



# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

October 2014

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

### *The Architectural Context of Carlyle House continued*

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Villa Rotonda, Vicenza, Italy, begun 1550.

Theories abound as to where John Carlyle got design inspiration for his Alexandria mansion. Some claim a Palladian influence, but what does that mean? Andrea Palladio (1508-1580), born in Padua and raised in the Veneto, fueled the idea that there is a correct way to design a building, and that correct way is rooted in the architecture of ancient Rome. He is best known for his 1570 treatise, *The Four Books of*

*Architecture*, one of the most influential architecture books of all time<sup>1</sup>. Palladio extensively studied, measured, and drew the buildings of ancient Rome. His interpretation carried classicism through the nineteenth century, and his designs symbolize the Renaissance mission and its rediscovery of ancient Rome more than any other architect's. Although other Renaissance architects also published treatises, Palladio's was the most useful and informative. His written work was far more influential than his built works.

Palladio mostly designed small scale private dwellings and villas, along with some churches and civic structures. Hallmarks of Palladian design include bilateral symmetry, and a profusion of dentils<sup>2</sup> and acroteria<sup>3</sup>. Building symmetry was the result of Palladio's fixation with harmonic proportions and math. He carefully computed the proportions of length, width, and height of each room according to an exact formula of ratios. Every room related mathematically to every other room, as well as to the building as a whole, creating a wonderful sense of balance. In revolutionary fashion, Palladio adapted the classical temple form for his villas' facades. Although this seems ordinary to us today, Palladio was the first to apply this prominent design element of classical temples to domestic buildings. He also publicized its domestic use through his writings. A portico makes an ordinary house look impressive, and marks the house as the residence of someone important. Palladio's best-known design motif is the Palladian window<sup>4</sup>, a Roman design motif initially popularized by Venetian architect Sebastiano Serlio (1475-1554) and known as a "serliana" until Palladio came along. Palladio used the motif sparingly, and it is still called a serliana or a Venetian window in Italy today. He also

excelled at engineering, constructing his villas with a series of complex hidden ducts that allowed the buildings to be cooled by breezes, a system that continues to function almost as well as air conditioning. Palladio's best-known and most-copied commission is the Villa Capra, or Villa Rotonda in Vicenza, Italy. Note the perfect symmetry, temple fronts on all four sides, acroteria, and dentails. Dozens of buildings worldwide pay homage to the Villa Rotonda, including Chiswick House in London and Mereworth Castle in Kent, both of which were completed in the 1720s. Palladio was one of the great formative influences on English architecture. In the early eighteenth century, four major books with Palladian ideas became popular: Giacomo Leoni's *Four Books of Architecture* (1716), a reinterpretation and translation of Palladio's book; James Gibbs' *A Book of Architecture* (1728); William Salmon's *Palladio Londinensis* (1734); and Robert Morris' *Select Architecture* (1757), originally published in 1750 as *Rural Architecture*. Beginning in



Drayton Hall, begun 1738, Charleston, SC.

the late seventeenth century, and continuing into the eighteenth century, Virginians assimilated classical design elements into their architecture. Many Virginia gentry used architectural pattern books, choosing plans and elements in the design of their own houses. John Drayton did so when he constructed Drayton Hall in South Carolina, built between 1738 and 1742 and considered the earliest and finest Georgian-Palladian dwelling in the United States. Note the temple front, the dentils, and the bilateral

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symmetry. The house only lacks Palladio's acroteria. George Washington used a variety of architectural pattern books when he enlarged Mount Vernon. John Tayloe II relied heavily on Gibbs' book when building Mount Airy in Richmond County, Virginia, completed in 1764. In the late twentieth century, historians began to refer to any structure based on a pattern book as "Palladian," no matter what books were used. This is probably when and why the term "Palladian-Georgian" in reference to Carlyle House originated. Even with no evidence of book-based design, buildings were labeled "Palladian" if they included elements vaguely resembling something out of an architectural treatise. The 1970s Carlyle House restoration architects appear to have believed that John Carlyle used a pattern book when building Carlyle House<sup>5</sup>. But we have no firm evidence to that effect. His estate inventory lists several books, including a five-volume history of England, a heraldry book, a naval history, and a dictionary. If Carlyle did own an architectural treatise, it was not explicitly listed. The 1980 restoration report identifies similarities between Carlyle house and Craigiehall, a mansion located on the outskirts of Edinburgh. The report



Craigiehall, begun 1695, renovated 1755, Edinburgh.

credits a drawing of Craigiehall that appears in William Adam's *Vitruvius Scoticus*. However, the book was not published until 1812 and the changes to Craigiehall that make it similar to Carlyle House were made after 1755, far too late to have been a design inspiration for Carlyle.

