

# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

### *Eighteenth-Century Fashion*

*by Teresa Martinez*

When she married John Carlyle in 1747, Sarah Fairfax's wedding gown was the height of fashion. A bold pattern in vivid colors, wide skirts supported by panniers or pocket hoops, heavy back pleats that flowed into the skirt, elbow-length sleeves ending in a wide cuff, and an ornate stomacher over the front closing of her gown all proclaimed her family's wealth and elegant taste.

By the mid eighteenth century, the elites of colonial Virginia were known for their obsession with the latest European fashions, and certainly seventeen-year old Sarah and her family were no different. Merchants like Sarah's husband-to-be imported fashion images and dolls dressed in the latest English styles, as well as elegant new fabrics and trims. Seamstresses, milliners, and tailors from England also made their way to Virginia to feed the growing desire for up-to-date fashion.

Women's fashions of the late 1740s were divided mostly into two different skirt shapes: a dome shape that flared out from the waist equally all the way around the body, and wide, shallow shape that made the skirt look almost square from the front. The latter style was more formal, and required the wearing of panniers, or pocket hoops, to hold the skirts out over the hips.

The bodice of a gown with either skirt shape was conical, a look achieved by wearing stays, a boned undergarment which was designed not to decrease the size of the waist, but to mold the torso into the fashionable inverted cone shape and to encourage proper posture and support the weight of full skirts.

Sleeves were almost universally elbow-length, with longer sleeves mostly reserved for

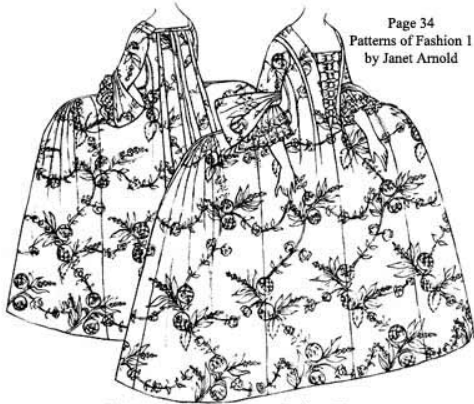


riding or traveling jackets. The sleeves usually ended in a large stiff pleated cuff, and were often finished with finely gathered fabric or lace ruffles called engageantes

The neckline of these gowns was generally low and square, and the bodice would lace or pin shut with a stomacher of the same or contrasting fabric, sometimes embroidered or extensively decorated, to cover the front opening. The back of the bodice and the back of the skirt were often cut in one piece, with deep pleats at the top to shape the fabric to the shoulders, which then fell loose to the ground. This gave the gown a straight line in the back from neck to hem.

By the time Sarah's oldest daughter (also named Sarah) was to be married in the mid-1770s,

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*Jim Bartlinski, Director*  
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c.1745-55 The Victoria and Albert Museum

the times and the fashions had changed. The American Revolution was looming, and non-importation agreements like the one that John Carlyle had

signed in 1770 had slowed the flow of British goods into the soon-to-be-independent American colonies. Though we have no evidence as to what Sarah Carlyle wore as her wedding gown, it is certainly possible that she would have had her mother's gown remade into a more current style. Even for an elite family like the Carlyles, ornate fabrics such as those that went into the creation of Sarah Fairfax Carlyle's wedding gown would often be reused, simply updating the style of a gown instead of having a new one made. The addition of the non-importation agreements, which the Carlyles had supported, makes it even more likely that young Sarah would have reused her mother's gown—perhaps allowing her to make a political statement in support of the Revolution in a world that largely limited women's direct political participation.

Panniers and pocket hoops were fading out of use as skirts returned to a more natural shape supported by several petticoats, and it is possible that Sarah, as a fashionable young woman, would have forgone the structured skirt supports.

The straight fall of fabric from neck to hem on the back of a gown was also beginning to become old fashioned by the 1770s. Many older women continued to wear gowns of that style, but fashion-conscious young women were sewing finer pleats down along the back of their gowns, allowing the fabric to release at the waist and flow into the skirt. This gave the gown a marked waist in the back, a departure from earlier styles. Some gowns were even cut with separate pieces for the back of

the bodice and the back of the skirt.

There were several areas, though, in which gown styles had not changed much in the decades since Sarah Fairfax's marriage. The cut of the gown neckline remained low and square, the shape of the bodice was still that of an inverted cone, and sleeves were still elbow length and finished with ruffles, though these were shrinking, and the stiff pleated cuff had disappeared altogether.

Though Sarah Carlyle may have used her mother's gown for her own wedding, the styles of fabrics had also changed since the 1740s. It was perfectly acceptable to reuse older fabric and remake it into a more updated styles and numerous examples exist of an early eighteenth century fabric made into a later-century style gown. This was probably especially common in the American colonies just before and during the American Revolution as imported goods such as fabrics became increasingly scarce. But when available, fabrics from the 1770s differed in several ways from those of the 1740s—cottons and lighter weaves of silk were becoming more popular, as were lighter colors, and smaller designs, and stripes were coming into vogue.

Near the close of the eighteenth century, we know that Sarah Carlyle Herbert remade (perhaps for a second time) her mother's wedding gown. According to family tradition, it was to be worn at a Birth Night Ball in honor of George



c.1775-85 Snowhill Manor

Washington, but whatever the occasion, we have



from a picture of Hogarth's in the Collection of J.B. Esq

from an Original (in the Collection) at the Opera

*A Section of The Petticoat or The Verus of 42 and 94 in.*

decades of women's natural figures being largely concealed by layers of fabric and ridged undergarments! Sleeves varied significantly, from small, short puffs to full length, some with ruffles or cuffs that extended down over the hand.

The clothing and styles worn by both Sarah Fairfax Carlyle and her daughter Sarah Carlyle Herbert provide effective bookends to the fashions of the eighteenth century, and show how dramatically women's fashion changed among the elite of Virginia.

remnants of the fabric that were cut to form a gown in a decidedly different style than that of the 1740s. Both the American and French Revolutions had substantial impacts on the fashion world. The collapse of the French monarchy, which had for most of the century been the foremost source of fashion inspiration the world over, created a vacuum in the fashion world that had to be filled by other sources.

Styles changed drastically at the end of the eighteenth century. The waistlines of women's gowns rose significantly, settling just below the bust, where they would remain for several decades. The bodice lost the emphasis on the inverted cone, but in most cases retained the low, square neckline. Some women stopped wearing stays altogether, but most began wearing a more lightly-boned undergarment that had more of a cylindrical shape, instead of the conical shape of earlier years.

Skirts also decreased in size, losing the voluminous petticoats that had supported the earlier fullness, and becoming almost cylindrical in shape. Caricatures of the period show women in transparent garments that left little to the imagination--certainly the images are exaggerations, but one can imagine the shock felt by many at this drastic change in style after



## *18th-Century Fashion Show*



*Enjoy an afternoon of high fashion ...  
eighteenth century style.*



*The Carlyle House terrace will be transformed  
into a runway as fashion historians and living  
history interpreters describe the various styles  
and types of clothing our models are wearing.*



When: Sunday, September 20th at 3 pm



Where: Carlyle House Terrace



Cost: \$10/adults, \$5/children 5-12  
Carlyle House Volunteers: \$8



How: To attend, please call 703-549-2997 or  
stop by the Carlyle House office to reserve your  
place.



The house will be open for touring following  
the event and we are looking for guides to be  
stationed in the house. These guides can attend  
the event for free. Sign up soon!

