

Carroll Yesteryears
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Happy to Make House Calls, Day or Night
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

In June 1938, Harry Peyton Gorsuch, editor of The [Carroll County] Times, paid tribute to the vanishing breed of country doctors who paid house calls day or night, delivered babies, made their own pills, and often were pillars of their communities. Gorsuch pointed to Francis J. Crawford, his family's physician, as someone who fit the description to a T.

Francis Jesse Crawford (1819–1885), like most country doctors of the mid-19th century, first gained practical knowledge by apprenticing under an established doctor for a period of time before attending medical school. In Crawford's case, it was Dr. James Claggett of Washington County. However, before beginning any medical studies, he taught school to gather the money he would need to cover pending expenses. He then attended lectures at Washington University School of Medicine in Baltimore, graduated in the class of 1844, and returned to Carroll County to set up a practice from his home in the Winfield area.

Between 1844 and the Civil War, Crawford's practice covered so much territory that eight doctors eventually were serving that area four decades later when he died. According to Scharf's History of Western Maryland, he made over 2,200 house calls and delivered 65 babies in just one year.

Peyton Gorsuch remembered the childhood visits by Dr. Crawford very well and described him as "a fine, jolly character." "On his professional calls, at least at our house, he was seldom in a hurry and if near meal time would accept the always standing invitation to remain. No matter what the ailment was the first thing he said to the patient was: 'Let me see your tongue', then he would feel your pulse, ask a question or two, and decide upon the medicine to give."

Because a pharmacy might be located miles away, Dr. Crawford would "sit down at a table, open his saddle bags, take out some bottles, and, without measuring or weighing, pour powders from two or three bottles, mix and then divide in about equal portions, wrap neatly in little papers and give directions when and how often to be given. If his decision was pills, he would use a liquid medicine to mix the powders and knead to a proper consistency, then roll into a long strip, cut into pill size with a knife, and with deft fingers shape them into perfectly round pills. One thing we remember was whether powder, pills or liquids, they were not easy to take, usually bitter and far from tempting to taste. But they seemed to be effective and his percentage of cures would rank well up with physicians of the current day."

Gorsuch wrote his tribute just a few years before doctors around the world began prescribing penicillin and other antibiotics which saved millions of lives starting in the 1940s. Gorsuch himself died at the age of 81 in 1944, perhaps a reminder that Dr. Crawford's concoctions may have cured many patients even if we snicker at their effectiveness today.

Although Crawford did not come from a wealthy family, he achieved success in his profession. Waterloo, his beautiful brick home, stands along Sam's Creek Road not far from Taylorsville and Winfield. He kept a stable with fine horses and a pack of fox hounds to pursue a sport he loved. He became successful at animal husbandry, breeding cattle as well as horses on his 370-acre farm. Although he avoided politics, he was socially active in groups such as the Odd Fellows fraternal order. His 1885 obituary in the Democratic Advocate noted "he was free handed and generous to the poor, his hospitality was unbounded, and he will be greatly missed in his neighborhood."

Thanks to donations from Crawford's descendants, the Historical Society of Carroll County has many objects from his life in its collection: six ledgers from his practice naming patients, the charges, and whatever service he performed; the deerskin-covered trunk he carried; a bronze mortar and pestle; a scale for weighing; and several images including a daguerreotype likely taken near the time he began practicing medicine. It is exciting for the Society to own so many items intimately connected with one of Carroll County's most prominent early physicians.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.



Image one: Portrait of Dr. Crawford, charcoal on paper, c.1880, by an unknown artist. Courtesy of Historical Society of Carroll County.



Image two: Deerskin-covered trunk used by Dr. Francis J. Crawford to carry his equipment and supplies when making house calls. Courtesy of Historical Society of Carroll County.