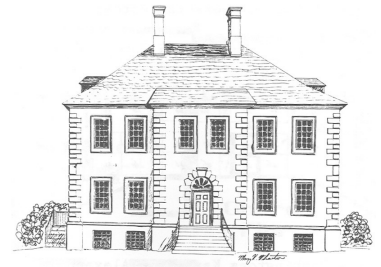


# Carlyle Connection

“It’s a fine beginning.”



## *John Carlyle’s Servants Hall: A Closer Look*

*By Richard Klingenmaier*

SERVANTS HALL: “A common room in the cellar of a large dwelling, or a subsidiary outbuilding such as a kitchen where servants gathered and dined.” Carl R. Lounsbury

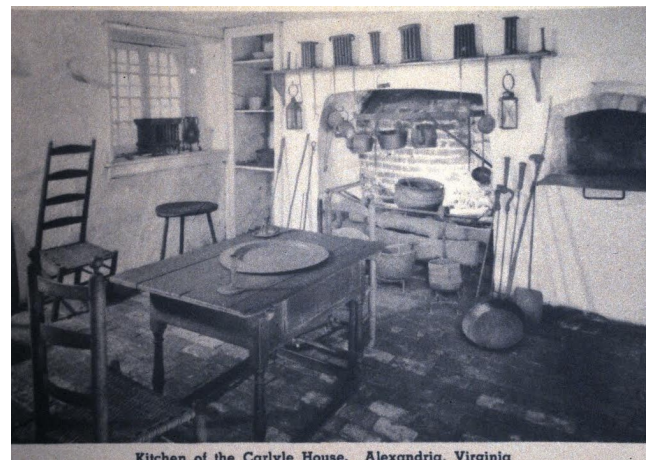
Eighteenth century Virginia gentry houses were frequently constructed over raised or below-ground cellars. These cellars were usually divided into storage areas for tools, food supplies, alcoholic beverages, etc. Some cellar spaces also supported activities such as meat storage and dairy processing, functions normally found in detached structures. Martha Washington instructed her niece Fanny Bassett Washington on May 24, 1795 to “...goe into the sellars (sic) meat house and look into the milk and butter.”

By the early eighteenth century elite southern house owners began to create spaces in or about their houses where their enslaved and indentured household servants could congregate out of view of the owner, his family, and especially visitors. These spaces, occasionally found in cellars, were referred to as servants halls. Servants were expected to perform additional chores such as polishing candlesticks and tableware, mending clothing, and washing dinnerware, while on call between their assigned duties. The servants hall usually did not serve as a space for sleeping or cooking. In elite houses, these activities were usually relegated to detached structures. [See Carlyle Connection, Spring 2018.]

While servants halls in most instances did not serve as food preparation sites, spaces specifically designated as “Cellar Kitchens” did involve cooking, their ceilings usually insulated to prevent unwelcome heat, cooking odors, and noise from intruding into living spaces above. Most importantly, they were equipped with fireplaces of sufficient size for cooking. When the cooking function was moved to a detached

kitchen, the cellar space occasionally became a servants hall. In at least one instance, that appears to have been the original intent of the owner.

In 1774, George Washington drew a sketch depicting a “cellar kitchen” to be built below a proposed two story addition to the south end of his mansion house. The 1775 cellar addition subsequently included a fireplace suitable for cooking. Preliminary evidence, according to Thomas Reinhart, Director of Architecture at Mount Vernon,



Kitchen of the Carlyle House. Alexandria, Virginia

suggests that the ceiling of this space was insulated between the joists with plaster, and a lath and plaster ceiling installed below the floor joists to ensure against heat, smells, and noise reaching Washington’s study directly above. However, a “cellar kitchen” appeared to be a redundancy since a detached kitchen already existed. However, Washington’s intent was likely two-fold: first, to provide a temporary back-up kitchen while he replaced the old detached kitchen in his front yard; and second, to subsequently use that cellar space as a servants hall and limited kitchen for his household staff. Current thinking by

Mount Vernon historians suggests Washington's white hired housekeeper, Mrs. Forbes, took her meals there.

