

Transcription of Richard Bierce lecture to Carlyle House docents on June 12, 2017

Richard Bierce, A.I.A., joined the Carlyle House restoration project in May of 1973, two weeks after the Mansion House Hotel/Braddock Apartments had been demolished. He served as the restoration's Alexandria Field Office Manager for three years.

See also notes taken by the Site Manager.

Question: Can you tell us more about the cat and the chimneys?

RB: The cat was found in a pier of a fireplace in the cellar. The chimney to the north had to be rebuilt, but we rebuilt it with brick and we stuccoed it so it's basically the same proportions.

Question: Do you have evidence for the Palladian window on the stair landing?

RB: The question of the Palladian window in the stairwell is absolutely speculative. There was no evidence, but you see all that brick, all that brick taken out of the original stone by James Green. Again, my boss, in thinking through the possibilities for this site, looked at Gunston Hall and said that we knew Palladian windows were certainly an available option at the time, and lots of light on the stair hall is necessary so it seemed like a reasonable option. I won't say it's absolutely accurate because there was no evidence, but that's the reason why it exists in its present form.

Question: Please discuss the front steps.

RB: As for the front entry steps, that curvature and those dimensions fit the fragments we found, and the curvature and the dimensions fit what you have there. So at the end of the day, this was probably close to the time it was getting open, the lawn had barely been planted, the back of Alexandria looked derelict, but that's what we started with in 1976.

I am going to pull my slides out, but we can start. A number of you did send me questions in advance, so I want to thank you for that, and if we get a chance I want to do some memory jogging. We can start with a little bit of that now, and then I thought we can take a walk and talk around the house so anything you see, want to know about, or don't understand, I might be right with you but we will try to figure it out. So I will be here as long as you need today.

Question: Is there any physical evidence that James Green reconfigured the attic?

RB: No, no, nothing specific. Put it in the context that he had a lot of children, and he made most of the changes to the interior of Carlyle house, and we always assumed he did, because the minimal architectural treatment was clearly mid-nineteenth century. Pretty generic trim and so forth. But we have absolutely no documentary evidence. The other thing that we failed then to do, and I think it has finally come down to us today, the house was a tenement for twenty years before James Green bought it. A number of these changes, smaller ones, perhaps could have been made in that period, and we don't necessarily distinguish between that period in 1835 and the 1850 period. That's a narrow window for these kind of modest changes. So, no, James Green probably did it, but no, we have no specific

evidence. Is it possible that the Union Army did it? I would say no, because to the best of my knowledge the house was still occupied by ranking military people. And lastly, the idea of getting wounded people up those winding staircases? I don't think that would be a healthy situation. I don't think they did that for a ward, but I could be wrong.

Question: Was the restoration team positive that the cellar door in the south wall of the basement was a non-Carlyle door?

RB: No, absolutely not! Not positive. Highly unlikely. I didn't find the picture of it and just thought maybe you've got some? But it was a fairly crude cut in to the wall, in the middle of the space, it didn't follow the normal expectation of a linear arrangement or properly located door. I suspect either during the tenement period or possibly during the James Green period, when the grade started coming down, it made for quicker access so they just said "Oh, let's put a door here." I don't know that for a fact, and I don't think I was there when they may have discovered that. The assumption was the best story that I was aware of. And so putting it back because we knew we were going to be elevating the grade again to its historic level, and that door would have required a stairway, and we had the door to the main floor right next to it, and how did they work together? We therefore did not put that door back.

Question: I have a question about that main door on the south end of the first floor. Do you think that was original? Or was that all AutoCAD?

RB: There is physical evidence that showed us the door construction had been covered up when James Green put the two rooms together and made the double parlor, but it had a separate corridor and we have restored that. There is physical evidence in the wall that allowed us to replicate the original use.

We assumed the kitchen was the south dependency, so it was the only way into the house with the foodstuff.

Question: What was the current servants hall?

RB: There is no documentation as to exact use (warming kitchen, servant's hall, Green family kitchen). I think the issue with the Mansion House Hotel is where did the Green family cooking actually get done? Did they use the hotel kitchen, or did they have their own? The use of many rooms in the house is highly speculative and circumstantial. We don't have precise Carlyle memoirs giving room use.

Question: Was there a bathroom or kitchen in the house in the Green period?

RB: We know from the warming oven in the current servants hall that some cooking occurred in the house, but we aren't sure where or how much. There were never any sanitary facilities.

Question: You are talking as if the Greens were there during the war? I thought the Greens were.

Site Manager: We have evidence that they left the house after a few weeks and were living on Prince St. Someone found Stephen Green's diary in recent years. This is new since the restoration. The Greens did come back though.

RB: Well if it was all Union military, then all of their food would have come from the commissary.

