



# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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### *The Secondary Staircase in the Carlyle House: A Rarity in Side Passage Design*

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“ A good house should always have two staircases, one for shew [sic] and the use of company, the other for domesticks.”

Issac Ware, 17561

In many eighteenth century Virginia houses a secondary staircase, usually situated in the “private” or domestic side of the house and not visible to visitors, provided discreet access to each level of the house, frequently including the cellar/servants’ hall, the ground and upper floors, and often the attic spaces where servants may have slept. The staircase was also often located near an exterior entrance providing access to the kitchen yard. This “hidden” staircase was essential to maintaining the level of gentility sought by the refined Virginia gentry. It was by way of this “discreet” passage that servants carried arduous chamber-pots and soiled linen on a daily basis to avoid offending the sensibilities of visitors or the rest of the family. Food for daily meals and for formal entertaining also would have been conveyed via this staircase. Family members also likely utilized this convenient avenue between floors to avoid unexpected contact with visitors to the house. Most importantly, it also served to limit the routine movement of servants up and down the more formal main staircase. And as one architectural historian has noted, this early Southern architectural design exhibited conflicting cultural values.<sup>2</sup> While the gentry class, as a whole, relied heavily upon indentured servants and particularly black slaves to maintain their perceived elite social status, some also created the means of isolating circulation routes within the house used by these domestic servants specifically to minimize the number of face to face encounters with family members as well as with visitors. A hidden secondary staircase provided that means.

A study of early Virginia houses of the gentry

class reveals that while design elements frequently found in English pattern books were used by carpenters, brick layers and home owners to replicate certain architectural details popular in Britain, actual floor plans did not in every case originate from pattern books and varied widely in America. Such books “rarely served as models for entire houses.”<sup>3</sup> While basic Georgian design elements generally prevailed in most elite houses, the size and location of specific rooms, the main staircase and any secondary staircases remained the prerogative of the owner/builder. As one expert has commented: Although the dwellings have common origins in the vernacular tradition of England, the Virginia dwellings developed largely on their own.<sup>4</sup> This American vernacular form of design was clearly evident in Virginia gentry houses in the eighteenth century.

The interior features of the *Carlyle House* follow basic Georgian design guidelines, i.e., four ground floor rooms with a central passage containing the main staircase separating the public from the private sides of the house. However, a closer study of Virginia houses of similar design and period, also reveals a number of variations to this basic design pattern. Of particular note is the presence or absence of a side passage with a secondary staircase, and if present, its varying location and design.

Surprisingly, several very prominent surviving gentry houses in Virginia of this period contain no secondary staircases at all: *Carter’s*

#### **CARLYLE HOUSE**

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Grove in James City County; *Westover* in Charles City County; and *The Wythe House* in Williamsburg. Others such as the *Governor's Palace* in Williamsburg; *Nomini Hall* in Westmoreland County; and *Berkeley* in Charles City County had their secondary staircases situated at the rear of the house or concealed adjacent to an interior chimney stack. Only three Virginia houses - *Carlyle House*, *Gunston Hall*, and *Sabine Hall* \*- appear to have been built with side passages containing an enclosed secondary winder staircase. Clearly, side passages with secondary staircases were the exception rather than the rule in Virginia.

**\*Note:** In the early nineteenth century the side passage and subsequently, the enclosed staircase in *Sabine Hall* in Richmond County, Virginia were eliminated to enlarge the adjacent parlor/library. The arrows denote the locations of the original side passage wall and staircase.<sup>5</sup>

One of the earliest depictions of the side passage plan appears in *Abraham Swan's A Collection of Designs*, published in England in 1757. Although the plan shows the side passage, with a secondary staircase, the staircase is an open, straight runner as opposed to an enclosed winder version. Also contrary to both the *Carlyle House* and *Gunston Hall* plans, the *Swan* side passage gives direct access to only one of the two rooms on what was likely the domestic side of the house.

Comparing the first floor plans of *Carlyle House* and *Gunston Hall* reveals striking similarities. An obvious exception is the location of the side passages being reversed, i.e., on the right of the central passage in *Carlyle House* and to the left in *Gunston Hall*; both in conformity with their respective private side of the house. In addition, the enclosed staircase in the *Carlyle House* intrudes into John Carlyle's study, (as currently interpreted) whereas in *Gunston Hall* the enclosed staircase occupies a corner of the master bed chamber. Both side passages provide direct access to each of the adjacent rooms, as well as access to the detached kitchen and other exterior support buildings, thereby restricting servant access to the domestic side of the house.

One of the mysteries surrounding the construction of John Carlyle's house is who designed and built it? Did John Carlyle personally plan his

house based on either firsthand knowledge of houses in his native England; on floor plans in English pattern books; on the knowledge of skilled indentured craftsmen; or on the expertise of a professional architect?

We know that John Carlyle was responsible for final design decisions and from surviving correspondence with his brother George that he was actively involved in the overall construction effort. He is known to have employed at least one indentured servant, Teba Wilson, to procure "the Materials for My Building."<sup>6</sup> It is likely John Carlyle hired additional skilled craftsmen known to be in the area such as carpenters, joiners, a glazier, painters and bricklayers, despite what he implied in his letter to his brother that he used primarily unskilled slave labor.<sup>7</sup> He may indeed have utilized his enslaved labor force to construct the sand stone shell of the house, but the sophistication of the finish work suggests employment of skilled labor. Certainly, the elaborate paneling and decorative carving in the formal dining room alone would indicate the use of highly skilled craftsmen.

