

HOMETOWN TOURISTS

A patriot's profession
HUGH MERCER, APOTHECARYBy JENNIFER STROBEL
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

OF FALL, Fredericksburg's historic sites, the Hugh Mercer Apothecary Shop is tops for sheer yuckiness.

There, live leeches coil their slithery bodies inside a clear jar of water.

The bloodsuckers are rarely called into service, though, except as centerpieces for the tourist attraction that features Colonial medical practices.

They share space with other medical implements of the times, including lancets, tooth-yankers and saws that look like they belong more in a carpenter's box than in a doctor's kit.

Visitors chuckle and make faces as the tour unfolds.

Rebecca Graham, a costumed shop "wench," doesn't think medical treatments and devices of the 21st century are tremendously advanced.

"We're still pretty crude," Graham said.

She speculates that in 200 years tourists will visit an "old-time" hospital emergency room staffed with costumed tour guides in green scrubs and white lab coats.

Those tourists, accustomed to a whole different level of pain-free health care, will exclaim with astonishment: "They cut the body open?"

She imagines they will be shocked that we expose the body to infection with such crude surgical methods, rather than eliciting cures microscopically or genetically.

Graham, a rising freshman at Virginia Commonwealth University, is spending the summer greeting visitors to the shop, one of eight stops on the "Fredericksburg Passport" tour.

The Hugh Mercer Apothecary Shop is a cool, darkened shelter on a hot summer day.

Shelves are filled with jars of herbal remedies.

Many of the names, if not the uses, are familiar to 21st-century visitors: peppermint for repelling insects such as fleas; chamomile as a digestive aid; comfrey to drink in tea and knit broken bones; rose hips for "ladies' complaint."

Health care uses of other items are more obscure to visitors: the spider's web was used as a bandage to stop bleeding of shallow scrapes to the skin.

Dried millipedes were kept on hand to treat children with whooping cough. Parents were advised to mix the millipedes with some wine, get the child to drink wine, then tell

Hugh Mercer Apothecary Shop, 1020

Caroline St., Fredericksburg. Living-history program on 18th-century medical practices. Open daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Adults \$4, students (6 and older) \$1.50. 373-3362.

For more information on the "Passport to Fredericksburg," call the Fredericksburg Visitor Center, 373-1776. The passport covers admission to eight sites for a total of \$19.75. Charge for a shuttle between sites is \$2.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Read more about Fredericksburg in upcoming WEEKenders.

Next week in Hometown Tourists:
The Rising Sun Tavern.

For Fredericksburg-area maps and more information on historic sites, see Attractions, pages 22 and 23.

the child they had just drunk millipedes to scare the whooping cough away.

Crab claws, composed of calcium carbonate (think Tums), came in handy as a treatment for hangover when mixed with ginger root, cinnamon and milk. The milk coated the stomach, the calcium carbonate neutralized the stomach acid, and the other flavors made the concoction more palatable.

Behind the apothecary shop, brick paths lined with boxwoods lead through a garden resplendent with herbs.

The plants are labeled and easy to find: marsh mallow for coughs, sore throat, bronchial complaints; St. John's wort as a tonic and for warding off evil spirits and hysteria.

Every so often, someone will peek in the front door looking for medicine, Tylenol perhaps. But the doctor has long been gone.

Hugh Mercer died in 1777, killed by British troops at Princeton, N.J. Still, his memory lives on, both as a city businessman and a Revolutionary War hero.

"He had quite an interesting and marvelous career," said Genevieve Bugay, site coordinator for the shop. "If you dig into the records and the correspondence of the time, you see how respected and how active he was."

Mercer practiced medicine in Pennsylvania until the French and Indian War. He then climbed the ranks to colonel and forged friendships with George Washington and George Weedon, fellow officers with ties to Fredericksburg.



DANIEL TURNER/THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Leeches, herbal mixtures and tinctures were dispensed on doctor's orders in the 18th century. You'll hear about Hugh Mercer's life and historical medical procedures when you visit the apothecary shop.

Toward the end of the war, he returned to the "practice of physick" and concluded that Fredericksburg was "likely to afford a genteel subsistence."

He opened an office somewhere near the intersection of Amelia and Caroline streets—remaining documents on the exact location are unclear—and set about the business of treating the important people in town.

George Washington's mother and brother both consulted him, and he once prescribed "volatile drops" for Washington's stepdaughter, Patsy.

He joined St. George's Episcopal Church and the Fredericksburg Masonic Lodge.

Husband to Isabella Gordon and father of five, he owned a number of lots. He was about to buy Ferry Farm, George Washington's boyhood home, when military duty called once more.

The Continental Congress appointed him brigadier general in the Continental Army. His friend Washington was commander in chief.

CONTINUED PAGE 24 ▶

etc.

HISTORICAL ATTRACTIONS MISCELLANEOUS SPORTS TICKETS HISTORICAL ATTRACTIONS MISCELLANEOUS

Apothecary shop is the picture of yesterday's health

► FROM PAGE 17

In December 1776, Washington called a council of war (which included Mercer) and planned a sneak attack on the Hessian camp at Trenton, N.J. Mercer crossed the Delaware River with Washington and fought the battle with him.

To follow up on the successful attack, American troops headed for Princeton, site of a British depot for ammunition and supplies.

Right at the front line, Mercer led troops head-on into British soldiers. They surrounded him, bayoneted him,

beat him with rifle butts and left him in the cold for dead.

Washington came upon the scene, rallied Mercer's troops, defeated the British and had Mercer taken to a nearby farmhouse. He died nine days later, on Jan. 12, 1777.

His body was taken to Philadelphia, where he was given a hero's funeral and burial. A city newspaper ran a lengthy report of the ceremony.

Two centuries later, a group called the Citizens Guild saved and restored the Caroline Street shop in honor of Mercer. It was originally believed the site was his actual shop, but

later research indicated that he probably practiced in a nearby building that no longer stands.

Passers-by can't miss the cream-colored frame building that houses the Hugh Mercer Apothecary Shop, an architectural mainstay through decades of change in the neighborhood.

The building is the only one at the intersection that stood during Mercer's lifetime. He most certainly passed the building many times as he made his rounds in the neighborhood.



This building didn't house Hugh Mercer's shop, but Mercer must have walked past it often.