

**Medical Marvels from the
MOHAI Collection**

Essay by Leonard Garfield, MOHAI Executive
Director

It is one of the smallest artifacts in MOHAI's [True Northwest: The Seattle Journey](#) exhibit. Yet the story it tells is one of the most powerful. The humble cotton gauze mask, made by women volunteers of the Red Cross and worn during the deadly Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918, is a deceptively simple reflection of a public health crisis unparalleled in Seattle history. It is a sign of the emerging science of epidemiology, and the awareness that the most casual social contact could turn into a deadly encounter. The mask also reflects the newly-found power of municipal government during the Progressive era, and the willingness of politicians to enforce measures that required individual sacrifice for the common good, in this case requiring every Seattle resident to wear a mask when in public in the late fall of 1918. This plain piece of cotton is a totem of a world under siege, and a city mobilized to save itself. It is also a message from a century ago of lessons learned during an age of pandemic.

The mask is just one of the rare objects in MOHAI's collection that reflects the history of health care in our region dating as far back as the 1850s. Seattle's first man of medicine—David Maynard—was trained at medical school in Vermont, had a successful career as a doctor in Ohio, and served patients along the trail on his way west to Puget Sound in 1850. But “Doc” Maynard was much more than a physician. He was Seattle's most enthusiastic promoter, its first merchant, and an important liaison to the Native community. Yet Maynard never left his medical training far behind, establishing the community's first hospital in Pioneer Square. His medical bag, dating to that period and now a part of [MOHAI's collection](#), includes such 19th century obstetrical instruments like forceps, a sign that the man some say “invented” Seattle also had a role bringing newly born Seattleites into the world.

Other medical artifacts at MOHAI range from an “iron lung” used by patients at the University of Washington Medical Center in 1948, which provided mechanical respiration to patients stricken with polio in the years before a vaccine helped eradicate the disease, to the famed LIFEPAK 5 defibrillator (now on display in *True Northwest*), the lightweight device developed in 1972 that allowed first responders to revive victims of sudden cardiac arrest.

Additional MOHAI artifacts illustrate innovations that resulted from the collaboration of inventors and doctors. Albert Swenson manufactured soft-serve ice cream machines in his Ballard workshop before he partnered with the University of Washington's Dr. Belding Scribner in 1962 to develop a groundbreaking home dialysis machine, now on display in [True Northwest](#). And the early ultrasound machine in the exhibit was developed by a group of engineers working on marine electronic systems who partnered with the UW in the 1970s to develop a diagnostic device that used high frequency sound waves to create images of soft tissues, organs, blood flow and fetal anatomy.

As I reflect on the range of these artifacts in the MOHAI collection, and the stories they illustrate, I am reminded that successfully tackling medical challenges requires a team approach, bringing together the skills of researchers, inventors, doctors, frontline medical personnel, and a community—and its leaders—united in their commitment to the health and well-being of every person.