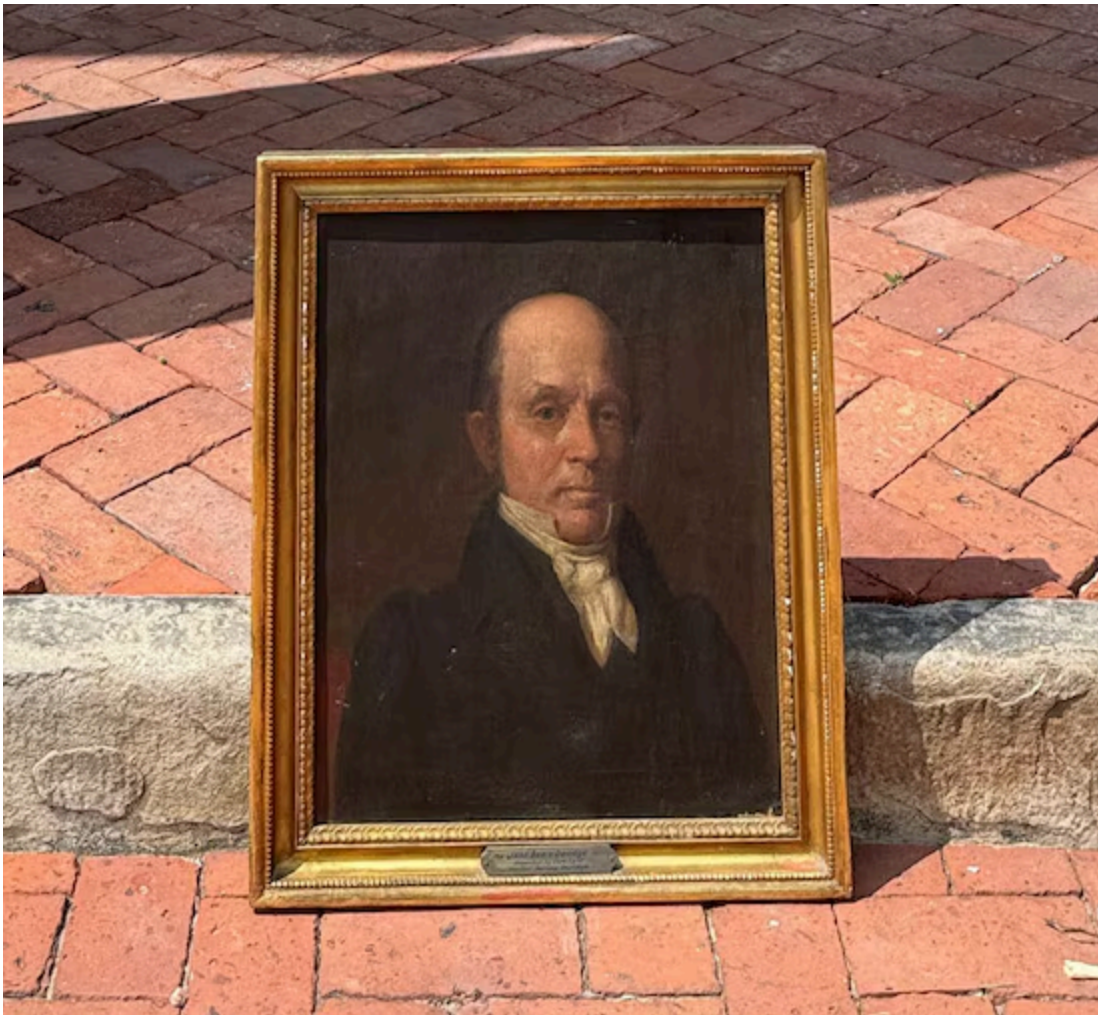


THE BALTIMORE BANNER

Bertha's Mussels served up a prized parting gift — from its closet

Jasmine Vaughn-Hall

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The University of Maryland School of Medicine uncovered what they believe to be the oldest surviving portrait of Dr. John Beale Davidge, its founder and first dean. (University of Maryland School of Medicine)

The Banner wants to know: What's in your closet?

Bertha's Mussels closed almost two years ago, but it recently opened the door to a slice of Maryland medical history.

Meg Fairfax Fielding, director of the history of Maryland medicine at the Maryland State Medical Society, got a text from a friend she hadn't seen in years who was helping clean out the half-century-old restaurant before [its May 29 auction](#).

The friend told her they had unearthed an old portrait in the bar. It had once hung on the walls of the popular Fells Point bar and restaurant before ending up in a closet.

After reading the plaque on the portrait, the friend noticed that the person was a doctor and instantly thought to connect with Fielding. It turned out to be an 1800s portrait of Dr. John Beale Davidge, the first dean and founder of the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

"We find stuff all the time," Fielding said. "It just happens."

Baltimore storage closets, especially in old buildings, seem to hold more than dusty brooms and mildewed mops.

Construction at [Frederick Douglass High School](#) in West Baltimore unearthed even more Baltimore keepsakes. In a storage closet, somehow covered and forgotten over the years, were cutouts of jazz bandleader and singer Cab Calloway, Frederick Douglass Class of 1925, originals and copies of photographs, newspaper clippings, some artwork and timelines of his life and career.

No one is sure who put the items in there, but many were on display at Baltimore's World Trade Center in 2008 to celebrate Calloway's 100th birthday.

The Banner is on the hunt for these stories. If you come across something, or know of someone who made a rare find, let us know using the form below.

Meanwhile, the discovery of the portrait at Bertha's sent Fielding into action.



Meg Fairfax Fielding holds the 1844 portrait of Dr. Davidge. (Courtesy of Meg Fairfax Fielding)

Over the span of a few days, she picked up the art, examined it herself and shared the information with the university. The back of the portrait says it was copied from the original in 1844 by an artist named A.L. Ratzka. (Davidge died years earlier.)

Fielding said the owner of Bertha's Mussels couldn't quite pinpoint where the portrait came from. But it certainly ended up in the right hands.

Fielding added that there are at least 120 portraits and other artwork at the Maryland State Medical Society, known as MedChi, in addition to an extensive library that is respectfully [haunted by a ghost](#).

MedChi donated the painting to the university, where it's believed to be one of the oldest surviving portraits of Davidge. The university had a picture of Davidge before, but it was stolen in the 1990s. Another piece was commissioned before the university's bicentennial in 2007.

Initially, Fielding worried about the condition of the portrait since it was likely in the bar for years — many of which included heavy indoor smoking.

Luckily, it was in good shape, and there are plans to get the Davidge portrait cleaned and placed in the perfect building on the University of Maryland Medical School campus: [Davidge Hall](#).

Renovations of the oldest medical facility building in the U.S. are expected to be complete late next year.

What's in your closet?

Have you ever discovered an ancient heirloom, oddity or important piece of history in your closet? What di

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Jasmine Vaughn-Hall

jasmine.vaughn@thebaltimorebanner.com



Jasmine Vaughn-Hall is a neighborhood and community reporter at the Baltimore Banner, covering the people, challenges, and solutions within West Baltimore. Have a tip about something happening in your community? Taco recommendations? Call or text Jasmine at 443-608-8983.



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