

Docent Dispatch

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CARLYLE HOUSE

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John Carlyle at Play

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Guiding visitors through the Carlyle House, sharing broad outlines of the great events and people associated with the residence, a more pedestrian question often comes to mind. What did they do for fun? Jane Carson's book *Colonial Virginians at Play*, in the Carlyle House library, provides some context for learning more about pursuits that John and his contemporaries would have enjoyed.

Dancing was probably one such diversion. John's unsmiling countenance in the painting hanging in the "office" doesn't square with historical accounts of how sociable Virginians were. On a tour of Berkeley plantation in the Virginia Tidewater last spring, my wife and I learned how a visiting George Washington danced with the ladies into the wee hours of the morning – on the same original floorboards we were standing on. Hardly the stiff image of the wig-clad Washington on the dollar bill.

The Carlyle House layout, opening into the large central hallway (a plan similar to Gunston Hall and other Georgian homes of the time), would have permitted dancing. Carson's book suggests that Carlyle parties would have been rather refined occasions, since "Virginians preferred minuets and French dances, while country

dances were more popular to the North." (p. 11)

Drinking and card games were popular too, part of the hospitality and socializing that so impressed visitors to Colonial Virginia. Carson notes that Virginia planters preferred simple and more sociable card games like whist over more serious and deliberate games such as chess. (p. 28) John Carlyle's probate inventory includes a three-pint tankard, punch ladles, eight wine glasses, a card table, and a backgammon table.

Yet according to his letters, John thought card games and drinking were distasteful and perhaps inappropriate for a gentleman. As he wrote his brother in England from "Hunting Creek" on January 25, 1748: "To end my days in my native country is one of my strongest wishes – if I am blessed with children those shall have English education and *not be allowed to imbibe the principles looked upon here to be polite, gaming and drinking, principles I hope me nor mine be addicted to.*" [emphasis added] In another letter to his brother in August 1755, John scoffed that the late General Braddock had been a "slave to his passions, women and wine" during his brief stay in Alexandria.

Horse racing (and the gambling that often accompanied it) were popular in

colonial times, and we know that one of John's many business pursuits was importing race horses. Contests in colonial Virginia would likely have been more like quarter racing on the American frontier (a burst of speed down a short straightaway) than an elegant Kentucky Derby-type affair with horses circling a track.

Carson elaborates:

“Only gentlemen entered horses in these races, and the owner usually rode his own horse. Anyone who was interested could attend, however, and large crowds often did, closely packed along the sides of the track. The official starter sounded the signal—a drum beat, a trumpet blast, or a gunshot—and the horses, which had been rearing and circling, jockeying for position in the better part of the path, suddenly took off at full speed. Further jostling was customary in the course of the race, and riders used whip and knee to unseat opponents or drive their mounts off the track. Daring and skillful riders as well as fast horses made the match a sporting event, for the outcome was seldom predictable. Until the end of the colonial period, the short sprints characteristic of seventeenth-century contests were popular as ‘quarter racing’ in Southside Virginia and in the backcountry.” (Carson p. 52)

Music was probably another leisure activity the Carlyles enjoyed, as is evident from the two trumpets, French horn, and fife in John's probate inventory. The spinet that John's daughter Sally took lessons for at Mount Vernon is not mentioned. Perhaps she took it with her when she married and moved out of Carlyle House.

John also had some interest in reading. He owned Voltaire's works, a book on heraldry, a history of England, a naval history, and of course the family Bible.

The elite Virginia social circles that John moved in mirrored those where he grew up in northern England and southern Scotland. Some of the rougher elements of his home country also transferred to Virginia, aspects of society that John was certainly aware of but did not participate in. Folk games that helped inhabitants of the English-Scottish borderlands prepare for the lack of security in the old country were quite appropriate for Virginia's frontier. The games, including wrestling and boxing, were often violent. “Bragging and fighting” in Britain involved heavy drinking followed by a no-holds barred fight. Imported to the American backcountry, this became known as “rough and tumble,” and was usually a contest between two males, sometimes two females. “Eye-gouging” during fights was common enough for local legislatures to outlaw it. In the crude game of “cudgeling,” contestants used a stout ash stick to try and beat each other into submission. (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug97/albion/asport.html>; Carson 72-73; <http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/spring08/pop.cfm>)

The times John lived in were tumultuous and uncertain. His letters home are peppered with references to dangers in the world beyond Alexandria, whether Bonnie Prince Charlie romping through Britain or the French and Indians terrorizing families along America's colonial frontier. Still, John and his contemporaries found ways to enjoy themselves and take their minds off life's harsher realities, as people always do. Virginia's enslaved population, of course, may not have had even that simple luxury.

