## The Farlow at 100

## **Donald Pfister**

n November 1, 2024, the Farlow Reference Library and Herbarium of Cryptogamic Botany at Harvard University celebrated one hundred years since its founding. The formal opening of the library and herbarium was in November of 1924. Although the activities began with William Gilson Farlow's tenure at Harvard, the institution was formally named and moved to its current location only in the 1920s. At Farlow's death in 1919 he left his remarkable library to Harvard University with the stipulation that it was to be housed together with the cryptogamic herbarium. The cryptogamic herbarium was Farlow's creation. The term cryptogamic itself may seem foreign to the modern ear. In the age when life was divided into plants, animals, and minerals, plants were divided into two groups. These were

the flowering plants and conifers, and everything else—ferns, fungi, lichens, algae, bryophytes, myxomycetes, and even bacteria. These are the cryptogams, or those organisms reproducing via independent spores. Today we recognize that these groups are spread across several kingdoms.

With the exception of the ferns, these were the groups on which Farlow concentrated. He collected widely and he purchased collections from around the world. This along with his extensive library established a world-renowned department for the study of these organisms.

To celebrate the anniversary a day long symposium was held that included talks by Jeannine Cavender-Bares, Donald Pfister, David Hibbett, Terry Henkel, Rebecca Yahr, Cathie Aime, and Brent Mishler. The symposium can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=nKj20Aod3zk.

At the time of his death, Farlow was a



From the left, Terry Henkel, David Hibbett, Rebecca Yahr, Brent Mishler, Jeannine Cavender-Bares (Director of the Harvard University Herbaria), Donald Pfister, and Cathie Aime.



leading scholar of cryptogams. Born in Boston in 1844, he studied at Harvard both as an undergraduate and in the medical school. After medical school, which he pursued as a fall back should botany as a career fail him, he became assistant to Harvard botanist Asa Gray. Then he studied with Anton deBary in Germany. He returned to ultimately become professor of cryptogamic botany at Harvard where he established the Cryptogamic Laboratory and began a long career as teacher, mentor, and researcher. Among his achievements were publications on the algae of New England, plant pathogens in the United States, bibliographic contributions, the noteworthy *Icones Farlowianae* (completed after his death by his former student E. A. Burt), the host index for plant pathogens in the United States and many articles and addresses.

Today the Farlow collections of cryptogams, numbering nearly two million, represent a worldwide sampling. This along with 70,000 books and an important archive make the institution one of the largest of its kind in the world. Among the collections of importance to mycologists and lichenologist are those of Moses Ashley Curtis, Edward Tuckerman, Job B. Ellis, Narcisse T. Patouilliard, Franz von Höhnel, Fedor V. Bucholtz, George Knox Merrill, Edward A. Burt, Roland Thaxter, Rolf Singer, Elam Bartholomew, David H. Linder, William L. White, William H. Weston, Jr., Elke McKenzie, and others. Loans are sent around the world; local research has focused on taxonomy and phylogeny of ascomycetes and basidiomycetes. Visitors are always welcome.

To arrive at the Farlow with a few questions often leads the visitor to discoveries they had not anticipated. They leave with new insights after surveying the riches to be found here.

Donald Pfister is Asa Gray Research Professor of Systematic Botany and Curator Emeritus of the Farlow Library and Herbarium. At Harvard he served in many roles including Faculty Dean at Kirkland House, Dean of the Harvard Summer School, Interim Dean of Harvard College and Director of the Harvard University Herbaria. His research has focused on the classification and diversity of fungi, history of collections and collectors of biological materials. He has done field work in many regions around the world, most recently in southern South America. He has taught courses ranging from the biology of fungi to plants used by people to forests and climate change.

THE GLASS FLOWERS AT HARVARD

## *Of other interest:* An exhibit of glass models of fungus life cycles

lass models of *Claviceps purpurea* Gand Puccinia graminis are on display in the Ware Collection of Blaschka Models of Glass Plants at the Harvard Museum of Natural History, Cambridge, Massachusetts. These are part of an exhibit detailing the life cycles of spore producing plants that include life size and magnified views of structures involved in reproduction of these organisms. Among the objects on exhibit are models of bryophytes, ferns and fern allies, and two fungi showing microscopic features. The exhibit will run until April 2026. It was curated by Jennifer Brown, manager of the collection, Michaela Schmull, director of collections in the Harvard University Herbaria, and Donald Pfister, interim curator of the Glass Flowers. This exhibit offers the chance to see these models that have not been on public view for more than 25 years. Previous exhibits from the collection included apples and rotten fruit and the fungi that caused the rot. These models were made for the Harvard Botanical Museum by father and son Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka working in the late 19th Century. They were used in educational displays for visitors and students in the Botanical Museum. By far the largest part of the collection are flowering plants. A synoptical collection is always on exhibit.

[Editor's note: I have personally seen the Glass Flowers at Harvard and it's an

incredible collection, unlike anything I have ever seen. The details and colors are exquisite! If you get the chance to go, I highly recommend it. If you cannot make it, I suggest the book The Glass Flowers at Harvard as a consolation, see cover image.]





A microscopic view of perithecia of Claviceps purpurea. Courtesy of the Presidents and Fellows of Harvard College.