Carlyle House
DOCENT DISPATCH
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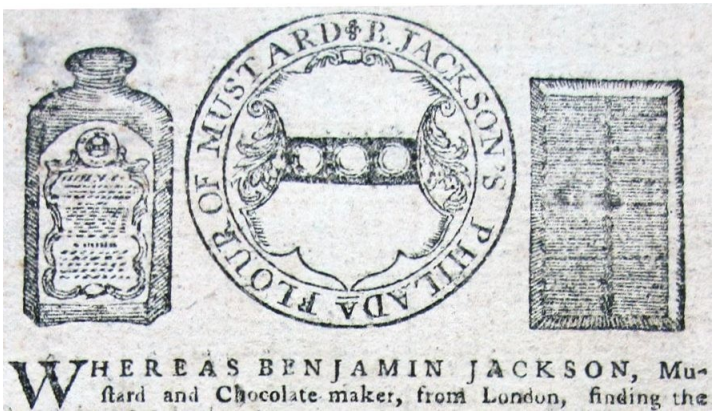
Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

"4 Ounces of Chocolate:" Conceptions of Chocolate in Colonial America

By Lacey Villiva

During John Carlyle's life time, chocolate was a relatively new innovation to Europe and the British colonies. Although it was brought to Spain early in the seventeenth century, chocolate did not reach the English-speaking world until the second half of the century. One of the first mentions of chocolate in Great Britain appears in a 1657 advertisement placed by a Frenchman running a coffeehouse in London. The gentleman solicited customers to enjoy "an excellent West India drink called chocolate to be sold, where you may have it ready at any time, and also unmade at reasonable rates." By the end of the century and into the eighteenth, chocolate had become a staple in households across the socio-economic spectrum. Consumers found the cocoa nib or bean—chocolate in its unprocessed form—and the finished product had many applications, whether used as a medicine, a foodstuff, a learning tool and a bargaining chip during wartime.

In the early years of its use, chocolate was introduced in large part as a medicine. Doctors of all sorts encouraged their patients to use chocolate as the drug of choice to cure any number of ailments. Ivan Day, an eminent food historian, cites the most popular reason for prescription was something that unashamedly marks the marketing of chocolate today: sex. His research shows that the "Indian Nectar" was sold as a powerful aphrodisiac. During the seventeenth century, it was hailed by doctors as being "comforting and cherishing the inward parts, and reviving natural strength." Even much later, when chocolate was well-ingrained as a regular part of the American diet, the drink was described as "a good medicine; at least a diet, for keeping up the warmth of the stomach, and assisting digestion." A section of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, written by Benjamin Franklin, recommends chocolate as an aid to nutrition for those suffering from smallpox. One wonders whether John Carlyle knew of this application in regards to the disease, for smallpox because he was a supervisor of smallpox inoculations for the City of Alexandria during a 1773 epidemic.



The image plate from chocolate maker Benjamin Jackson's advertisement in the Pennsylvania Gazette *in 1764. The graphic on the right is a block of chocolate as it would be sold in shops.*

On the flip side, chocolate was also used for nefarious purposes. In August, 1735, an article in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* publicized a case in which chocolate was the agent used to carry to poison to victims. Fortunately the attempt was not successful, as the article states: "some Arsenick [sic] or Ratsbane having been put into a Skillet of Chocolate when they eat for Breakfast; Finding themselves soon after all disordered thereby, immediately applied to a Physician, and upon using proper Means, we hear, they are in a likely Way to do well." By mid-century, chocolate had

