



“Every Day Knocking at the Gates of the Grave”: Illness & Death in a 19th-Century Home

By popular demand, the Merchant's House Museum will present a new exhibition that will enable visitors to experience up close and personal what it was like to live in an era when death was so often premature and when dying took place at home.

“Every Day, Knocking at the Gates of the Grave”: Illness & Death in a 19th-Century Home, on view from October 12 through 31, will present recreated scenes in every room of the House, telling the story of how families in the 19th century struggled with illness, coped with the moment of death, and mourned the loss of their loved ones.

A new dimension has been added to the exhibit this year with the interpretation of the back bedroom as a sick room. Even seriously ill persons were treated at home then, hospitals being charity institutions for the indigent. Doctors made as many as three or four house calls a day. However, the field of medicine was notably exempt from technological or scientific advances for most of the 19th century. Doctors did not know what made people sick, and what was worse, they didn't know how complete their ignorance really was. Erroneous theories of disease led them to practice various “heroic measures,” exemplified by a bleeding bowl, one of the examples of medical paraphernalia that will be on display.

Bleeding, or venesection, was a primitive practice prescribed for almost every ailment. The doctor, using a razor sharp lancet opened a vein in the neck, arm, or leg, and drained blood into a



The Last Request, c. 1844

**“He that would die well must always look for death,
every day knocking at the gates of the grave.”**

Quoted from *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying* by Bishop Jeremy Taylor. First published in 1651, Bishop Taylor's work remained a standard reference in Christian homes throughout the 19th century.

bowl, which was marked on the inside with measurements to tell how much had been let. The bleeding bowl that will be on exhibit is on generous loan from the New-York Historical Society.

Mourning clothes from the Museum's extensive collection of 19th-century textiles and memorial hair jewelry will show the strict mourning customs that were practiced during the period. The deathbed and funeral of Seabury Tredwell, who died on March 7, 1865, will be recreated, and there will be an opportunity to follow the casket, as 19th-century mourners did, to nearby New York Marble Cemetery, where Tredwell was temporarily interred. He is buried in the family plot in the churchyard

of Christ Church in Manhasset, Long Island, along with his wife, Eliza, and his five unmarried children.

EXHIBITION

**“Every Day, Knocking at
the Gates of the Grave”:
Illness & Death in a
19th-Century Home**

October 12 through October 31

Thursday-Monday, 12 to 5 p.m.

Special tour free with regular admission. Consult the calendar in this newsletter or visit our website for information about related events.

MERCHANT'S HOUSE MUSEUM

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The Merchant's House Museum is New York City's only family home preserved intact - inside and out - from the 19th century. A National Historic and New York City Landmark, the House was built in 1832 and was home to a prosperous merchant family for 100 years.

The Merchant's House Museum is owned by the City of New York, operated by Old Merchants House of New York, Inc., and is a member of the Historic House Trust.

ON THE MID-19TH C. HOME FRONT: NEWS & NOTES FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

RESEARCH TO BEGIN ON HISTORIC FURNISHINGS PLAN

Ellen Denker, well-known authority on American decorative arts, will begin work this fall to develop an historic furnishings plan for the Merchant's House.

The completion of the historic furnishings plan will represent a milestone in our stewardship of the Merchant's House and will enable us to tell an even more authentic story of how life was really lived by a 19th-century New York City merchant family.

Based on extensive research of Museum documents, including the recently completed paint and finishes analysis (thanks to a generous grant from Benjamin Moore & Co.), the Historic Structures Report, and contemporary 19th-century sources, the plan will provide a scholarly rationale for the interpretation of the House. Recommendations for placement of the original Tredwell family furniture and appropriate floor, window, and upholstery coverings will be made. The project is expected to take approximately one year.

Ms. Denker, who is a graduate of the University of Delaware and a fellow of the Winterthur program has served as a museum consultant for over 20 years. She has extensive experience preparing furnishings plans for historic homes, including the home of Franklin D. Roosevelt in Hyde Park, N.Y., and most recently the Crane House Museum in Montclair, N.J., interpreted to the mid-1850s.

We are very grateful to the Historic House Trust of New York City for its support in helping raise funds for this important project. With generous grants from the Trust and the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Cynthia Woods Mitchell Fund for Historic Interiors, we are well on our way to reaching our goal.

TREDWELL FAMILY COSTUME CONSERVATION TO CONTINUE

Continuation of the Tredwell Costume Conservation Program has been made possible by a second very generous grant of \$30,000 from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.

We are grateful for this support, which will help insure that one of the most significant 19th-century costume collections in New York City will be preserved and made available for exhibition and study.

Phase I of the project began in October 2004 with preparation of a detailed condition report and a conservation treatment proposal for each of the 42 dresses documented to have belonged to the Tredwell family. Conservation treatment of 11 dresses was then completed as well as the refurbishment of four of the Museum's mannequins.

