

Notes on Richard Bierce presentation to docents, June 12, 2017

See also the transcription.

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 therefore never saw the hotel/apartment building. Richard served as the Alexandria Field Office Manager for three years.

James Green lowered the grade in the front of Carlyle House (CH) in order to access the Mansion House Hotel cellar. This action put CH up on a pedestal.

Green removed the center wall panels on both the east and west elevations, replacing them with Victorian elements.

The house was built of load-bearing Aquia sandstone. The stone is no longer load bearing; instead, the house is supported by a steel frame installed in 1975. Green changed the original 6'2" door heights to 6'6" – there was some discussion as to why Carlyle built the original doors at such a low height. The low height helped keep heat in the rooms.

Photos from the restoration show that the north wall of the dining room, between the windows, was brick when the restoration began. This section of the wall had been a passage to the hotel; the passage was removed and bricked closed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The area where the bathrooms are now show evidence of post 1850s changes. What is the brick structure? The restoration team found a cistern under the pile of bricks in front of the brick structure. This cistern, which would have been used to store water, probably predated the Greens. It is only 12 – 13 feet deep and therefore too shallow to have served as a well. It may or may not date to Carlyle. Evidence is unclear.

The restoration patched some areas with brick, knowing that the stucco would cover it.

NOVA Parks' objective was to tell the story of John Carlyle. The organization was not interested in any other facet of the site's history. Anything non-Carlyle was to be ignored. The restoration team's task was to identify and replicate elements to the 1753-1780 time period. They were also in a rush to complete the project in time for the 1976 Bicentennial celebration. The grand opening took place 1/18/1976.

In January of 1975 a severe storm blew out the entire panel/area of stone above the master chamber, including the architecture room wall.

The exterior walls are 24" thick BUT they are not solid. They are composed of a dressed stone on the exterior, a rough stone on the interior, and rubble infill between those two walls.

The first half of the project was structural – they had to support the walls, which was very expensive. They also could not touch the Law Building next door, which dates to pre-1855. Due to the poor/collapsing condition of the walls of CH, steel was necessary to support the structure. Due to its inflexibility, steel is not generally used in a historic structure, but it was necessary in this case.

The 1880s Harper's image shows that the house does not have a pediment or proper Georgian roof planes. This is probably due to the 1752 storm that Carlyle references in a letter to his brother. Carlyle wanted to hurry and complete the project and move in. Building proper Georgian details would have delayed the project even further and he was already behind schedule.

The restoration team felt that Craigie Hall was possibly the source of some ideas for the design of the house. As Green had completely reconfigured the front door, they considered a Palladian entry here. However, the discovery that the cheek walls and historic fragments found under them date to Green led them to create the current doorway/elevation instead of a Palladian entry.

Both chimneys were rebuilt during the restoration. The southeast corner of the southernmost chimney had completely failed all the way down to the cellar and the entire chimney had to be replaced. The exterior portion of the northern chimney was rebuilt.

The Palladian window on the east elevation was speculative.

The curve of the front steps was created based on architectural evidence.

Keep in mind that the house was a tenement for 20 years prior to the Green ownership. Some of the minor changes to the house could have taken place before Green owned it. The house was also a tenement for a period of time after the Green ownership.

The south cellar door was a crude opening, probably added during the tenement time or during the Green period. It could not have dated to the Carlyle period, because the landscape grade during the Carlyle period was much higher and a door here would not have made sense. The southern door on the main living level dates to the Carlyle period.

There is not definitive evidence as to whether or not the servants' hall actually served as a servants' hall. The floor was higher during the Carlyle period. The servants' hall had a 19<sup>th</sup> century oven, so someone cooked in this room during the Green period (or tenement?). The fireplace had been reworked, so we do not know if the current configuration is correct.

There were no bathrooms in the house prior to the 1970s restoration. The bathroom is designed so that it can be removed at a future date if desired.

The restoration team did not have time to work the proportions of the house. In architectural design, the "golden section" ideal proportion is 1:1.61. This goes back to the Egyptians. This proportion is considered pleasing and appropriate in architecture and is still used today in some designs. John Arriss may have worked on CH. Did Carlyle know him? We can't be sure. Did Carlyle know basic design principles? We don't know. The restoration team looked at elite dwellings along the rivers of Virginia, and other river plantations, including Gunston Hall and Mount Airy, have some architectural elements that exactly match those at CH.