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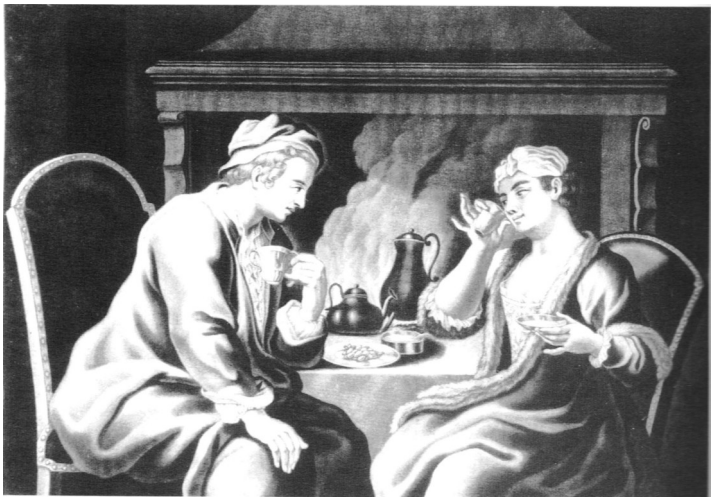
clearly found its way into the home as a staple beverage.

Chocolate was much renowned as a breakfast beverage once it made its way into the diet of British citizens and American colonists, though it could be consumed throughout the day. In 1733, Ann Granville, an English noble, writes of a meal including chocolate: "We meet at breakfast about ten: chocolate, tea, coffee, toast, and butter…, etc are devoured without mercy." By this point, chocolate was very much a part of the American diet as well. It was frequently lauded as a woman's drink; however, William Byrd, a prominent Virginian, recorded in his journal that "I rose at 6 o'clock this morning and read a chapter in Hebrew and 200 verses in Homer's Odyssey. I said my [prayers] and ate chocolate for breakfast with Mr. Isham Randolph…" Clearly chocolate crossed gender lines in consumption. Another famous Virginian to consume a chocolate-based beverage was Martha Washington. She preferred, according to a letter written by George Washington, a drink made from the "shells of Cocoa nuts." There are also records of other uses by Virginia cooks, including a recipe in a manuscript cookbook called *"To Make Chocolate Almonds,"* which appears to be a chocolate and candy-coated almonds.



"Coffee and Chocolate," Courtesy of the Johann Jacob Museum, Zurich. This couple appears to be in a state of undress, sharing their morning meal, including the chocolate being consumed by the lady.

Along with the craze for the beverage itself, equipment was developed to prepare and consume chocolate. According to historians, raw chocolate was not processed in the home during the eighteenth century. The method of shaping raw cocoa nibs into an edible product was too labor intensive and exacting to produce a repeatedly acceptable end result. It also required equipment which would be too large and too expensive for all but the very wealthy or those who made it their business. Chocolate mills and producers ranged up and down the east coast, but were mainly based in New York, Boston and Philadelphia. Virginia, one of the major consumers of chocolate, appears to be just that. There are no advertisements for commercial chocolate makers listed in the *Virginia Gazette*, the typical publication for such advertisements at the time.

On the other hand, many probate inventories of wealthy individuals of John Carlyle's position list a plethora of equipage related to the preparation of chocolate in the home. All sorts of china and other goods appear, from cups and saucers, to pots, graters, mills, and more multipurpose cooking pots. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, specialized containers and tools had developed to produce the most desirable beverage. It is possible to make chocolate without specialized tools, all one needs is a knife, a whisk, a steep-sided pot and cups from which to drink it. However, the demand and fashionability of the beverage led to the production of specialized equipment for more affluent consumers. Cups were frequently small, straight-sided, with one or two opposing handles; they frequently had lids, called covers. They also included specialized saucers with an elaborate silver or ceramic cradle for the cup. Because the drink required frothing, pots were developed specifically for chocolate. They were frequently silver, but could also be made of base metals or ceramic, with a spout high on the body and a hole in the lid. This hole allowed a moulinet, often called a chocolate mill or stirrer, to be spun sharply within the pot without getting hot liquid everywhere. John Carlyle, unfortunately, had none of these specialized pieces of equipment; therefore it is

impossible to say whether or not it was ever prepared at Carlyle House.

This copper pot is an original chocolate pot, currently in the collection at Colonial Williamsburg. This is the most common form of chocolate pot found in the colonies.