Question: Key to the use of that servants hall is the fireplace. When you were doing the restoration, were you convinced that that was the original fireplace, or has it been reworked?

RB: I suspect the latter. I think there were cooking implements and stuff in there. We were on that fast track, so that little mystery did not get a lot of examination. That would be a good question for further research and archaeology. It was used for cooking at some time in its history.

Docent comment: Given that it is at the base of a chimney stack, it has to be the original location at least.

RB: Someone sent a question about the golden section. This means it was built to the golden mean / the golden ratio. It has to do with proportions to which the building was built. Carlyle's house was not studied for exact golden proportions; we had our schedule and were focused on making the house stand up. The golden section goes back to the Egyptians. It is a 1 to 1.61 ratio. It is considered pleasing and is the basis on which Greek, Roman, and all imitations thereof are based for appropriate and pleasing proportions. It has underlain all of Western architecture for thousands of years, and is used consciously today, though not by everybody. Not clear if it was used here; not enough info on the designer and if he was classically trained, apprenticed, etc. In my opinion, it's possible, having done some comparative analysis of preceding structures up and down the Potomac, including Gunston Hall and Mount Airy, which show signs of it.

Question: Regarding the Palladian window, I was told we chose to do that because of Carlyle's association with Christ Church.

RB: We need to remember that Christ Church was made twenty years after Carlyle House.

Question: Yes, but why was it chosen for us in the 20th century?

RB: Oh, we weren't considering that. Mr. Fauber was trained in Williamsburg and brought knowledge and experience to the Carlyle restoration. It was his idea, though never proven, that Craigie Hall influenced John Carlyle. Any of Carlyle's architects or stone masons could have had that knowledge. Construction was a dialogue among many parties, not just commands from the architect. Also, we have confirmed what Munson said about the house having red shingles. We found a red shingle in the archaeology of the earliest period. I don't think the Park Authority ever raised the issue of a painted roof, though. Our original unpainted cedar roof lasted a long time, and the replacement shingles were painted in the traditional way; every shingle was hand dipped, then hammered on.

Question: What would the original shingle fasteners have been, and what did we use?

RB: The originals would have been wrought nails. Cut nails didn't come in until about 1790. As we moved west, people would burn their old homes down to recover the nails and hardware. I was also struck by, in the Munson book, how he referred to the stone from the restoration as a veneer. That's not quite true. Traditional style was to have dressed stone on the front, and rubble stone on the

interior. Every stone course of the restoration is slightly different, which is accurate to the time of construction. There was no regularity. It took us a very long time. We had trouble finding the matching stone to Aquia, which is why we chose the limestone because it was a close match compositionally but better structurally. There was no opening between the two layers of wall; it was all filled with loose rubble and cement. The stone walls were 18-24 inches thick, the interior was partitioned in wood. The exterior walls were free standing, so if one of them failed, it could have brought the whole house down. When we removed the stucco on the south wall, you could put your whole hand in the wall because of dissolved or broken stones. This may have been due to cheap leftover stone being used. For the restoration, every single stone was hand measured. The stones came from the quarry numbered for us.

Question: Does this bear out Carlyle's complaint about building the house?

RB: The technical craftsmanship of the stonework isn't bad, as is the woodwork that did survive. It was more of a planning and execution problem. Carlyle's workmen may not have been bad, but the team was. He even had a stone cornice survive, which is very rare. The little bit of original plaster that did survive uses animal hair as a binder, and the use of lime and oyster shells was common at the time. Often you only had what we would call scratch and finish coats, as opposed to the three part modern process. The oyster shells were crushed or burned to provide the lime in the finished plaster. The substrate was the rough lath or the stone walls to which the plaster was affixed.

RB: Someone had questions about both staircases. The essence of both staircases is in their original locations. We found sufficient physical, as well as trace, evidence to give us a very firm sense of how the stairs were constructed, where they went, what the riser height was, etc. The door going into the dining room (no longer called the council room) was never a door. It was a blind door. Green is the one who opened it up for utility. It was suspected that there was a lower landing, or maybe two landings. We found enough evidence to suggest the dogleg we chose. Our center hall is very close to Gunston Hall's, and they have one exactly the same. We had enough physical and other corroboration. For the servant stairs, we had gaps to work with. The risers are high and the treads are small. But it was the best guess we had at the time, aided by the original post found in a wall.

