

Early American herbal medicines are carefully documented in this vibrantly illustrated masterpiece of Federal-era printing

Jacob Bigelow, *American Medical Botany*. Boston: Cummings & Hilliard, 1817–1820. 10 1/8 inches x 6 7/8 inches (257 x 175 mm), 3 volumes: 596 pages, 60 color plates.

Bigelow's *American Medical Botany* is a work of enduring significance, representing a striking convergence of medicine, botany, and printing: As a medical text, it records details of the traditional herbal medicines of the New World that were widely used before the establishment of synthetic pharmacy; as a botanical work, it represents the most exhaustive study of New England medical flora of the time; and as a monument of printing technology, it is notable as one of the first fully color-printed books published in America, whose innovative technology continues to merit investigation. In all three areas, this impressive synthesis bears the individual stamp of its creator, an accomplished nineteenth-century polymath.

Bigelow, a practicing physician, taught both materia medica and technology at Harvard. An ancient term, "materia medica" traditionally encompassed knowledge of all substances used medicinally; in the early nineteenth century, as medicine became specialized, it was split into many branches, including pharmacy and therapeutics. In *American Medical Botany*, Bigelow promoted the use of native and naturalized plants in American therapeutics as an alternative to costly imported herbs.

Bigelow's Harvard lectures on technology covered useful and applied arts and sciences that included topics as diverse as glue, gaslight, gunpowder, and embalming. Although the word "technology" (derived from the Greek word *techne*, meaning art or craft) was used as early as the seventeenth century, Bigelow is often credited with its invention. He was, however, the first to popularize the word through his lectures and his book *Elements of Technology*.

Bigelow's avid interest in technology and his work as a physician and amateur botanist well qualified him for the task of creating *American*

Medical Botany. He drew all but a few of the plants for the book, and worked closely with his Boston printer to devise a way to economically and beautifully print the illustrations in color.

This copy from the Cary Graphic Arts Collection at Rochester Institute of Technology was originally owned by Dr. Gavin Lawson Rose, who acquired it shortly after its publication and added his bookplate. The work was originally published in six parts in green wrappers, each part presenting ten specimens. This copy is bound in three volumes each containing two of these parts. It is bound in contemporary tan sheep, with morocco lettering pieces on the spines reading “bigelow’s | botany” (on volume 2 mislettered “biglow”) and gilt volume numbers.

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