



Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

The Dessert Table is Back

The Carlyle dessert table is out again just in time for the holiday season. The table displays all the important elements of the second course of an eighteenth-century meal. Unlike today, Christmas Day was a holy day—not a holiday. But the twelve days that followed, until the epiphany, were marked with entertaining in Virginia. The table in the museum today is representative of a table found during this time of year or any other time an elegant dessert course was required.

A variety of dessert items appear on the table ranging from cakes to candied fruit and jellies. Eighteenth-century cookbooks provide a great deal of information about how to prepare these desserts. Using eighteenth-century recipes, the staff has recreated a number of these fashionable desserts.

The slave named Cook (a male or female) prepared most of the meals when John Carlyle lived here, but it is likely that the Carlyle ladies took part in planning and even making some of the dishes, particularly the desserts. The preface of Mrs. Elizabeth Price’s “the New Universal and Complete Confectioner” stated that “the Art of Confectionary being deemed the chief branch of FEMALE KNOWLEDGE, and worthy the study and attention of ALL LADIES...must certainly meet with the approbation and encouragement of all the patrons of female education...” Hannah Glasse, the author of another popular cookbook of the eighteenth century, stated that, “every young lady ought to know both how to make all kind of confectionary and dress out

a dessert; in former days it was look’d on as a great perfection in a young lady to understand all these things, if it was only to give directions to her servant...”

Of course, none of these confections survive and no accounts of a dessert course before the Revolution have ever been found in Virginia. However, there are descriptions of English dessert tables and drawings of ideal tables. Sarah and Ann Carlyle as proper young ladies were probably aware of what was fashionable for an English table and as Hannah Glasse said, “for country ladies it is a pretty amusement, both to make the sweet-meats and dress out a dessert as it depends



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Dessert Table (con't)



wholly on fancy and but little expense.”

In addition to the food on the table, the serving items were an equally important aspect of an elegant table. According to Kevin M. Sweeney, “These goods also served to convey character. In the eighteenth century American possessions became tools for actively cultivating a distinctive, genteel style of life that set off ‘polite society’ from the ‘meaner sort’.” The ability to set elaborate tables with a variety of table equipage separated the Virginia gentry from the emerging middle class below them.



John Carlyle and his family were well equipped to provide their guests with such a spread. The inventory indicates he owned *1 large glass stand with 17 sweet meat glasses* and *1 small glass stand with 17 sweet meat glasses*. These stands are used to create the pyramid of jellies and syllabubs that grace the table today.

In addition to the pyramid, there are a variety of other items on the table that would have also been found on an eighteenth-century table. The dinner plates are “Queens China” a popular eighteenth-century ceramic listed

on the Carlyle inventory. The forks that appear are family pieces from the Herbert family. The new table linens, a tablecloth and matching oversized napkins, were hand woven in England. As important as the food itself, the table equipage was an essential part of the eighteenth-century dining experience.

It wasn't enough, though, to own all of the necessary equipment and to be able to provide a variety of delicacies to serve your guests. One had to know how to place them all on the table in an aesthetically pleasing layout. Similar to the popular architecture of the time, tables in the eighteenth century had to be arranged symmetrically. Both dinner and serving plates were placed to create a balanced effect on all sides of the table.

With all of the expense and time that went into the preparation of an elaborate meal, John Carlyle was definitely making a statement about his place in Virginia society when he sat down to eat.