John Carlyle's house contains a cellar space measuring 16' X 14' at the base of the servant's staircase. This space appears, at first glance, to have served as a kitchen. The large well equipped fireplace, with its adjacent bake oven, easily supports this initial assumption. However, certain structural aspects of the fireplace, as well as details of the house's history, suggest otherwise. Research now indicates this space was never intended to be a working kitchen during John Carlyle's life time, and that it is correctly interpreted today as his "servants hall."

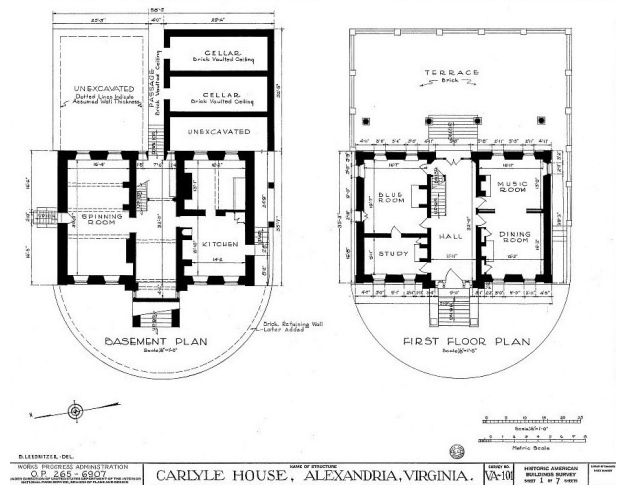
A closer examination of the current fireplace suggests that it was altered significantly after John Carlyle's death in 1780, its fire box enlarged vertically by as much as two feet and likely widened to its current five foot width. This alteration could have occurred as early as 1832 when that portion of the property containing John Carlyle's original detached kitchen was sold, creating a need for a working kitchen inside the mansion. Certainly up to that time, the existence of both a cellar kitchen and a detached kitchen would have been redundant, further supporting the presence of a "servants hall," not a kitchen, in the cellar.

It is more likely that James Green created the current "kitchen" in the cellar when he made the house his home in 1848. Between Sarah Carlyle Herbert's death in 1827 and Green's purchase of the house, ownership was fluid, with none of its owners having actual interest in living in the house. Three attempts to sell the property — in 1830, 1834, and 1838 — were unsuccessful. By 1841, a British traveler described the house as a tenement, "... occupied by a number of poor families, two or three living in each of the separate floors." Under these circumstances, enlarging the small fireplace in the servants hall would have been unnecessary, each tenant family likely cooking meals in a fireplace in that portion of the house they occupied. However, after 1848 James Green and his family would have found a kitchen—size fireplace essential.

Based on other surviving examples, the fireplace opening in Carlyle's servants hall was probably at most three feet high by perhaps two and a half feet wide, a fairly standard opening for a fireplace meant for warmth, not for cooking. Other examples of servants halls in cellars with similarly sized fireplaces include those at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and James Madison's Montpelier.

Architecturally, the current fire box opening is clearly an anomaly; it does not conform to known eighteenth century fireplace designs. The unusual shape of the upper sides of the fire box indicates a nineteenth century or later reworking of the original opening. In fact, the point at which the upper sides curve inward may indicate the original three foot height of the fire box lintel. The 1980 Restoration Report notes a "reworking" of the original fireplace using "nineteenth century hardware and details," but does not describe what the "original" fireplace opening may have looked like. However, based on other surviving examples, the original fireplace lintel likely was either slightly arched or simply flat in appearance.

The 1980 Restoration Report does not mention any changes to the current fireplace at the time of the 1970s restoration. The Historic American Buildings Survey (VA-101) report of 1936 depicts an identical cellar fireplace layout forty years earlier. However, both plans do show an anomaly between two interior load-bearing walls in the western half of the cellar, one wall containing the fireplace in the servants hall and the other the south wall of the current Museum Gift Shop. Assuming that both of these load bearing walls would have been originally constructed of equal length, the longer wall in the servants hall suggests it was intentionally extended, probably by Green, about a foot to the east to



accommodate the enlargement of the fire box and the addition of a bake oven. This wall extension was likely responsible for the narrow passage between the servants hall and the middle room, and is further proof that the original servants hall fireplace was much smaller and meant for warmth, not cooking.

