



Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

December 2005

Festive Occasions

by Cindy Major

During the holiday season of 1774, we find John Carlyle entertaining friends and family at his grand stone mansion. This year it is likely that the festivities at John Carlyle's house would be enhanced by the excitement of the courtship and engagement of his daughter Sarah to William Herbert. The guests will be shown into the elegant candlelit dining room where the table is set for a sumptuous late supper. Using the description of a late supper at a home near Philadelphia, the Carlyles' table is decorated with an abundance of greens, flowers and an orange tree. Both sweets and savories are displayed on the table but the highlight of the meal is the popular syllabub.

Courtship and engagement in the 18th century was a very important period in a girl's life. Arranged marriages were no longer looked on favorably by 1750 although parents certainly felt a responsibility to see their children in good matches and children showed concern for pleasing their parents. During the period of courtship, a woman would hold considerable power and she would enjoy the most attention in her life. Long courtships were to her advantage giving her more time to evaluate her suitor and prolonging her rule. This was probably the most important decision a woman would ever make. It would determine her social status and who would be in control of making major decisions for her in the future.

In March of 1774, Sarah Carlyle and William Herbert were both house guests of the Washingtons at Mt. Vernon. Could this have been the beginning of a romance? We don't know how their relationship progressed but records show that they were both frequent visitors at Mt. Vernon and certainly members of the same social set.

The occasion of an engagement in the 18th century often initiated the exchange of miniature portraits between a couple. Miniatures were done by accomplished artists such as John Singleton Copley



A Parterre of Fruit at Fairfax House

CARLYLE HOUSE

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director
Jim Bartlinski, Curator
Cindy Major, Curator of Education

(American 1738-1815) who did life size oil portraits of his subjects and then copied them in watercolor on ivory. This technique was done first by Venetian miniaturists who applied watercolor to ivory snuffboxes. The luminosity of ivory allows the artist to capture the sheen of hair and fabrics. It was a difficult process but the small size allowed a loved one to keep the likeness at hand. These diminutive watercolors were worn as bracelets, locket, pins or simply on a ribbon. Dr. Samuel Johnson may have had these miniatures in mind when he said: *Portrait Painting is a reasonable and natural consequence of affection*.

We will have pictures of a pair of miniature portraits displayed in the dining room as a talking point about engagements and courtships in the mid to late 1700s.

The decorations on our table are inspired by a letter from Mrs. Benjamin Stoddert, wife of the first Secretary of the Navy, written to her sister describing an affair she attended at the home of the William Bingham of Philadelphia. Servants offered guests refreshments served on trays early in the evening. These included punch, lemonade and ice cream. At eleven o'clock the doors to the dining room were thrown open and an elaborately decorated table was presented to the guests.

In the middle was an orange tree with ripe fruit, (its) root . . . Covered with evergreens some natural (and) some artificial flowers. Nothing scarcely appeared on the table without evergreens to decorate it. . . . You can't think how beautiful it looked.

Unlike the formal dinner served earlier in the day that consisted of separate courses for the entrees and desserts, late suppers combined both types of dishes. Our table will feature the ever popular oysters and meat pies. The oysters are served on the half shell as they appear in the 1734 painting by Jean-François de Troy. *The Oyster Lunch*. Oysters were eaten throughout the year in stews, bread and stuffing, as well as the classic



The Oyster Lunch

presentation shown to the left where diners would simply slip them into their mouths.

Pies or patties were a popular dish, easy to pick-up and kept meats and poultry sealed to preserve them longer. They originally were considered a dish for servants and included any parts of any kind of meat; feet, heads, tongues, hearts and livers. Fine patties, as described by Hanna Glasse in the *Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, were a dressed-up version for guests. Her

recipe or receipt (the 18th-century term) calls for turkey, lamb, or chicken with equal parts of veal and or sirloin of beef. Added to these meats was parsley, thyme and lemon peel pounded fine in a marble mortar. The pies were baked in a puff pastry folded into a triangle.

John Carlyle's guests may have enjoyed vegetables during the winter due to careful preservation techniques. Beans and peas were cleaned, carefully picked over and stored in a glazed jar or pot in the spring. In her book, Hannah Glasse instructs her readers to layer the vegetables with fine writing sand. The jar is then covered with leather, tightly tied and buried two feet under the earth. Our beans are accompanied with pickled beets. Pickling was a common way to preserve vegetables during this period.

For dessert, syllabub has been added to the traditional display of jellies and creams. It could be either eaten with a spoon or drunk. Originally, it was drunk for nourishment from a bowl or cup much like the caudle that was so popular after childbirth. It consists of wine and cream with lemon and sugar added for flavor. Men enjoyed it at anytime of the day or night until it became whipped. Once women began preparing it whipped, it took on a frothy appearance and was displayed as a dessert. A whipped or everlasting syllabub was served in a glass and could be eaten with a spoon. These impressive desserts would last at least three days. Syllabubs are either pale yellow or rose colored, depending on the type of wine it is made with. There will be a description of all the dishes



displayed on John Carlyle’s table available in the dining room as well as the docent table in the office.

There is another addition to the table this year. It is described by Hanna Glasse in *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*. She refers to *little things of sugar, with devises in them* and instructs the hostess in their use.

in the middle of them have little pieces of paper smart sentences wrote on them: they will in company make much mirth.

These are a good reminder to our visitors and ourselves that eighteenth-century guests relied on simple games, tongue twisters, riddles and entertainments that would be considered very childlike today.

This is the time of year that entertaining in the homes of Virginia’s elite would be at its height. We want our twenty-first century visitors to understand the effort and care that went into presenting a beautiful and imaginative table with a variety of dishes in the eighteenth century. Describing the importance of a courtship or engagement in the eighteenth-century will give our guests a sense of the excitement in the Carlyle household this season.

Sources

Jane Ceser, *Tying the Knot*, GMU Symposium
Louise Conway Belden, *The Festive Tradition Table Decoration and Deserts in America, 1650-1900*

Peter Brown and Ivan Day, *Pleasures of the Table*

Hanna Glasse, *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*

Sara Paston-Williams, *The Art of Dining*

Timeline Additions

Please take time to notice that we are adding new sets of cards to the Timeline.

Kirk Hoffman and Erica Nuckles, our talented interns from the George Washington University gradate program in Museum Studies, have contributed research for these additions.

THANK YOU ERIC AND KIRK.

C A L E N D A R O F E V E N T S

December 3, 2005

Soldiers’ Christmas

Noon to 4:00 p.m.

December 9, 2005

Friends’ Candlelight Tours

6:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

December 10, 2005

Candlelight Tours

6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

January 3-February 5, 2006

Exhibit of:

30th Anniversary of Museum

January 18, 2006

Anniversary of Museum Opening