CARLYLE HOUSE
HISTORIC PARK

Docent Dispatch

May 2017

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Carlyle House Architecture, Part 4

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Second Floor:

Embellishment indicates that the second floor rooms were much lower in the design hierarchy than the rooms downstairs.

The Carlyle family would have used the upper passage as an informal upstairs drawing room or parlor. It would have also held overflow guests or slave pallets on an as-needed basis. Instead of keeping the upper passage a large open space, James Green constructed a wall across the upper passage, running north and south, creating an additional room on the west side of the space. NOVA Parks removed that wall in the 1970s restoration.

Although we normally interpret the north rooms as the children's rooms, the family would have completely shut off the north/public side of the house during cold winters if they had no guests. In doing so, they only had to heat one side of the house.

On the south side of the house, the architecture room shows what much of the house looked like when NOVA Parks purchased it in the 1970s. Architectural evidence indicates that the architecture room was the most elaborately embellished of the upstairs bedchambers, although it was inferior to the upper passage. This space clearly functioned as the best second-floor chamber. Honored guests, including George Washington and General Braddock, would have stayed in this room.

Today in the architecture room, we see that NOVA Parks shored up the house with steel beams. A severe winter storm during the restoration blew out the west wall of this room. The modern brick on this wall therefore dates to the 1970s. The clear panel in the floor allows us to see the original dovetail joints in the floor joists. Note the Roman numerals, which have been used in construction since at least as early as the Greeks. Timbers were cut and

framed on the ground, then moved into place. The Roman numerals indicate which tenon goes into which mortice, to ensure that the building is constructed properly. Much like a jigsaw, the floor joists fit together very precisely, and could not be forced into place.

A 1987 conservation report indicates that the original ceiling consisted of hand split pine lath nailed to the pine joists. Lathing was hand split until circa 1850, when sawn lath came into usage. The lath was spaced varying from 1/8" to 1/4" apart. For those of you who don't know, lathing is the stuff that keeps plaster on the walls. It's the "canvas" for the plaster. In this room, the plaster was applied in a series of 2 coats, not 3 which was customary. In a usual plaster application (please skip to the end if this is too boring), the first step is to apply the scratch coat, the thick first coat applied with heavy-handed pressure to the lath to insure the formation of good keys behind the lath. Keys are the plaster chunks that ooze behind the lathing and dry into chunks.

The second step is to apply and layer the brown coat. This typically gritty/ sandy layer of plaster is thick, not completely smooth, and often made with a strengthening additive, such as horse hair or hay and grasses, to bond it all together. As it is applied it oozes through the gaps in the lath, making more "keys" as it hardens and locks it in place.

The final coat is the lime coat. This finish coat of plaster is also the thinnest and most fragile. Usually white in appearance, it can take days, or even months, to fully cure. Some builders kept interior walls and ceilings unpainted for six months to a year to allow for a full cure and the right exterior temperature to foster a good finish paint job.

In the architecture room, the scratch coat is missing, as is the layering of the brown coat, indicating that the basic subcoat was layered on in one application. Therefore good "keys" were not created before the application of the final lime coat. Also, the lath was split too thin and the joists were too green when cut, meaning that the moisture content in the wood was too high when the lathing was nailed to the joists. This made the nails back out of the wood over the years. This, taken with the lack of good keys, made the plaster fall down in places, which explains the plexiglass shields. This room was obviously plastered by a beginning journeyman, not a master, who would have worked on the public downstairs rooms. Carlyle wrote his brother that he had trouble finding decent workmen.

The 20th century restoration and installation of a steel reinforcing system made the plaster problem far worse, and conservators came in to make repairs in 1987. Their report refers to the "traumatic work done during the renovations."

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