RB: The basement floor was in fact lowered for head room. In the process of the archaeology, we found a well shaft near the present north door and the cistern in the southeast corner room. The shaft under the north door was in a weird location. It was apparently never used as anything but storage. It was found to have been filled all at once circa 1780. One time fill, not gradual or layered. The cistern had 19th century fill elements in it. It was likely used up until the time James Green started his major work. The cistern would have been used purely for water storage. We believe, though not proven, that the well in the east vault under the terrace is Carlyle period. We aren't sure if it was the main well. We didn't have a full plantation's contingent of laborers here, but we don't know where a lot of them worked. Feel and scale were plantation-like, but this was a tight urban site. The basement floor plan wasn't changed except to add the kitchen and the partition where the toilets are now. The openings under the main entry to the west were probably part of the Green series of changes. The opening to the terrace and vaults had to clearly be that period. We don't have documentation on the timber sources; we don't know of any nearby timber mills. The framing system was probably prepared off site and then brought in

and assembled here. The numerals let the illiterate workers build by number. Many of the more modest early 19th century houses in Alexandria had framing completely made in the Caribbean for on-site assembly.

RB: For the paneling paint was the norm. However, in Virginia, there are rare 18th century examples of fine unpainted panel work as well. The objective was to paint it, though if you could afford a better finish you may not. None of the original 18th century hardware or handles survived in the house. The lead clamps that hold the cornice together are original. The rest is all pretty much 19th century. The floor bricks in the basement were not from the hotel, but were purchased during the renovation. Nothing other than a few floor boards were salvaged from the hotel.

Question: Why is it so hot all the time?

RB: There is not enough insulation in the attic, and 1/3 of the attic is completely uninsulated. Secondly, the Park Authority never replaced your a/c, so it is just a revamped system from 45 years ago. The standards were developed in 1975. We tried to overcompensate for the fact that the house was very leaky, and very few of the antiques required a temperature stable environment. The a/c was pretty much only installed for the comfort of visitors and staff.

RB: Using Delft tile was a practice known to exist in Virginia at the time. We found a very small bit of evidence to suggest there were tiles in the house. We decided to put the tiles around the fireplace in the study. Just a nice little feature, typical of the time. The tile came from a store at the corner of Queen and Fairfax called Iberian Imports. These are Portuguese imports, not really Delft.

RB: Outbuildings. We know about kitchen, office, stores, warehouse, privies. There must have been a stable or slave quarters, but we have no mention of those things, and no understanding of some of these other utilitarian structures. How did they handle? Lee Street didn't exist at the time, that was all water. So we don't know where these structures were.

Question: We were specifically told there were NOT slave quarters, and the slaves would have slept where they worked or in the halls on pallets. This is based on other urban slave settings.

RB: Carlyle was utilitarian. He built a wharf and warehouse. He was a money making machine. This is like living in a factory, would have felt odd at home.

Site Manager: There was no heat in the attic, so you probably wouldn't put enslaved workers up there.

RB: With the property on Four Mile Run, it is also possible that slaves transferred back and forth.

RB: Green didn't put in the service stair; it was already there. We don't know exactly when it was put in. It was taken out in the 1930s restoration, and we put it back. For fireplace facing, other than the one fleeting reference to tile, we have no reference of anything other than standard plaster. It was simple and typical. We filled the cistern with sand. We put a package of documentation in the bottom of the well before filling it in. In the restroom area, everything in that space is designed for instant removal, so the impact will be minimal when you finally get separate facilities. We rebuilt the chimney base there.

RB: The door frames are 6'2" inches high. Why that short? It was for conservation of hot air in the winter. Hot air rises, so a shorter door keeps more warmth in. Many other Southern houses have higher ceilings for the same reason. The doors are the same height Carlyle made them, based on physical evidence. In my experience 6'2" is the average height. About 90% of the dining room is original. It is the most preserved room in the house because someone knew about the Council of Five Governors. Most of the first level floors are original, too. Do we have photographs of how the house looked when Green renovated? No, we don't. There is a lot of untapped territory between 1880 when Green died and the 1970s.

Question: Why is there a lot of expansion and shrinkage in the dining panels but not in other rooms?

RB: It was intentional for maintaining the house. It is a factor of the climate. Letting an old house change with the seasons as it always did could be problematic for preservation. You need to find a good balance between the house and the objects/people in the house.

Question: Why is the wallpaper in small squares?

RB: The reason the wallpaper was in small squares was the limitation of the presses that made it. I got the information from an excellent book on historical wallpaper from the 70s.

Question: Can you explain the fire protection system?

RB: The Halon gas was put in for fire protection. It was held up as a great system after the 1967 space center fire when three astronauts were killed. But in 1973 no building codes recognized Halon, so we had to fight the City of Alexandria for the permit and go to the National Fire Protection Association for a formal request of adjudication. It was a challenge with how big and porous are spaces are, comparatively. Carlyle is now grandfathered for its Halon system even though they are discontinued elsewhere. The sensors are designed to give the greatest warning possible, but make sure you seal all doors behind you as you evacuate.

The group then moved on to the house, where Mr. Bierce pointed out particular elements discussed in his talk.