The interior layout of the first floor of *Carlyle House* was likely a combination of two sources - previous personal knowledge on the part of John Carlyle, perhaps from his 1750-51 trip to England and Scotland, and secondly, the knowledge and experience of indentured, skilled workers he may have employed. Thomas Waterman [The Mansions of Virginia 1706-1776] speculated that Virginian John Ariss, who studied architecture in England and returned to the Tidewater area by 1750, may have been the architect employed by John Carlyle, since both the exterior facade and first floor plan of *Mt. Airy*, a Maryland manor house designed by Ariss, are similar to *Carlyle House*.<sup>8</sup> However, there is one glaring discrepancy; *Mt. Airy* had no secondary staircase or side passage. As the Fauber Garbee restoration report of 1980 states: "...he [Ariss] remains an elusive figure in American architecture. Until further evidence comes to light, it will be impossible to conclusively tie Ariss to Carlyle House." "Available information points to John Carlyle as the primary force behind the design and supervision of construction."<sup>9</sup>

It also appears unlikely that John Carlyle, if



he served as his own architect, used pattern books. The 1780 inventory of his library holdings does not include such notable publications, and it is doubtful that he would have discarded these valuable books. And it is just as unlikely that any local craftsmen he may have employed would have owned copies of these expensive design books at this early date. As one writer has pointed out, even William Buckland, the skilled carpenter/joiner employed by George Mason and hired directly from England, did not own such design books until much later in his career when he could afford them. Rather than published designs, Buckland's previous six-year apprenticeship in England probably provided him with hands-on knowledge of the latest architectural designs. In addition, English pattern books are not known to have arrived in North America prior to 1751, and then in very limited numbers.<sup>10</sup> Timing also would rule out any role played by *Swan's Collection of Designs*; *Swan's* book was not published until five years after *Carlyle House* was built. In reality, "Most colonial buildings owed their shape to the artisans who built them, or their owners, or some sort of collaboration between the two."<sup>11</sup>

Similar speculation pertains to George Mason's *Gunston Hall*. Like John Carlyle, Mason also paid close attention to the construction of his house. In a letter written in 1763, he wrote: "When I built my House I was at pains to measure all the Lime and Sand as my mortar was made up..."<sup>12</sup> In addition, Mason hired two highly skilled indentured workers directly from England to work on his house, William Buckland and William Bernard Sears, a Master carver. It is generally believed that they arrived in Virginia in the fall of 1755 after the foundation, exterior walls and the basic interior layout had already been completed, presumably including the side passage.<sup>13</sup> According to one architectural historian, Buckland may have suggested the enclosed secondary staircase to facilitate private communication between the Masons' bed chamber and their children's rooms on the second floor.<sup>14</sup> If this was indeed the case, then it would strongly suggest the side passage already existed as part of the original design and the enclosed winder stair case was subsequently added. The question remains: Who was responsible for *Gunston Hall's* ground floor

design?

The striking similarities [almost mirror images] between the ground floor plans of *Gunston Hall* and *Carlyle House* suggest that George Mason may have based his first floor plan on what John Carlyle had already built several years earlier. Both men participated in local political affairs, were trustees of the town of Alexandria, and likely socialized as well. In the absence of expensive architectural pattern books even among the Virginia elite, informal conversations among social peers likely provided the means of sharing knowledge of house design and construction.<sup>15</sup> It is indeed plausible that George Mason and John Carlyle had such discussions and Mason recognized the advantages of a side passage in the domestic side of the house. Unfortunately, neither Mason nor Carlyle family documentation confirms this.

Endnotes:

- 1 Ware, Issac. *A Complete Body of Architecture*, London, 1756.
- 2 Wells, Camille. "The Planter's Prospect: Houses, Outbuildings, and Rural Landscapes in Eighteenth Century Virginia", *Winterthur Portfolio*, 28, no. 1, 1993.
- 3 Coffin, Lewis A. & Holden, Arthur C. *Brick Architecture of the Colonial Period in Maryland and Virginia*. Architectural Book Publishing Co. New York, 1919.
- 4 Reiff, Daniel D. *Small Georgian Houses in England and Virginia, Origins and Development Through the 1750s*. University of Delaware Press, 1986.
- 5 Rasmussen, William M. "Sabine Hall: A Classical Villa in Virginia", 1980. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Delaware. Also, Waterman, Thomas T. *The Mansions of Virginia 1706-1776*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1945.
- 6 Mooney, Barbara Burlison. *Prodigy Houses of Virginia - Architecture and the Native Elite*. University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville & London, 2008.
- 7 Munson, James D. *Col. John Carlyle, Gent.* Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, 1986.
- 8 Morrill, Penny. *Who Built Alexandria? - Architects in Alexandria 1750-1900*. Carlyle House Historic Park, Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, 1979.
9. "The John Carlyle House Restoration Report for the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority" by Fauber Garbee, Inc.,



Architects. Forest, Virginia, July 1980.

10. Reiff, Daniel D.

11. Dalzell, Jr., Robert F. & Dalzell, Lee B. George Washington's Mount Vernon -At Home in Revolutionary America. Oxford Press, 1998.

12. Mooney, Barbara Burlison.

13. Buckland - The Master Builder of the 18th Century , The Board of Regents of Gunston Hall, 1978.

14. Mooney, Barbara Burlison.

15. Mooney, Barbara Burlison.