

Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

Memories of the Carlyle Apartments: Last Days of Mansion House Hotel

By Jane Coughran



Jocelyn Granet, c. 1967

In June 1967, Jocelyn Granet, a young college student on a research break from classes, moved to this area and began looking for an affordable apartment with good public transportation to the Library of Congress and the waitress job in Washington that would finance her research stay. A newspaper ad plus friends living nearby led her to an old building in downtown

Alexandria which met her criteria, and for \$80 a month she rented a fourth floor room and a half apartment with kitchen and bath. What's more, the rent included all utilities except phone, the apartment came with old but comfortable furniture and adequate kitchen appliances and the bathroom featured an 1880s vintage pedestal sink and lovely claw footed tub on which Jocelyn immediately painted red toenails. Only the lack of a phone presented a bit of a problem. The Carlyle Apartments had never been wired for phones--other tenants made do with a pay phone in the lobby--so she had to pay extra for that tricky installation. But soon she had her own private phone which immensely pleased her concerned parents.

From the outset Jocelyn was aware of and somewhat puzzled by her new home's faded grandeur, although initially she was unfamiliar with the building's illustrious history as James Green's Mansion House, once lauded as one of the largest and finest hotels in the South. Or how its glory days between its opening in 1849 and Green's death in 1880 had been interrupted by four years of Civil War, during which

it served as a Union Army hospital. Now the enormous interior stairwell with its overhead skylight, formed by the glass sided cupola atop the building, and its lattice-like railings that allowed more light into the hallways seemed overly grand for the shabby little apartments lining those corridors. "It was like the grand staircase of Harry Potter's Hogwart School but without the adjacent great hall," she said recently.



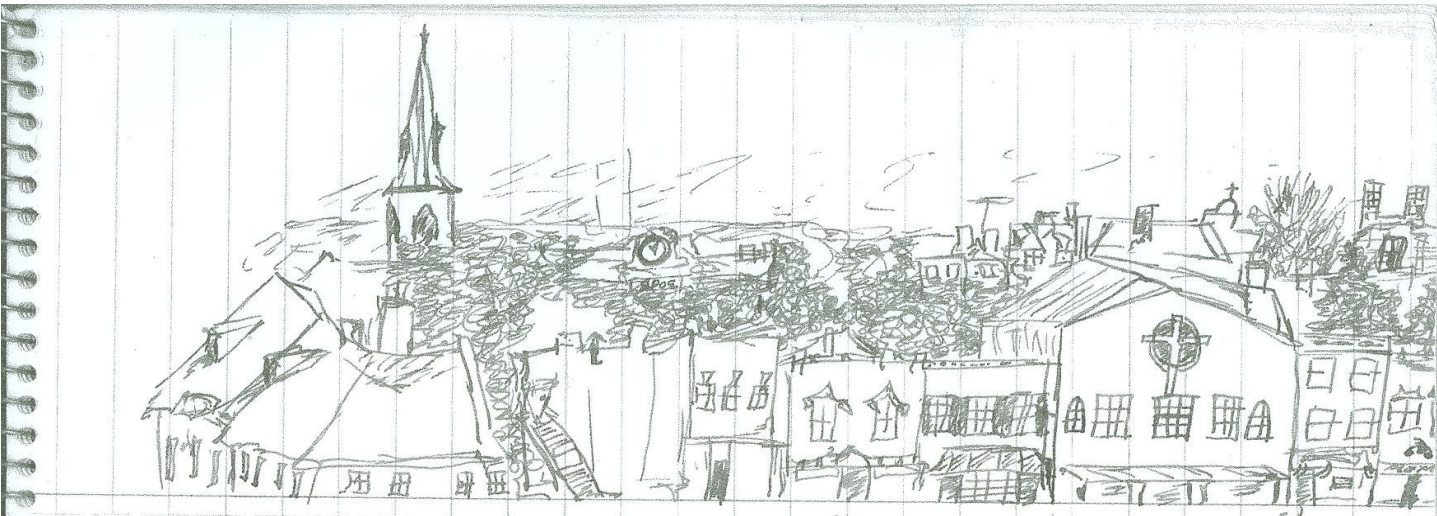
The Carlyle Apartments in the 1960s. Jocelyn's apartment was on the left side of the center section's top floor.

CARLYLE HOUSE

Sarah Coster, Site Administrator

Helen Wirka, Site Specialist

Lacey Villiva, Education Assistant



View from the Fire escape of 129 N. Fairfax St.
looking south — Sept 9, 1967

"a soft, grey day"

Construction for Market Square
was still in progress

HERE

Salvation Army - 316
Paints - hardware
Pawn shop

Carlyle

Jocelyn sketched the south side of King Street's 300 block from her fourth floor fire escape. The large Salvation Army building, with cross on its front, was flanked on the left by a real estate office and antique shop and on the right by a paint and hardware store and a pawn shop with the traditional three black balls above its door. Visible in the background are the steeple of St. Mary's Church, the clock atop the Elks Club and the cross atop St. Paul's Church.. By 1970 the only King Street building pictured that was still standing was at the corner of King and South Fairfax Streets. Its neighbors and the buildings in front of Market Square had all fallen victim to urban renewal.

However, there were mysterious closed doors on the main floor near the foot of the stairwell which, when opened, revealed large empty rooms, gloomy relics from the 19th century when "the most select wines and liquors, oysters and other delicacies of the season" were served in the elegant dining room and nattily attired gentlemen enjoyed the tables in the billiard room. On higher floors even more puzzling doors within many apartments were permanently locked, an indication that much larger hotel suites had been chopped up into smaller rental units, possibly when the old hotel became an apartment house in 1906. Once those suites had probably been carpeted, but no longer. When Jocelyn moved into

her apartment she was told that its old linoleum flooring would be replaced with carpet but when she returned home she found the new floor cover was just new linoleum. "They were very keen on dark brown linoleum," she explained. "All the wide hallways were covered with it."

