



# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

### *From China to the Carlyle House: A 237 Year Journey*

By Frank Conrad

On December 18, 1751, the Dutch cargo ship, *Geldermalsen*, sailed from Canton, China with 112 people on board. The ship was only two years old and was bound for the Netherlands with a cargo of 239,000 pieces of porcelain in 203 crates, 686,997 pounds of tea and 5,240 bolts of silk fabric. She also carried a chest filled with 147 bars and “shoes” of 20-22 karat gold. A bar was not that large, about one-third of an inch long by one inch wide by one-and-three-quarters inch deep,



*A modern model of what the Dutch ship, Geldermalsen, might have looked like under full sail.*

but a shoe was even smaller, only one-half inch long by eight-tenths of an inch wide by eight-tenths of an inch deep. A shoe was of more or less oval shape. It had an indentation made by stamping a seal in the middle. The indentation made it look like a shoe. The gold cargo was valued at more than twice that of the porcelain.

On Monday, January 3, 1752, after 16 days at sea, the

*Geldermalsen* was near 55 minutes latitude, just above the equator. At half past three in the afternoon, the captain oriented his position. There was no reason whatsoever to think of a catastrophe; the weather was fine with a calm northerly wind. He gave instructions to set a southerly course. By seven that evening it was dark and the bo’sun was at work on the anchors. Suddenly, he observed breakers, waves crashing over shallow land. He shouted for the helm to be brought hard over but it was too late. With a loud crash, the *Geldermalsen* ran into a reef and quickly began to sink. Thirty-two crew members survived, but the ship and cargo disappeared out of sight.



*An underwater image of the Geldermalsen’s encrusted cargo. Layers of tea and encrustation protected the ceramics and gold.*

End of story? Not quite. In 1985, the *Geldermalsen* was located and salvaged. When a

#### **CARLYLE HOUSE**

*Sarah Coster, Site Administrator*

*Helen Wirka, Site Specialist*

*Lacey Villiva, Education Assistant*



ship has lain in water for 233 years, not much is left. Only items of durable material, such as gold, bronze and, of course, porcelain can survive intact over a long period of time. In the case of the *Geldermalsen* the tea cargo had settled over the porcelain, so that the china was protected all those years from marine encrustation. The original layer of tea, several meters deep, thickened and thickened again, thus forming a soft protective layer over the porcelain underneath.



*Lots of gold ingots and shoes from the Geldermalsen. These, and the ceramics, are often listed as the "Nanking Cargo."*

The salvagers found 125 of the 147 ingots and shoes of gold. The gold was extremely pure, about 20 to 22 carats and stamped with Chinese seals of quality. The shoes were stamped with one or two round seals with the character *ji*, which means luck. The bars had two square seals bearing the character *yuan* and a gourd-shaped seal with the signs *yuan ji bao*, meaning gold block or valuable.

The following year, in 1986, with extensive advance publicity of the

salvage of the Nanking Cargo, an auction was held at Christie's Auction House in Amsterdam, Holland. The sale title

as selected because there were many 18th century auctions which advertised porcelain as Nanking Ware. Before the sale, approximately 160,000 pieces of porcelain were placed on display on shelf after shelf in a large warehouse. Dealers were overwhelmed with the size of the display and the number of pieces of china to be sold. Some superb advertising by Christie's also generated great enthusiasm for this auction. A major press conference was held for international newspapermen and television journalists in Amsterdam. Bloomingdale's, a trendsetter in this field, purchased more than 3,000 pieces, advertising them as "a rare opportunity to bring museum-quality artifacts into your home." The auction was an overwhelming

success with extremely high bidding. All of the undamaged pieces of blue and white Chinese porcelain were sold, along with 125 gold ingots. The sale grossed over 16 million dollars, over four times the estimated value.



*A lot of the "Nanking Cargo" porcelains. The plate on the far right is the pattern which we have at the Carlyle House.*

The porcelain sold consisted of the contents of 203 chests, with the following assortment:

171	dinner services
63,623	tea cups and saucers
19,535	coffee cups and saucers
9,735	chocolate cups
578	teapots
548	milk jugs
14,315	flat dinner plates
1,452	soup plates
299	cuspidors
606	vomit bowls
75	fish bowls
447	single dishes
1000	round dishes
195	butter saucers
2563	bowls with saucers
821	mugs or English beer tankards
25,921	slop bowls

An interesting story, but how does it affect the Carlyle House? On April 6, 1989, Carlyle House acquired five Nanking Cargo Chinese export



porcelain plates with floral designs and one Nanking Cargo bowl. All six items are circa 1750.

The Carlyle House permanent collection records:

Item 89.5.1 - Plate - acquired 4/6/1989 - “ Simple design shows rock crested w/ floral tree up center which curves to the left and wraps around back past the center; another flowered stem comes out from the right and curves halfway to the top. Floral design in blue and white, rims have three clusters of central peony stems and leaf designs. No finishing border, double row of diaper design bands. China; c. 1750”



*One of five plates the Carlyle House obtained from the Nanking Cargo. The museum also has possession of one bowl with a brown overglaze exterior.*

Item 89.5.6 - Bowl - acquired 4/6/1989 - “ Bowl is a possible breakfast bowl or slop bowl. Blue underglaze interior. It has brown overglaze exterior. 3 peony designs around interior w/ a central peony flower at bottom surrounded by a thin blue line of approximately 3" diameter. Rim is finished w/ typical diapering band and lip is finished w/ brown glaze from exterior. China; c. 1750”

These items were probably made in the Jingdezhen Province in southern China. Jingdezhen has been a center of ceramic production in China for more than 1,700 years.

More than sixty million pieces of porcelain reached the west before 1800! The allure of porcelain reached an emotional level. Coming from a country that few had actually seen, the creations of Chinese potters never ceased to fascinate. Also, tea did not become a popular drink until the late 1600's. The preparation of tea required a sturdy vessel made of a substance that would not spoil its flavor. Porcelain, preferred by the Chinese, was the obvious choice.

One of the main appeals of Chinese porcelain was the mystery of its manufacture. The Chinese made porcelain from two kinds of earth: a very pure white clay, known as kaolin, and a feldspathic stone called petuntse. Plastic and infusible, kaolin was considered the “flesh” of porcelain, while petuntse was considered its “bones” because the latter provided translucence and resonance. Gathered in the mountains, these ingredients were carefully ground, washed and refined. The creamy mass was passed through a fine horse-hair sieve and then into and through a bag made of two thicknesses of silk. The ingredients were shaped into small rectangular bricks to facilitate storage and shipment to the main porcelain-making centers.

European potteries could not match the incredibly low cost of Chinese export china ware until the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Chinese imports declined. Tastes were changing and competition from new European factories with mass-production reduced the Chinese cost advantage.

Where may you tell this unusual and interesting story? In two rooms: the Parlor, where the plates and bowl will be displayed in the closet behind plexiglass, and in the Dining Room where dishes like this would have been used. These dishes were not owned by John Carlyle but a man of his stature would have owned similar Chinese porcelain. John's inventory lists an assortment of tableware from China including “14 [Blue and White China] table plates...11 blue and



white common china plates,” along with teapots, coffee cups and serving dishes.

Every time I tell this story to Carlyle House guests, they become more attentive and seem more immersed in our tour. Such background information about our collection makes the objects “come alive” and brings them closer to an 18<sup>th</sup> century experience.

Sources:

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