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**CARLYLE
HOUSE**

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Docent Dispatch

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Carlyle House: An Early Docent Remembers

By Henry R. Desmarais

I've long thought that docents at Carlyle House Historic Park, even those proudly sporting 5, 10, and 15-year service pins, would benefit from learning more about the early days of the site's latest incarnation as a museum. After some cajoling, a knowledgeable source of information about those days, Janice Magnuson, recently agreed to be



interviewed for this docent newsletter article. She also shared copies of some early docent newsletters.

Janice has faithfully served as a weekend docent at Carlyle House since May of 1976, now almost 40 years ago. This means she began giving tours only a few months after the official dedication of the museum, a Bicentennial event she sadly missed. Janice says she had read a call for volunteers at Carlyle House in one of the local papers and the opportunity nicely jived with her longstanding passion for American History.

Unfortunately, Janice does not have very detailed memories of her earliest days at Carlyle House. However, she does recall that the house was largely empty at that time, meaning that tours

necessarily focused on the people who had lived there, not on their possessions. Janice likens that situation to today's Drayton Hall, an exceedingly well preserved 18th century plantation house just outside of Charleston, South Carolina, where tours of an empty, Palladian house focus on its exquisite architectural features and the family history of its occupants. Some things at Carlyle House, however, have not changed much, if at all, including typical tour length, tours conducted on the hour and half-hour, and the museum's hours of operation. Also, as is currently the case, early docents wore their regular "street" clothes when giving tours, although some, like Janice, donned home-made colonial costumes for certain special events. Janice also remembers that docents could choose the path their tours took, and she elected to climb the servants' stairs all the way to the second floor, and only later proceed to the main level of the house.

Janice recalls that the early Carlyle House paid staff also functioned as weekend staff, and joked that she frequently wondered when they did their laundry. Janice ascribes much of what went on in the early days of the museum to a very tight budget (something that may not be all that different today). For example, Janice

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recalls helping to construct some of the museum's display cases. In addition, sewing and hanging the curtains for the green bed now found in the girls' room was a docent-staff project, as was painting the first summer house (its replacement is often now called the gazebo, but this is apparently a later term for such a structure).

While short on specifics, Janice acknowledges that the gardens surrounding Carlyle House have evolved considerably over the years. A docent newsletter from 1988 that she shared describes numerous, upcoming changes to the front yard in order to return it to its presumptive 18th century appearance, including the removal or relocation of inappropriate foundation and other plants (for example, a dozen boxwoods, a holly and some azaleas) and the planting of two lines of Virginia red cedar, thereby producing a "somewhat plainer" landscape. Of course, there have also been many changes inside the house. In fact, Janice says that it is the many, gradual changes and additions to the house over the years that make it difficult for her to dredge up specific memories of her earliest days as a volunteer.

Janice notes that through the years she has generally had very positive experiences with Carlyle House visitors. She could not recall a single difficult or unusual situation; for example, no one has fainted or had a medical emergency or an accident during one of her many tours. As we chatted, she fondly recalled the following: a special tea-focused exhibit in the early 1980s, visited by none other than Mr. Twinning of Twinings tea company fame; a 1984 CBS mini-series on George Washington, which was

partially filmed at Carlyle House (starring Barry Bostwick as the young George Washington and James Mason as General Braddock, as well as Lloyd Bridges and Patty Duke, among others); the 1990s-era video, *Don't Get Weary*, which focuses on the enslaved people at Carlyle House and which was made possible by a National Endowment for the Humanities grant; and festive Carlyle House holiday parties held in the Dining Room--where docents and other guests were even permitted to eat and drink! Most importantly, Janice cherishes the close friendships she developed with the early museum administrators, Susan Borchardt and Julia Claypool, whose brains she regularly picked during her weekend shifts at the museum.

As my questions multiplied, Janice would jump up in search of a newspaper



Janice with Henry Desmarais, Carole Smith, and Curator Helen Wirka at the Chesapeake House Conference.

clipping, an old photo or other memento, and she admits to having a very large collection of docent newsletters. I suspect her house contains a treasure trove of Carlyle House-related information, which I encouraged her to organize and make available to a broader audience. By the way, early docent newsletters talk of such things as a buzzer system, which docents carried in case of a medical

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emergency or other trouble and whose use was promised to bring “a staff member on the run,” and of docents being asked to tape one of their tours for review by Carlyle House staff.

I was intrigued to learn that during her shifts at Carlyle House, Janice carries an envelope filled with quotes, pictures, wallpaper samples and information of all kinds, which she uses to enliven her tours. This envelope even contains stickers for well-behaving children. She calls it her “show and tell package.” Among its contents are pictures of Marble Hill House, located just outside of London, a place which Janice visited years ago. Its exterior closely resembles Carlyle House and it was originally built to house a mistress of King George II.

Janice also told me that she values the flexibility granted to Carlyle House docents, who have lots of information available to them but no mandated script. She also finds the touch baskets in the house very useful. Janice greatly appreciates the social opportunities provided by Carlyle House volunteer work. She especially enjoys talking with the weekend museum aides, which she characterized as enthusiastic, young people, most of whom are in the museum field.

It is clear that Janice Magnuson remains as enthusiastic as ever, even after nearly 40 years as a docent, a length of service she never expected. She still looks forward to learning new things and regularly attends symposia, workshops and lectures at places such as Colonial Williamsburg and Mount Vernon. Janice anxiously awaits the upcoming PBS American drama

program, *Mercy Street*, which will air in winter 2016. This six-part series will focus on the Mansion House Hospital, which stood on the Carlyle House front lawn, and the Civil War-era doctors, nurses, and Green family members who lived and worked there. According to a PBS press release, the series, which began production this past April, is being shot in the Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia, areas. Perhaps someday, there will be a PBS series on Carlyle House docents; if so, it will obviously need to feature Janice Magnuson and her many years of service to the museum. Until that day comes, Janice probably has enough time to give a few (thousand) more tours. Very good news for Carlyle House!