Carlyle House
DOCENT DISPATCH
December 2007
Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

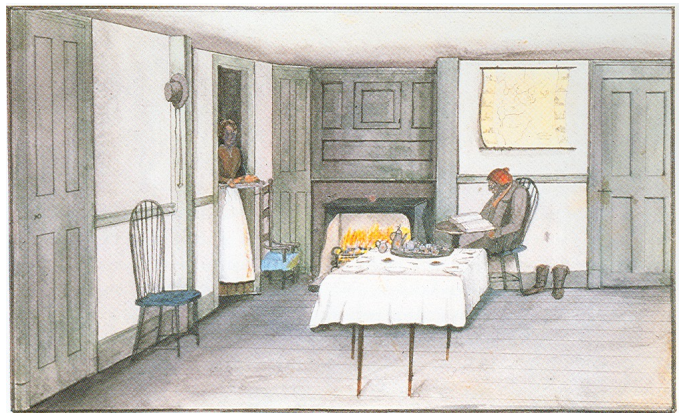
# "A Prominent Pleasure": Dining in the Eighteenth Century

by Sarah A. Arnold

Life at Carlyle House revolved around dinner. Contemporaries described dinner as "the most prominent pleasure of the day." Even ordinary eighteenth-century gentry dinners were elaborate by modern standards, but they were especially spectacular when entertaining. Christmas in the eighteenth-century, like today, was often a time for large-scale entertainment. On December 18, 1773, Philip Fithian wrote, "nothing is now to be heard of in conversation but the Balls, the Fox-hunts, the fine entertainment and the good fellowship which are to be exhibited at the approaching Christmas."

The entertainment centered around the table in the dining room. All of the evidence we have points to the fact that John Carlyle and his family placed dining at the center of their daily lives. The layout of the house itself is a clear indication. Scots attached great importance to "the ritual of the table" in this period, an importance which is reflected in their disproportionately large dining room.

The size of the Carlyle House dining room becomes even more surprising when one remembers that having a room just for dining was a new concept. Historically, people ate in any convenient location. "In the course of the eighteenth century, fashionable English families followed French precedent and aspired to have a room set apart for the sole purpose of dining" (Garrett, 78). Despite this change, however, people still ate in various rooms, including bedchambers and studies. During the winter, families took their meals in a smaller, well-heated room. Outside of the gentry, few could afford to set aside one room for dining in the eighteenth century and it only became a common practice by the end of the nineteenth-century.



*When they weren't entertaining, eighteenth century families often took their meals in a smaller, well-heated parlor.*
Dining Room of Dr. Whitridge's, Tiverton, Rhode Island. *Water-color by Joseph Showmaker Russell.*

John Carlyle built and furnished his house to the latest tastes. His inventory tells us he owned many types of tables; tea tables, card tables, dressing tables. But prominent in his dining room were these tables noted on the inventory as "2 large mahogany dining Tables."

Because these tables are listed as one entry, we can assume they were a pair. It was typical in the eighteenth century for tables to come in pairs.

**CARLYLE HOUSE**

*Mary Ruth Coleman, Director*
*Jim Bartlinski, Curator*
*Sarah Arnold, Curator of Education*

*The 2007 dessert table, set for a party of eight.*

This way they could be brought together to make a larger table. After the meal, they were easily taken apart and put up against the wall as pier tables.

A 1757 invoice from George Washington lists "two neat Mahogany Tables, 4 f 6 I square each and all the feet to move to join with hooks." Based on the evidence, Carlyle House, due to the generous support of the Friends of Carlyle House, recently acquired a pair of mahogany dining tables, which after some restoration work, will soon be on view. The tables are a matched pair of Chippendale dining tables, dating from 1775-1785, which places them in the period of our interpretation. The tables have straight Marlboro legs and were manufactured in America, probably Philadelphia. Unlike our current dining tables, these tables match and can be fitted together to display dining scenes.

