



Carlyle House

Docent Dispatch



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Private Places

by Cindy Major

Perhaps the reason history is intriguing to so many people is because it is like a jigsaw puzzle. The puzzle pieces are bits of information. When arranged or interpreted by different scholars, they can give the picture in the puzzle a different look. Occasionally fortune shines on us and new pieces of the puzzle are found which change our concept of events in the past.

Our museum has been very fortunate in having dedicated researchers over the years examining information known about the Carlyle House as well as information about other Chesapeake elite households. They have given us the most accurate picture possible of John Carlyle's use of his house and furnishings.

The architectural elements of the house clearly point to the north side of the first floor as the more formal, public rooms. The south side has few original elements so we must look to other homes of the period for clues as to how they were typically used.

Betty Leviner and Robert Leath made a very strong presentation May 9th at Lloyd House and again the next morning at Carlyle House explaining the reasoning behind changing the Chamber to the front of the house and the family dining room to the back of the house and referring to it as Colonel Carlyle's Study. In this article, we will look at what we know about private rooms that appear to be designated for the primary use of the master of the house.

The problem with private rooms is that they were private. This is where personal as well as possibly business interests were pursued. We know that the Carlyles carried on all the basic activities of life: sleep, food consumption, personal hygiene, family interaction and more than their share of births, illnesses and deaths. We have very limited information about these very personal activities.

Carl Lounsbury points out that Virginia houses in the early 1700s, composed of two rooms, the front



First Floor Chamber

room was a public space referred to as the Hall and the second room became known as The Chamber. Sleeping arrangements varied widely but it was not uncommon for the master to sleep in The Hall and the mistress in The Chamber. By the mid-18th century, just as many social activities were segregated by sex, private rooms are now given titles that identify them as being for either male or female use.

In the home of George Mason, the first floor chamber was referred to by John Mason as "Mother's

CARLYLE HOUSE

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Chamber.” At Belvoir, the inventory of John Carlyle’s brother-in-law labels the contents of the first floor chamber as Mrs. Fairfax’s Chamber. It is not surprising that as houses became larger and the number of rooms multiplied we see rooms on the private side of the house being labeled Colonel Mason’s Study, Colonel Fairfax’s Dressing Room, Library (at Sabine Hall) and other terms associated with masculine pursuits.

Men and women were dominating very separate realms in Colonial America. The academic, political and business worlds were not generally open to women. It seems reasonable that the names they gave their private spaces reflect that separation of powers. The room that we are now calling Colonel Carlyle’s Study is perfectly situated to give him a view of the Potomac River the link to world commerce, international and national affairs.

We are fortunate that George Mason’s Gunston Hall has the recollection’s of John Mason describing the use of the two private rooms of that house. John calls the room at the back of the house “the small Dining Room”. He specifies that it was the family that dined here but also clearly states that it was, first and foremost, his father’s private space.

“...the Small Dining room was devoted to his service when he used to write, and he absented as it were from the Family sometimes for weeks together-and often until very late at night during the revolutionary War....”

George Mason refers to the same room in a letter to his son in 1787 when describing where he left papers he wants sent to him in Philadelphia as being in “my Desk & Book Case” in the “little Parlour” The title of little parlor opens the possibility that the same room was used for social activities such as conversation, reading aloud, or games.

In another reference to this same room, John Mason writes “my father in good weather would

several times a day pass out of his Study and walk (in the garden)...and return to his Desk....” The term study also strengthens the notion of Mason dominating the room for his use as an office and private space.

At Nomoni Hall, where there were two dining rooms, one specifically assigned to the children, it is likely that Robert Carter’s study was off limits to the rest of the family. Philip Vickers Fithian, tells of the desired effect on his young students when threatened

with a trip to visit their Papa in his study. Clearly in this household, interrupting their father in his study was not something his children did lightly.

How did John Carlyle use his private space? Did his family join him there for conversation? Did his servants enter to be given instructions? Was it a busy domestic space or a quiet retreat for the master of the house?

We want the public to be able to see family life being carried out in the private spaces of the Carlyle House but we must be careful to qualify our descriptions with phrases

such as “research leads us to believe”, “scholars generally agree that” or “it was traditional that.” Just as new studies and recent discoveries have led us to refine our thoughts on how the rooms on the south side of Carlyle House were used new pieces to this puzzle may emerge to change the picture in the future.

Sources

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Colonel Carlyle’s Study