

Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

Death Comes to Carlyle House: An 18th-Century Virginia Home in Mourning
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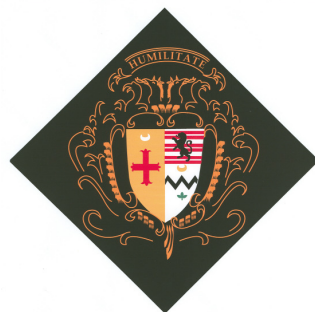
“... death has been very comon in my home ...”

Colonel John Carlyle - December 12, 1769

Every fall, Carlyle House is transformed, both inside and out, to reflect how it may have looked in 1780, when John Carlyle died. *Death Comes to Carlyle House* allows visitors to explore the mourning practices of 18th-century Virginia through the experience of Colonel John Carlyle's household.

Exterior of House: The first signs of mourning were visible simply by observing the front of a house. A funeral hatchment signifying the deceased hung above the front doorway with black crape flowing down its sides. The black crape, typically made of a stiff, matte silk, may have been ordered upon the news of a death. These adornments announced the death to all that passed by in a respectful, yet public manner.

Upon entering a house in mourning, more hangings would be apparent throughout the public spaces of the house. White fabric covered the mirrors while black fabric, providing a contrast, was draped on the walls.



The possible design of the funeral hatchment for John Carlyle.



Basement: During mourning and funeral, this area might have been used by enslaved workers to prepare for the incoming guests. It is possible many of the slaves owned by John Carlyle were concerned about their future as Carlyle's property changed hands.

Also in the basement, one will find a good luck charm that seems not to have worked. The mummified or “dried” cat had been incorporated into the base of the southeast chimney sometime between 1751 and 1753. The presence of dried plant material suggests that cat was placed here purposefully.



Dried cat, c. 1753

Folklorists believe that interring a cat in a home's foundation is an ancient defense against evil spirits and witchcraft. The practice dates back to the “Dark Ages” and occurred throughout Europe, North America and Australia.

Apparently, Carlyle or someone associated with the home's construction sought to stave off

CARLYLE HOUSE
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misfortune from visiting his estate. Perhaps the cat was placed here to keep death at bay? Sadly, the animal proved ineffective at protecting the Carlyles from harm, for death was no stranger here.

Bed Chamber: Medical care in the 18th-century was very primitive compared to today. Then, a doctor may have used a mirror to check for Carlyle’s breath and a watch for his pulse. Soon after Carlyle’s death, his body was likely measured for his coffin, then washed and dressed in a white linen or a flannel winding-sheet (strips of cloth wound around



the corpse and pinned in place) or possibly a coffin sheet. Someone called a streaker, usually a woman, may have prepared John Carlyle’s body for burial. However, it could also have been one of his servants, the

attending physician, or possibly even his daughter, Sarah Carlyle Herbert. The women in a family were typically entrusted with this melancholy task.

Central Passage: Here mourners were greeted and presented their invitation to the funeral. A table may have been laid out with “spirited” refreshments. Alexandrians were recorded as having raucous funerals. Olney Winsor wrote in 1780 that in Alexandria, “many of the guests are frequently almost as insensible before they quite the house as their deposited friend...”

Dining Room: A person of means like Colonel John Carlyle, may have been laid to rest in an inner coffin of elm, lined with fabric and encased in lead, with a memorial depositum, or nameplate, in tin, brass, or silver attached to the lid before it was encased in an outer shell of elm or oak. With that done, the whole coffin was upholstered in scarlet or black velvet that was then secured in place with rows of round-headed brass tacks.

When the coffin was completed, the deceased was

placed inside. Afterward, the body would lie in state for a period of three to four days so relatives, friends and acquaintances traveling from afar could pay their last respects. There was also a widespread fear of premature burial that prompted many people, including George Washington, to request that their bodies not be interred for a few days after death to ensure they were, in fact, dead.

During the night it was customary for someone to hold a nocturnal vigil over the corpse, as did Virginia indentured servant, John Harrower and “Company” on the evenings of March 11 and 12, 1775. Rosemary has been used historically during funerals, both as a scent to mask the smell of the corpse and to ward off evil spirits.

The coffin (casket is a Victorian term) faced the east, due to the Christian belief that Jesus will rise from the east. When the pallbearers removed the coffin from the house, they made sure the feet went out first.



18th-Century English Funeral

It was feared that if the soul saw its house while leaving it would want to stay and haunt it.

Carlyle Quotable



I am as contented as I can be, but am afraid I have repined too much; I have fallen away in my flesh and am really an old man.

1 August 1766