While not intended to serve as a kitchen, evidence

nonetheless suggests that John Carlyle's servants hall may have been used briefly for that purpose in 1753. Clues in Carlyle's correspondence indicate that the detached kitchen in the front yard may not have been functional at the time the Carlyle family first moved into the house in August of that year. In writing to his brother, George, John Carlyle repeatedly indicated impatience over delays in completing the house and, by inference, likely its detached structures as well.

As Susan Hellman discusses in the Spring 2018 Carlyle Connection, the construction timeline for Carlyle's mansion house poses certain critical questions. As she points out, "...sizable and well-appointed colonial dwellings, like John Carlyle's, normally took between four and six years to complete," yet, the carved date - "1752" - on the keystone over the front entrance indicates an anticipated construction period of much shorter duration.

John Carlyle left for England in the spring of 1750 and returned to Alexandria in May of 1751, suggesting a 1751 construction start date. However, the construction timeline most likely began much earlier, possibly as early as the Fall of 1749 shortly after Carlyle purchased the property. This earlier date would have conformed to the town of Alexandria's requirement that new construction begin within two years of purchasing town lots. The initial construction work would have included clearing the land, excavating the cellar, acquiring building materials, and constructing the massive outer sandstone walls and inner brick load-bearing walls. This labor intensive work could have been performed in Carlyle's absence by his enslaved and indentured workers, perhaps under supervision by his business partner John Dalton. A 1749 start date would more logically explain the "1752" date, although even this nearly three-year timeline appears unrealistic for a house of its size and sophistication. In fact, on May 23, 1752, Carlyle complained to his brother George that his house was not yet finished. By November 12, Carlyle voiced further disappointment: "...I am now out of hopes of getting into my house this winter [1752-1753], the Violent Rains...this Fall has hurt the Stone Walls that We Was obliged to Take down..." strongly suggesting that either the roof had not yet been completed or that the exterior walls themselves were not sufficiently sealed to preclude water damage. These factors imply that Carlyle's mansion was likely still under construction when the family finally did move in on August 1, 1753. This raises the question of whether all essential detached structures on the property, such as the kitchen, laundry, stable, and smoke house also

were completed. John wrote to George as late as August 11, 1753: "My buildings Are Near finished..." implying that multiple structures were still under construction. Could these "near finished" structures have included the detached kitchen? If so, the Carlyle family would have had to rely temporarily on the small fireplace in the servants hall for their cooking needs.

Once the detached kitchen became functional, the cellar space would have been utilized as a servants hall, its small fireplace used sparsely in warm weather, but definitely for warmth in the winter. It would have been here that Carlyle's household servants, and perhaps a white female housekeeper, ate their daily meals. The actual cooking most likely took place in the detached kitchen. As of this date, there is no evidence that the ceiling of the servants hall was insulated to prevent unwanted heat and cooking odors rising to the rooms above, supporting the premise that the space was not used for cooking.

Most importantly, Carlyle's servants hall would have been used as an intermediate work space between the outside kitchen and the dining areas of the house. Food would have been transferred from common pewter and earthenware dishes to more appropriate ceramic serving pieces prior to presentation at the dining table. This activity, known as "dressing and staging the food," was an essential part of a wealthy family's formal dining experience. Only appropriately attired servants (in livery) would have carried food to the dining table. Unlike Washington's Mount Vernon mansion with its butler's pantry on the first floor, no evidence exists that John Carlyle's house had a similar space for the purpose of dressing and staging food, other than the servants hall.

Since Carlyle's 1780 House Inventory does not list furnishings by room, it is difficult to discern what specific kitchenware, utensils, etc., were present in the kitchen and the servants hall spaces. Other surviving eighteenth century inventories, however, confirm that ceramic wares were not found in detached kitchens; "kitchen ware" consisted of pewter, woodenware, and earthenware. Carlyle owned a variety of pewter items including "pewter table plates" that were probably used in both the kitchen and the servants hall by the enslaved, indentured, and hired servants for their daily meals. On the other hand, special ceramic serving pieces such as creamware and stoneware dishes and platters used for food transfer, would have been kept in the servants hall for that purpose. It is unlikely that Carlyle's expensive

“Queens China,” “Delft coffee cups and saucers,” “Blue and White Dinner plates,” and other fine tableware and silver, would have been routinely stored in the servants hall. They would have been carried there for washing and then returned to the secure closets on the first floor.

