

Docent Dispatch

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Snuff Said—John Carlyle’s Snuff Box and More— Probably Much More Than You Really Want to Know

By John Wilson

Introduction. In 1775 while King George III of England was hiring German mercenaries for the purpose of snuffing out the American Revolution, his German born wife Queen Charlotte was engaged in a different kind of snuffing -- inhaling powdered tobacco into her nostrils. The Queen was such an avid user of snuff that she had an entire room at Windsor Castle devoted entirely to her snuff stock and Queen Charlotte herself was often referred to as 'Snuffy Charlotte'. [The insert shows the Queen as painted by Joshua Reynolds in 1779 with her powdered hair dressed with a string of pearls and a small crown.]



By the time of the American Revolution, snuff had become the tobacco product of choice among the elite on both sides of the Atlantic and used by both English and American gentry, such as John Carlyle. This article brief-

ly discusses the history and use of tobacco, particularly the use of snuff in the Colonial era and, of course, John Carlyle’s snuff box

Brief History of Snuff. Romaneó Pane, a young Franciscan friar from Spain, who accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the New World in 1499, is credited with first reporting on the use of tobacco to a European audience. He had seen the natives burning the dried leaves of what looked like a weed and inhaling the smoke or sniffing a powder made from the leaves into their nostrils. He mentioned that the natives did this for both enjoyment and medical reasons.



In 1561 Jean Nicot (pictured above and whose name later became associated with an active ingredient in tobacco) provided ground tobacco to the French Queen Catherine de Medici to treat her migraine headaches. Jean Nicot was a

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CARLYLE HOUSE

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French man who had become aware of tobacco while serving as ambassador to Portugal. While there he became intrigued with the medical benefits of tobacco and after successfully using tobacco ointment to treat a man with a tumor, he became convinced that ground tobacco could alleviate a wide range of ailments. Queen Catherine was greatly impressed with snuff's curative properties and her approval helped popularize its use among the French nobility. Soon its use spread throughout Europe and the practice of using snuff served to distinguish the elite from the "common" folks who usually smoked or chewed tobacco.

Users and Abusers. Over the span of several centuries, there were many prominent snuff users including popes and kings as well as other notables, such as Napoleon Bonaparte, the Duke of Wellington, Lord Nelson (who took large quantities of snuff with him when he went to sea), Marie Antoinette, Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson. Its popularity also led to some serious objections to the practice. Queen Elizabeth I issued a decree against the misuse of tobacco in 1584 and Pope Urban VIII who reigned from 1623 to 1644 issued a papal interdict against the practice. The pope took strong exception to the habit of priest taking snuff while saying mass.



Women had not taken to smoking tobacco, but many did take a liking to snuff. The most notable example of taking snuff to an extreme involved a woman -- Mrs.

Margaret Thompson of East London, England -- a wealthy and avid snuffer. She died in April 1776 and her will stipulated that the coffin containing her body should be filled with the best Scotch snuff -- making it the world's largest snuff box. Her will also called for six males, selected because they were the biggest users of snuff in the community, to wear snuff-colored beaver hats while serving as coffin bearers. Furthermore, it stated that the funeral procession include six maidens to accompany the entourage carrying snuffboxes and every twenty yards place generous amounts of snuff in the street. A final stipulation was that two bushels of high-quality snuff be distributed at her house after the funeral ceremony. Reportedly her funeral service was very well attended.

Snuff Making and Taking. Snuff is the most highly processed and expensive of all tobacco products. The types and varieties of snuff are numerous and snuff can be made with different sizes of grain, assorted colors, degrees of moisture and various flavors. After being ground and sieved the snuff is often aged in oak barrels like fine wine. The snuff can be sold either plain or blended and flavored. If flavored, it can be scented with herbal oils such as peppermint, spearmint, etc. Snuff taking typically involves the use of accessories such as a container for the snuff (a box or bottle which can often be very ornate and expensive). At certain times in the 18th century, the taking of snuff involved elaborate rituals that were described in books of etiquette on the art of snuffing.

Tobacco Artifacts at Carlyle House. During John Carlyle's lifetime there were three ways that tobacco could be used -- smoking in a pipe, chewing it; or inhaling it. Artifacts for the first two uses can be seen in John Carlyle's study -- there are two clay pipes and a

small rope like plug of tobacco on the side table.



John Carlyle's snuff box is sometimes displayed in a glass case in the upper passage. John Carlyle's snuff box is a lovely artifact that is described by John Munson in his biography as being "a cowrie shell snuffbox, Scottish or English, mid-18th century. The hinged silver lid is engraved with the Carlyle coat of arms and the motto *Humilitate* – With humility". When describing to Carlyle house visitors how snuff was used – sniffing it into the nostrils – some people display a rather strong negative reaction, considering it an extremely distasteful practice. Such a reaction can provide the opportunity to remind them of the many pungent smells that they would likely experience in the 18th century -- a time when the unpaved dirt roads of Alexandria were likely to be littered with horse dung and when people did not have the benefit of hot showers or the use of deodorants. In that historical context, inhaling snuff, particularly when flavored, could have been a welcome alternative to inhaling the ambient Alexandrian air of the 18th century.

The author of this article is not enough of a Carlyle scholar to know the extent to which Mr. or Mrs. Carlyle used snuff. In any case, these Carlyle House artifacts as well as the barrel in the study near the desk, provide an opportunity to talk about the important role of tobacco in the social and commercial life of John Carlyle as

well as in the history and formation of Virginia society.

Sources for this article include the following:

1. Ursula Bourne, **Snuff**, Shire Publications, Cromwell House Buckinghamshire HP17 9AJ, United Kingdom, 1990
2. Wikipedia, **Snuff**, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snuff_\(tobacco\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snuff_(tobacco))
3. James D. Munson, **John Carlyle, Gent.**, North Virginia Park Authority, 1986