



# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

February 2015



### *Keeping Warm in Early America: The Carlyle House*

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Winter for the Carlyle family of Alexandria, Virginia was no doubt uncomfortable. It made little difference that their house was constructed substantially of sand stone or that it had more fireplaces for heating than most other dwellings in town. Those very fireplaces, lacking dampers, allowed heat loss up the chimney and chilling down drafts of cold air when fires were not kept. The structure's numerous multi-paned windows added further to winter's intrusion. High ceilings, beneficial for summer living, only served to make rooms more difficult to heat in the winter. In short, life for the Carlyle family, like that of their neighbors, became highly constricted - limited to that part of the house that could be kept relatively warm.



In reality, the only persons depicted in this romanticized view of a New England kitchen/sitting room in winter who would have been comfortably warm are to the two children nestling in the chimney corner and the woman and children immediately in front of the fireplace. Everyone else would have been outside the six-foot zone of warmth.

Daily life during the coldest days would have been spent in the private side of the house; the lower passage would have been dark and frigid, its use as a living space given up until Spring. The public rooms - the parlor and formal dining room - were kept closed and likely, rarely heated except when visitors were expected. Since the parlor is the smallest room in the house and more easily warmed as a result, may have seen more frequent use by family members as an escape from the confines of their bed chambers or John's study. Musical entertainment by John's daughter, Sarah, playing the piano forte may have been an additional enticement. We know the Carlyles used coal on a grate

as an additional source of heat in both the parlor and the large dining room. As the weather became more severe and family living space more constricted, one of those grates may have been moved to John's study where the family would have spent the majority of their day. While coal did burn more slowly than wood and without the attendant heavy smoke and frequent sparks, it did not necessarily guarantee a warmer room. Harriet Martineau of Boston recalled that even with anthracite coal burning on a grate in her bed chamber, "...everything you touch seems to blister your fingers with cold."

The door leading to the private quarters from the frigid lower passage, as well as the individual doors to the study and master bed chamber, would have been kept tightly closed. During the coldest days, except for those individual chambers that saw fires, other rooms, side passages, stairways, and the upper passage would have been frigid and uninhabitable. Throughout the house, interior window shutters in unoccupied rooms were likely kept closed throughout the winter; during the day, those in occupied spaces probably were open to some degree to avoid having to burn candles before sunset. In any event, once the family retired for the evening, all shutters would have been closed to further reduce the infiltration of cold air.

The family's daily meals would continue to be served in John Carlyle's study or perhaps in individual bed chambers for those who chose to

#### **CARLYLE HOUSE**

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keep fires during the day. It is quite possible that John and his wife entertained their closest friends in their bedchamber, as did William Pyncheon on 12 January 1785, when he and his wife had tea with two other couples in "Mrs. Pyncheon's chamber." This chamber was likely the warmest room in the house and the one in which the Pyncheons spent most of their day at this time of the year.

The household servants working in the servants' hall probably kept a fire going throughout the day both for warmth as well as for reheating the family's food prior to taking it upstairs. Given the location of the servants' hall directly below the master bed chamber, the Carlyles would have benefited at this time of the year from the extra heat rising through the floor boards. However, we can only imagine how uncomfortable it may have been by early morning for those servants who may have slept on the dirt floor of this space. While the clothing of household servants was generally of a better quality than that worn by field hands, usually made of wool and linen and worn in layers for added warmth, never-the-less, sleeping on straw mattresses in the cellar of the house would have been quite uncomfortable. Perhaps during the coldest weather they slept "above stairs" or in the attic spaces. The cook who spent the day in the detached kitchen, where a fire was likely kept all day long, would have slept in the loft above and benefited somewhat throughout the night from the residual heat radiating from the well heated bricks of the chimney. Even in the detached kitchen, however, keeping an unattended fire throughout the night would have been discouraged.

Unless servants stayed awake and personally tended fires, the bed chambers for both the parents and their children were probably without fires while they slept. Curtained bedsteads, along with the use of brass bed warmers, hot water bottles or wrapped heated bricks to mitigate stinging sheets, if used, would have provided protection from cold drafts and helped to retain body heat. If fires were kept in bed chambers during the day, some residual warmth from heated chimneys might have radiated into the chambers for at least a portion of the night, depending, of course, on how low the outside temperature was and its duration. Even houses constructed of stone did not insulate the occupants

indefinitely; once the cold penetrated the stone walls to the interior, those frigid interior surfaces would be stinging to the touch. Like other Alexandria residents the Carlyles would have worn layers of woolen or flannel garments, woolen stockings, and some form of head cover, as well as covering themselves with layers of blankets. However, as Warren Johnson of Johnstown, New York recalled, "...in bed people are cold even with ten blankets on." Sharing a bed, John and Sally (and later Sybil) and the two daughters - Ann and Sarah - each would have benefited from the additional body heat within their enclosed bedsteads. Young George William may not have been as fortunate, unless he chose to share his bed with one of the servants.

Rising in the morning was yet another uncomfortable experience. In some households of the gentry class, servants mitigated the impact of a frigid house by rising early and starting a fire in the room where breakfast was to be taken. It was probably quite unusual, though, for servants to enter the Carlyles' bed chamber for the purpose of starting a fire before the occupants arose. Clarissa Packard in 1834, provides a vivid description of such a morning event. When she arose at eight o'clock, she "...found snow patches in every crevice of my windows, a tracery of frost work on the panes of glass, and the water in the ewer a mass of ice." "With chattering teeth and purple fingers I descended to the parlour... [where]... a cheerful fire blazed on the hearth..." most likely started by one of her servants. Perhaps John Carlyle's office/study provided a similar refuge.

However the Carlyles chose to face the cold, they, like their neighbors in town, could not escape winter's discomfort entirely. They could only persevere and look forward to the inevitable change of seasons when, as one diarist recorded, I "Sat in my chamber without any fire, went to meeting without a great coat...took off my Waistcoat...took off my flannel...[and]...shifted to finer stockings."

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