The absence of a specific inventory listing for Carlyle’s servants hall also precludes a clear image of how the space was furnished. In general, inventories of servants halls, when taken, reflect a relatively bare, utilitarian space; it was seldom if ever comfortably furnished. Since this space did not serve as a kitchen, the presence of cooking utensils and basic tableware would have been minimal. Perhaps only a few items for the servants’ personal use would have been found here, i.e., a tea kettle, a few pewter plates, spoons, and cups, and perhaps an old ceramic teapot, and a few well worn ceramic tea bowls. Two or three iron candle sticks would have provided a gloomy source of light, cellar work spaces being relatively dark places. The two current window openings were originally much smaller. The small fireplace would have been minimally equipped with simple andirons, perhaps a shovel and tongs, and possibly a small iron crane.

Furniture pieces in the servants hall would have been limited to a plain work table or two, and a few simple chairs, stools or benches. The presence of ceramic platters and dishes for food transfer purposes, however, would have required some form of built-in shelving or cupboard for their storage. Furniture attached to the walls, such as shelving, dressers, and built-in cupboards, was considered part of the house’s structure, not personal property and is seldom identified in inventories. Freestanding furniture, such as tables and chairs, was invariably of local manufacture and not considered valuable enough to be included in most inventories. Surprisingly, while a table is sometimes noted in work-place inventories, seating forms are usually conspicuous by their absence, further suggesting how primitive they may have been.

While the mansion houses of wealthy men like Carlyle usually exemplified the best of 18th century design, their owners were torn between projecting an image of wealth and refinement, while relying on the labor of enslaved black servants to achieve that lifestyle. As one historian has noted, with the advent of the American Revolution, “...the appearance of slavery discomfited owners and guests in the elite settings of hospitality, where refinement and republican virtue were enacted.” Food delivery reflected the most visible aspect of this sense of refinement. Achieving that

goal, however, required disguising both the process and the enslaved individuals involved.

Preparing food outside the main house and providing both a space for its transfer to finer ceramics as well as a discreet location for servants to work and gather, helped to disguise the process. “Disguising” the enslaved servants who brought the food to the table meant dressing them in fine textiles and fittings called “livery.” One writer has described this attire as “...a bit like wallpaper, ...expressing wealth and refinement of the house and the slave owner’s ability to drape his property in striking colors and textures.” Carlyle’s servants hall would have played a prominent role in this process of deception.

## News from the Educator

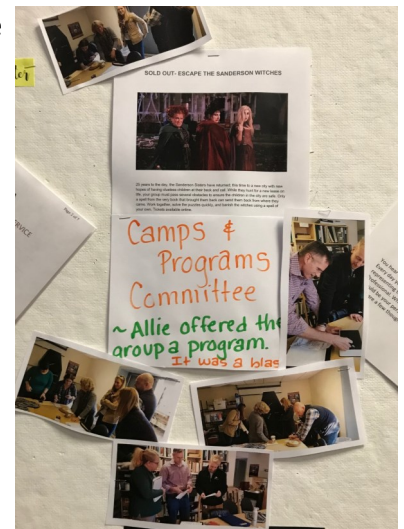
Since November we have hosted 2 group tours and 776 students on school programs.

Plans for revamping our Don’t Get Weary school tour, with possible name changes, are underway. With the new information provided to the site by Maddy McCoy, there are many things that can be added. We’re also looking into the possibility of designing a traveling trunk for area schools.

Summer program planning has begun. We’ll once again be hosting a summer reading program in partnership with the Alexandria Public Library. As noted, our Hands on History Tent program will be moved to June this year and will be focusing on the end of the Civil War, Juneteenth, and Reconstruction. We’ll also be hosting Crafts at Carlyle once more, weather permitting, in September.

