



Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority



Recreating the Wedding of Sarah Carlyle and William Herbert by Katherine Maas

Courtship, weddings, and marriage rituals are as varied as the people who have participated in them over the centuries. Family rituals (a particular piece of jewelry or clothing worn by several generations) might mix with cultural rituals (following a prescribed ritual of engagement) and religious ones (a specific marriage rite, performed by a qualified individual). Some elements of the modern American wedding, such as the eating of a special cake and toasting with champagne, are old practices, modified from even older ones: The eating of wedding cake originated as the throwing of grain to ensure fertility, which was modified to the creation of cakes to be thrown at the bride and groom, and then, eventually, the baking of cakes to be eaten. The clinking of glasses during a champagne toast originated from the belief that the chime-like sound this made would scare away evil spirits. Some traditions, such as that of wearing a veil, originated in many cultures worldwide as protection from evil—although veils did not tend to be used in European and Euro-American rituals during the eighteenth century. It is impossible to tell which rituals would have been used by a given couple, but some educated estimates can be made.

Sarah Carlyle and William Herbert were married around 1774 or 1775. There seems to have been no official announcement in the local newspapers, a result, perhaps, of the shadow of the growing tensions with England. Given Sarah's station in Alexandria, however, we can assume that every effort would have been made to create as joyous and large a celebration as was possible at that time. Sarah and William's meeting and courtship probably followed the usual pattern for the time: the social lives of the elite were structured around couples and families. The numerous dances and balls held throughout elite society (even at Carlyle House



The Wedding of Stephen Beckingham and Mary Cox, 1729
William Hogarth (British, 1697–1764)

itself) served to introduce young people to one another and to allow them to interact in what was hopefully a controlled setting. Large dinner parties also allowed for light conversation and flirtation: an entry in George Washington's diary from March of 1774 refers to a Miss Carlyle and a Mr. Herbert coming to dinner—perhaps they met for the first time that night, or perhaps they were continuing a burgeoning relationship begun in the months before. In either case, by late 1775 they were married: in a letter from late December of that year, Martha Washington asks her Alexandrian correspondent to give her love to Mrs. Herbert. William and Sarah's first child, John Carlyle Herbert, was born 16 August 1775, according to his entry in the *Congressional Biography Directory* (he was elected as a representative from Maryland in 1815).

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After William had made “addresses” to Sarah and declared to John Carlyle his intention to marry John’s daughter, their engagement would have been official, and the planning could commence. Short courtships, from meeting and conversing to declaring intent and actually getting married, were very common at this time: after the proposal had been made and accepted, it was usually a matter of mere weeks or months until the marriage ceremony. It is impossible to know for certain which church Sarah and William were married in: John was, of course, at heart a member of the Presbyterian church; William Herbert, at least later in his life, was deeply involved at Christ Church, and was buried in the Wilkes Street burial ground. Sarah might well have been raised in both churches, and would certainly have been familiar with the Anglican church of which her father was nominally a member. While it was customary for a couple to be married in the bride’s church (perhaps, in this case, a Presbyterian one), it would also have been important for the Carlyle family to maintain its allegiance to the Anglican community in Alexandria. It is certainly possible that Sarah and William were married in an Anglican ceremony—and they probably would have been married in Sarah’s home, as was customary in Virginia at the time, rather than in the recently completed Christ Church.



Pamela is Married, 1743-44. By Joseph Highmore

Given that William, at least, was Anglican, banns would have been read in his church in the several weeks before the ceremony itself. This practice involved the priest stating during the weekly gathering of the congregation, “I publish the Banns of Marriage between Sarah Carlyle of Alexandria and William Herbert of Alexandria. If any of you know just cause why they may not be joined together in Holy Matrimony, you are bidden to declare it. This is the first [or second, or third] time of asking.” This “publishing” of the banns informed the community at large that the two individuals were intending to be married—and ensured that neither one of them had already been promised to someone else.

The ceremony itself, assuming, again, that an Anglican ceremony was performed, would have followed the “Form of Solemnization of Matrimony” in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*: the couple was asked once more if there was any “impediment” to their marriage; they were asked to declare their consent to marry and then said their vows. A ring might have been given to the woman (but not the man—the double-ring ceremony is actually a fairly modern tradition), and the priest would declare them married and bless the union. The ceremony would conclude with readings and prayers, and possibly a brief sermon. Since the colonial Virginians tended to be married in the home (rather than in church), communion would not be part of the ceremony.

The wedding would have been followed by two to three days of celebrations involving food rituals, many related in some way to fertility. The fruit cake, common in the colonial period, was symbolic of fertility. If one could afford it, as John Carlyle probably could, these one-tiered cakes utilized expensive ingredients such as “sugar, imported spices, fresh butter and eggs, nuts, and dried fruits” (Kittler). The rituals surrounding food (the cake and champagne, the several days of excessive feasts) not only displayed the couple’s wealth and elite status, but also allowed all the guests to participate in the celebration and blessing of the marriage. There were even special allowances made for those who did not care to stay up dancing until the early hours of the morning: the celebrations of



Detail from *The Stages of Man*, artist unknown, c. 1815-1835

Cornelia Lee and John Hopkins at Bellevue in 1806 involved a dinner given the day after the wedding, at which Sarah and William Herbert were present. Attendees to any or all of these celebrations, especially if they had not attended the wedding itself, were called upon, through their participation in the post-wedding celebrations, to sanction the marriage. Fertile marriages were, by definition, the life blood of a community, and every family and community had a stake in ensuring their success.

This has been only an overview of wedding rites and rituals from the colonial period in Virginia. The Carlyle House staff hopes you will join us on May 9, 2009 to celebrate the historical reenactment of Sarah Carlyle and Williams Herbert's wedding.

Works Cited

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"William Herbert." Vertical File, Carlyle House.

April Events a Success!

Thank you to the numerous individuals who made our many April programs the successful events they were. Braddock Day, the exhibit opening and Garden Day were outstanding events, and we could not have done it without everyone's help. From volunteer docents, organizers, reenactors, Friends members and staff, the time and effort put in has been noticed by all and has made a huge impact in the success of our programs.



Clockwise: Debby Christie explains herbs to a customer, Henry Desmarais interprets the parlor on Garden Day, the 1797 dress makes its debut.