



Carlyle House

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The Summer Parlor: Space Utilization in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Houses

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Eighteenth and nineteenth century room utilization, including the concept of multipurpose room-use, are aspects of historic house tours that



continue to fascinate visitors. One space in particular is often misunderstood in this regard: the entry passage. The earliest eighteenth century houses of many southern planters and merchants consisted of a simple two-room floor plan comprising a hall and chamber/parlor on the ground floor with a garret space above. The main entrance gave direct access into the “hall”, a general purpose space where family and servants dined, worked, socialized and frequently slept, a concept referred to by historians as the “socially open” plan. With the subsequent introduction of the Georgian house “aesthetic”, involving a symmetrical design approach and incorporating a desire for greater family privacy, the basic two-room plan was altered to accommodate a center entry passage between the hall and chamber/parlor spaces. This passage served as a circulation space within the house, as well as a means of controlling visitor access to the family’s private quarters. The immediate effect of this design change was the creation of a multipurpose-use space that could serve as a reception and storage area, as well as an additional living space when furnished accordingly, i.e., as a “summer parlor”.

The centrally located lower passage, usually a fairly wide hallway in the larger houses extending from the front to the rear of the house, provided air circulation in the summer months and a convenient area adjacent to

the parlor and other rooms, such as a separate dining room in the wealthier houses, for year-round storage of additional furniture that might occasionally be needed in those rooms. Surviving household inventories reveal that the passage could be minimally furnished while serving as the reception area for visitors and, at other times, could contain a wider variety of furnishings suggesting use as a functional living space. However, unlike other living spaces in the house, the entry passage was subject to seasonal restrictions, because invariably it lacked a source of heat. In the depth of winter this space would be brutally cold and uninhabitable - a space to pass through quickly to the next warm room. There is some historical evidence, however, to suggest that a few home owners in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries - possibly even planter George Mason - heated the entry passage by installing a cast iron stove for the winter months. Architectural research conducted at George Mason’s Virginia home - Gunston Hall - for example, has uncovered evidence of a stove pipe opening above the bed chamber door adjoining the entry passage, as well as ghost marks and signs of charring on the passage floor, suggesting the use at some point of a cast iron stove to warm the passage. Of possible significance is a cast iron stove plate unearthed in the cellar of the house in 1975 that tentatively has been dated to the late 18th or early 19th century. Other documentary sources also suggest the use of a stove in the

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passage was more prevalent than originally thought. In December 1821, Jane Haines residing in Philadelphia noted in her diary that she was “sitting in the Hall [entry passage] which is made comfortable by a coal fire in the stove”. Phebe Ann Beach Lyman of Cherry Valley, New York advised her sister that mutual friends “had established their living quarters by their stove in the entry for the duration of cold weather”. These few examples of winter use of the entry passage notwithstanding, it is likely far more typical that the 18th and 19th century entry passage was uninhabitable during the winter season.

THE SUMMER PARLOR

It was during the warmer months of the year that the entry passage came to fully exemplify the multipurpose use concept. This passage for many Americans became the “Summer Parlor” as well as an entry, reception, and storage area. Interestingly, the center passage design, while recognized as a means of ventilation - or an “aircraft in summer” - was not originally invented with that seasonal purpose in mind. It was actually an inherited design feature of English tradition, probably having more to do with establishing a separation between public and private spaces of the house, which climate considerations in North America, especially in the south, favored its retention throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A number of furnishing inventories of Virginia gentry houses as early as the mid-eighteenth century show these entry passages containing a wider range of furniture and utilitarian items than its sole use as a reception space or even a storage area, would suggest. In 1760, planter Gawen Corbin of Westmoreland County, Virginia had in his passage “a couch, twelve chairs, three tables, a corner cupboard, a candle stand and a harpsichord”. A year later, Nathaniel Chapman’s house in Charles County, Maryland contained “1 couch, 1 doz. chairs, 4 large maps, 2 small [maps], 1 large walnut table, 1 spying glass [and] 1 black walnut Case w/21 bottles” in the entry passage. Richard Chew’s inventory dated 30 October 1761 shows the passage in his house in Anne Arundle County, Maryland contained “6 flagg

