



# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

### *What is That Piece of Furniture on Loan in the Master Chamber?*

*By Helen Wirka*



On many of the tours the staff and docents have given, there is frequently a cry of delight as visitors enter the Master Chamber: “Oh look! A highboy!” Many visitors to Carlyle House often consider themselves to be furniture experts when they visit museums, and we do attract many antiques and museum professionals for tours here.

Frequently our guests demonstrate a well-informed knowledge of many objects in our collection. As volunteers and staff who are dedicated to Carlyle House, we are very happy to learn from them as well and sometimes we adjust the information on our tours as a result. However, the biggest misconception that our visitors have when touring Carlyle House, is that there is a Philadelphia highboy in our collection. And in this instance, they are incorrect in their thinking.

Hopefully this article will help explain the difference between what our guests believe to be a highboy and what is actually the correct name for this object: a “double chest” or a “double chest of drawers.” Please note that for efficiency purposes in this article, I am shortening the name of the piece to “double chest” but it may be called either of the two names mentioned above on tours of the museum.

In the Master Chamber, we have been very lucky to have a beautiful double chest, or double chest of drawers, on loan to the museum from Carlyle family descendants, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur H. Holt. The Holts lovingly cared for this treasured piece for many years, however the Holts agreed to loan it to Carlyle House and it has been on display since 2003. From August 2003 through January 2004, the museum had an exhibit entitled “Coming Home: Carlyle Family Treasures.”

The purpose of this exhibit was to celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Carlyle family moving into the house in 1753.

Interestingly enough, the Carlyle double chest was not included in the 1780 probate inventory that was recorded in November of 1780. Therefore, having this object on display is a slight departure from our statement that we have furnished Carlyle House according to the 1780 inventory. But, happily, it does have a place in the museum as it is Carlyle House’s mission to interpret the life and times of the Carlyle family dating from when they moved into the house in 1753. And, the double chest actually has a pristine family provenance. The story goes that John Carlyle gave it to his eldest daughter, Sarah Carlyle, upon the occasion of her marriage to William Herbert in 1775 and the double chest has been in the family ever since. Arthur Holt, who is the owner of the double chest and has loaned it to Carlyle House, is a descendant of Sarah Carlyle Herbert.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the purpose of a piece such as the Carlyle double chest was to store clothing for various members of the household and it was possibly also used to store linens such as tablecloths and napkins. Unfortunately we do not have any primary source documentation from John Carlyle or either his first wife or his second wife, discussing the use of this large piece of furniture. However, there is a very good description of the

#### **CARLYLE HOUSE**

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purpose served by a similar chest of drawers at Gunston Hall. The firsthand account was written by George Mason's son, John Mason, in 1773. He was writing about his mother, Ann Eilbeck Mason, and how she used her chamber space.

*I remember well the economy & arrangement of her chamber. There stood, among other things, a large old fashioned chest of drawers which held the children's clothes to which, little fellow that I was, I was often carried to get something or to rummage in it without leave. The lower tier consisted of three drawers – the middle and [longest] of these was the stocking drawer, that on the right and smaller was the towel drawer, and that on the left of the same size was the shoe drawer. Next above, a thin [drawer] & the whole depth of the case was the cap drawer; next above this, a deep one & also the whole length was the gown drawer; next above was the shirt drawer; and next to that the jacket drawer. Then above all came two drawers each of half length which were kept locked and the only two of the whole [which] were devoted to my Mother's private use and for matters of greater value. The other drawers were always unlocked, applied exclusively for the purpose their names designated, and called by all the family by these names.*

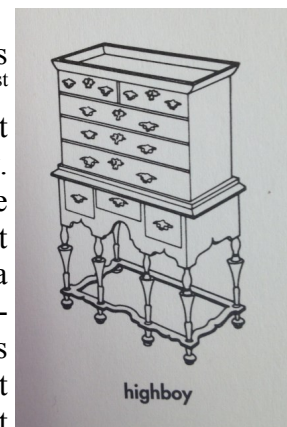
It is very likely that both John Carlyle's first wife, Sarah Fairfax Carlyle (b. 1730; d. 1761) and his second wife, Sybil West Carlyle (m. 1761; d. 1769), used the double chest (made c. 1753) in the same manner as John Mason's mother did. The Masons

and the Carlyles were socializing in the same circles. Therefore it makes sense to come to the conclusion that popular furniture pieces of the time were used in a similar manner in both households with the lady of the house designating specific drawers for certain purposes and storage.

