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**CARLYLE  
HOUSE**

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# Docent Dispatch

December 2015

## *Interpreting the Objects of Carlyle House: The Curator's Perspective*

By Helen Wirka



*Dish depicting the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Image courtesy, Winterthur Museum, Dish, 1920-1947, bequest of Henry Francis du Pont, 1966.652*

One of my first courses in college about museums was entitled “Dimensions of Material Culture” and was taught by a leading expert in the Decorative Arts field, Ann Smart Martin. Professor Martin was team-teaching the course with my favorite undergraduate professor, Jean Lee, who has consulted with Mount Vernon on slavery, culture in the 18th century, taught courses about the American Revolution and written a book on Charles County and Saint Mary's County, Maryland. The focus of the course was on telling the story of objects. Who made them? Why did they make them? Who used them? What were they used for—the intended

purpose of the maker or another purpose come up with by the consumer? I had been started on this path to appreciating the story behind objects in Professor Lee's course on American Revolution. She shared a slide in class one day that depicted the signing of the Declaration of Independence on Chinese export porcelain. The uniqueness of this porcelain, however, was that all of the signers had Asian features, including the fiery redhaired Thomas Jefferson. Today, we seek and tell the stories at Carlyle House of those objects in our collection that make them more than just a piece of furniture or more than just a plate. For example, there is the Peter Scott desk and cabinet in the study: we now know who made it (even though Carlyle didn't necessarily own a Scott piece), but it tells us a lot about the contemporaries from whom John Carlyle would have been purchasing items locally in the Chesapeake and tidewater regions. There is also the clothes press in the upper passage which has the imprint of a laundry inventory trapped in the wood by the authentic 18th or 19th century ink. This list gives us clues to household practices in the dwelling of a family living in the James River Valley.

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So how does all of this translate to the two objects in the collection that we began discussing in the September Dispatch?

*Floorcloth:* How do we interpret the floorcloth in the study? Often when I walk into that room on tour with visitors, their attention is immediately drawn to the floor covering. Sometimes I start by discussing the floorcloth, but usually I direct their attention up above to the portrait of John Carlyle and the images and maps on the wall, saying that we will come back to the floor



*Floorcloths come in all shapes and sizes. This one is similar to the one at Carlyle House and was also made by Canvasworks Design. 10 foot Tumbling Block octagon will be ready to ship to its new home in Massachusetts just in time for the holiday. This design was first published by John Carwitham in 1739.*

covering. If I haven't covered it yet (because there is so much to talk about in this space!) before we leave the room I ask if there are any questions, and, visitors usually ask about the floorcloth. I explain that it was very convenient for John Carlyle to have, not only because it kept the floors clean. And, although I might not bring it up right away, I do in fact love talking about the floorcloth, for these reasons: people can relate to it; it's hands-on;

and it opens their eyes to a better understanding of life in the 18th century.

I start off by talking about how floorcloths were the precursor to linoleum, and when I have them bend down and touch it they go "ahhh!". Then I pass around the sample pieces of canvas (as well as the image of the 1800 painting which inspired the colors selected by staff in 2009). Floorcloths were used not only to keep the floors cleaner and to show off wealth and to add decoration to their dwelling, but also, to insulate the structure against drafts between the floorboards. This is also one of the purposes of wallpaper: wallpaper is decoration, shows off the wealth of the family and hides any abnormalities in the structure of the walls, but again, it insulates the room. It's so practical of a reason to have a canvas covering on the floor, however it's often overlooked.

*Spinnet:* The spinet in the parlor is an integral part of the story of the Carlyle family's transatlantic correspondence as well as the Carlyles' relationship with the Washingtons. It was an excellent addition to our collection a few years ago in 2008. Although it is a 1970s reproduction of a 1765 Bentside spinet and it IS playable, it's a delicate piece, and we ask that you refrain from playing keys on it. (Note: Prior to acquiring the current instrument that we own, Carlyle House had borrowed a spinet from the DAR Museum (Daughters of the American Revolution).) I address the spinet when

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bringing visitors into the parlor, and I explain right away that it is an instrument which is in the harpsicord family and is an ancestor to the piano. How do we know that Carlyle had a spinet? It wasn't in the inventory. But, letters from John and his eldest daughter, Sarah Fairfax Carlyle (Herbert), to her uncle George Carlyle in England reveal that she took lessons on the spinet and would be practicing on her own soon.: "My famely are All well, Sally [nine years old] is Learning the Spinet She Meets the Master at Col Washintons abt 8 miles of where he Attends the Cols Two Childrun & he is So kind as to Let Sally Stay Two days the master will not attend for One Scholar, you See we are Obliged to take a good deal of Trouble to get our Children Educated She & Mrs Carlyle are gone their or woud write by this Oppertunity, My little Ann [four years old] & my Son George Wm [four months old] Are both fine Childrun & at preasant healthy...". (October 16, 1766)

Sarah (Sally), also wrote to her uncle George Carlyle about her talents on the spinet and requested that he send her music:

*"In a letter to my Papa I see you have desired me to write to you for any musick that I want. I am greatly obliged for the Liberty of doing so, as it offers me an Oppportunity of writing to you which gives me great plesure as it does also to write to my Dr. Couzins and shoud by this Oppportunity but am told the ship will sail this Evening and am afraid I cannot answer my Dr Couzins Letter as I shoud doe in time, I still*

*have a Master to attend me and have entered into Thro' Bass but find it very deficult. My papa only intends to keep me with the Master this season & I am in want Of some agreeable Tunes that I can Learn myself I see in a list of Musick by one Brimner in London a book of reals and Country Dances, A Bass for the harpicord vol the 1 st price five shillings which I woud be glad to have, its called the Caledonian Pocket Companion...". (August 25, 1769)*

I use the spinet as a way to link the familial relationships between John and his blood brother George Carlyle and his Virginia "brother" George Washington. I use the fingers on my right hand to explain how John and GW were related, starting with my pinkie which represents John, and remind the visitor that he married Sarah Fairfax (represented by my ring finger) and her sister was Ann Fairfax (represented by my middle finger), who married Lawrence Washington (represented by my index finger), who built Mount Vernon and was half brothers with George Washington (represented by my thumb). It shows how closely linked everyone was in the two families.

Each object has more than one story to tell, and we are very lucky to have our large collection which follows John Carlyle's inventory so closely. If you have any questions about how to interpret these objects, always feel free to ask me or Vanessa. Happy December!

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**Calendar of Events**

**December 5, Saturday**

*Soldier's Christmas*  
Free Open House  
1pm-4pm

**December 12 and 13**

*Candlelight Tours*  
Saturday 6pm-9pm and Sunday 3pm-  
6pm  
Adults \$25  
Seniors/Active Military \$20  
Children (6-17)- \$5  
Docents Needed

**January 10, Sunday**

Friends of Carlyle House Holiday  
Party  
Details TBD

**February 6, Saturday**

John Carlyle Birthday  
Details TBD  
Docents Needed

**February 20, Saturday**

Behind the Scenes Tour: Slavery at  
Carlyle House with Vanessa  
Details TBD

**Happy Hours**

Every 3rd Thursday of the month we will meet at a different location for a chance to catch up and share good company! Vanessa will be present to validate parking for happy hours that take place in Old Town. Check your email the day of the happy hour for more details. If you have a great idea for happy hour please feel free to share!

\*This list has been updated since the September Dispatch\*

**December 17**

Chadwicks  
4pm-7pm

**January 21**

O'Connell's  
4pm-7pm

**February 18**

Mount Vernon Inn  
4pm-7pm

