

Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

January 2010

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

The Archaeology of The Carlyle House by Steve Kimbel

The archaeology of The Carlyle House is a lot like its builder's history.

As docents we are all aware of the close call the man who built the Carlyle House had with history. When it comes to the historical record, John Carlyle nearly disappeared. As it turns out, Carlyle's imprint on the archaeological record is even thinner.

Lots of historical and scientific research has been done on Carlyle House and its owners since its restoration for the U.S. Bicentennial. The results can be found in documents including the 1980 Restoration Report, the 1984 Historic Furnishings Plan, and the 1985 Interpretive Master Plan. This work has continued with studies such as the 2002 Paint Analysis Report. But there are also archaeological reports.

During the restoration of Carlyle House between 1972 and 1976 an archaeological survey was conducted under salvage conditions. Salvage archaeology is sometimes accompanied by



Much of the archeology done in Alexandria during the 1970s was salvage archeology, as this photo shows. Archeologists scrambled to save artifacts, as the city began a massive movement to clean up its image by wrecking old buildings.

bulldozers roaring in the background as archaeologists scramble in front of the blade trying to recover as much of the past as possible. Even under much less



dramatic circumstances, salvage digs usually occur under less than ideal conditions.

Faced with the pressure to complete their work as quickly as possible, salvage archaeologists focus on rapid recovery of high value artifacts: pieces of the past that will yield the most useful information. On historic sites some spots are just inherently hot spots for artifacts. Topping the list of artifact rich locations are wells and privies.

Wells and privies are convenient places for disposing of anything that is broken or no longer useful. They are a magnet for pottery and ceramic shards, worn out shoes and boots, broken buttons and all sorts of discarded items. They are also holes in the ground that must be filled in when they are abandoned, when a well runs dry or a privy becomes too smelly to put up with any longer.

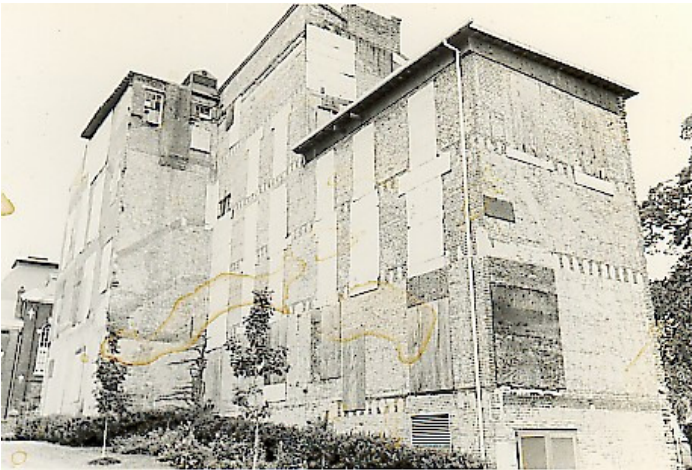
Of course, after cities like Alexandria established public water works and began piping potable water into private homes and businesses, wells and

CARLYLE HOUSE
Jim Bartlinski, Director
Sarah Coster, Curator
Heather Dunn, Curator of Education



privies quickly became obsolete and citizens rushed to fill them in. Alexandria's first public water works were constructed on Shuter's Hill in 1851 and enlarged in 1873. The two reservoirs that supplied water to the gravity fed system were located where today we see the Masonic memorial to George Washington.

The archaeological investigation of Carlyle House involved the excavation of five shafts lined with brick. Four of them were probably water wells or dry wells used for storage, but the largest shaft and the one containing the most valuable information was most likely used as a privy. It was located in an annex connecting the house and the Bank of Alexandria building.



The archaeologists designated the privy 44AX3C. The number 44 tells us the archaeological site is in the state of Virginia, the 44th in an alphabetical list of the 50 states. The initials "AX" tell us the site is located in the City of Alexandria, and the number three (3) that The Carlyle House is the third archaeological site in the city to be officially registered with the office of the Virginia State Archaeologist in Richmond, (AX 1 is now the site of the Alexandria Courthouse and AX 2 is Gadsby's Tavern). Finally, the letter "C" lets us know this is the third archaeological feature discovered on the site.

The first well was discovered in January 1974 and later designated 44AX3B. It is located in the floor of

the vaults under the terrace added to the rear of the house by James Green, the Alexandria furniture factory owner who turned the Carlyle House into the centerpiece of his Mansion House Hotel opened in 1849. Artifacts found in this well were dated to between 1825 and 1875. The opening to the well is clearly visible in the floor of the vault. A circle of bricks outlines the circumference of the shaft and the wall of the vault intrudes into the circle clearly showing that the well predates construction of the terrace and its vaults.

During the rest of the winter of 1974 and early spring of 1975 two more wells were discovered and excavated. Shaft 44AX3A appears to date to the late 18th century based on a few ceramic sherds. It was filled with oyster shells and splintered animal bones, broken bricks and stone rubble. Shaft 44AX3D contained artifacts from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mostly broken pieces of everyday tableware and medicine bottles.

The privy (44AX3C) was discovered by accident in January 1975 when machinery excavating a utility trench hit the concrete slab used to seal the privy. At more than 22 feet deep and eight feet in diameter the brick lined shaft would prove difficult and dangerous to excavate.

The artifacts found in 44AX3C show things were dropped in the privy starting in the late 18th century and continued through the middle of the 19th. A shard of china bearing the name of "Newton's Hotel" indicates the privy shaft was filled in after Green's Hotel opened in 1849. The presence of construction debris moves the most likely date for the final filling of the privy up to between 1855 and 1859 when a new wing was added to the Hotel by incorporating the former Bank of Alexandria building.

