



Carlyle House

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Reconstructing John Carlyle's Library

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With so few of John Carlyle's books identified by title or author in the probate inventory of his estate it is nearly impossible to reconstruct his library of 235 volumes. However, it is possible to examine the books owned by one of his

friends.

Researchers of local history are blessed with an invaluable resource housed at Gunston Hall, the colonial home of George Mason IV (1725-1792). It is a collection of 325 probate inventories from estates in the Chesapeake region of Maryland and Virginia. They have been transcribed and put online where they can be searched. The inventories include those of John Carlyle and several of his contemporaries.

Among the criteria used to decide which probate inventories would be transcribed is the number of books they contained. The online inventories were also chosen to give researchers insights into the furniture, china, silver, and clothing that men like John Carlyle and his family members would have owned.

In an effort to acquire some understanding of John Carlyle's library the probate inventory of one of his contemporaries was selected for examination and analysis: his friend and relation George Washington.

County courts appointed the takers of probate inventories. In the case of John Carlyle they chose a cousin Charles Little and Carlyle's son-in-law, William Herbert. Their inventory was extremely sketchy. For instance, to describe most of the books they used phrases such as: "35 large octavos." They provide neither the titles nor the authors. Here are other examples. Little and Herbert used the phrase: "sundry books" to account for 69 books, and they list 90 more volumes as "small octavos." These phrases are all we

have for 80 percent of the 235 volumes in Carlyle's library. (An octavo is a single sheet of paper of any size on which sixteen pages of a book or pamphlet are printed.)

Faced with such scanty information one needs to turn to other 18th century libraries with more detailed inventories. Fortunately those who catalogued George Washington's books for his probate inventory provide the detail we need.

George Washington died on December 14, 1799. His will had been probated on January 10, 1800 but the inventory of his possessions and holdings was not recorded until August 20, 1810. Final settlement of the estate was not achieved until June 21, 1847.

There are four court appointed takers of the inventory: General Thompson Mason, son of George Mason IV; Tobias Lear, Washington's personal secretary; Thomas Peter, Martha Washington's grandson-in-law; and William H. Foote, the nephew of Lund Washington's widow, Elizabeth Foote Washington.

The inventory was a room-by-room record of everything the four men found at Mount Vernon. In the study they catalogued and appraised Washington's vast collection of books, maps, pamphlets and other publications.

Among the volumes were books on history, agriculture, gardening, the law, philosophy, natural history, astronomy, religion, political science, military science, several discussions of slavery and

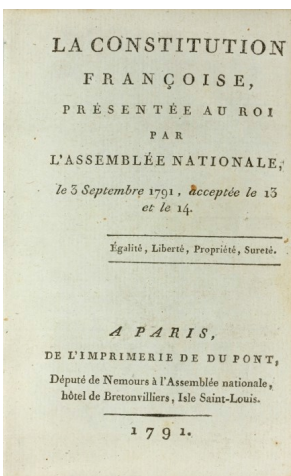
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many other topics including lots of travel literature and many more on horticulture and animal husbandry; including a "Treatise on Peat Moss".

As one should expect Washington owned copies of Tom Payne's "Common Sense", "The Age of Reason", and "The Rights of Man," as well as a copy of "The Federalist Papers" and the works of John Locke whose philosophy so strongly influenced the founding fathers.

Washington had a copy of "The French Constitution"



and like John Carlyle he owned volumes by the man whose thoughts contributed to both the American and French Revolutions: "Voltaire" (a.k.a. François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778)). Also, as William Herbert did in the inventory of Carlyle's books, those recording Washington's inventory misspelled the French philosopher's nom de plume. In Washington's inventory it is "Voltares" and

in Carlyle's "Voltairs".

Among Washington's books is one containing the ideas of the influential Scottish economist Adam Smith in a volume of his: "Wealth of Nations." With his Scots heritage one can imagine that Carlyle may have possessed the same work.