In more modern times, such equipment is no longer necessary for the preparation of hot chocolate, as the process has been simplified by the development of more soluble chocolate products. Prior to these developments, which came about in the nineteenth century, consumers still had a culinary journey ahead when preparing commercially available chocolate. Once processed from its raw form, chocolate paste was shaped into cakes or poured into molds and allowed to harden. Colonists would have purchased their chocolate, wrapped in brown paper, from merchants and traders. Chocolate would then be grated or scraped very finely and prepared according to a recipe or personal taste. A recipe from a manuscript cookbook in New Jersey calls for "a quart of good Sweet Cream…4 Ounces of Chocolate… the Yolks of 6 Eggs. Take it off from the Fire and sweeten it to your Taste." Another uses a "pint of water…and, when it boils put in the [chocolate]…When wanted put a spoonful or two of milk, boil it with the sugar, and mill it well." The most surprising recipes were made with "a pint of White-wine." Any number of spices could be added to all of these, sometimes by the manufacturer, but also in the home. Common enhancers included cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, cloves, anise, and pepper. Less common were orange water, almond, hazelnut, and rhubarb.

Chocolate, along with a number of these different additives, is listed in the ledgers of merchants and tradesmen across the colonies. While we do not know what goods John Carlyle was dealing in specifically, it is entirely possible that chocolate was one of them, especially while carrying out his duties as a commissary for the British army and the American militia. Many journals, letters, and invoices suggest that chocolate was a frequent addition to regular rations, either supplied by the army or purchased from local merchants. During the French and Indian War, Benjamin Franklin procured supplemental supplies including sugar, tea, coffee, vinegar, cheese, Madeira, and chocolate. Also during that part of the century, Indian Agent William Johnson ordered supplies to feed his frequent guests. Among the supplies he prepared for the Native Americans who came to meet with him was a large amount of chocolate; one order includes a request for 50lbs of the cake. This was an expensive endeavor.

In 1758, commissaries like Carlyle estimated that for a month's worth of the most basic supplies (pork, beef, bread, and flour) would take 1,000 shallow draft boats, 800 wagons and 1,000 ox carts for 100 miles of transport from Albany, New York to the frontier. This was for 20,000 soldiers; the number of wagons and supplies that would have been needed to be transported across the rest of the colonies would have provided an opportunity for some to prosper greatly. Others suffered, especially during the American Revolution. In 1775, British General Thomas Gage imposed regulations that restricted citizens from traveling with more than "a single loaf of bread, and half a pound of chocolate, so that no one is allowed to carry out a mouthful of provisions." State governments and Committees of Safety, of which we know Carlyle was a member, enacted price controls.

Eventually it became so bad that the Continental Congress became involved. Though they did not make provisions for civilians, they made it possible to keep officers and hospitals rationed with chocolate. As with its early uses, during the Revolution, chocolate again took on a more medicinal quality, but not to the same extent as in years past. The beverage became a staple of hospitals. With its high fat content

A modern interpretation of chocolate as supplied by merchants. The segmented bar is one of many types of "cakes" prepared by chocolate makers in the 18th century.

and protein when prepared with milk, chocolate was both easily digestible and a ready source of energy for the ill and wounded.

Throughout the eighteenth century, chocolate became a part of the American diet. While frequently purported to be a breakfast drink for women, the beverage was consumed by both genders, at various meals throughout the day. Tastes in chocolate have also clearly changed as to how it is prepared, but the love of chocolate can be seen developing in all sorts of uses, from the poor and working classes to the very wealthy. And while John Carlyle may not have consumed the beverage in his own home, he may very well have supplied his contemporaries with this heart and hearth warming drink.

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Correction from November Dispatch

In the November "Docent Dispatch" the article entitled "John Carlyle and the Alexandria Jockey Club" misidentified the newspaper in which the Office of Historic Alexandria column "Out of the Attic" appears in *The Alexandria Journal*. It should have read *The Alexandria Times*. The author, Steve Kimbel, apologizes for his mistake.