



Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

Keeping Warm in Colonial Alexandria

By Sarah Coster

This December has already been the coldest one in the region in 10 years. Even with our modern conveniences to help us cope, the cold is a challenge. But how did John Carlyle keep warm during the many winters he and his family spent in Alexandria between 1753 and 1780?



there are twenty Eight steady fires! & most of these are very Large!”

Smaller than Carter’s plantation complex, Nomini Hall, Carlyle House had fewer rooms to heat. In the winter, the number of rooms in use would be reduced to conserve heat. When they weren’t entertaining, the Carlyles may have limited their activity to

Astute visitors will notice that there is a fireplace in nearly every single room of the house. Family would pull their chairs and tables up close and use fire screens to protect the exposed skin on their faces. The fires consumed a huge amount of firewood. Philip Vickers Fithian

the south, or private side, of the house, perhaps dining in John Carlyle's study, a small room that would have been much easier to keep warm than the large dining room.

John Carlyle’s inventory indicates that he not only burned firewood to heat his home, but also coal. A copper coal scuttle and two large brass grates are listed on his 1780 probate inventory.

While not listed on John Carlyle’s probate inventory, homes in the period often contained bed warmers. A bed warmer is a metal container attached to a wood pole. A servant or slave would



Coal grate and copper coal scuttle.



commented that his employer “Mr. Carter has a Cart & three pair of Oxen which every Day bring in four Loads of Wood, Sundays excepted. And indeed I do not wonder, for in the Great House, School, House, Kitchen, &c.

CARLYLE HOUSE
Jim Bartlinski, Site Administrator
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Curtains, and perhaps a cozy bed partner, made winter nights more bearable.

fill the container with hot coals out of the fireplace and rub it over the bed sheets, ensuring they were nice and warm for the lucky person about to climb in. Two bed warmers are on view in the museum, in the

Girl's Chamber and the Master Chamber.

Sharing a bed with someone certainly helped keep one warm at night. The absence of a bedmate would be noticeable, as it was for midwife Martha Ballard in New England while her husband was in jail. She notes in her diary entry for January 6, 1805, "Clear and cold. I was obliged to Sleep in my Cloaths or freeze, unhappy Mother I am."

What about when they left the house? Cloaks were worn by both men and women. Women would layer several petticoats, including quilted ones. While riding in a carriage or sitting in a church pew, you might find ladies using "foot warmers" to warm their toes. These little wood and tin boxes often had decorative patterns punched into the tin. They were filled with coals and placed under feet.



A 19th-century foot warmer from the Carlyle House Education Collection.

Certainly winter in the 18th-century was not as comfortable as it is today, in a time of electric blankets and Snuggies, but Alexandria's early residents did invent ways to cope!

Thank You!

Thank you to everyone who volunteered at our many events this holiday season, including A Soldier's Christmas and Candlelight Tours. We welcomed over 800 visitors at these events. We could not do it without you. We also want to thank you for giving your time so generously during this busy time of year.