Bottom’d chairs, 1 glass lanthorn, 1 mahogany table, 1 old gun, 1 spy glass, 1 case w/pickle bottles, 1 chest and wash stand, 1 man’s saddle, and 4 old Razors”. In 1794, Doctor Richard Smith’s passage in Prince George’s County, Maryland contained “1 small square walnut table, 2 large Mahogany walnut tables with oil covers [painted canvas cloths?], 1 round walnut tea table, 2 old pictures - some broke, 2 Green arm chairs [windsors?], and 2 old leather bottom chairs”. The contents of these inventories indicate these ground floor passages were likely employed throughout much of the year as multipurpose-use spaces, especially for daily living during the uncomfortable summer season. This space served as a place where the family could take their meals, children could play and take lessons, and friends and neighbors could be informally entertained. In 1753, William Fairfax recorded that Virginians sit in their entry passage and “frequently dine and sup” there. One diarist noted in July 1774, “We took our seats in a cool passage where the Company were sitting”. Reviewing household furnishing inventories has obvious analytical limitations. The contents of any space shown at the time of the owner’s death do not necessarily reflect their use and location at an earlier time or different season of the year. Whether specific furnishings as well as specific amounts of furniture were considered more essential for daily living by one owner as opposed to another, further complicates the analytical process. While inventories known to have been taken during the summer months are probably a good indicator of the space’s use at that specific time, those taken during the cooler seasons of the year, however, may not provide sufficient evidence of how the space was utilized during the summer season, especially if furnishings, other than those routinely stored in the passage, were moved to other areas of the house when the space could not be comfortably occupied.

When entry passages were utilized strictly as reception spaces, a minimal amount of furnishings, invariably chairs, were clearly noted in the inventories. Thomas Hornsby, a well-to-do planter furnished the passage of his townhouse in York, Virginia in 1772 with 1 table, 1 screen, 2 chairs, and 2 fire buckets. Equally sparse furnishings were found in the entry passage of General Thomas Nelson’s



manson house in York, Virginia in 1789: “1 glass lantern, 1 looking glass, [and] 1 pc carpeting”. Thomas Addison, Esqr. of Prince George’s County, Maryland had in his passage in March 1775: “A Couch, A large Black Walnut Table, A Passage Lanthorn, A Prospect glass, [and] 12 Windsor Chairs”.

Early American families came to appreciate the practical advantages of the center hall as a refuge from the heat of summer. By the mid-eighteenth century wealthier families were spending increasing portions of their time there. In 1732, William Grove described the typical early Georgian period house as having “a broad Stayrcase [sic] with a passage thro [sic] the house in the middle which is the Summer hall and Draws the air”. Philip Vickers Fithian noted in his diary in July 1774 that in visiting George Turberville in Westmoreland County, Virginia he found him seated “in a cool passage”. On visiting the Tayloes at Mt. Airy that same summer, Fithian recalled finding “the young ladies...in the Hall playing the Harpsicord” [sic]. In 1775, William Lee writing to Landon Carter of Sabine Hall plantation mentioned a place “to repose on in a hot afternoon in ye cool passage”.

Sarah Nourse, residing in Berkeley County [West] Virginia, noted the hot weather in her diary in July 1783, and complained of her “discomfort from the heat and humidity”. If breezes allowed, she sat “...in the ground-floor passage - dressed only in a shift or undergarment, sometimes taking her meals there”. When refreshing air movement ceased, she sought relief “in the cool cellar”, where she reported “working, dining and occasionally, having tea”. The entry passage could be a convenient storage space year round, where chairs and folded or disassembled dining tables often lined the walls. Since dining rooms often served as family sitting rooms, and sitting rooms served as “dining parlors” for the family [except in the wealthiest homes where a separate dining room existed], it was often necessary to store dining tables in the passage from where they could be retrieved when needed, even on a daily basis. Elizabeth Wirt of Richmond, Virginia suggested to her husband in 1812 that “two or three tables could be moved to the front entry, which would leave space in the dining room for a couch”,

clear evidence of the multipurpose use of both the dining room and the entry passage.

Other possible uses for the ground floor passage include sleeping and entertainment - including dancing. At least one wealthy Virginian, Landon Carter, sought the cool center passage for night time sleeping. In 1773, he contemplated purchasing “one of Gale’s Patten [sic] bedsteads...for my Passage in Summer”. Gentleman John Minor of Fairfax County, Virginia had in his “Passage” in August 1753 “ a bed, a pr. [of] sheets, 2 quilts, 2 bolsters, 2 pillows, Curtins Valens Teaster cloth, bedstead Cord & hide, a large chest, a gun”. [Note: Both inventories confirm the passages in question were on the ground floor.] The additional use of the entry passage for dancing during large entertainments has been suggested by Virginia traveler Thomas Anburey. In 1779, he recorded such use in the “saloon” or passage at Tuckahoe plantation. “These saloons...were used not only as a cool retreat from the scorching and sultry heat of the climate [but as] an occasional ball-room”. The eighteenth century multipurpose room-use concept as it applied to the ground floor entry passage of early American houses is a relic of the past. Today this space serves solely as a reception area, its furnishings essentially decorative props. Modern heating and cooling appliances have all but eliminated the need for seasonal room use. The “Summer Parlor” is no more.