

Dear Educator:

As you consider a visit to the Forbes House Museum, we wanted to share the following detailed information about the themes and content addressed in the current exhibition[*Opium: The Business of Addiction*](https://www.forbeshousemuseum.org/opium-exhibition/). The exhibition is an effort by the Forbes House Museum to confront the complicated history of harm, addiction, and wealth generated by the opium trade, and to explore the roles played and represented by the objects, people, and house we interpret. We acknowledge the painful effects of the opium trade that are still felt by many today.

Please review this material in advance of your class visit to the exhibition and think about how best to prepare your students to engage with this material. The topics of addiction and anti-Asian racism are addressed and might be difficult or upsetting for some students to discuss in a group setting. Please contact us by email at [glabbe@forbeshousemuseum.org](mailto:glabbe@forbeshousemuseum.org) or call us at 617-696-1815, before your visit if you have any questions, concerns, or adaptations you would like us to consider. We welcome your input as we explore this facet of the Forbes family history

Heidi Vaughan

Executive Director

**Content addressed in the exhibition and tour**

* The 19th century China trade, which included opium smuggled by the United States, Great Britain, and other European countries, provided the financial foundation for capitalism in the United States and established the nation as an independent country abroad. However, the cost of the illegal opium trade to China was devastating. An estimated one-third of the population regularly used the drug by the middle of the century, leading to grave social and economic problems for the country to contend with.
* The Forbes family was deeply involved in the China trade and made enormous profits trading opium and other commodities and establishing diverse businesses around the globe. The family were partners in the largest shipping company in the United States, Perkins and Company, which merged with Russell and Company in 1827. Thomas Perkins, the family patriarch, provided his nephews with employment in the family business and established a global network of trading outposts run by family members to oversee his operation around the world.
* The Forbes family diversified its investments beyond global trade by founding an insurance company to protect merchants and their goods from loss, lent money through Baring Brothers in London, and invested in American infrastructure like railroads and mining. They used their accumulated wealth to support a number of civic and philanthropic endeavors in Boston, around the country, and in Ireland during the famine.
* Misunderstandings between the Chinese and the Westerners, including the United States, led to the First and Second Opium Wars (1839-42, 1856-60); unfair treaties to settle those wars; and the “Century of Humiliation”—a nationalist narrative that includes the Opium Wars, multiple invasions by foreign countries, and the end of imperial China. This narrative continues to be taught in Chinese schools today, resulting in a long-standing distrust between the United States and China.
* Foreign and trade relations between China and the United States, beginning with the opium trade, resulted in misunderstandings on both sides and led to racial stereotyping, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1887, and the anti-Asian racism and violence that still exists today.
* Members of the Forbes family struggled with the moral implications of their dealings in opium. Some wrote about it and explained their rationalizations and eventual ambivalence about their involvement.

**What you will see during your visit**

As you enter the Forbes’ house, you will see a content warning, advising those who might be triggered by images, objects, or text related to opioids and/or substance use disorder that they are free to leave and return to the exhibition if they so choose. This warning is noted below:

**CONTENT ADVISORY**

This exhibition contains images, information, and descriptions of opium and opioids, their uses, and their effects.

This advisory is offered because many families experience the harmful effects of addiction. Please honor any needs you have and feel free to leave. You may return again.

***Objects and images on display related to opium use***

**Dotchin or hand scales** with original fitted box

This *dotchin* (an anglicized version of the Chinese name) once belonged to Thomas Handasyd Perkins. It accurately measures small quantities of valuable items such as herbs, gems, gold, silver, or opium. The Chinese continue to use scales like these in their stores for weighing and measuring herbs, gems, and other commodities.

**Opium Pipe**

In the 19th century, opium was typically smoked through a pipe, designs of which varied in material, quality and expense.

**Opium Set**

In addition to opium itself, there was money to be made from the many objects—such as this water pipe set—related to storage, sale, and consumption of the drug.

**Opium Pillow**

Ceramic pillows were a cool place to rest one’s head and to store valuables while feeling the effects of smoking opium.

**Opium Smoker**

Roughly one-third of the Chinese population was addicted to opium in 1838. Opium smuggled by the Forbes and others fueled this epidemic. Opium addiction has never left China. In the early 20th century, it was estimated that 27% of Chinese males were opium users. In the 1950s, about 5% of the Chinese population was addicted. While accurate statistics are difficult to find, addiction in China is on the rise again. The effects of the opium trade continue to impact the current opioid epidemic.

**American Woman Smoking Opium**

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Americans used opium and its derivatives, morphine and heroin, for both pain and pleasure. Laudanum, another substance that was used, consisted of morphine and wine. It was often prescribed for women who had “nervous troubles.” All of these drugs were legally allowed in the U.S. until the Food and Drug Act of 1904.

**Use of Legal Drugs in the United States in the 19th century**

Opium, Morphine and Heroin — all legal in the United States at the time, frequently appeared in the medicine cabinets of many Americans in the form of both trusted and novel remedies to everyday ailments. This section of the exhibit contains medicine bottles and advertisements for over-the-counter painkillers commonly used at the time.

**Bottle used to store laudanum (Reproduction)**

**Card for Mrs. Winslow’s Soothing Syrup (“The Baby Killer”)**

**Bayer Aspirin Bottle with Heroin (Reproduction)**

**Trade Card for Ayer’s Cherry Pectoral**

**The current opioid epidemic**

In addition to the historically-focused exhibition at the Forbes House Museum, a complementary exhibition was created in collaboration with the [Milton Coalition](https://www.milton-coalition.org/) and is on view in the Historical Resource Room at the [Milton Public Library](https://miltonlibrary.libguides.com/ForbesHouseExhibit). The focus is on current events: the latest facts on the opioid epidemic, the impact of the COVID pandemic on those who have substance use disorders, and research into new treatments and prevention. This exhibition includes the follow content advisory:

Information about opioids, and photographs of people engaging in illicit drug activity are on display in this exhibit. Visitors are free to leave and return at any time.

*To learn more, or to seek help for you or someone you know, contact:*

the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) national helpline at **1-800-662-4357** [**www.samhsa.gov**](http://www.samhsa.gov)

**The Milton Coalition** brings together health and social service professionals, public leaders in education, religion, media, recreation, business, public safety, policy and planning, as well as diverse residents—including students, parents and affected family members—to work collaboratively on preventing and addressing substance abuse and preventable mental illness in our Town of Milton, with a focus on youth. We encourage you to visit [their website](https://www.milton-coalition.org/) for additional resources and support in addressing the issue of substance use disorder with your students.

Or, visit the [Massachusetts Bureau of Substance Addiction Services website](https://www.mass.gov/orgs/bureau-of-substance-addiction-services) to learn more about addiction services and resources available statewide.