From the History and Archives Collection

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The Delaware Academy of Medicine has a number of books in its historical collection which pertain directly to death and dying, and countless others which provide a window to how end of life has been perceived through the ages.

According to the Hospice Education Institute:

“Each society throughout history has evolved special ways of caring for the dying and the bereaved. For example: in old China the “death houses” offered a place for the destitute dying to stay; in New Zealand, Maori customs give practical support for the family at the time of death, and encourage the community to participate in the mourning rituals; in East Africa, wise elders give both practical and spiritual support to the dying and bereaved.”

They go onto state:

“(in the) Middle Ages: Religious orders establish “hospices” at key crossroads on the way to religious shrines like Santiago de Compostela, Chartres and Rome. These shelters helped pilgrims, many of whom were traveling to these shrines seeking miraculous cure of chronic and fatal illnesses, and many of whom died while on their pilgrimages.”

An excerpt from a book in our collection, “History of Medicine” by Fielding H. Garrison, A.B., M.D., F.A.C.S. donated by the family of Edwin Bird, M.D., one of the founding trustees of the Academy, is shown below (Figure 1). It references hospices directly, and the plan of Saint Gall, a monastic compound dating from the early 9th century which would include a “hospital, with a room for grave cases” (Figure 2).

Figure 1. History of Medicine, by Fielding H. Garrison, AB, MD, FACS
Figure 2. Page 177 of History of Medicine, by F.H. Garrison