In March of 1974 a fourth shaft was located in the garden. Metal rods were used to probe the ground for the feature's outline. The probing revealed a circular brick construction under the ground measuring more than ten feet in diameter. Test excavations inside the brick circle produced glass fragments, ceramics shards and a lot of ashes. The



feature was left unexcavated because it is in a public park and protected from any disturbance.

It is considered good practice to leave part of a site unexcavated. With a better understanding of the site's history future archaeologist could use more advanced excavation techniques and analytical technology to discover more valuable information about life and how it was lived by those who occupied the house John Carlyle built on Fairfax Street.

Carlyle House docents spend a lot of time near one of the four excavated wells. Shaft 44AX3A is located just inside the north entrance to the Carlyle House cellar. You can see the outline of the shaft in the brick floor of the door way leading into the office where docents wait for their tours to start. The shaft was a brick lined water well or a dry storage well. It was probably dry when it was filled in with oyster shell. This fill also contained some pieces of well preserved animal bone, brickbats, coal, dirty clay and a few shards of broken 18th century glassware and ceramics. The shaft was probably filled in during the mid-to-late 18th century.

The oyster shell may have come from a Native American shell midden (a waste dump site made up mostly of shells). Prehistoric Indian pottery sherds were found in the bottom of the shaft. Natives foraging all along the shores of the tidal rivers and Chesapeake Bay created large deposits of oyster and clamshells. Colonists used them as a source of lime for making mortar and plaster and as fertilizer for their gardens and fields.

Because ceramic sherds increased as the excavation penetrated the lower strata the archaeologists theorize a Native American shell midden on the property may have been used as a trash pit by the occupants of the Carlyle House and then as fill for the well shaft, thus turning everything topsy-turvy in shaft 44AX3A. The excellent preservation of the large animal bones found in the shaft is explained in part by the oyster shell, which would neutralize the bone dissolving high acid soils of Alexandria.

Archeologist Geoffrey Gyrisco excavated Shaft



44AX3A in 1977. He attempted a quantitative analysis and tried to set a date range for the ceramic sherds in the shaft of between 1755 and 1770. The dates are dead on John Carlyle's occupation of the property but the documentary evidence fails to line up with the material evidence.

The artifacts from 44AX3A bear no relation to the items in the probate inventory of Carlyle's property done in 1780. No ceramics matching the shards excavated from the well are to be found in the 1780 inventory. As the author of the Carlyle House archaeology report notes: "(The probate inventory) makes no mention of white salt-glazed stoneware which is the most abundant ware in the deposit. One would expect a few pieces of this quite durable ware to have lasted." Wares of the quality and in the quantity owned by the wealthy merchant should have left many sherds and even whole vessels behind in the ground. However, as the archaeological report emphatically states, these ceramics are "conspicuously absent in the deposit, (although they) figure prominently in Carlyle's inventory."

This is the closest the archaeology report comes to connecting anything found during the digs to John Carlyle. As the author of the report concludes, the absence of significant quantities of first quality ceramics in the excavations "casts doubt on any attempt to attribute the artifacts to the Carlyle household."



Never the less, artifacts from the archaeology done at the Carlyle House are used to illustrate its history in exhibits housed in the basement. Since no artifacts could be reliably associated with John Carlyle's years (1753 to 1780) the Herbert period (1782 to 1827) provides the first attributable remains from the past. These include bone toothbrushes found in the privy. Pig bristles were used in constructing the brushes and the bristles were affixed with silver wire. In an 1805 letter to her daughter Margaret, Sarah Carlyle Herbert urges her to brush her teeth every day. *"I hope you take care of your teeth— for my sake, endure the Bark daily as tooth Powder, for indeed your teeth is getting very bad. Mine threaten'd at your age in the same way, & by cleaning them constantly since with bark, they are very little worse since that time."* She is concerned that Margaret left her toothbrush the last time she visited. Perhaps this is one of the many brushes discovered in the privy.

Other artifacts from the Herbert years on exhibit in the basement include the delicate shards of a green shell edged pearl ware fruit basket and matching plate (c. 1780-1820) and examples of Chinese export porcelain in a teacup and saucer circa 1790. The hand blown glassware on display includes a wine glass and decanter dated from 1790 to 1825, a blown glass medicine vile from the late 18th or early 19th century, and molded glass medicine bottle from the first half of the 19th century.



Glassmakers used molds to make bottles. The glassblower inflated a bubble of glass inside a bottle shaped metal mold to form the shape of the

glass bottle.

The glassware found at the Carlyle House provides an example of how archaeologists use artifacts to date sites. The Herbert period at Carlyle House

comes to an end in 1827 when Sarah dies and her son and heir, John Carlyle Herbert, sells the property. The year 1827 also just happens to be the year in which the first patent for the machinery used in making pressed glass is granted. It is possible, then, that the glass table ware found in the well designated as shaft 44AX3C belonged to the Herbert's because it is all blown glass, there are no examples of pressed glass in the deposit.

Obviously it takes several years for pressed glass artifacts to begin appearing in trash pits, and thereby entering the archaeological record, but their discovery provides a terminal date for archaeologists. For instance, if you are excavating a trash pit and finding nothing but pressed glassware then you know everything in the pit was deposited after 1827. Similarly, when archaeologists at the Carlyle House find the pearl ware fruit basket they know they are excavating artifacts that can be dated no earlier than 1780, because the historical record shows pearl ware was not manufactured before 1780 nor after 1820.

Thus far archaeological discoveries at the Carlyle House are a disappointment for docents. We would all like to point to an archaeological artifact in one of the exhibit cases and tell visitors to the Carlyle house that: "This toothbrush brushed the teeth of John Carlyle." However, there remains some hope for future excavations.



Perhaps the unexcavated shaft in the garden might one day yield an artifact held by the hand of the man who built Carlyle House.

Alexandria Archeologists at a dig near the Masonic Memorial