



# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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### *Interpreting Slavery at Carlyle House*

By Sarah Coster

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February is Black History month and a chance to reflect on the African-Americans who lived and worked at Carlyle House. With so many stories, facts and objects to interpret that focus on the Carlyle family, it is easy to forget the more silent voices of those who labored here. This is a good time to listen closely to those voices, reflect on them and think about how their voices could become a part of your tour.

The history of slavery is not always an easy one to discuss. It's important to remember that we are telling the story of America. Most Americans did not live like John Carlyle and his family, who represent the top 5% of society. Our visitors are longing to hear the story of not only John Carlyle, but the many others who lived and worked at Carlyle House.

Visitors want to know *who* these people were. What happened to them in their lives? Who were they? What is the actual story of actual people? Fortunately for us, we do know something about them. *The* best way to incorporate the history of enslaved persons on your tour is to use what we know and to tell specific stories and facts, instead of speaking in generalities.

A great place to start is by passing around the 1780 probate inventory of the deceased John Carlyle's property. The inventory lists the names of nine enslaved African-Americans; Joe, Cook, Penny, Nanny, Moses, Cate, Sibreia, Jerry and Charles. Before and after these names are common household goods; wheelbarrows, tools, beehives, hammers. And next to all the items, both names and goods alike, are numbers indicating the value of the property. Simply pointing this out to visitors in the Servant's Passage can be a powerful illustration of how eighteenth-century owners viewed

Negro Jerry	25
do Joe	00
do Cook	35
do Penny	30
do Charles	35
do Sibreia	60
do Cate	35
do Moses	65
do Nanny	20
3 Vol. <sup>4</sup> Nations History of England	
1 Vol. Chambers Dictionary	
3 Vol. <sup>3</sup> Salmons History	

slaves as property.

Notice how some of the slaves are not even given names. Cook and Nanny are simply referred to by the tasks they perform in the household. Although we use an elderly female mannequin to portray Cook, she could have been a man or a woman. An all-day job, Cook most likely spent the majority of her time in Carlyle's separate kitchen building and slept in the loft space above it.

While it is difficult to define the servant spaces in colonial homes, some evidence indicates these areas. A 1775 advertisement for the lease of Belvoir, the home of William Fairfax, Carlyle's father-in-law, described the house as having "a servants hall and cellars below." George Washington referred to a servant's hall at Mt. Vernon in a letter written in 1796. Apparently it was a separate outbuilding used, at least in part, as

#### CARLYLE HOUSE

Susan Hellman, Site Administrator

Helen Wirka, Site Specialist

Vanessa Herndon, Education Assistant



a servants' sleeping space. Washington wrote, *Let the Rooms in the Servants Hall, above and below, be well cleaned; and to have the Beds and bedsteads therein put in order.*"

Although there is little direct evidence about servant-oriented spaces on Carlyle's property, he might have emulated the Fairfaxes. It is possible that the southwest cellar room at Carlyle House functioned as a servants hall. The presence of the fireplace in this room gives weight to this idea. Probably, the space served as a combined dining and work area by the servants and that most slept in spaces like the loft over the kitchen, the stables, or the attic, or even on mats in the hallway outside the bedchambers, as dictated by their duties and positions in the servant hierarchy.

In addition to inventories, another way historians research the lives of enslaved persons is through runaway ads. John Carlyle placed no runaway ads for slaves, but he did place two ads for runaway convict servants. In 1767, Carlyle places an ad for a young Irishman, Dennis Shields, who had runaway from one of his ships. In 1772 John Jardine, from Carlyle's own Cumberland, runs away with a horse. Discussing these ads with your visitors is one way to introduce the many types of servants who lived in Carlyle's household, including enslaved persons, convict servants, indentured servants, and free servants. Many of these people labored side by side in Carlyle's warehouses, ships and plantations.

Our interpretation of slavery at Carlyle House can be both visual and physical. Have visitors look around the small Servant's Passage. Show the property map and remind them that there were no slave quarters. Enslaved persons often slept where they worked and had little privacy. Ask visitors to try picking up the bucket of water and to imagine, as they walk up the winding servant's stairs, what it would be like to carry that bucket up and down the stairs several times a day.