A lesser-known, but just as common, method of incorporating classical details into building design involved direct observation. Many colonial elite, including John Carlyle, traveled to England for business or personal reasons. While there, they absorbed what they saw.

"Although most never set out to deliberately study aristocratic houses, castle, gardens, and churches for design details, their travels shaped or reinforced more general ideas about architectural aesthetics."<sup>6</sup> In addition to seeing the great English country houses in person, classical design was also disseminated to the colonies through prints and other graphic sources. John Carlyle's numerous prints of his native land, along with his 1750 return to England and Scotland, are far more likely sources for design inspiration than a pattern book.

John Carlyle returned to England in 1750 with William Fairfax. We know that they visited Carlisle, Papcastle, Kendal, York, London, Hull, and Whitehaven. Several mansions in northern England and Scotland bear a striking

resemblance to Carlyle House. Glendoick, for example, was built around 1747 in the Perth area, approximately 140 miles from Carlisle. Like Carlyle House, Glendoick is two stories tall above a raised cellar, with a five-bay



Glendoick, circa 1747, Perth.

primary elevation, two interior chimneys, corner quoins, and a projecting central pavilion. Many of these design elements became ubiquitous in mid-eighteenth century Anglo-American architectural design. Although these elements are based in classicism, they are not considered strictly Palladian. Note the pediment topping Glendoick's pavilion. This is the most common treatment of a pavilion, and a nod to Palladio's use of the temple front in domestic design. For whatever reason, John Carlyle chose not to include a pediment, moving his design that much further away from the Palladian ideal. Of course, Carlyle House does exhibit other classical details typical of the Georgian period. The dining room retains its original embellishment, which indicates that it was the most important room in the house. The pineapple motifs, the pilasters and overmantel above the fireplace, and the modillioned cornice are some of the most obvious classical motifs, all of which were common in Georgian dwellings, not only Palladian-inspired dwellings. The broken pediments above the doors share some similarities to a plate in William Salmon's *Palladio Londinensis*, but this too was a very common element in eighteenth century genteel dwellings. The one element of the house that would label it Palladian is the Palladian window on the rear elevation. However, that window is not original to the house and there is no evidence that there was ever a window in that location. This was a "conjectural architectural treatment" applied by the restoration architects after they removed the nineteenth-century gallery at the rear of the house.

Carlyle House fits solidly into the pantheon of genteel eighteenth century Anglo-American design. Although it lacks signature Palladian design features, it includes a wealth of typical classical detailing. John Carlyle built to impress, using the most modern and fashionable architectural elements he knew. Wherever Carlyle found inspiration, his was one of the most fashionable dwellings in Virginia.



Endnotes:

1. For an English copy, see Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books of Architecture*, with an introduction by Adolf K. Placzek, (New York: Dover Publications, 1965).

2. Dentil: one of a band of small, square, tooth-like blocks forming part of the characteristic ornamentation of the Ionic, Corinthian, and Composite orders, and sometimes the Doric. See Cyril M. Harris, editor, *Illustrated Dictionary of Historic Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977).

3. Acroteria: the ornament at the corners or peak of a roof. See Harris, op. cit.

4. Palladian window: a window of large size, characteristic of neoclassic styles, divided by columns or piers resembling pilasters, into three lights (i.e. windows), the middle one of which is usually wider than the others and is sometimes arched. The lintel is flat over each side light. See Harris, op. cit. In plain English, a central round-arched window flanked by lower flat-topped windows.

5. Fauber Garbee, Inc., Architects, “The John Carlyle House, Alexandria, Virginia: Restoration Report for the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority” (unpublished manuscript, July 1980). This is now available online on the City of Alexandria website.

6. Cary Carson & Carl L. Lounsbury, eds., *The Chesapeake House: Architectural Investigation by Colonial Williamsburg* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), pg 80.

7. A quoin is the external angle of a wall, especially the stones or bricks that form the corner of the wall. Decorative quoining sometimes employed raised or rusticated quoins, whereby bricks or stones projected beyond the surface of a wall and generally had beveled edges. See Carl R. Lounsbury, editor, *An Illustrated Glossary of Early Southern Architecture and Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 81.

8. Pavilion: a projecting subdivision of a larger building, often forming a terminating wing and distinguished by variations in height and roof form. Lounsbury, op. cit., 264.