

Carroll Yesteryears
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Intestinal Fortitude and 19th Century Medical Training
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

This newspaper has printed “Carroll’s Yesteryears” columns for a very long time. Much of today’s column about medical training of local doctors in the 19th century, appeared in 1991 while Joe Getty, then director of the Historical Society of Carroll County, and Dr. Theodore Woodward were preparing a book eventually published as *Carroll County Physicians of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*.

During their research, Joe unearthed a fascinating letter in the Society’s manuscript collection written in 1853 by John Fuss Buffington (1828-1896) while studying medicine in Baltimore. It was addressed to Buffington’s friend, John McKellip, then setting up his pharmacy on Frederick Street in Taneytown.

Just a little background is needed to set the stage for the letter. Buffington was a Taneytown native, son of a farmer and a college graduate. In the 1850 census, his occupation was “farmer,” but he apparently was apprenticing about the same time under Drs. John and Samuel Swope, physicians in the northwestern part of Carroll County. Apprenticing was a common way to gain medical experience, but Buffington apparently wanted additional preparation and attended medical schools in Baltimore, then later in Philadelphia before settling down in 1856 to practice in New Windsor until his death.

Below is Buffington’s eye-opening letter which explains his studies and experiences in the dissecting laboratory. Readers should be advised that he pulls no punches. Buffington, although his name appeared as a potential draftee during the Civil War, never entered military service. He married and enjoyed practicing with his son, John A. Buffington (1862-1902). The letter is reproduced with only minor changes and offers a unique opportunity to see what medical school was like in the middle of the 19th century.

“How d’ye do old fellow? How is Taneytown? The Ladies? The people in general & particular? Thriving I S’psoe, like “huckleberries” in a snowstorm. Your communication came to hand just 18 days after it had been dated, but was even at that late day fresh and welcome. I am under obligation to you for so kindly performing my request and trust I shall some day be able to do you an equal favor. But John, ‘I’m yon’ in Baltimore undergoing a process of chiseling which is intended, how it will succeed I do not know, to make a d-o-c-t-o-r out of me. Well I tell you, it will take a very great and skillful operation that will ever make anything out of my poor self. But I find I’m not much more ignorant than some others I meet with occasionally, but with these I never like to compare myself. I prefer always to compare my abilities with those I know to be greater – This induces me to renewed exertion and cultivates a degree of modesty which is always desirable. . . This kind of colleging is different from the other kind I was used to. The studies are different, the manner of conducting things all quite new to me. Fellows are all sociable – even kind to one another, but then some board here and some board there and you may never meet them save in the lecture room – and never know any more of them than that they

have a straight-nose, a high dickey, a prominent moustache and look as if they didn't care if it snowed in the harvest.

“But I must not close my letter without saying something of the infirmary and the Surgical operations performed in presence of the class. Two students have keeled over while looking at the process and some have nearly done the same and rally. I'm not much surprised for some operations not to be described here were such as to cause any one to feel sympathy for the sufferers, even if the sight of the deformed sores and the bloody openings made by the surgeon's instrument did not shock his nervous system. To visit as we do, the infirmary, and witness the operations performed, must have a salutary effect on thinking minds. Every time I see them I determine anew to make every exertion to prepare myself well, that I may be able, when called upon to relieve promptly and effectually my suffering fellow creatures. The infirmary preaches to me more effectually than the pulpit. The preacher says we are poor afflicted mortals, there I see it. He says we fade as the flower, there one day is a sufferer, a few days after I look, his bed is empty – no one need tell me the story. I know it at once, the hand of death, more skillful than the physician had soothed his sores and his pains.

“But the beauty of beauties is the dissection room. I procured my tickets as soon as I could after I came into the city, for it burned in my pockets, and this brought me on for an early dissection. The consequence was that two subjects were brought in during that warm weather and I was assigned a part in the play. It was entirely too hot; the bodies soon began to decompose and consequently (had) a most offensive odor. But the work had to be done, and early too, as it would ‘spile’ so I worked hard at it every leisure moment, and now I have done at it what I could under the circumstances. Had it come in on the first of this week when it was cold I could have kept a long time & would have worked at it at least a month, but when dead beings begin to come to life again, as one did though not mine, it is high time that they be conveyed from the ‘Preparation Room.’

“At first I disliked very much the thought of commencing while it was so warm, but my nerves and stomach and my poor nose endured it all with admirable good grace, and now I can go into the room without the least feelings of delicacy. I'll bet a hoss I can look at anything at which anyone else can, provided it be a proper object, without blanching a cheek. But what is nicest, it saturates my clothes completely, with odor, and when (I) get down into the parlor or at the table I am not so agreeable to the delicate nasal organs of the Ladies.

“Dean Reaver I judge is (in) Taneytown, give him my regards. Give my respects to my Preceptor and tell him I am Succeeding at least tolerably. As to books, I have as many here as I can conveniently consult and more than I can master. Give my regards to all the young Ladies &c. but especially, John, remember me with the sincerest respect to your other and better half and consider me as ever

Your true best friend,

Buffington”

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



Credit: Historical Society of Carroll County

Caption: Daguerreotype of Dr. Jacob J. Weaver, Sr., and his wife Beulah, of Uniontown, another of the important physicians practicing in Carroll County during the 19th century.