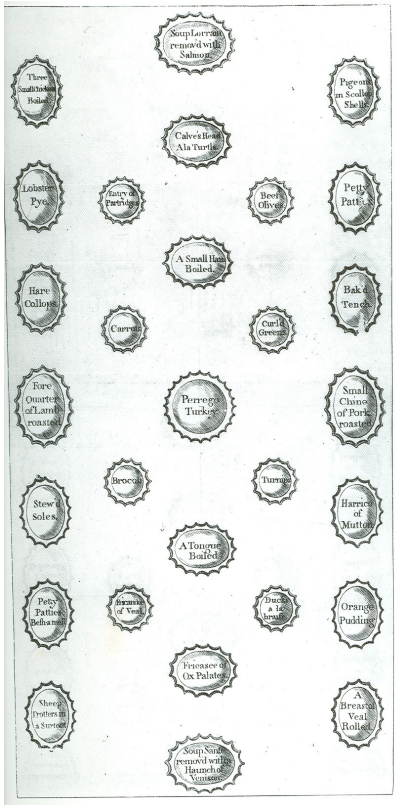
Rectangular tables were becoming the norm by the 1780s. Their large size and the fact that they can be paired together to make larger tables reflects a change in dining practices. In the earlier part of the 1700s, gate leg tables were popular. During the Queen Anne period, these gate leg tables begin to have cabriole legs and pad feet, replacing turned legs. Oval shaped tables appear more frequently in inventories of the early 1700s than other types. At large dinner parties, guests ate at several smaller tables scattered throughout (Fitzgerald, 25). By mid-century in Philadelphia, the square top table was becoming more popular than the round.

Mahogany was the wood of choice for dining room furniture in the Chippendale period due to its rich finish and masculine associations. Additionally, carvers found its dense grain worked well for carved decorations, an important feature of Chippendale furniture. Dining chairs were also mahogany and were typically covered with leather or horsehair. These materials did not retain the smell of food or stain easily. For these reasons, the furnishing plan places John Carlyle's "11 mahogany leather Bottomd Chairs" and one armchair in the dining room.

Dining room furniture was often in the "plain and neat" style, particularly dining tables, as they were covered with a tablecloth for much of the meal. Tablecloths, whose main purpose was to protect the wood, were always white. Pressed and kept crisp, table clothes could be made of fine damask, linen and a variety of other materials.

In some regions, folded napkins under each plate substituted for a tablecloth (Garrett, 82). However, this was not as universal of a practice as simply using a tablecloth. For many, in fact, a tablecloth was all that was needed. One French visitor in the 1780s complained that "the table is covered with a cloth that also serves for napkins, it is ordinarily large enough to overflow on all sides, and each one wipes in front of himself (unhappily they do not change very often)" (Garrett, 84). After the 1750s,

*Notice the use of both tablecloth and napkins in this painting, "Elegant Merrymaking" by Peter Angellis.*




*Course layout from Mary Smith's "Complete Housekeeper," 1772.* There are 29 courses in this diagram. Notice the symmetry.

however, the use of napkins was common in urban areas.

With a tablecloth in place, the dinner table was loaded with food. An everyday dinner might have five dishes in the first course, while guests at a dinner party might enjoy up to 21 dishes in one course. During the eighteenth century tables were set for the English style of serving where all the dishes for each course were placed out at once. Chafing dishes and hot-water plates were used to keep the food warm on the trip from the kitchen. The spread of the table emphasized line and symmetry, both integral aspects of eighteenth century aesthetics.

Before the last course of the meal, the fruit and nut course, servants removed the tablecloth revealing the rich polished mahogany wood and signaling the end of dining and the start of drinking. Londoner Thomas Cosnett's *Foodman's Directory* gave instructions to two footmen on how to remove the tablecloth. The process involved wiping off the crumbs and rolling the cloth. The servants then covered the exposed table with bowls of fresh and preserved fruit, sweetmeats, small plates of nuts and glasses of sparkling jellies, creams and syllabubs.

After dinner, most American gentry families followed the English practice of having the women retire to the parlor. Fithian notes that "when we had dined the Ladies' retired, leaving a Bottle of Wine and a bowl of Toddy for companions." Frenchman La Rochefoucauld gives an even more colorful description of the practice. After a drink, he tells us, the ladies retire for "tea and scandal" leaving the "heroes to their pleasure" (Paston-Williams, 261). One can almost imagine John Carlyle and other "heroes" drinking over our mahogany dining table.

*Henry Sergeant,* "The Dinner Party." *Gentleman enjoy fruit and sweet wines on a pair of mahogany tables.*

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