

# Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

June, 2011

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

## *Preserving Pages: A Writer's Peek Inside a Book Restorer's Workshop*

*By Jean Marie Ward*

Do you ever think about what happens to your books after you're gone? I mean long gone, as in two-hundred-years-after-your-grandkids gone? Recently, I had a chance to find out. As a volunteer guide at the Carlyle House in Alexandria, Virginia, I was invited to tour the workshop of Thomas Albro, the restorer working on John Carlyle's family bible.

Like many of his contemporaries, Carlyle used blank pages in his family bible, a massive sixteen-by-ten inch tome published in London in 1759, to record the births and deaths of his two wives and eleven children. In the two hundred sixty years since, the book was rode hard and (all too literally) put away wet. The bible had it easier following the conversion of the house to a living museum in 1976. It rested in a specially constructed display case, its pages carefully turned by cotton-gloved curators on a schedule designed with preservation in mind. Despite the staff's best efforts, however, by 2010 the pages had browned to the point where it was hard to read the text, much less the family notes scattered throughout. The binding—the bible's second—was crumbling, to say nothing of the debris trapped between the pages.



*Pages of the Bible undergoing conservation alongside embossing tools used to recreate the original binding of the Bible.*

original label stamped with the words “Holy Bible With Cuts”), the bad (grease, possibly from candle drippings) and the ugly (mold, mildew and rat droppings). On the plus side, there wasn't any bacon.

That's right, bacon might've been an issue. Eighteenth century worthies apparently brought their bibles to the breakfast table. In addition to breadcrumbs and coffee and tea stains, books from the 1700s typically preserve bits of bacon. “Sometimes you find a whole strip of bacon,” Mr. Albro said, “almost as if they used it as a bookmark.”



*Green lace found trapped in the pages of the Bible.*

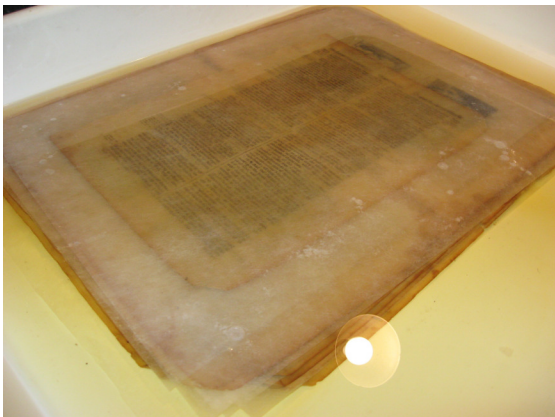
What kind of debris? According to Mr. Albro, they ran the usual gamut of the good (a wisp of green lace used as a bookmark, minute copper sequins and thread from the sleeve of an 18th century gown, the book's

**CARLYLE HOUSE**  
*Sarah Coster, Site Administrator*  
*Helen Wirka, Site Specialist*  
*Lacey Villiva, Education Assistant*



Carlyle’s bible was spared that indignity. But it was in desperate need of cleaning, conserving and restoring. Each conservation and bookbinding job is different, but Mr. Albro’s twenty-five years of experience restoring books at the Library of Congress and his extensive work as an independent consultant equipped him for everything the Carlyle bible had to offer.

First, he removed the binding and prepped the individual pages for washing. Dunking old paper in water may seem like the last thing you want to do with it, but according to Mr. Albro, “Paper comes from water. It’s an important component of the whole.”



Pages of John Carlyle’s Bible soaking in water.

It takes to water very well, as long as you take the correct precautions, such as placing each page on a larger sheet of nonwoven polyester (much like the polyester interfacing used by home sewers) for support. Several sheets can be washed at once. The number depends on the size of the wash tub and the number of drying racks available. (Mr. Albro’s workshop boasts a rolling “baker’s rack” of roughly twenty stacked screens.)

Several pages from the Carlyle bible were soaking in a basin of filtered water when my tour arrived. It reminded me of brewing tea. After an hour in the tub, the water was about the same color, too. Mr. Albro gently pressed the pages to circulate the grime and then lifted the stack of paper and polyester sheets out of the water onto an angled slab of glass



Two pages of the Bible, one before sun bleaching and one after.