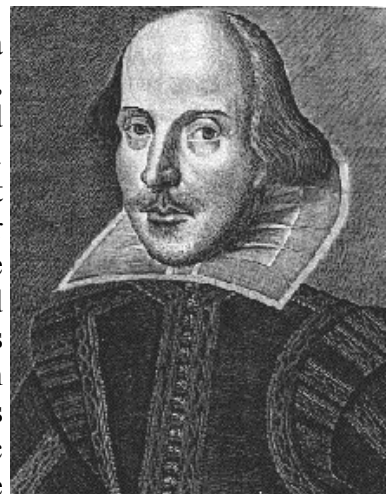
The 18th century's fashionable fascination with Roman history is reflected in Washington's copy of Edward Gibbon's "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" published in seven volumes in 1776; unfortunately the inventory lists only six volumes. He also owned some Roman poetry with a copy of "Ossian's Poems" and some Roman philosophy with a copy of "Morals" by Seneca.

The founding fathers took inspiration from the ideas of those who founded earlier republics. The republican principles of the Greek city-states gave them their foundation and the Roman Republic expanded the model the founders of the American Republic wished to reconstruct.

When it comes to literature the First President read from a single volume entitled "Shakespeare's Works" and in his speeches he frequently quoted from

Shakespeare's plays including Hamlet, Othello, The Merchant of Venice, The Tempest, Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, and Henry V.

He owned Cervantes' "Don Quixote" in a four-volume set, mysteriously listed twice in the inventory. As one of the first pieces of fiction ever written and one of the first works produced in the author's vernacular, "Don Quixote" was considered a classic well before



Washington purchased his copy and it remained on the library shelves of important people well into the next century. His Majesty, King David Kalakaua, the last King of Hawaii also owned a copy bound in white leather, but his was in Spanish, like the original.

"Gulliver's Travels" and "Swift's Works" in one volume were also among the First President's books. Jonathan Swift's satire was viewed as critical of the British aristocracy and the government and so was probably appreciated by the American revolutionaries who agreed with Swift's views.

"Alexander Pope's Works" in six volumes were on the bookshelves at Mount Vernon, as were Pope's translations of Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey". There's a note in the inventory that two of the six volumes of the "Iliad" are missing.

Washington also had Smollett's "History of England" a reminder that he remained a loyal subject of his King until he could no longer tolerate the despotism of George III.

Washington also had lots of maps including a "Fry/Jefferson map of Virginia" like the one that hangs in the lower passage of the Carlyle House.

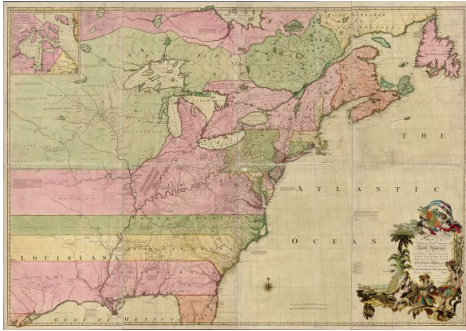
Finally, here is a sample from among the more practical titles in Washington's library: "The Elements of Riging (sic)," "Price's Carpenter," "Gibbons diseases of horses," "The Bee" with a note that the thirteenth of the eighteen volumes is missing.



Since he owned racehorses and at least four ships it is safe to assume that like George Washington he had many instructive titles on equine matters and naval technology.

While we will probably never know the vast majority of book titles in Carlyle's collection, it is fun to ponder the question: "Did he borrow books from his illustrious friend and neighbor, to say nothing of brother-in-law, George Washington? And if he did, then may we speculate about which of the several volumes listed as missing from Washington's probate

long, cold winter evenings when she wanted to curl up in bed with a good book."



inventory might have been among the "small octavos" and "sundry books" recorded by William Herbert while he was taking his inventory of John Carlyle's library.

Notes & Bibliography:

"Probing the Past" is a collection of 325 probate inventories from the Chesapeake region of Maryland and Virginia covering 70 years from 1740 to 1810. The project is under the direction of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University and Gunston Hall Plantation and supported by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. The website is at: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/probateinventory/index.php>

The Papers of George Washington, <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/george-washingtons-last-will-and-testament/>

"Washington: A Life" Ron Chernow; The Penguin Press, 2010.

Author's Note: This is the second in a series of articles about John Carlyle's library. The first was published in the December 2013 "Docent Dispatch." The next in the series may explore those "small octavos" and "sundry books" and the question: "What did Sarah read on those