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**CARLYLE  
HOUSE**

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# Docent Dispatch

September 2015

## *Interpreting the Objects of Carlyle House: The Educator's Perspective*

By Vanessa Herndon

One of the advantages of working at a historic house museum is that we never run out of stories to tell. From the family to the architecture we are able to share with visitors a compelling biography of those who inhabited Carlyle House. How are we able to keep the stories of a dwelling older than the United States new and fresh to our visitors? The answer is simple: the objects. Yes we have the letters, the land records, and some bills of sale but it is the objects placed throughout the house that allow the story of John Carlyle to be interpreted in a variety of ways. While Luther Vandross crooned "A Chair is Just a Chair" we in the museum field know this is not at all true. A chair in Carlyle House is not only a chair but a Chippendale Chair, a Windsor Chair, and an open stool chair. Each of these chairs tells a different story from how they were made, who would have used them, to how they were used. What better way to demonstrate how diverse interpretation of objects can be than having two people who know the museum well provide an interpretation?

In this two part article two Carlyle House staff members will examine two objects and provide an interpretation on both from their own perspective. This process will be completed by using the "Five Steps to Interpret Material Culture" a valued resource of many museum professionals. The steps are as follows:

Step 1: Identification- What is the object?

Step 2: Function- What does this object do? How was it used?

Step 3: People- Who made it? Who used it? What meaning/importance did the object have for people in the past?

Step 4: Ideas- What are the relationships among the object, its function, and the people associated with it?

Step 5: Interpretation- What connections can we make between the story of this historical objects and our own lives?

The first analyses will be my perspective and the second will feature Helen's perspective. The objects we selected to

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interpret are the floor cloth in the study and the spinet, two of our more popular objects. As you read my interpretations think about the steps above and how I build upon each step to formulate an analysis.

### Floor cloth



Upon entering the Study I ask visitors to imagine living in an agrarian society where there are no paved roads, the main mode of transportation is horses, and there are more livestock on public streets than today. I point out that John Carlyle's household was busy with many comings and goings causing the remnants of the outdoors to be left on ones shoes and then brought into the home. This is when I point out the floor cloth if a visitor has not already commented on it. Many visitors will then admire the beautiful design while I discuss how floor cloths had a dual purpose by being attractive and easy to clean. I use the items in the touch basket to discuss the materials and demonstrate how the floor cloth was made. As visitors feel the materials I then pose the question "who was making floor cloths?" It is a very simple question but one that if posed can lead to a different story about the object. Was this a job for a skilled artisan? Would one work as an apprentice to learn the craft similar to a blacksmith? Was this a job for an enslaved individual or indentured

servant? I also discuss floor cloths first rising in popularity in Britain and then making their way to the colonies. This also is a great way to talk about trade between the colonies and Britain and connect it to John's role as a merchant. Overall, my interpretation demonstrates that the floor cloth is not just another material possession of John Carlyle but is a representation of class, trade, and the distribution of labor in the 18th century.

### Spinet



Placed against the back wall of the parlor is an object that many visitors immediately describe as a piano or piano forte. I explain while it is similar to a piano forte we refer to this object as the spinet. This spinet, often confused with a harpsicord, is a smaller version of a piano making it ideal to have in rooms that lacked the space for a piano. I discuss the parlor is where Mrs. Carlyle or the Carlyle daughters would receive friends and family for tea, musical entertainment, or conversation after dinner. I find this room fun to interpret, especially when I have children on my tour. At first sight of the spinet they exclaim "Oh a piano!" to which I quickly correct them before explaining the difference between a

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piano and a spinet. I also use this opportunity to ask if they play an instrument, allowing each child to answer. I then explain it was customary for women to play instruments such as the harpsicord, spinet, and bass violin while men played the flute, oboe, and violin. I do this with adults as well, since it is another opportunity to engage my audience. Like the floor cloth, this interpretation of the spinet allows me to present it as more than a form of entertainment but also an example of gender roles in the 18th century.