The first reference to Carlyle's ownership of slaves comes in a letter, written shortly after his first marriage, when he notes that his *"Wife's fortune Consists of Lands & Sum Negro's."* Later, during the construction of his house, Carlyle wrote, *"it's a Pleasure to build in England but here where we are obligated To Doe Everything With one's own*

*servants & thise Negros make it Require Constant Attendance & Care-& So much trouble that If I had Suspected it woud been What I have meet with, I believe I Shoud made Shift with a Very Small house."*

A great place to remind visitors of the hands that built Carlyle House is the Architecture Room. The chisel marks in the sandstone walls are a stark reminder of the enormous amount of physical labor that went into the construction of Carlyle House. The Roman numerals on the summer beam's dovetail joints are a reminder of the illiteracy of the slave population as well as much of the colonial population in general. As we look at the handmade nails, we can almost hear them being hammered into the walls.

Nails just like these were probably made on Carlyle's property. "Joe," listed on inventory, may have been the "Smith Jo" who ran errands to the Glassford store in town for Carlyle. Joe's high value--£80--indicates a skilled man in the prime of life. The skills of a blacksmith were essential to Carlyle not only as an undertaker and farmer, but as a merchant as well.

The enslaved workers at Carlyle House often ran errands around Alexandria for the family. Carlyle's mother-in-law, Sybil West, notes that *"Mr. Carlyle's mulatto Girl, Mr. Carlyle's Deliah, and Mr. Carlyle's Gardner"* all purchased items for her.

While the lives of many of these enslaved persons remain a mystery, we know much more about the woman named Penny. In 1750, when he was 29, John Carlyle purchased a slave named Penelope from the estate sale of Fairfax County planter Richard Osborn. Osborn's probate inventory lists Penny at a value of £20, a high value that most likely indicated she was no longer a child. The sale of Richard Osborn's holdings was spread out over three days on April 23, 24 and 25, 1750. Noted on the ledger for the auction of Osborn's estate is the purchase by *"Mr. Carlyle"* of two enslaved persons, *"Forrester"* and *"Penelope."* Carlyle paid £81 for the lot. Was Forrester her kin? If not, was Penny forever separated from her family?

Thirty years later, Penny appeared in Carlyle's 1780 inventory and was valued at £50. In those thirty years, Penny stood witness to every significant event that occurred on Fairfax Street: from the first day the expectant parents moved into their



new home in 1753 to the “Grandest Congress” in 1755 to the death of her master in 1780.

What did Penny’s duties include? Was she a nurse to the children? A seamstress? We can only speculate. What is evident is that she remained with the family after Carlyle’s death. In 1804, when Penny took ill after being “almost killed by the doctors,” Sarah Carlyle Herbert took “great care of her” and nursed her back to health.

Writing to her daughter Margaret Herbert Fairfax, Sarah mentions how she:

*“Found Poor old Penny almost killed by the doctors when I return’d from Danby. It was the fashion last fall, if a person complain’d of being sick, to bleed, blister, & salivate – accordingly when the old women called a Doctor, tho’x she was upwards Sixty they bled, Blister’d, & put her in so severe a salivation,*

*that when I came home she had scarcely any pilsse. I was obliged to give her a quantity of Maderia wine & take great care of her-.”*



If Penny was, as Sarah claims, “upwards of Sixty” in 1804, then she would have been born in the late 1730s or early 1740s. This also substantiates the theory that she was a

young, healthy teenager when she was purchased in 1750. If Penny’s role was as a domestic servant in the house, Penny was possibly the only constant female presence in Sarah’s life.

It is easy to imagine these two women living alongside each other, but each in very different worlds. While in the girl’s bedchamber, be sure to mention Penny and her life here at Carlyle House. The purchase of new mannequins for our exhibit will help bring her to life for the visiting public. *(For a more detailed look at Penny’s life, please see Jim Bartlinski’s article in the March 2007 Docent Dispatch).*

Little is known about Carlyle’s attitude toward slavery, although his extensive ownership and

of and dealing in slaves seems to indicate full participation in the system. Even if he had wanted to free his slaves upon his death, this was not a legal possibility in Virginia. The Virginia legislature did not pass a law allowing the private manumission of slaves until 1782.

As you can see, a frank discussion about the lives of the enslaved persons living at Carlyle House can enhance your tour. By examining the evidence we have and presenting it to the public, we bring into focus the rich history of Carlyle House’s silent voices.