Carlyle Apartments may have been well past its prime but what it lacked in amenities it more than made up for in character. The Mansion House's original ornate portico was long gone but the two metal fire escapes adorning the building's Fairfax Street facade served as crude balconies from which tenants could take the sun, catch a refreshing breeze



and view the passing parade below. Jocelyn could access a fire escape from both her kitchen and bedroom alcove windows, and on hot, humid evenings she would climb out on it and watch the nightly arrival of the paddy wagon at the police headquarters across the street (now part of Alexandria's City Hall). "There was always quite a little ruckus," she recalled, describing the behavior of those just arrested. "Usually a lot of yelling and occasionally a fight. It was quite a show." The building's facade also featured several shops and businesses in the street level arcade-like bays--Jocelyn remembered a law office and a locksmith--and a filigreed cast iron balcony above the bays that was supported by a series of large, elaborately carved mahogany brackets. Two entrances into the building. Numbers 127 and 129 North Fairfax Street both led to stairs that accessed the upper floors as well as the grand central staircase.



Ornate mahogany brackets supported Carlyle Apartments' front balcony.

Behind the building, wedged between it and the front of Carlyle House was another outdoor area, a small grassy courtyard guarded by two stone lions that flanked the mansion's rarely used front steps. The

courtyard itself was lined with locked doors leading into the vast but off limits area of the apartment building's basement. It also contained clothes lines which supplemented the dryer in the basement laundry room and a few lawn chairs where tenants could sit and visit. Most tenants were at least semi-transient---they paid by the month and never stayed for long. One young woman, unmarried and pregnant, had apparently been exiled by her family to Carlyle Apartments to await the birth of her child.

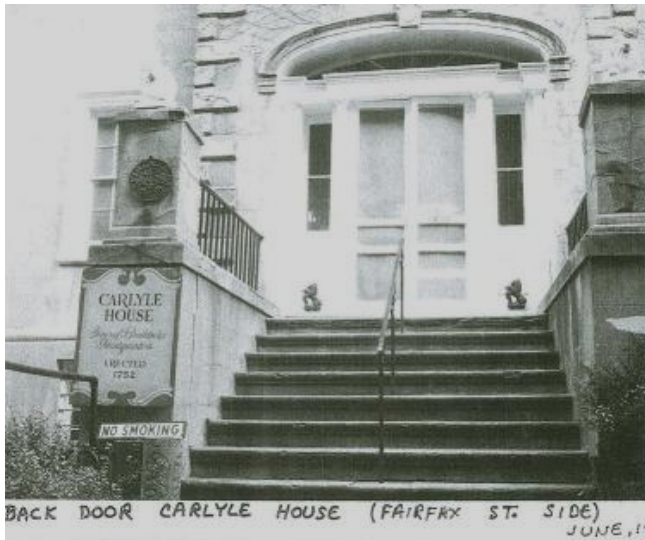
Across the small patch of grass John Carlyle's former home stood like a ghostly forgotten sentinel, uninhabited and accessible only through a long, dark green painted tunnel that connected the apartment

building's basement with the mansion's present basement exhibit room. Visitors wishing to see the museum Lloyd Schaeffer had opened in Carlyle House had to enter the apartment building, pay a minimal fee, sign a visitors book and receive a little brochure and directions on how to navigate the labyrinth leading to it. Often they were also given a flashlight to illuminate their dark passage and the unlit museum beyond. However, tenants of Carlyle Apartments could visit the mansion for free--the kindly woman who manned the desk and served as the building's on-site manager saw to that--and Jocelyn, took advantage. She was writing her senior thesis on the French and Indian Wars and her interest in Carlyle House's connection to it and General Edward Braddock far outweighed the dark circuitous trip.



The back of Carlyle Apartments loomed above the front steps of Carlyle House. A pair of lions guarded the small grassy courtyard between the two buildings.

The Carlyle Apartments outlasted Jocelyn Granet's 1967 departure by less than six years. Downtown Alexandria, after decades of stagnation, decline and decay, had finally started to awaken. A few years earlier, in an attempt to revitalize the historic community, the city had embraced urban renewal and razed many of the old buildings lining both sides of King Street between Fairfax and St. Asaph Streets and filling what is now Market Square. More destruction in the name of progress would follow. But Historic Preservation had become the new battle cry and it was starting to focus on John Carlyle's crumbling home and, to a lesser degree, on the old hotel turned apartment house which had hidden the mansion from view for more than 100



Carlyle House's rarely used front entrance, (misabeled as back door) featured James Green's wide fanlight and two side-lights as well as the two lions.

years. In the end, after much heated controversy, one was saved and restored, the other wasn't. The Carlyle Apartments' last tenants were evicted in April 1972 and in early 1973 the building, except for the old Bank of Alexandria wing, was demolished.

Sources

Interview with Jocelyn Granet Lindsay

Fauber, J. Everette Jr., F.S.I.A. "Preliminary Program for Restoration. The Carlyle House, Alexandria, VA for Northern Virginia Regional Parks Authority." Lynchburg, VA, 10 April 1972

Additional sources in Carlyle House Restoration and Bank Restoration files.

Thank you, Jane Coughran, for this wonderful article which brings to life a very different Alexandria!



One of the long hallways of the Carlyle Apartments. Notice the brown linoleum so vivid in Ms. Granet's memories.