CARLYLE HOUSE
HISTORIC PARK

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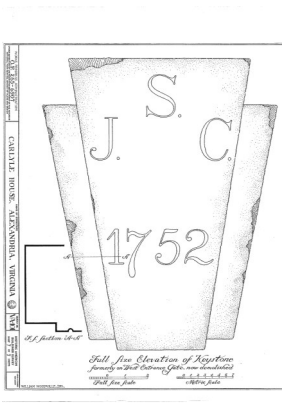
Carlyle House Architecture

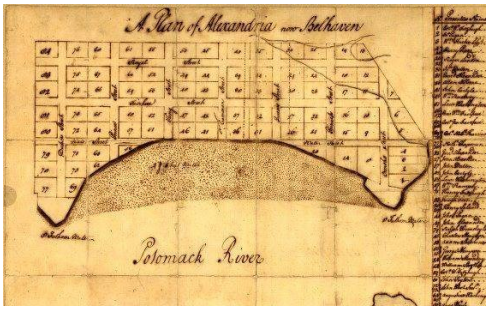
By Susan Hellman

Over the next 5 dispatches we'll take a look into Carlyle House's architectural history. These articles are based on Susan's Architecture Tour

As you all know, the background story of John Carlyle and his purchase of two lots in the newly-platted town of Alexandria, I will move right into the architecture without further preamble. The Carlyles finally moved into the house in August of 1753. Carlyle had anticipated that the building would be completed in 1752, and had the keystone carved to reflect that date, but several problems pushed completion of the mansion back a year. Carlyle wrote his brother George in November of 1752, telling him that a severe storm damaged much of the masonry and led to the collapse of one of the exterior walls. Several sources, including our own sign, mistakenly identify Carlyle House as a 1752 building because of that keystone.



The house is set back from Fairfax Street by about 75 feet. No other dwelling in



Alexandria has this setback. This helps us to date the beginning of the house's construction. On July 18, 1752, the Alexandria Board of Trustees enacted an ordinance requiring that all houses be constructed flush with the front property line. Carlyle obviously began construction of his house prior to that date. Some claim that he used his position as a Trustee to skirt the law, but I doubt that's the case.

The house is load-bearing masonry, sandstone from Aquia, with carved stone trim. A thin veneer of stucco serves as weatherproofing. The walls are about 24" thick BUT they are not solid. As originally built, they were constructed as cavity walls consisting of two veneers approximately 6" – 8" thick of cut sandstone on the exterior and rough sandstone on the interior, with an infill and rubble loose material within. Over time, the house was patched with brick in so many places that most people thought it was built of brick, not stone. By the 1970s, in some places, the stucco was the only thing holding the walls together. According to

one of the architects who worked on the 1970s restoration, the lowest portion of the exterior wall, from the water table to the ground, was originally rusticated. Rustication is a type of masonry treatment in which the blocks making up a wall are articulated by exaggerated joints rather than being

flush with each other. The material is generally left rough, emphasizing massing. The Palazzo Medici Riccardi in Florence, depicted above, has lower-level rustication.

The "front," or primary elevation, is very formal with rough-dressed sandstone blocks laid in a crude ashlar pattern. Notice that the other three elevations look almost unfinished. This is one of many clues telling us that Carlyle intended for this to be the primary entrance. Some theorize that the river side of the house was either the primary entrance or an equal entrance to this one, as was the case with Gunston Hall and other river plantations. The level of embellishment on this elevation as compared to the river side tells us that is not the case. The cornice on this elevation is stone, the only extant mid-18th century stone cornice in Virginia. The other three elevations have a wood cornice instead of the more expensive stone, another clue that the land entrance served as the primary entrance.

The sides are now cementitious stucco and the front is limestone. We think that Carlyle House was originally stuccoed, but we aren't positive. The hipped roof is cedar shingle with an unusual flare not common to hipped roofs.

In the 18th century, stone was a very high-quality and high-status building material. Stone was so desirable that many early Americans with wood frame houses scored the wood boards to look like stone blocks, and added sand to the exterior paint to mimic the textured appearance of stone. Washington did this at Mount Vernon. By building Carlyle House in stone, John Carlyle proclaimed his wealth and social status to all. Stone also served to link Carlyle to his Scottish heritage.