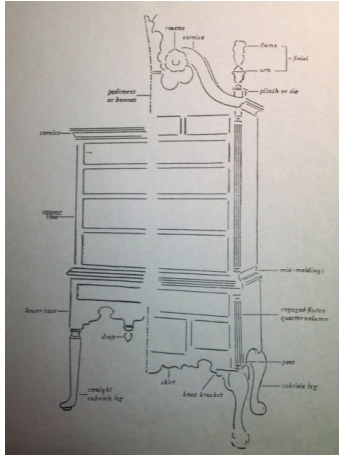
Next, let's look at some definitions.

Defining a highboy:

The phrase highboy is frequently used in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however it was not used until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century a piece like the Carlyle double chest was commonly known as a "high chest" or a "chest-on-frame." The fact that highboy is a 19<sup>th</sup> century term is the first reason why this word does not apply to the Carlyle family double chest. Secondly, when looking at a sketch of a highboy, one can clearly see a marked difference between that image and the Carlyle family double chest in their structures. The phrases "high chest" and "chest-on-frame" absolutely make sense as can be seen in the *Dictionary of Furniture, Third Edition* by Charles Boyce. The sketch depicts what is known as a "case" piece supported on a stand with four or more narrow legs. The legs are usually connected by low stretchers and the lower half of the structure consists of a stand and three or more drawers. This piece would have been produced separately from the upper portion, and was called a dressing table or "lowboy." The top half of the piece has four or more "tiers" of wide drawers that were the width of the entire piece. Like the British tallboy, which the American highboy was based upon, these pieces have two rows of drawers "divided into two or three narrower drawers." The heights of these drawers vary with the tallest drawers appearing on the bottom row of the upper chest and gradually get shorter as the piece gets taller.



Defining a double chest:



The term double chest refers to a case piece with a lower chest of drawers positioned beneath an upper chest of drawers. The chest on the bottom was somewhat wider than the one on top. Double chests were sometimes referred to as a “chest-on-chest,” which is a 17<sup>th</sup> century English piece of furniture. However, the

at the top is original. There would have been two additional finials, one on each corner at the front, but they were both missing when the double chest was loaned to the museum. There is also a “slide” that pulls out to serve as a desk. We do not pull this out for guests however, nor do we open the drawers during tours.

term “chest-on-chest” continued to be used in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the American consumer market, especially in New England, and is still frequently used today.

Based upon when furniture terms and definitions were first used, the best description of the Carlyle double chest is in fact a double chest or double chest of drawers. When pressed, the phrase high chest could also be used, but never the word highboy which postdates this 1753 piece. The next time you are in the Master Chamber, perhaps you will take a moment to examine the beautiful features on this original family piece.

Oscar Fitzgerald is a local renowned furniture expert and published author. He has done a thorough examination of the Carlyle double chest. However, when referencing furniture just like the Carlyle double chest in his book, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, Fitzgerald uses the phrase “high chest” throughout his chapter on the Chippendale style. Fitzgerald discusses how Philadelphia high chests, or double chests, from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century frequently exhibited elements of architecture and nature in the carvings. These included triangular shaped pediments, fluted columns, urns, flames, shells, vines, flowers and leaves to name a few of those qualities and several of them can be seen on the double chest at Carlyle House.

Look for forthcoming articles on specific objects in the e collection such as this one!

- i. A Proposal for Revisions to the John Carlyle House Historic Furnishings Plan, 20.
- ii. *Dictionary of Furniture, Third Edition* by Charles Boyce, 2014.
- iii. According to Boyce’s book, A case piece is one that is shaped and built like a box for the purpose of storing something. Traditional case pieces are chests, cupboards, cabinets, chests of drawers, wardrobes or secretaries (Boyce, 50-51).
- iv. Boyce, 50-51.

The Carlyle family double chest is made of mahogany and the secondary woods are cedar and pine. It was made circa 1753, and has many Philadelphia and Chippendale features. There is a bonnet top which is curved and the central shell drawer is traditionally identified as being Philadelphia style along with vines and flowers. All

of the brass pulls are original with only two exceptions and they were replaced probably in the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The urn and flame finial in the center

