



Carlyle House

Docent Dispatch

February 2001

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Chamber Pots and Close Stools: A Necessary Study of Colonial Private Life

Ivor Noel Hume writes, “Chamber pots have long been the butt of indelicate jokes. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that in the days before we had indoor plumbing these vessels were as much a part of contemporary life as mugs, bottles, or dishes.” Historians often overlook the most basic parts of life in their exploration of the past, despite the fact they are often the most revealing. My research into chamber pots began while setting up the gaming scene in the large parlor. The staff questioned whether the close stool, normally in John’s chamber, should be included in the scene. This question led to additional research on the topic and, like one of the children on my school tours, I became very interested in chamber pots!

A society’s attitudes toward personal sanitation can be very illuminating. Most often these attitudes must be studied indirectly through the furnishings that provide for this need. In the eighteenth century, indoor toilet needs were met in several ways. The two basic forms seem to have been the chamber pot, made from either ceramic or metal, and used by itself, or the close stool, a piece of furniture designed to hold a chamber pot or pan. Eighteenth-century probate inventories are an excellent source for learning about these indelicate objects. A plethora of materials and terminology for chamber pots and close stools are listed on these inventories, including close stool, close stool stand, close stool chair, night stool, and night table. A close stool itself could take multiple forms such as an armchair with a ring seat under which was a chamber pot or a box-like piece, similar to a trunk



with a lid. According to Peter Thornton, “usually close stools were discreetly hidden either in a niche masked by curtains, *or* in a specially contrived ‘stool house’ or ‘house of office’ furnished with a door.” The recorded chamber pots were made of many different materials such as stone, earthenware, pewter, ceramic, or delft. They were brought into the bedchamber in the evening and removed again in the morning. By looking at the number of these items, their composition, their values, and their location on the inventory, we can get a glimpse of how they fit into eighteenth-century life.

Outside their obvious purpose, chamber pots might have been used for a number of other functions. For example, Ivor Noel Hume writes “a portrait of

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Chamber Pots (con't)



Hogarth at his easel by artist John Mortimer included such a pot; but lying across it are two paint brushes clearly showing that it was being used as a container for color. Full sized, red-earthenware pots were commonly used by house of theatrical scenery painters.” Another clue to this use of chamber pots can be found in the probate inventory of Moore Fauntleroy of Richmond Virginia in 1791. The inventory lists “one chamber pot and three paint mugs” in the same entry line. Also, two chamber pots in Colonial Williamsburg were discovered that contained white lead and black paint on them which highlights their use as a paint receptacle.

In addition to their multi-purpose use, chamber pots and close stools were stored in different rooms in the colonial household. In the eighteenth-century probate inventories of elite households in Virginia and Maryland, close stools and chamber pots were primarily listed with bedchamber items and kitchen items, but can also be found with items in a number of other rooms. Mary Ellen D’Agostino in her article, *Privy Business*, states, “again and again, however, chamber pots were associated with table wares – eating, serving, and especially drinking vessels – and not with the bed. Were these objects all stored

in the same place? Was it their hollow shape? Was it the materials they were made of usually pewter or ceramic? Or (horrors) were they actually used in dining rooms where food and drink was being served?”

There are a number of other indications that suggest chamber pots and close stools were kept in public spaces. For example, the eighteenth century British writer, Horace Walpole, “tells of one Lord Hervey, who made use of a chamber pot behind a curtain during a social event. Deeply in thought regarding political matters, he emerged ‘in a situation extremely diverting to the women’ and highly embarrassing to himself.” In addition, eighteenth-century prints by Hogarth, depict gaming scenes with chamber pots but the women present are depicted as “loose” women. As a result, we decided that although a chamber pot or closed stool might be present at a gaming evening with all gentlemen, it would not be present in the mixed company of our interpretation.

The location and wording of the *two* entries regarding close stools on John Carlyle’s inventory requires further investigation. The first entry on the inventory “1 Close Stool Chair” is listed with a number of other chairs. This close stool chair is reported to be worth 1 pound and ten shillings. The other entry, “1 (pewter) Close Stool and pan” is found among kitchen items such as soup plates and a warming pan and

is listed as being worth 10 shillings. While the first of these entries is fairly straight forward, the second seems to make no sense as it stands. Modern scholarship knows of no form that might have been described as a pewter close stool with a separate pan; therefore it seems logical to assume that some error was made in the clerk’s transcription of the original inventory or that one of the inventory takers was careless. The mistake might have also been within the entry itself. There are a number of different ways in which this entry could be interpreted. The author’s intention might have been to say “1 pewter close stool pan.” If this was the case, the pewter pan most likely belonged to the close stool chair listed previously in the inventory. This might explain its lesser value compared to the other close stool listing.

The entry could have also read “1 close stool and pewter pan.” When looking at the cost of other close stools in probate inventories, it appears as if both values of the close stools are consistent with those found elsewhere. John Fendell, in his 1764 Virginia probate inventory, owned 1 mahogany close stool chair that was worth 1 pound, ten shillings. Francis Goodrick, of Charles County Maryland, also lists 1 close stool worth 1 pound, ten shillings,

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but Nathaniel Chapman in 1761 owned 1 close stool that was worth only 5 shillings. The range of values signified a range of quality and materials used to make the close stools.

Also, many of Carlyle's contemporaries had more than one close stool listed on their inventories, so it would not have been uncommon for a household to have more than one close stool. In fact, Dr. Nicholas Flood, from Richmond Virginia had a wide array of toilets listed on his 1776 probate inventory including "2 pewter bed pans, 8 stone chamber pots, 2 delft chamber pots, 5 pewter chamber pots, 2 close stool chairs." (Interestingly, Dr. Flood's two close stool chairs are listed in the "Brick Passage" on the inventory.) John Carlyle most likely owned a number of chamber pots in addition to his close stools. The archeological digs around the Carlyle House revealed pieces of a creamware chamber pot that probably dated to his period. We will never really know the number and exact location of Carlyle's close stools or chamber pots. By asking the questions though, it becomes apparent how much we still have to learn about the private lives of colonial Americans.

and Sexpots in Colonial Life" by Mary Ellen D'Agostino, Archeology July/August.

- Authentic Décor, Peter Thornton
- At Home, Elisabeth Donaghy Garrett.
- Eighteenth-century Virginia and Maryland Probate Inventory Database, Gunston Hall Plantation

Works Consulted

- "Mentioning the Unmentionable", Ivor Noel Hume, The Journal of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Winter 2000-2001.
- "Privy Business: Chamber Pots