



# Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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*Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority*

## Through a Pier Glass: A Look at the Carlyle Inventory

The discovery of new acquisitions to enhance the collection is one of the most exciting aspects of the museum profession. The Carlyle House staff realized this first hand when Mary Ruth spotted two pier glasses at the Alexandria Antique Show earlier this month. After some bargaining, the dealer agreed to let us have the pier glasses on approval so our collections committee could review them. A group of experts examined them to verify their period authenticity. When the staff hung the pier glasses in the large parlor, no one could deny that they belonged in the Carlyle House collection. The long search for these important pieces of John Carlyle’s household has at last ended.

During the eighteenth century “looking glass” was the term used to describe our modern day mirrors. They appeared in many elegant homes in the colonies. Hung over fireplaces or between windows, looking glasses were used to help reflect light in a room. John Carlyle’s inventory lists “2 large Covered framd peer looking glasses” valued at 10 pounds. Peer refers to the pier in a room, which is the architectural term for the location on a wall between two windows. At first, the reference to “Covered” was confusing. The staff believed that they might have been covered with protective netting or gauze during the summer months, until a local antique dealer deduced that it was probably meant to be “carved” and was just spelled incorrectly.

The Carlyle House pier glasses, while strikingly similar in appearance, have a number of differences.

The first pier glass is a fine George II mahogany and gilt looking glass with a swan-neck pediment of carved and gilt foliated C-scrolls, centering a projecting carved and gilt phoenix. It was made in England circa 1755. The second is a George II walnut and gilt looking glass with a swan-neck pediment

centering a carved and pierced double C-scrolled open gilt cartouche, beneath a projecting spray of carved acanthus foliage. It was crafted in England circa 1750. The “mirror” in both of the looking glasses was replaced at some point in their lives and is not original.



Historical records indicated that the majority of looking glasses owned by eighteenth-century Americans were imported from England. The most significant reason for importing English looking glasses was that American craftsmen were unable to master the production of glass plates with sufficient smoothness and clarity for silvering. According to David Barquist, “the process was complicated and

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### Carlyle House

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director  
Heidi Miller, Curator  
Caroline Neely, Curator of Education



## Through a Pier Glass (con't)



required skilled workmen for each stage: creating the plate by blowing or casting, followed by polishing, silvering, and ‘diamond cutting’ or beveling.” Shipping the glass from England to the colonies did not appear to present a problem. In March 1718, James Logan of Philadelphia requested “A handsome black looking glass for a Parlor” from England and received it in October of the same year.

In researching these looking glasses, we discovered that it is very difficult to determine their origin. Much of this is due to the process used to create them in the eighteenth century. These elaborate looking glasses frequently began as a basic shell and then decorations were added to them. The most expensive looking glasses were produced from component parts and could have their ornamentation designed to meet the buyer’s requests. The makers might purchase these parts from carvers, inlay makers, glass painters, or other specialists. It becomes difficult to determine whether these decorative additions were added by the original maker or ordered later by the owner to enhance the looking glass. As a result of the changing nature of looking glasses, the level of acceptable repair is much higher on looking glasses than other furniture.



its signature pediments over the doorway.

The entire staff is very excited about our two new purchases. We are continuing research to determine the appropriate method and height to hang them. Please make sure to include these new additions to our collection in your interpretation of the house. Ore information can be found in the blue room resource books

### **Works Consulted:**

- *American Tables and Looking Glasses*, by David L. Barquist.

A popular style of looking glass, called pediment glasses, was introduced in England around 1730. These looking glasses were a product of the interest in classical and Renaissance architecture, influenced by the work of Andrea Palladio and Inigo Jones. Designs for doorways, windows, and overmantles found in books by Palladian architects appear to have been the primary inspiration for these looking glasses. According to Barquist, “With forms and moldings derived from classical sources, pediment looking glasses (such as the ones we purchased) were perfectly suited to Georgian houses of the second and third quarters of the eighteenth century and were popular throughout the American colonies. Reminiscent of pediments, the swan necks on our new mirrors fit perfectly in the large parlor with