You will notice that a large part of my interpretation of these objects is creating dialogue with the visitor. I am not just sharing information about the objects but I am also posing questions to get them to think critically about what they are seeing in the museum. This complements the style in which I give my tours, which relies heavily on visitor engagement. Of course you do not have to do this on your tour, it is a demonstration of how interpretation changes person to person. Please be sure to see Helen's object analysis in the October Docent Dispatch!

## CHAD Events

**Sunday, September 13**

**Volunteer Appreciation Dinner**

**6pm-8pm**

The Staff of Carlyle House would like to say "Thank You!" for all that you do at our annual Volunteer Appreciation Dinner. Come join us for an evening of food and fellowship at **Gadsby's Tavern Restaurant**.

Please RSVP to [CARLYLE@nvrpa.org](mailto:CARLYLE@nvrpa.org) by Friday, September 4th.

**Monday, October 5**

**Marine Corps Museum**

**18900 Jefferson Davis Hwy  
Triangle, VA 22172**

**10am**

More details to come. Please RSVP to [vherndon@nvrpa.org](mailto:vherndon@nvrpa.org) or sign up in the Docent Lounge.

**Monday, October 19**

**Carlyle House Book Club**

**12pm**

*Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson and the*

*Opening of the American West* by Stephen E. Ambrose

Email Jamie Harding for more information [jamieh3@verizon.net](mailto:jamieh3@verizon.net).



## Calendar of Events

### CARLYLE HOUSE HISTORIC PARK

#### **September 14, Monday**

*New Docent Training*  
Curator's Lecture  
12pm

#### **September 16, Wednesday**

*New Docent Training*  
Curator's Lecture  
7pm

#### **September 19-20**

Scottish Heritage/Outlander Event  
*Docents Needed*  
See page 5 for more information

#### **September 21, Monday**

*New Docent Training*  
Educator's Workshop  
12pm

#### **September 22, Wednesday**

*New Docent Training*  
Educator's Workshop  
7pm

#### **October 17, Saturday**

*Walking With Zombies*  
Details TBD

#### **October 18, Sunday**

*Cauldron Tea*  
1pm, Magnolia Terrace  
\$30/person, \$15/child

#### **October 31, Saturday**

*Trick or Treat*  
5pm-7pm  
Carlyle House will open its door to provide tricks and treats to the many pint sized visitors on All Hallow's Eve this year.

#### **December 5, Saturday**

Soldier's Christmas  
Details TBD

#### **December 12 and 13**

Candlelight Tours  
Saturday 6-9 and Sunday 3-6  
Adults \$25  
Seniors/Active Military \$20  
Children (6-17)- \$5  
*Docents Needed*

### ***Happy Hours***

Every 3rd Thursday of the month we will meet at a different location for a chance to catch up and share good company! Vanessa will be present to validate parking for happy hours that take place in Old Town. Check your email the day of the happy hour for more details. If you have a great idea for happy hour please feel free to share!

\*This list has been updated since the July Dispatch\*

#### **September 17**

Charthouse  
4pm-6:30pm

#### **October 15**

Bilbo Baggins  
4pm-7pm

#### **November 19**

TBD  
4pm-7:00pm

#### **December 17**

TBD  
4pm-7pm



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## Outlander Comes to Carlyle House

During the Alexandria Arts Festival weekend, stop by Carlyle House for some Scottish fun, Outlander Style! On Saturday, September 19th at 10am, there will be a Scottish fashion show discussing dress at the time that Jamie, Claire AND John Carlyle lived in the 18th century! Advance tickets must be purchased for \$15/attendee; children 5 and under are free. Coffee and shortbread cookies (baked by the Dairy Godmother!) will be provided as refreshments and included in the ticket price. At 11:15am the Granfling School of Highland Dance will give a free performance of Scottish dancing which has strong roots in history. Then at 12:30pm, the Devil's Tailors will perform on period style instruments. This event will also include the City of Alexandria Pipe and Drums making an appearance.

On Sunday, September 20th, Carlyle House is hosting an Outlander Tea! Check our website for details and pricing at [www.carlylehouse.org](http://www.carlylehouse.org). Advance reservations will be required. Call us at 703-549-2997 or email us at [carlyle@nvrpa.org](mailto:carlyle@nvrpa.org) with questions or to reserve your spot at the fashion show or tea!

