

Sternberg Museum of Natural History

In terms of scientific holdings, the Sternberg Museum of Natural History ranks among the best natural history museums. No other state university the size of Fort Hays State University has a natural history museum comparable in size and scientific importance to this museum's holdings. Sternberg Museum collections include one of the finest scientific collections of *Pteranodon* material, the largest collection of fossil seeds, and a truly outstanding collection of Cretaceous fossils. These are complemented by excellent collections of modern biological material, most notably mammals and plants.

Museum collections have been used extensively in research by faculty and students at FHSU and by scholars from other institutions worldwide.

First in a series of historical events that led to the presence of an outstanding museum at FHSU was the fascination of early Kansas settlers for the abundant fossils and wildlife of the region. Not long after the establishment of the Kansas State Normal College in 1902, some private collections of these early settlers were given to the young institution that would later be known as Fort Hays State University. Knickknacks and taxidermy mounts dotted different offices on campus. The first formal museum shared one half of a large room with the library in Picken Hall. In 1914, C.F. Miller was appointed as the first curator. By 1915 the library was in need of more space, and the museum specimens were pushed aside. Museum and university administrators sought way to preserve and use these specimens for public display and educational purposes. This led to the appointment of George F. Sternberg to develop the museum as it moved to quarters in the new McCartney Hall. Sternberg, a famous fossil collector and preparatory, collected his first notable fossil, a complete plesiosaur, in 1892 at the age of 9. He, along with others at the university (including the famous mycologist Elam Bartholomew), amassed materials for exhibits, research, and education. This resulted in phenomenal growth of the museum.

George spent the remainder of his life developing the public and education portion of the museum as well as the paleontology and geology research collections.

Intended primarily as an academic support facility, the museum soon became a notable attraction. Local and regional citizens brought guests, and schoolteachers throughout western Kansas scheduled field trips to visit the growing museum. One of the most noted specimens of the museum is an exceptionally well-preserved *Gillicus* within a *Xyphactinus*, collected by Sternberg in 1952, know worldwide as the fish-within-a-fish.

After George's death in 1969, the Sternberg Geology Club petitioned the university for the public portion of the museum to be named in honor of the Sternberg family. In the 1970s, the administration of Sternberg memorial Museum began to emphasize tourism and education as a part of the mission of the museum. An expanded mission stressed the use of collections, as educational resources for persons of all ages, including school children, university students and faculty, local citizens, and tourists.

Continued growth of the museum led to a lack of collection space, overcrowded displays, reduced research space, and limited public access. Furthermore, as a result of the FHSU campus being situated on the flood plain, museum specimens were water damaged on several occasions. With collections stored in multiple buildings, proper conservation and environmental control was difficult. By the mid 1980s university administration recognized the potential benefits of Sternberg Museum moving to a location offering more public exhibits, research and collection space, easier access, and great visibility. An unusual building in northeast Hays offered the museum just that.

With the acquisition of a new building for the museum in 1991, the academic collections known as the Museum of the High Plains were merged with the Sternberg Memorial Museum to become the Sternberg Museum of Natural History. Ambitious plans to develop a world-class museum and tourist attraction continue to demonstrate our commitment to science, education, and tourism.

The Sternberg Museum of Natural History, now housed in the former metroplex dome, features a realistic Cretaceous diorama, redesigned exhibits from the original museum, along with displays of specimens not previously on exhibit. Also new at the "dome" is the discovery room, an interactive area of the museum where visitors can explore the wonders of nature.