Janet Kuhl, textile conservator, is now at work on the continuation of Phase II, which will include conservation of the remaining dresses.

This phase of the work consists of vacuuming, wet cleaning and blocking, humidification, spot cleaning of stains as well as meticulous repair such as providing support patches, net overlays, linings, and lace repair.

During Phase III the collection will be rehoused in specially designed boxes, and the three remaining mannequins will be restored to make them safe for displaying the conserved costumes. The project is scheduled for completion in 2007.

In addition to the \$60,000 granted by the Kress Foundation for the conservation project, supplemental funding has been generously provided by the Bay and Paul Foundation and the Lower Hudson Conference of Historical Agencies and Museums.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

For reservations, call 212-777-1089 or email nyc1832@merchantshouse.org

“EVERY DAY KNOCKING AT THE GATES OF THE GRAVE”: EXHIBITION-RELATED EVENTS IN OCTOBER 2006

Friday & Saturday, October 20 & 21 and October 27 & 28

Tour “Manhattan’s Most Haunted House” by Candlelight

You’ll also learn about real customs surrounding illness, death, and mourning in the 19th-century. \$20, \$13 members. Tours begin every half hour from 7 to 10 pm. Reservations strongly suggested. Note: this tour may not be appropriate for young children.

Sunday, October 29, 2006, 3 to 5 p.m.

From Parlor to Grave: Recreating a Mid-19th Century Funeral

Join us as we recreate and discuss an 1865 funeral, then follow the casket to New York Marble Cemetery for a twilight tour. 19th-century mourning dress is encouraged. (Black armbands will be provided.) \$10, \$5 members.

Tuesday, October 31, 2006, 6:30 p.m.

Simon Loekle Reads Poe and Other Masters of Gothic Horror

Join radio personality and scholar extraordinaire Simon Loekle for an evening of spine-chilling 19th-century stories in the Museum’s double parlors. \$10, \$5 members.

Sunday, November 19, 2006, 5:30 p.m.

Salon Music: Wayfaring Strangers

Our own Bond Street Euterpean Singing Society presents a musical revue of early 19th-century New York City. \$10, FREE for members.

PRESENTED IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE NATIONAL ACADEMY MUSEUM

Tuesday, November 14, 2006, 6:30 p.m., at the Merchant’s House Museum

Paintings & Parlors: Art at Home in Nineteenth-Century New York

Art historian Catherine Roach will discuss mid-19th century popular art and its place in a private home like the Merchant’s House. \$10, \$5 students & seniors, FREE for members.

Wednesday, November 29, 2006, 6:30 p.m., at the National Academy Museum

An Evening of Music and Art

Join curator Mark Mitchell for an introduction to James A. Suydam, a 19th-century artist and art collector, followed by period music performed by Maria Miller. \$10, \$5 students & seniors, FREE for members. At 1083 Fifth Avenue, NYC. RSVP 212-369-4880

ON EXHIBITION

Through Monday, October 9

Conservation and Restoration of the Gas Chandeliers

This exhibition will track the conservation of the Museum’s pair of 19th-century gasoliers, called the oldest *in situ* in the country by historic lighting experts. And don’t miss your chance to see the pair of ultra-modern neon fixtures, on loan from Lite Brite Neon (www.litebriteneon.com), that have been holding their place.

Thursday, October 12, through

Tuesday, October 31

“Every Day Knocking at the Gates of the Grave”: Illness & Death in a 19th-Century Home

For the third year, we’re offering a unique chance to see what Manhattan’s only intact domestic interior might have looked like following a death in the family. We’ll recreate scenes of illness and death including the 1865 funeral of Seabury Tredwell.

Opens Friday, November 24

A Mid-19th Century Christmas

Opening early for a Thanksgiving weekend preview. The Museum will be decorated with swags of greenery and an authentic table-top tree in honor of the holiday season.

I (We) would like to help preserve the Merchant’s House Museum (Donations are tax-deductible)

Good Neighbor \$50 Family/Household \$75 Protector \$125 Cultural Hero \$250

Princely Supporter \$500 Leading Light \$1,000 Paragon of Virtue \$2,500 Senior/Student \$25

Please make checks payable to the Merchant’s House Museum and mail with this form to 29 East Fourth Street, New York, NY 10003-7003, or charge your contribution to: American Express Visa Master Card

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MERCHANT'S HOUSE MUSEUM

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HOURS

Thursday through Monday,
12 to 5 p.m., self-guided tours
Guided tour every Saturday &
Sunday at 1 p.m.
(Closed Tuesday, Wednesday)

ADMISSION

Members Free
Adults \$8, Students & Seniors \$5

GROUP TOURS

Guided tours are offered seven
days a week by appointment.

www.merchantshouse.org



Disassembled and labeled rear parlor gaselier depicting the cast arms, shade holders and gas valves during the conservation treatment. Photograph by conservator Julie Baker.

Non-Profit
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Merchant's House Museum
29 East Fourth Street
New York, NY 10003