

## ARCHIVES

# A Museum of Discovery and Progress

Celebrating the centennial of the National Academy of Sciences building, 1924–2024.

The National Academy of Sciences maintained numerous scientific exhibits for the public from the building's opening in 1924 until the building closed to visitors in 1941, when the United States entered World War II. The public areas were designed to be a “museum of discovery and progress,” as described in a 1923 prospectus by the Academy's Committee on Exhibits. These exhibits illustrated fundamental phenomena of nature and recent scientific discoveries. They were displayed in and around the Great Hall, where visitors could view and, in some cases, operate them.

The Foucault pendulum and spectrograph in the Great Hall were central to the exhibits. Seven rooms surrounding the Great Hall showcased museum artifacts and scientific research from government, industry, and university laboratories. These included a magnetograph for continuous visual displays of magnetic storms, a seismograph for observing earthquakes, and fundamental electricity experiments that illustrated discoveries in physics underlying wireless telegraphy and telephony. The exhibits were loaned to other venues, such as the 1926 US Sesquicentennial Exposition in Philadelphia and the 1932–1933 Chicago World's Fair.



The exhibits were popular, attracting more than 30,000 visitors in the first year and nearly 58,000 by 1937. They continued to draw visitors until the need for increased office space for the Academy's expanding wartime activities led to the conversion of the exhibition rooms into office spaces.

*Hermetically Sealed Living Plant*, ca. 1924–1929. From the caption on the back of the photo: “Plants thrive indefinitely sealed in airtight bulbs. Miss Louise Thorne, of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, holding a small living plant hermetically sealed in an old electric light bulb. Although the plant has been shut up in this glass prison for several months, receiving nothing from outside but sunlight and warmth, it is thriving and growing, using the same supply of water and air over and over again. This system of growing plants is the invention of Raymond H. Wallace, a student of botany at Columbia University.”