



Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Growing up in the Carlyle House

An important part of interpreting the Carlyle House for your visitors is to mentally fill the house with the people that lived there. It's often difficult to imagine on quiet days in the museum, but at one point in the house's long history it would have been filled with the sound of children. Using the clues found in John Carlyle's letters and Will, we can piece together an accurate image of what it would have been like to be a child growing up at the Carlyle House.

The information that we do know about the Carlyle children and John Carlyle, appears to be very consistent with their Virginia contemporaries. Based on what John Carlyle writes in his letters about his children, it appears that he was quite a doting parent. He writes in reference to the death of one of his children, "My loss is very great...I am so very fond of other people's children and much more of my own." We also get a rare glimpse into the emotional side of John Carlyle when he writes to his brother about the death of his son, "My Dr. Little Jackey to my great greaf he was taken from me In February, to say what he was I cannot but that he was above every Child of his age I ever saw too good too sensible for me & fitt for whatt he is an angel." The fondness that John expresses for his children makes you realize how devastating the loss of so many of his children must have been for him.

In terms of education, both the girls took music lessons at Mount Vernon, which is consistent with what was considered appropriate for the daughters of the Virginia elite. We know that John Carlyle had



plans for his children to have a proper English education. He writes, "If I am blessed with childrun those shall have English Education & not be allowed to imbibe the principles looked upon here to be polite..."

There is much we don't know about the family and in order to fill in the gaps in our knowledge, it is useful to look at the lives of other elite children in eighteenth-century Virginia. Theories about childhood in the eighteenth century shifted during the middle of the century, right about the time when many of the Carlyle children were born. In the early eighteenth century, childhood was not considered a separate stage of development. Parents strongly encouraged children to become adults as soon as possible. Infants were swaddled immediately after birth. The swaddling period was followed by a push for children to quickly stand up and join the adult world. This is visible in the portraits of the time in which children are dressed like their parents and were portrayed as "little adults." Corsets were used on both male and female children to ensure that they maintained an appropriate upright posture. A young child's corset resembled those worn by adult women except that children's stays were

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Carlyle House

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director
Heidi Miller, Curator
Caroline Neely, Curator of Education



Growing up in the (con't)



corded or quilted for stiffness, rather than boned.

Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, perceptions of children began to change. New interest in nature and the laws of science made people look at childhood as a developmental stage. Just like a growing plant found in the natural world, parents realized children required the proper environment and encouragement for growth. Rousseau argued that children needed freedom of movement to explore their world. The formal adult dress of the early century prevented children from freely moving and exploring. For example, children would have difficulty bending while wearing their corsets. Loose fitting and light garments replaced the formal costume of children. In fact, up until the age of five or six all children wore dress-like garments regardless of their sex.



Clothing was also symbolic of the perceived differences between male and female children as they grew older. The “breeching” at age 5 or 6 of a boy was an important stage in the life of a boy, because putting on his first pair of breeches indicated he had entered into the masculine world. Wearing breeches also afforded boys a

more active lifestyle because of the new freedom of movement. Young girls continued to wear their dresses and maintained their childhood attire despite their change in age. The only change in the attire of young girls was to eventually trade their soft stays for ones that were boned.

Male and female children’s lives also diverged in other ways at this age. Boys began to spend more time with their fathers and girls spent time with their mothers so that they could learn proper deportment. Karin Calvert writes, “ Boys were drawn closer to their fathers, who began to shape their lives more actively; girls remained under the influence of their mothers and a circle of female relatives and

friends, who by example suggested the female model most girls willingly accepted.” Most parents believed that children should be separated and placed under the watchful eye and influence of another adult so that they would learn appropriate behavior. This even included sleeping with other adults. According to Karin Calvert, “Sharing a room, and probably a bed with someone else was so common and accepted that children and even adults found it decidedly distracted to sleep alone.”

When children were not learning proper behavior, their playtime also diverged according to their gender. Phillip Vickers Fithian writes about

the Carter girls, whom he is tutoring, “by stuffing rags and other lumber under their gowns just below the apron strings, were prodigiously charmed at their resemblance to pregnant women.” Even at a young age, girls recognized the roles they would play in their adult lives.

Many widowed parents worried that their children would not have the appropriate examples to learn deportment. John Carlyle must have been concerned with the education of his two daughters when Sarah died. Quickly marrying Sybil West ensured that the two little girls would have the female role model that they needed to become elite ladies. After Sybil dies, he writes, “When I consider my Little Giraes now in a time of life the most dangerous to be without a proper Directris.” Even little Sarah is concerned when she writes to her Uncle George in England, “...wish she had lived a few years longer that I might have been Intrusted to have taken care of papas house Upon my own hands, which is much too much for me as yet.”

By using the information we have specifically about the Carlyle children as well as the research we have on other children in colonial Virginia, one can’t help but imagine what the house would have been like filled with the Carlyle children.