Magnolia Mound plantation tour guide, pauses while sweeping the plantation's "sick room" floor on Saturday to examine a small jar kept in a medicine chest. The room is designed to display 19th century medical care given to slaves stricken with disease or injury. The bed at left is draped in netting to protect the patients from mosquito bites. Mayeux, also a historic re-enactor, is dressed as a planter who might have treated slaves in the "sick room," an area dedicated to showing how injuries and illnesses of slaves were treated.

The exhibit — tucked away on the far end of the Magnolia Mound grounds in the building where the room would likely have been originally — is not a stop on the guided tour, which focuses on the main plantation house and nearby outbuildings.

"Being behind the overseer's house, they put up a special sign on the corner, so people will know it's there," said Dwight "Shark" Mayeux, Magnolia Mound tour guide.

"Here, they made the display in the overseer's cabin because the main house doesn't include numerous rooms like Nottoway," Mayeux said. "You have eight rooms in this little house. There's a spare room in the overseer's house, so they put the sick room there."

According to information provided at the exhibit, a number of planters, especially those found in Louisiana's cotton and sugar deltas, provided for the healthcare of slaves. A common method of treating illnesses of slaves was to set up a "slave hospital" on the plantation or farm. Other medicines used in the "sick room," not on the premises, was common to fund the "sick room" in either the overseer's or plantation owner's home.

Magnolia Mound has recreated a "sick room," furnished with one mosquito-netted bed, a chair, and a small desk. On the desk, visitors can view an apothecary case, filled with small bottles of herbs, seeds, and other ingredients for home remedies.

Many of the ingredients are still grown today on the grounds of Magnolia Mound plantation.

"Around the outside edge of the kitchen garden are herbs," Mayeux said. "Foxglove is an herb for illness. Comfrey is an herb for illness. There are several medicinal herbs out there in the garden."

The herbs could be used in many different forms. "You would either use the herb as it was, or make a poultice, which could be used as a medicinal paste, or soak the herb in oil to make a tincture," Mayeux said.

Tinctures were colorings that often were used to cover up scars on slaves, according to the slave quarters exhibit at Magnolia Mound.

In addition to a medicinal case, the exhibit features an 1800s lancet, used for bleeding individuals. This technique was used in the 19th century to treat many illnesses. Other treatments used in the "sick room," now known to cause damage rather than heal, are opiates and mercury.

According to Magnolia Mound's brochure provided to visitors to the "sick room," the main care-provider in a 19th century "sick room" was not a physician. "Quite often, it was the plantation mistress, overseer or even a slave who took on the role of the healer, and learned how to bleed and administer prescribed medicine," Mayeux said. "It was a complex art and one not taken lightly."

At Magnolia Mound plantation, it is believed the overseer's wife took on the role of "sick room" caretaker. "Probably the overseer's wife would've been in charge of doing the doctoring and it would've been folk remedies," Mayeux said. "She wasn't a trained physician. If they thought turpentine was good in a stomach ache, they'd give a spoonful of turpentine." "It is believed the overseer's wife took on the role of "sick room" caretaker. "Probably the overseer's wife would've been in charge of doing the doctoring and it would've been folk remedies," Mayeux said. "She wasn't a trained physician. If they thought turpentine was good in a stomach ache, they'd give a spoonful of turpentine." "It is believed the overseer's wife took on the role of "sick room" caretaker. "Probably the overseer's wife would've been in charge of doing the doctoring and it would've been folk remedies," Mayeux said. "She wasn't a trained physician. If they thought turpentine was good in a stomach ache, they'd give a spoonful of turpentine." "It is believed the overseer's wife took on the role of "sick room" caretaker. "Probably the overseer's wife would've been in charge of doing the doctoring and it would've been folk remedies," Mayeux said. "She wasn't a trained physician. If they thought turpentine was good in a stomach ache, they'd give a spoonful of turpentine."

Magnolia Mound exhibit shows how illnesses were treated

BY KRISTIN GRANT
Special to The Advocate

Baton Rouge's Magnolia Mound plantation, one of the few remaining Creole plantations open to the public, features a permanent exhibit that is often overlooked by visitors. The room is designed to display 19th century medical care given to slaves with disease or injury. The bed at left is draped in netting to protect the patients from mosquito bites. Mayeux, also a historic re-enactor, is dressed as a planter who might have treated slaves in the "sick room," an area dedicated to showing how injuries and illnesses of slaves were treated.

