



Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

“Different Scize and pattrons:” Eighteenth-century Wine and Glassware

“Then wine, I say! I’ll drink to madness!
Wine, my girl, to cure my sadness!
And tell me no more, there’s folly in drinking,
Can anything equal the folly of thinking!”
18th-century drinking song

The popularity of wine is reflected in the inventories of eighteenth-century gentlemen. These listings of property frequently include a large collection of various wines as well as the appropriate glassware. Similar to punch, wine was so expensive that only the upper classes could afford to drink it. These inventories as well as numerous accounts in journals and letters make it clear that wine was an important part of gentry entertaining in the colonies.

Wines that Virginians drank were typically from Spain or Portugal. Enough money and the right connections could get you champagne from France, even with the tense political situation between England and France. There were a variety of other wines that were popular to drink in the colonies including port, claret, sack, and Madeira. Champagne, both red and white, was the most expensive wine and could be served sparkling or still. The cheapest of the foreign wines was port. As a result of a treaty signed with Portugal, port could be shipped with only a nominal duty. Claret and sack were any number of red and white wines that came from France, Spain and Portugal. The word claret, which came from the Latin word *clarus* meaning “clear” signified light rose-colored wines in the seventeenth century and true red wines later. Sack refers to a strong golden wine that came from various places in southern Spain.

Of all the wines, Madeira gained the distinction of being the favorite served on colonial tables. Ambassador Bagot found that Americans drank “scarcely any other wine than Madeira” and that they offered it to him in a quantity better than he could hope to give them. The inventory of the Governor in Williamsburg, Lord Botetourt, in 1770 reveals his penchant for Madeira listing in the Binn cellar alone “7 ½ doz. Madeira, 37 doz. & 7 Madeira, 12 doz. & 2 bottles Madeira.” Phillip Vickers Fithian, the tutor at Nomini Hall writes, “dined with us today Captain Walker, Colonel Richard Lee & Mr. Lanclot Lee, sat after dinner till Sunset, drank three bottles of Madaira...”



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Carlyle House

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“Different Scize and pattrons:” (con’t)



In addition to imported wines, Virginians also set their tables with homemade versions. To supplement the imported beverages in the wine cellars, the mistresses and servants made acceptable wines out of dandelions, elderberries, currents, persimmons, black berries, and a variety of grapes native to the area. Mary Randolph provides a recipe for making current wine in *The Virginia Housewife* - “Gather full ripe currents on a dry day, pick them from stalks, and weigh them; then crush them with your hands, leaving none whole; for every two pounds of currents put one quart of water, stir all well together, and let it stand three hours, and strain the liquor through a sieve; then, for every three pounds of currents, put one pound of powdered loaf sugar, stir it till the sugar is dissolved, boil it, and keep skimming it as long as any scum will rise; let it stand sixteen hours to cool before you put it in the cask; stop it very close...This is a pleasant and cheap wine, and if properly made, will keep good for many years.” Outside of the home, wine was typically served in taverns, although not widely available outside of the city areas. In fact, French visitor the Marquis de Chastellux, “being apprised that wine was not always to meet with in inns,” carried his own.

In addition to purchasing wine

itself, the upper class colonists required the proper accoutrement. Most gentlemen owned a variety of glassware including wine glasses and small bowls, called glass wash basins or glass coolers, which made it possible for the drinkers to rinse their wine glass between wines. If George Washington’s orders were indicative of the practices of the time, drinking glasses were ordered by the dozen or the half dozen every five years. No doubt these repeat orders were due to the fragile nature of the glasses and the increased entertaining needs in the Washington household. Washington’s invoices and orders record his purchase of at least 10 dozen wine glasses between 1757 and 1771. Such orders were probably commonplace judging by the listing of five dozen wine glasses in George Johnston’s inventory of 1767 and the 55 wine glasses found in Landon Carter’s parlor closet at the time of his death in 1779.

The large number of orders could have also been affected by the precarious nature of shipping glassware. William Byrd writes in a letter to a merchant in July of 1741, “My glasses were all shatters tho that I must aquit your Master of because I can demonstrate they were so, when they were packt up in England. For the Barrel, was whole and fast naid, when it came ashore & when we opened it, the Glasses were broke and yet not one piece of Glass as big as my Nail to be found

in the straw which I caused to be taken out and shaken before my Eyes.”

Where then, against this background, does the Carlyle household with its 8 *Wine Glasses different Scize and pattrons* fall? The key is in the qualifying phrase “different scize and pattrons,” clearly indicating that these glasses are the remnants of various sets purchased by Carlyle during his lifetime. Although only pieces of sets survived in Carlyle’s household by 1780 when he died, the fact that glasses were commonly ordered by the dozen or half dozen does suggest fairly large numbers of glasses were owned by the Carlyles originally. Considering Carlyle’s social position in the Virginia gentry, it is not surprising that John Carlyle would have needed a large number of glasses to serve fine wines while entertaining.

Sources Consulted:

- *Come Drink the Bowl Dry*, Peter Brown
- *Festive Tradition*, Louise Conway Belden
- *The Art of Dining*, Sara Paston-Williams
- *Glass in Colonial Williamsburg’s Archeological Collections*, Ivor Noel Hume
- *Early American Taverns*, Kym Rice
- *The Alcoholic Republic*, W.J. Rorabaugh