273# Robb House (Script by Peggy Macdonald)

Today, American women have the freedom to pursue the college and career of their choice. In the late19th century, however, there was significant resistance to co-education in America. Dr. Edward H. Clarke, the author of the 1873 book, *Sex in Education; Or, a Fair Chance for the Girls*, went so far as to claim that higher education was bad for women’s health and could lead to sterility and even death.

At the time, women interested in a medical career were funneled into nursing, which was the path Sarah Lucretia Robb pursued until her husband, Dr. Robert Lee Robb, a homeopathic physician, encouraged her to become a doctor. When Sarah was unable to gain admission to an American medical school because she was a woman, she moved to Heidelberg, Germany, where she completed a medical degree in two years.

Dr. Sarah Robb was not the first female doctor in Florida, but she was the first woman doctor to practice in Alachua County. After medical school the husband-and-wife doctor team set up practice together in Chicago, Illinois before moving to Gainesville in 1884. Robert relocated to Gainesville in 1882 on doctor’s orders after being diagnosed with tuberculosis. Gainesville’s moderate climate and clean air assisted his recovery, inspiring him to open the Odd Fellows Home and Sanitorium at Southeast Second Street and Southeast Eighth Street for the treatment of other tuberculosis patients. He also planned to develop a health spa and suburb that would be connected to downtown Gainesville by a street railway system. However, the 1888 yellow fever epidemic prevented this plan from coming to fruition.

The Victorian cottage in which the Robbs lived and practiced medicine was nearly demolished in the 1970s. Joseph H. Avera built the house in approximately 1878. After Sarah’s death the building was used as a law office, dance studio, karate center and rental apartment before it fell into disrepair.

The Robb House was originally located at 406 East Liberty Street, which became East University Avenue after the University of Florida opened in Gainesville in 1906. On April 11, 1981, the building was moved intact to 235 Southwest Second Avenue and was transformed into the Robb House Medical Museum and the headquarters of the Alachua County Medical Society. Among the vast assortment of artifacts on display inside the museum are the remaining original furniture and medical tools from the Robbs’ home office; an authentic Civil War-era amputation kit; early X-ray equipment; and antique forceps. Several rooms are filled with items from Alachua General Hospital, including an operating table that was used when the hospital opened back in 1928.

Dr. Robert Robb died in 1902. Dr. Sarah Robb continued to travel throughout Alachua County with a horse and buggy to deliver babies and treat sick patients. She died in 1937. The Robbs are buried at Gainesville’s historic Evergreen Cemetery, where they share a tombstone marked with a caduceus.