Christ Church was NOT the basis for the CH Palladian window. The head of the restoration project, J. Everette Fauber, Jr. trained at Williamsburg, and followed Williamsburg design principles. Fauber used

Craigie Hall as a basis for many of the restoration concepts. Another source to know is *Mansions of Virginia* by T.T. Waterman.

James Munson's book refers to red shingles. Yes, the restoration team did find some red round-butt shingles. Mount Vernon has a red-painted roof. Matt Mosca later found gray paint on the shingles. The 1975 roof was unpainted cedar. The current/newest roof is painted, which will help it last longer. To paint shingles, each shingle is dipped individually in paint, completely covering the entire surface. Eighteenth century shingles were held in place with wrought nails. People frequently burned old buildings to get the nails.

The stone on the west elevation is sort of a veneer now. In the 1970s they replicated every single existing stone, all of which were different sizes. They could not find a good sandstone match, and used Indiana limestone instead. It is a close visual match and is much stronger structurally than sandstone. The dimensional irregularity of the stones is very uncommon. It's an inexplicable mystery as to why they are all different sizes. The restoration team measured every stone and sent the measurements to the quarry to make exact replicas. The original technical craftwork is not too bad. The stone cornice is relatively unusual. The woodwork is nicely done.

In the study, to the left (west) of the fireplace, Carlyle had a niche, possibly a closet. Green made that a door into the center passage.

The plaster contains some animal hair. The scratch coat goes onto the substrate (lath or stone walls) as a basis to level the surface. The brown coat further levels the surface, and the finish coat is highly refined. Carlyle House only has two layers, not three.

Both staircases are in their original locations. They found an original newel post which had been reused as a stud elsewhere in the house. This newel post was an excellent source for determining the details of the stair. The main stair of Carlyle House is almost an exact replica of the one at Gunston Hall, as is the center passage. The main stair is therefore correct.

The cellar floor was lowered in the 1970s for 20<sup>th</sup> century headroom. In lowering the floor, they found the well shaft by the north door and the cistern in the southwest area where the bathrooms now are. The well by the north door was filled in ca. 1780 all at once. It's in an odd location. The cistern, used to store water, had 19<sup>th</sup> century fill and was therefore used up to the Green period. The well in the easternmost vault probably dates to the Carlyle period. Was there another well closer to the kitchen? We don't know.

Where were the other outbuildings? Most houses from this period have a laundry, smokehouse, dairy, schoolhouse, and other such buildings. Carlyle House should have had these as well, but we have no evidence as to where they would have stood. We know about the kitchen, office, storerooms, and privies. They must have had stables, slave quarters, and other utilitarian buildings, but we have no evidence.

Richard thinks that the only entrance to the cellar during the Carlyle period was the one at the north end of the house, where the gift shop entrance is now. The only change they made to the cellar plan was to add a wall by the bathrooms.

Structural timbers were probably pitsawn on site. The Roman numerals could possibly indicate that timbers were cut off site. Some early 19<sup>th</sup> century Alexandria houses (i.e. post Carlyle House) had the timber frames cut in the Caribbean and shipped here – much like 20<sup>th</sup> century Sears houses.

All current hardware in Carlyle House was purchased or made for the restoration. Nothing original remains.

The floor bricks in the cellar were all purchased. A few floorboards from the Mansion House Hotel were reused on the Carlyle House first floor.

One third of the attic is not insulated – the rest is under-insulated.

Delft tile was commonly used in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Richard recalls some evidence of Delft tile found during the restoration, which is why they used them. They chose the study for the tile because that room had been so compromised.

There is no evidence of anything other than plaster fascia around the fireplaces.

The restoration team put a time capsule with architectural drawings and other information in the cistern that is in the bathroom area.

In the dining room, 90% of the woodwork and flooring is original. The team only had to fix the westernmost window that had been converted into a door leading into the hotel.

Most of the flooring on the first floor is original.

The degree of decoration in the stairhall is typical of the period, but there is no existing physical evidence.

Notes taken by:

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