Atomic energy embodied the hopes and fears for the future in 1950s America. At the same time that General Electric produced its instructive video, *A is for Atom,* heralding the achievements of the atomic age, children across the United States were being warned by Bert the Turtle to “duck and cover” in case of a nuclear attack. Cold War fears began in post-World War II America when the Soviets successfully tested an atomic bomb and tensions between the two countries grew. At the same time that the American government competed with the Soviets in a heated arms and propaganda race, they attempted to tame the people’s growing anxiety through videos and programs designed to assure the public that science and organization would save the day. Faith in the American capitalist system and its commitment to technological improvement and order would provide the necessary insurance against the atomic calamity experienced by the Japanese.

A lasting reminder of these government programs can be found in many a dusty and abandoned building basement throughout the country—here lie the remains of the Civilian Defense Emergency Hospitals. In the early 1950s, the federal government, under the auspices of the Federal Civil Defense Administration, developed these mobile units, supplying
more than 2,000 towns and cities with all that was necessary to construct a 200-bed emergency hospital. Research conducted by the government concluded that a medium-sized city hit by an atomic bomb would only have a fraction of the beds necessary to deal with the victims, with around 20,000 beds required. In light of this potential need, these quickly assembled units were devised and then spread throughout the country.

The units came equipped with 200 cots and a small cache of laboratory equipment, surgical supplies, drugs, x-ray machines, and sterilization equipment. Each mobile unit required at least 15,000 square feet of space and was stored in an area where it could be easily set up and put into use. The units were based on the Mobile Army Surgical Hospitals (MASH), used in Korea for frontline medical emergencies. The supplies were calculated to last through the first 36 to 48 hours of any disaster, with additional supplies stashed at

convenient distribution locations around the country. Each unit consisted of 450 packages and could be delivered in one van load. Staff needs would have required 10 physicians and 20 registered nurses with an additional 125 aides.

The first mock-up was displayed in Washington in early 1954 and the government ordered 200 for initial distribution. States and cities could order their own unit with matching government funds.

It is not clear where our hospital was originally stored, but it eventually ended up in a City of Pittsburgh storage location run by the Bureau of Emergency Medical Services, which generously donated it to the History Center. As the United States veered away from Cold War civil defense type security to more comprehensive disaster response plans, these Cold War remnants were left to gather dust or were distributed piecemeal when their various elements filled a community need. They serve as a reminder of Cold War fears that enveloped the nation during the prosperity of the Baby Boom generation.

Gourd Fiddle and Bow

This folk fiddle was made in St. Mary’s County, Maryland, in the mid-19th century. It is indicative of the style of musical instrument made by enslaved Africans in America and typical of gourd fiddles of the Senegambia region of West Africa, the home of many of Maryland’s enslaved. Music played an important part in African cultural pathos. It was especially important in rituals and other cultural practices. Gourds continue to be utilitarian in African societies and used for a variety of purposes, making them a perfect material for instruments. Part of the retention of African musical culture was the adaptation of traditional instruments to American conditions. The gourd fiddle is one example of the traditional string instrument’s adaptation to American conditions. Even under chattel slavery, African craftsmen and musicians were able to make instruments for ritual, work, and entertainment.