~Allie Kelley

*Bulletin board at NOVA Parks headquarters praising Allie’s Sanderson Sisters program*



## News from the Site Specialist

December saw our two annual holiday events: Scottish Walk Open House and Candlelight Tours. Despite the rain we had a good number of people come out to the site for the Scottish Walk Open House. Unfortunately, Candlelight tours had fewer visitors than in the past but visitors still were able to enjoy a visit with the Herberts and music by Charm City Baroque. At the beginning of February we hosted an open house to celebrate John Carlyle's 299th birthday. We had a wonderful day of music, visitors and Martha Washington's Great Cake!

We'll be busy in the next couple of months with programs. March 2nd is our Home with the Herberts program which will focus on 1814 and celebrating the Herberts time living at the house. It is the same day as the St. Patrick's Day Parade in Old Town. April 6th we will host our annual Braddock Day program. May 4th we will have our second annual Wine and Chocolate tasting. If you'd like to sponsor that program please let me know. May also sees the return of our ever popular Yoga on the Terrace. May is Preservation Month and this year we will be teaming up with Lee-Fendall House to host Pillars to Pavers; Preservation in Alexandria. This walking tour will be replacing the annual Attics & Alleys tour that is longer taking place. We hope that you will be able to join us for one of these programs. If you can help out with any of them please let me know.

~Kerry Mitchell

*Foreground: William and Sarah Herbert.  
Background: John Carlyle and Mrs. Conway*



## Upcoming Events

### Home With the Herberts

**Saturday, March 2; 12 pm to 4 pm**

John Carlyle's son-in-law, William Herbert, became an influential merchant, banker, and politician in Alexandria, resigning as Mayor on the eve of the War of 1812. Step back in time to see what life was like in the 19th century in Alexandria, and to learn more about this part of Carlyle's family life. Free.



### Braddock Day

**Saturday, April 6; 12 pm to 4 pm**

Come meet Major General Edward Braddock, Commander-in-Chief of His Majesty's Forces in North America, and the five colonial governors he called together at Carlyle House in 1755 to discuss war funding. Free.

### Perfectly Paired Wine & Chocolate Tasting

**Saturday, May 4; 6:30 pm to 9 pm**

What goes better with wine than chocolate? Join Potomac Chocolate on the Magnolia Terrace for an evening of locally made chocolates paired with delicious wines. There will also be small snacks to enjoy. Fee.

### Mother's Day Tea

**Sunday, May 12; 2:30 pm to 4 pm**

Treat that special woman in your life to an elegant afternoon tea on our Magnolia Terrace. Fee.

See our website for more details.

Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram!



*Some of our friends visiting during the Scottish Walk.*

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*Carlyle House Historic Park is accredited by  
the American Alliance of Museums.*



## News from the Site Manager

Welcome to 2019! I hope you enjoyed your holidays and got to enjoy some quality time with family.

Those of you who attended the Burns Night celebration on January 25 know that it was a smashing success.

We had a wonderful evening in the Gadsby's Tavern Museum Ballroom. Suellen Savukas welcomed us all and introduced a trio of excellent speakers. Bill Dickinson provided a background on Robert Burns and his importance to the Scottish people, Ken Miller did a brief Burns reading, and Peter Pennington added some color commentary before leading us in a rousing rendition of "Auld Lang Syne," Burns' best-known poem. Several Friends told me that this was our best party yet, and recommended that we do it again next year.

We're doing something a little different with the Annual Appeal this year. You probably noticed that we didn't mail one last fall. We normally mail a membership renewal in March, then an Annual Appeal in October. We've gotten feedback from several of you who prefer that we only ask for money once a year, instead of twice. So this year we will bundle the Annual Appeal together with the membership drive in March. Hopefully that will be less confusing and easier for all of you.

We are also changing up Garden Day, which takes place on April 27. Mount Vernon can no longer provide us with plants to sell, so the Friends Board decided to turn this day into a craft fair. They will invite local vendors to rent spaces and sell their wares. Stay tuned to the website and social media for details.

Finally, staff has been very busy getting ready for our AAM reaccreditation site visit in mid-March. The last reaccreditation visit was in 2004, when Mary Ruth Coleman and her team passed with flying colors. We hope to do the same this year.

Thank you for your steady support—we look forward to seeing you on a tour or at one of our programs!

~Susan Hellman



*January snowfall—lovely, but I hope we're done.*