ware jars, ordered from Holland in 1743 along with other equipment, to store gums, ointments and resins. All are in excellent condition with their mustard color tin lids and their Latin labels. A few even contain some of their original materials.

There are several other rare scales, homeopathic medicine kits, and blue poison bottles with a distinct quilted design which can be recognized by touch even in the dark. *(Point out blue bottles.)*

Also displayed are blood-letting knives, pill rollers, square glass candy jars, prescription files, a pigment scale to weigh paints and putty, old ledgers and many labels for such things as Godrey’s Cordial, gold tincture, Freytag’s bitters, worm tea, hysteric drops, cattle powder, Chinese exterminator (for bugs), tooth powder, cologne, bay rum, eye water, soft and hard soap, black varnish and prescription and day books, handwritten in German script. The tile flooring is believed to have been brought from Europe as ballast in ships.
Among the artifacts in the Apothecary Collection is the apothecary extract book (circa 1765) which
lists inventories of equipment, outstanding debts and purchases.

In addition, literally hundreds of prescriptions from the period have been retained and are available for
study and analysis. (Point out the prescriptions hanging from the ceiling)

Significantly, the Apothecary collection consists of artifacts which were actually used in, and were a
part of the Bethlehem community. They were not assembled from other locations as is the case of
most apothecary museums.

Clearly, Bethlehem in the 1700s was in the forefront of medicine. The quality of medical care
available here during the 18th century was the best available for that time.

References:
“Die Apotheke” and “18th Century Bethlehem Medical Practices”