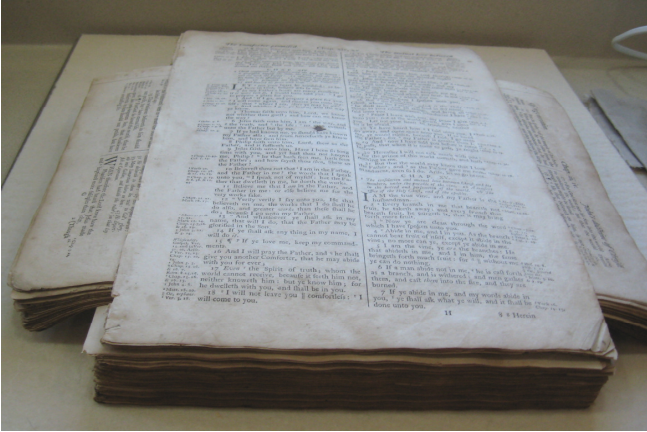
or acrylic to drain. While they were draining, he prepped a sizing solution, which acts as a preservative.

“You can’t write or print on paper without sizing,” he said. “The surface isn’t smooth enough to take the ink.”

The mixture he favored for this project features methyl cellulose, which, despite its chemical-sounding name, is a benign compound used in everything from toothpaste to liquid tears. It also helps inhibit the growth of bacteria, an important consideration when you’re conserving a book for the ages.

Following sizing and drying, many of the pages with engraved illustrations (the so-called “cuts”—an abbreviation for wood-cuts—mentioned on the bible’s label) were allowed to bleach in the sun. The effect of a few hours of sun exposure was amazing. The washed pages were the color of old ivory. The bleached ones looked like fresh cream.

Not all the illustrated pages received this treatment, however. Although printers ink is impervious to sunlight, the ink used by Mr. Carlyle and his granddaughters to make their notations is not. It would fade as quickly as a watercolor—not an option when those notes are among the reasons for preserving this particular book.



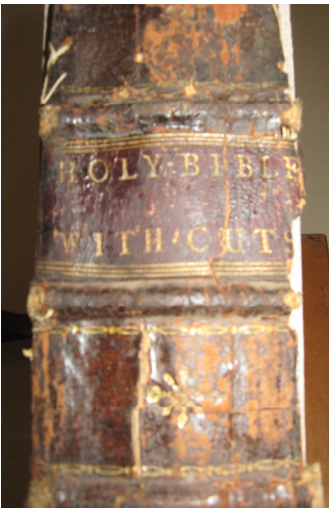
Pages of John Carlyle's Bible stacked in Tom Albro's lab.

But dirt and grime weren't the bible's only problems. Many of the pages were crumpled and torn. The washing and sizing process takes care of unwanted folds. Handmade Japanese paper dyed to match is used to mend damaged pages and replace ripped corners. After patching, the paper is cut to the original dimensions of the page to aid in binding.

The final step, rebinding the bible, may prove to be the most challenging. In addition to collating and hand stitching all the pages of the Old and New Testament (not all of which were numbered) Mr.

Albro plans to create a cover similar to the original, possibly out of goatskin. "It'll probably be brownish black with reddish stamps to reflect what we have of the original."

It might even have gold embossing. Mr. Albro found an embossed stamp—a one inch square of reddish leather used to decorate the spine of the original 18th century binding—when he disassembled the bible for washing. He's pretty sure he can find a matching



Removing a badly done c.1950s cover revealed parts of the original spine, including the title "Holy Bible With Cuts."

punch among his collection of antique embossing tools. The result might not be identical to the book Carlyle brought from London two and a half centuries ago, but it's sure to be a thing of beauty and a joy for a very long time to come, if not forever.

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*Thank you to Jean Marie Ward, a volunteer docent at Carlyle House and a professional writer, who volunteered her writing talents to compose this article.*

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John Carlyle's family bible returned home this May. The staff of Carlyle House is extremely grateful to the Friends of Carlyle House for funding this important conservation effort. In its safer, more stable condition, the Carlyle bible is poised to last for another 250 years and beyond.



