

# Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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*Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority*

## Beer: The Colonial Beverage of Choice

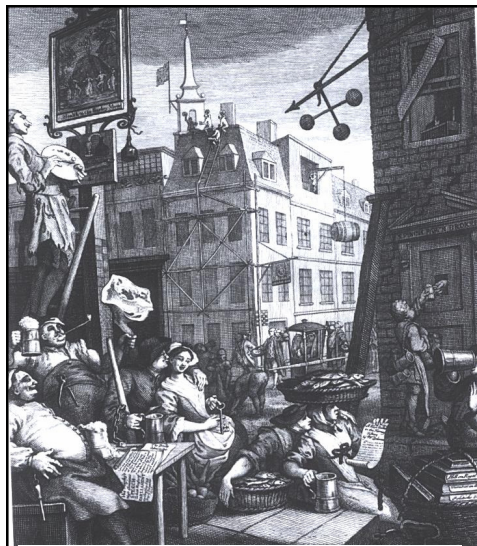
*This is the first in a series of articles focusing on the beverages consumed in eighteenth-century Virginia. Beer was probably the most popular drink of the time, so we will begin with it.*

In the eighteenth century, beer was a beverage widely enjoyed in Virginia and throughout the American colonies. It was not constrained by socioeconomic or cultural boundaries. People drank beer with every meal and unlike modern practices, beer was enjoyed by all ages. Even young children had beer with their daily meals.

The popularity of beer had much to do with the perception that it had healthful qualities. During this time, there was a fear of drinking water. In many cities in England in the eighteenth century, the rivers were like sewers and thus perpetuated the spread of diseases. This mistrust of water followed the British colonists to Virginia. Despite the pristine waterways flowing through the land, colonists trusted and preferred the taste of beer instead of water. Gregg Smith, author of *Beer in America*, writes, "More than a mere cultural habit, beer drinking evolved into a healthful practice. Brewers have to boil water to make beer, thus killing the microbes that imperil health."

Beer was considered to be healthful for other reasons as well. *In the Art of Dining*, Sarah Paston-

Williams states, "In eighteenth-century England, consumption of alcohol reached such an extreme level among all the classes that some observers seriously feared for the stability of the social structure. The chief cause of which was the unrestricted sale of cheap



Beer Street, William Hogarth, c. 1740

raw spirits made from the excess grain crops." Gin and brandy were so cheap that even the poorest could afford to imbibe. Paston-Williams continues, "It was estimated that in certain parts of London one in every four houses was a gin shop." By the mid-century, all of this gin drinking was thought to bring about the decay of society. Beer was promoted as a much healthier alternative to gin. As a result, people from all walks of life thought it synonymous with wellness, and its daily use was second nature. The British and

American colonists even considered beer a preventative medicine for many illnesses.

At both the breakfast and dinner table beer or cider was common. Beer also became a part of contracts between workers and their employers. It was

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### Carlyle House

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## Beer (con't)



customary for the workers to consume tremendous quantities of beer throughout the workday. In a tradition brought over from Europe, employees received drink as a part of their wages. In fact, Gregg Smith writes “most could not make it through the day without refreshment to ‘comfortably proceed in their works.’” For lower class workers, beer provided essential calories that they would not receive otherwise. Colonies such as Massachusetts tried to legislate the drinking of beer for fear that consumption of it during the day by workers was excessive. But beer was too much of an integral part of the culture and no laws were successfully enforced.

The major centers for brewing beer commercially in the colonies were Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Beer was also imported from England. According to Gregg Smith, “exporting crops of tobacco and cotton set up an agreeable barter system that brought back English beer.” Many colonists did not want to pay the taxes placed on imported beer. As a result, many households in Virginia brewed their own. Early Virginians had to be creative in how they made their beer. Without the hops prevalent for brewing in England, they had to find substitutes. A variety of new tasting beers emerged using different ingredients such as corn,

spruce, and molasses. Virginians also faced the challenge of temperature control during the hot summers. Beer ferments best at 70 degrees or less. In higher temperatures, the yeast produces fusel oils, which give the beer a taste similar to a strong solvent. In addition, beer had to be stored in a cool area because it spoiled easily when kept too warm.

Beer, like today, was brewed in different qualities. At Shurgborough, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century English estate, records indicate that four different beers were brewed. A “strong very old” ale was drunk exclusively by family and guests at dinner. The second quality of beer was ale that was probably the main table beer for both the family and servants. The next quality was a “small beer” that had low alcohol content and was drunk by servants at times other than the main meal. Finally, porter, an almost black beer with a high alcohol content, was served for special occasions. The Irish version of this beer came to be known as Guinness, after Arthur Guinness, who established a brewery in Dublin in 1759.

Hannah Glasse provides instructions for making beer in *Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*: “For a middling beer, a quarter of malt makes a hogshead of good small beer, allowing eight pounds of hops. This will keep all year. Or it will make twenty gallons of strong

ale, and two hogsheads of small beer that will keep all the year.” George Washington had his own recipe for brewing beer, “take a large Siffer full of Bran hops to your taste, boil these 3 hours (t)hen strain out 30 Gallns into a cooler put in 3 Gallns molasses while the beer is scalding hot or rather draw the molasses into the cooler & strain the beer on it while boiling hot. Let this stand till it is little more than blood warm then put in a quart of yeast if the weather is very cold cover it over with a blanket & let it work in the cooler 24 hours then put it into a cask...” Many wealthy Virginians, instead of worrying about home brewing, placed an order at a tavern that made the beer that they liked the best.

We will never know what type of beer John Carlyle drank or if he brewed his own beer at home. As a gentleman in Virginia during the eighteenth century, it is safe to assume that beer would have been a staple item in the Carlyle household.

### Sources Consulted:

- *Beer in Early America*, Gregg Smith
- *The Art of Dining*, Sara Paston-Williams
- *Come Drink the Bowl Dry*, Peter Brown
- *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, Hannah Glasse