The exhibit — tucked away on the far end of the Magnolia Mound grounds in the building where the room would likely have been originally — is not a stop on the guided tour, which focuses on the main plantation house and nearby outbuildings.

"Being behind the overseer's house, they put up a special sign on the corner, so people will know it's there," said Dwight "Shark" Mayeux, Magnolia Mound tour guide.

"Here, they made the display in the overseer's cabin because the main house doesn't include numerous rooms like Nottoway," Mayeux said. "You have eight rooms in this little house. There's a spare room in the overseer's house, so they put the sick room there."

According to information provided at the exhibit, a number of planters, especially those found in Louisiana's cotton and sugar deltas, provided for the healthcare of slaves. A common method of treating illnesses of slaves was to set up a "slave hospital" on the plantation or farm. Other medicines used in the "sick room," not on the premises, was common to fund the "sick room" in either the overseer's or plantation owner's home.

Magnolia Mound has recreated a "sick room," furnished with one mosquito-netted bed, a chair, and a small desk. On the desk, visitors can view an apothecary case, filled with small bottles of herbs, seeds, and other ingredients for home remedies.

Many of the ingredients are still grown today on the grounds of Magnolia Mound plantation.

"Around the outside edge of the kitchen garden are herbs," Mayeux said. "Foxglove is an herb for illness. Comfrey is an herb for illness. There are several medicinal herbs out there in the garden."

The herbs could be used in many different forms. "You would either use the herb as it was, or make a poultice, which could be used as a medicinal paste, or soak the herb in oil to make a tincture," Mayeux said.

Tinctures were colorings that often were used to cover up scars on slaves, according to the slave quarters exhibit at Magnolia Mound.

In addition to a medicinal case, the exhibit features an 1800s lancet, used for bleeding individuals. This technique was used in the 19th century to treat many illnesses. Other treatments used in the "sick room," now known to cause damage rather than heal, are opiates and mercury.

According to Magnolia Mound's brochure provided to visitors to the "sick room," the main care-provider in a 19th century "sick room" was not a physician. "Quite often, it was the plantation mistress, overseer or even a slave who took on the role of the healer, and learned how to bleed and administer prescribed medicine," Mayeux said. "It was a complex art and one not taken lightly."

At Magnolia Mound plantation, it is believed the overseer's wife took on the role of "sick room" caretaker. "Probably the overseer's wife would've been in charge of doing the doctoring and it would've been folk remedies," Mayeux said. "She wasn't a trained physician. If they thought turpentine was good in a stomach ache, they'd give a spoonful of turpentine."

With medical care in the hands of laymen, two items regularly were purchased and used by plantation owners in "sick rooms."" According to Magnolia Mound literature, home medical chests with medicinal ingredients as well as medical manuals (written in laymen's terms) were available for purchase by plantation owners, and often were.

Mayeux noted that most of the remedies had little real effectiveness, compared to treatments offered by medical science today.

"They didn't have the slightest concept of germs. They didn't have the slightest concept of what really made you sick," he said.

One reason illnesses were treated onsite in the 1800s was the lack of external medical care available.

"There was no hospital in Baton Rouge in the 1800s when Magnolia Mound was at its height," Mayeux said. "But folk remedies were very popular."

These folk remedies used in the "sick room" were administered in conditions superior to the slave quarters, Mayeux said.

The mattress in the "sick room" was likely made of feathers or Spanish moss.

"They used Spanish moss until the 1950s," Mayeux said. "They would soak the Spanish moss for a few weeks in a big vat, which they'd make out of a hollow log. The outside edges of the moss would go off. You take that out and hang it on the fence to dry and use it to stuff saddles, mattresses and chairs. This was a big industry until the 1950s."

By viewing the exhibit, visitors can immerse themselves into another era.

"You stop and think about how people lived and their conditions," said John Lewis, a Magnolia Mound visitor from Mobile, Ala.

"You try to put yourself back in that time," Lewis said. "Get some type of idea of what it's all about. They didn't have the medicines we have today, and it makes you think of the survival rate."