

Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

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Coffee: The American Beverage

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In America there is an intense love affair with coffee that has begun to spill across the entire

globe. On every other street corner in American cities there is a coffee shop, whether it be a Starbucks or a smaller establishment. The roots of this passionate relationship lie in the history of coffee in the western world and its place in the American colonies.

Coffee, like tea was a relatively new commodity to the Englishmen in the eighteenth century. The beverage was discovered by Europeans through their trade with the Turks at the end of the sixteenth century, who made the brew from the fruit they called "coava." The drink was made by boiling the ground, roasted beans until the water achieved the desired darkness and taste.

The coffee bean and beverage were brought to England in the seventeenth century and popularized by students at Oxford in 1654. In the latter half of the same century, coffee, and Coffee-Houses, were introduced to the English Colonies in North America. The drink quickly took hold among the colonial gentry and soon rivaled tea and alcohol in popularity.

Coffee's popularity in the American colonies, and subsequently in the United States, was almost certainly boosted by the taxes imposed on tea. This might have been because it was produced much nearer to the colonies and would have been by far cheaper even without the taxes on tea. The real

reason remains hazy, but whatever the case, by the eve of the Revolution it was a much desired commodity. So much so that in 1777, a number of Boston women raided a food warehouse to get coffee beans back in their cupboards.

Even the Carlyle household was a part of the ever growing market for the brew. Based on items listed in John Carlyle's probate inventory, it can be safely said that he consumed coffee or, at the very least, provided the beverage for his guests. Among other kitchen-wares and China are two sets of cups and saucers specifically for coffee, fancy and plain coffee pots, and a coffee mill. All of these items would be necessary to prepare and serve coffee. From these items and



Coffee pot in the Carlyle House collection.

extant copies of receipt books it is possible to recreate some of the methods and means of creating the beverage as it would have been served under the command of his wives and daughters Sarah and Anne.

Much like tea, coffee would

CARLYLE HOUSE

*Jim Bartlinski, Director
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A coffee roaster.

have been kept under lock and key by the lady of the house, and the cook would be required to obtain the beans from her. Because the beans would last longer in their unprocessed state they would have been purchased and stored green. The cook would take them back to the kitchen to prepare the beverage; the first part of this preparation would be

to roast the beans. One of the items that is not included in John Carlyle's probate inventory is a coffee roaster which appears in inventories and archaeology from the period. Lacking that item however, the person making the coffee would have roasted the beans in a pan until they began to darken and smoke.

The roasted beans would then have been ground into powder in a coffee mill, like the one that is listed in Carlyle's inventory. This powder and a measured amount of water would be placed in a kettle and boiled together until the brew was made. The grounds would be removed and the coffee put into one of the many coffee pots that Carlyle had. The probate inventory lists five different coffee pots, each of which would have been used for different occasions. The silver one would have been used for social occasions, as well might have the copper coffee pot. Each of the coffee pots likely only held a few cupfuls, which would have suited the two sets of Delft and China coffee cups.



An illustration of a coffee plant, from An Historical Account of Coffee, by John Ellis, 1774

Coffee prepared like this in the home was taken as a part of the breakfast or another meal, as



An illustration of coffeehouse life, from Coffee, It's History, Cultivation and Uses by Robert Hewitt, 1872

well as in social settings. An evening or afternoon gathering, what we would call a "Tea" might include coffee among the beverages served. Coffee, along with tea, wine and punch, would also have been offered after a late evening supper, or throughout the course of a ball or party.

Coffee was also frequently consumed by gentlemen in Coffee-Houses, which ran the gamut from a place to consume beverages, headquarters for merchants and the staging ground for politics. Modeled after the houses that were established in London; there were numerous Coffee-Houses throughout the colonies, including in Williamsburg and Fredericksburg in Virginia. The most prevalent houses, however, were in Boston, Philadelphia and New York. It is possible that the Dutch, whose coffee-culture differed slightly from the British, brought coffee to New York first, but the British most certainly established the New England Coffee-Houses that made the beverage so popular. Into the end of the eighteenth century, colonial Coffee-Houses were particularly popular as civic forums, more so than taverns it seems. These Coffee-Houses remained fashionable well into the nineteenth century and laid the seeds for coffee shops like Starbucks that are recognized the world-over today.



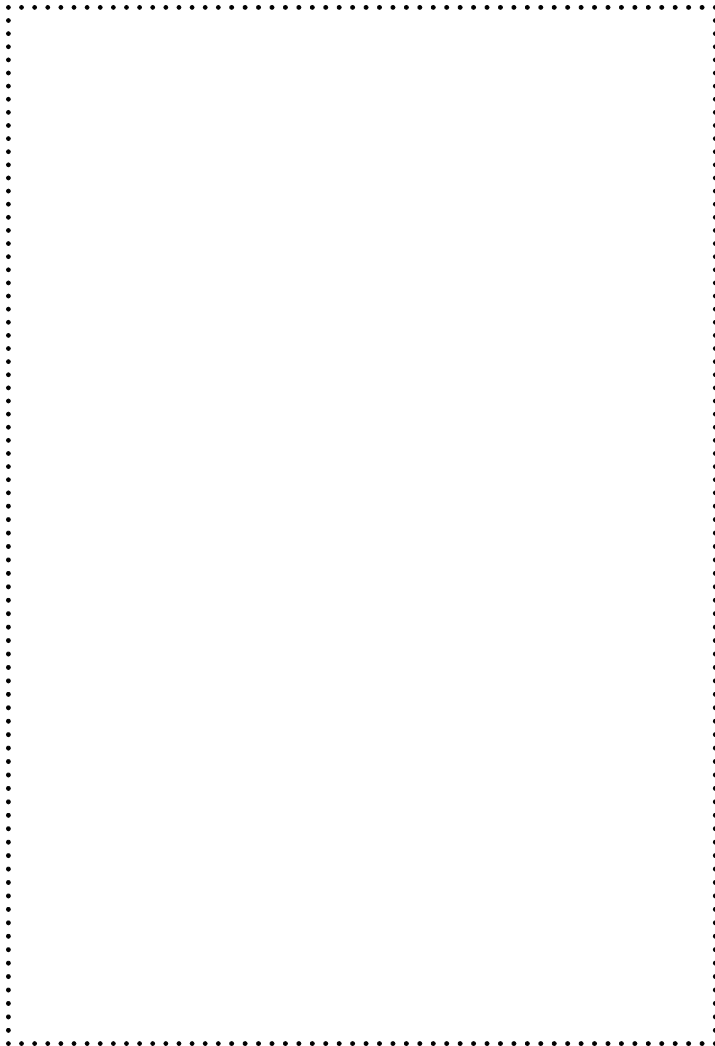
While buried in the mysteries of daily life in the colonies, the popularity of coffee in the American colonies is easily separated from the mysteries of food in history. From the time it was introduced, through the tumultuous years of the Revolution and the decades after, coffee was a favored beverage of American residents. The relationship between Americans and their coffee, combined with other factors, resulted in a very peculiar food culture which produces phenomena like coffee shops on every corner.

Works Cited

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Thank You to Our Gardeners

The Carlyle House garden brings rest and enjoyment to the thousands of people who use it each year. While we employ a part-time



horticulturalist, the hard work and time it takes to keep the garden looking beautiful is done by volunteers.