If you must label this dwelling, Carlyle House is Georgian. The Georgian period in Virginia began around 1700 with the Wren Building at the College of William and Mary, and ended circa 1780, when Thomas Jefferson's Virginia State Capitol in Richmond ushered in the Federal period.

Most Georgian dwellings have five to seven bays, or openings, across the front elevation on each floor. Carlyle House does not exactly fit this criterion, as it is five-bay on the first floor and six-bay on the second, although the center two windows on the upper floor are centered on the door below. This is not particularly unusual, as American builders rarely got English architectural details perfectly correct. The house measures approximately 52' X 35,' is two stories

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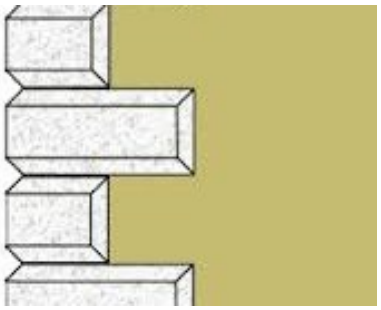
tall above a raised cellar, has two interior chimneys, corner quoins (see drawing below), and a projecting central pavilion – all typically Georgian features. The corner quoins are not symmetrical, mostly due to the disparity in the course heights because of different stone sizes. Also typically Georgian is the fact that you can generally determine the floor plan by looking at the front elevation. It's a typical center-hall plan, with two rooms on either side of a passage that runs the depth of the house. Many of these design elements became ubiquitous in mid-eighteenth century Anglo-American architectural design.

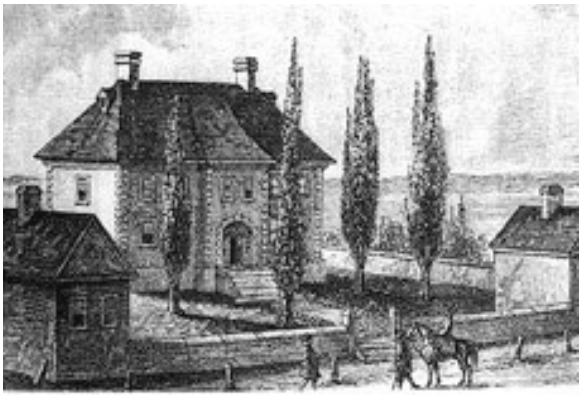


The windows are six light (i.e. pane) over nine light, but in all old photos they are six over six, which was common after circa1730. The restoration report does not explain why they changed the windows.

The front porch and steps date from the 1970s restoration. Basement windows during Carlyle's time were larger. The sill level that existed prior to the restoration is now below grade due to changes in grade elevations over time.

In more elaborate dwellings, and/or those in more rural settings, hyphens sometimes connected the main house with wings and/or outbuildings.

Carlyle's outbuildings stood apart from the house, as shown in the 1880s image from *Harper's.* Although a great deal of archaeological evidence was lost, we know that Carlyle House originally had several outbuildings, including an office and a kitchen.



Although early Virginians cooked meals in their dwellings, by the end of the seventeenth century the kitchen was generally housed in a separate outbuilding. In addition to creating a fire hazard and being extremely hot in the summer, an in-house kitchen created unwanted racial integration. As white indentured servants were replaced by enslaved workers from Africa, Virginia gentry desired to keep family members separate from slaves. Hence, many household functions were relegated to outbuildings. A number of outbuildings also decreed the wealth and social authority of the owner. Some gentry deliberately placed outbuildings in a way to impress the visitor. Unfortunately, we have no idea where the Carlyle slaves lived. They may have resided in the cellar and attic of the house. The cook would have lived over the kitchen. It's possible that there were slave dwellings on the property, but we have no evidence. The outbuildings were demolished circa 1855, when James Green extended the Bank Building extended across the front lawn. The hotel addition was demolished in the 1970s restoration of the site.

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