Conservator Tom Albro brings the newly conserved bible back home to Carlyle House. Tom spent countless hours cleaning and repairing each page of this massive book

**“A dish of Tea to cheer me”:  
A Tea Tasting & Lecture**



**Sunday, June 5th  
2-3:30 p.m.  
Magnolia Terrace**

**Admission is \$15  
RSVP to Carlyle House at  
carlyle@nvrpa.org or 703-549-2997**

**Presentation will cover:**

- a brief history of tea in the 18th-century**
- the different types of tea, including white, green, oolong, black, and herbal**
- the characteristics of tea and what drives the differences in tea type, taste, and properties**
- a demonstration of proper preparation and tasting of each**
- a Q&A session including discussion of afternoon tea and etiquette**

***This event is co-sponsored by  
the Carlyle House Historic Park and  
the Spice & Tea Exchange of Alexandria***

**CHAD Events**

**June**

**Monday, June 6th- 12:30 pm  
Lecture and Lunch: “The  
Nurses of the Mansion  
House Hospital”**



Bring your brown bag lunch and appetite for learning as we take a closer look at the fascinating nurses who served at the Carlyle House during the Civil War. Sarah Coster will be leading the lecture. *RSVP to 703-549-2997 or lvilliva@nvrpa.org*

**July**

**Monday, July 11th–  
Meet at the DAR Museum at 10:15 am  
Curator led tour of the Daughters of the  
American Revolution Museum’s new exhibit  
“Try to See it My Way”**

Meet us downtown on Monday, July 11th to enjoy a fascinating exhibit, led by on the DAR museum curators. Following the exhibit, we will have lunch at a local café. Below is the exhibit description from the DAR website:

“Try to See It My Way: Behind the Scenes at the DAR Museum,” examines the notion that there is more than one way to look at a museum object. The exhibition gives visitors a peek into the minds of educators, curators and registrars as they create an exhibition of fascinating objects.” *RSVP*

*Sign up in the office or by calling 703-549-2997*



## A Note from Sarah

Thank you to everyone who came out and volunteered for Alexandria’s kick-off to the Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration event on May 21st. It was a warm and beautiful day and the crowds were out by the hundreds to learn a little history. Carlyle House alone saw 560 visitors through the house in a three hour time slot. We appreciate your hard work.

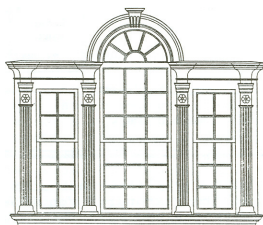
As we continue into the summer months we will continue to have high visitation daily. Please help us keep things going smoothly by keeping your tours on time. Your tour should end no later than one hour after the video starts playing. This is important for many reasons:

1. We have promised visitors the tour will only take one hour. We have a commitment to them to keep it to the promised length.
2. In the summer, many of you will give back-to-back tours. For your safety and comfort, we strongly urge you to have a 15 minute break between tours. You can only do this by being back downstairs on time.
3. We don’t have staff to spare to come upstairs and remind you that you need to be back downstairs for your next tour. Please wear a watch and keep track of time.

Please check out the events listed to the right and RSVP if you are interested in attending. The Friends of Carlyle House annual meeting will be held on Friday, June 10th. If you are not a Friend of Carlyle House, we encourage you to become a member. You can now become a member online at [www.nvrpa.org/store](http://www.nvrpa.org/store)

Thank you for everything you do and have a safe and happy summer!

~Sarah



# C A L E N D A R

## June 5, Sunday

*“A Cup of Tea to Cheer Me” Tea Tasting and Lecture with Spice and Tea Exchange*  
**2 - 3:30 pm—\$15—RSVP Encouraged**

## June 6, Monday

*Lunch and Lecture: Nurses at the Mansion House Hospital*  
**12:30 pm- RSVP Required**

## June 10, Friday

*Friends of Carlyle House Annual Meeting*  
**6:00 pm - Invitation Only, RSVP required**

## June 28, Tuesday

*Hands-on-History Tent: The Civil War*  
**11 am—1 pm Volunteers Needed!**

## July 11, Monday

*CHAD Field Trip to DAR Museum Exhibit “Try To See It My Way”*  
**Meet at 10:15 at the DAR– RSVP Required**



## Carlyle Quotables

“The general (Braddock) and his Aid de Camps, secretary, and servants lodged with me; he took everything he wanted, abused my home and furniture, and made me little or no satisfaction, though expressed a great deal of friendship for me and gave me a commission as Keeper of the Kings storehouses.”

-15 August 1755