



In This Issue

- *Changing Interpretation: New Information on the Bedchamber bed.*
- Calendar of Events
- Happy Hour

**CARLYLE
HOUSE**

Susan Hellman
Site Manager

Kerry Mitchell
Site Specialist

Allison Kelley
Curator of Education

Docent Dispatch

November 2017

Changing Interpretation: New Information on the Bedchamber bed.

Recent correspondence has shed new light on the provenance of the bed in the Master Chamber. The history of this item has shifted over the years, due to word of mouth or new finds in research. Originally, the donor of the bed informed Carlyle House staff that the family oral history said Sarah Fairfax brought this bed with her when she married John Carlyle. Recently Adam Erby discovered information at Mount Vernon, using the ledger that was kept by George William Fairfax, that supports this story instead of the bed being purchased at the Fort Belvoir auction. Below is his information that points toward this possible shift in interpretation:

“The one piece of material I have found relevant to you is on your Fairfax bed, which is said to have come from Belvoir. I have done quite a bit of analysis on this ledger, and I don’t think your mahogany bedstead can be the one John Carlyle purchased from the Fairfax sale in 1774. In the ledger, each of the beds is described in great detail, and we know that these were the only beds in the house at Fairfax’s departure. The Fairfaxes had four beds: a chintz bed (the most expensive); a yellow morine bed; a crimson check bed; and a Saxon green bed. All of these beds were made by the London upholsterer William Gomm in 1763. At the time of the sale, the chintz bed did not sell, and its curtains were sent to the Fairfaxes in England. Thus, the bed John Carlyle purchased at auction cannot be the same as the chintz bed owned by the Fairfaxes. That leaves you with three other beds that could have been purchased by Carlyle. The yellow morine bed had “Mahy fluted Pilliars (pillars),” and your bed has plain columns, so that one is out. The other two beds do not have their woods listed, which means that they did not have mahogany

posts, as mahogany is always called out as an up charge in this invoice. The Carlyle house bed has mahogany posts, so it cannot be one of these.

Beyond the chintz bed, the three others can be traced through the auction. The auction account is tricky, because they used the word bed to indicate mattress, and there were more “beds,” or mattresses than there were “bedsteads.” The three bedsteads went to Francis Willis, Jr. (£11.12), Joshua Gore (£8.15), and John Carlyle (£7). If the relative prices paid at the auction correlate with those of the original purchase, and it should, as Fairfax wanted to be paid in Virginia currency as close as possible to what he paid in pounds sterling, then it would follow that Francis Willis, Jr. got the yellow morine bed valued at £13.13; Joshua Gore got the red check bed valued at £10; and John Carlyle got the Saxon green bed valued at £8.

The green check bed is pretty important, because that is the one listed in the Belvoir inventory in “Mrs. Fairfax’s chamber,” so Carlyle bought the bed from his in-laws’ room. It seems strange that the Fairfaxes used a bed that was not their best, but I have found this several times in Tidewater inventories. It seems to be a retention of the English custom of something of a state bed for someone of higher social status. Here is a link to the Fairfax ledger: <http://catalog.mountvernon.org/cdm/ref/collection/p16829coll5/id/630>. Your Saxon green bed is at the top of the second page.”

With this new information presented to Carlyle House staff, a changing interpretation of the bedstead must be considered. Updates on this shift in interpretation will be given as the staff decides how to move forward.

**CARLYLE HOUSE
HISTORIC PARK**

Adam Erby

Adam T. Erby is associate curator at George Washington's Mount Vernon, where he is responsible for both special exhibitions and historic interiors. He was a major contributor to the recent conservation of George Washington's "New Room," and he curated the special exhibition Gardens & Groves: George Washington's Landscape at Mount Vernon. He is the principal author of the recently released book *The General in the Garden: George Washington's Landscape at Mount Vernon*. His work has been published in *The Magazine Antiques*, *Antiques & Fine Arts*, and the Chipstone Foundation's journal *American Furniture*. Erby holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia and a master's degree from the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture. He is currently at work on the upcoming restorations of Mount Vernon's front parlor and central passage. He is also completing articles on George Washington's purchases of British furniture and the Alexandria, Virginia artist John Gadsby Chapman.

