Carlyle House
DOCENT DISPATCH
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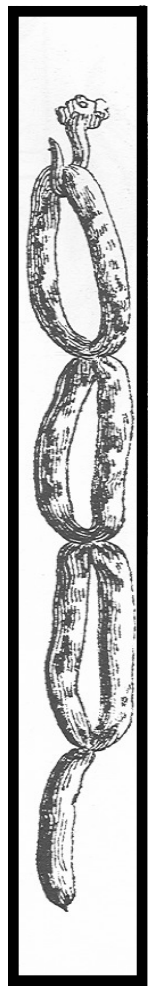
Forged in the Past

by Erin Adams

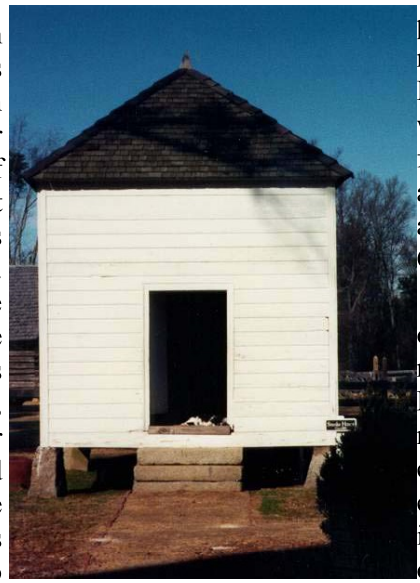
There has long been debate between academic historians and the museum profession about the importance of individual objects in the teaching of history. To academic historians, history is the clear alignment of evidence found in written documents. Museums, on the other hand, believe that written documents, no matter how important they are, cannot substitute for authentic objects and the lessons they teach. This study of objects, called material culture, becomes the driving force behind a good museum's curatorial and educational functions. Objects offer seemingly limitless interpretation. Does the object reveal its use? Can we determine its maker or method or place of manufacture? Is the object representative of aesthetic, cultural, or technological trends or innovations? Each new discovery opens more windows of exploration for a museum's staff.

In 2004, the staff of Carlyle House stumbled into such an opportunity when it took on the tremendous task of preparing for AAM reaccreditation. No stone was left unturned; no closet was left uncleaned. It was while cleaning the office closets that an undiscovered piece of Carlyle House history came to light. From a dark corner came the sound of scraping, dragging metal: A rusted, pitted metal hook had attached itself to the broom and refused to be swept away. The age of the hook was indeterminate, so it was set aside for future study, and the less glamorous job of cleaning continued.

At a more convenient time, the hook was brought out of its storage holder and examined. There are no marks on the hook. No indications of who might have made it. There are no records, at least in the museum's holding, to tell us whether or not this hook was owned or made by John Carlyle or any members of his household. So without a written trail on this hook, what good can it be to the museum? We cannot even be sure that this hook was manufactured in the eighteenth century, let alone by Joe, a talented enslaved blacksmith owned by John Carlyle. But suppose it was. The artifact would be valuable for a number of reasons. It would be the only artifact of its kind found at the Carlyle House, despite the many years of landscape upheaval. Additional research into the composition of the metal and an evaluation of its surface, would enlighten us as to its use and its position on the property. Finally, the hook stands as a symbol of the boisterous nature of colonial industry. It introduces dialogue on the materials, the makers, and the consumers of eighteenth-century Alexandria, Virginia.



At first glance, the hook appears to be an ordinary, unexceptional hook. In its present form, the iron hook measures 6 3/8 inches in depth. One end is square in shape, with two major horizontal cracks, and is entirely covered with rust. The other end shapes into a curving tip.



Examining its structure and composition removes the first layer of mystery. James Mackay, Director of the Lyceum Museum, provided guidelines for determining the hook's age, style of manufacture, and use. No markings exist to pinpoint the hook's age, and patterns of use cannot be determined specifically. Understanding the composition and style of similar artifacts helps to approximate both the hook's age and use. The hook is hand-forged iron: There are no seams, and it is not uniform in width or proportion. It appears to thicken and strengthen from the hook-tip to the square end. Two major horizontal splits in the metal tell us that the iron used to forge it contained impurities. Crystallized oxidization covers the surface of the entire hook—running a hand over it would not produce rust stains. Various patches of white and grey discoloration indicate that the hook has been exposed to paint, plaster, or whitewash.

These characteristics fit the mold, so to speak, of other eighteenth-century hooks found in Alexandria and used for general utility. According to Mr. Mackay, the style of hooks changed little during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Let us, for a moment, explore this hook as representative of hooks of eighteenth-century colonial Virginia. When looked at empirically, several questions should be prompted: Who made these hooks? What quantity and quality of materials were available? For whom are they made? What allows them to survive in relatively fair conditions? Knowing more about Carlyle's business and employees, this hook takes on more significance.

Carlyle House was the primary residence of Colonel John Carlyle, Gentleman, from 1753 until 1780. Professionally, Carlyle identified himself as a merchant, shipping and receiving goods between the American colonies, the Caribbean, and Britain. Archaeology, recorded history, and legend expand his list of concerns to include a bloomery, three wheat, tobacco, and livestock plantations, a carpentry shop, undertaking, and iron mining. Carlyle owned significant amounts of land throughout Northern Virginia, including lands at the head of the Shenandoah Valley, an area rich in its iron ore deposits. Like all three of Carlyle's plantations, this plantation provided economic support for Carlyle's business concerns. But according to his biographer, Dr. James Munson, Carlyle—along with George Washington and others—purchased two shares in William Ramsay's mining operations at Sugarland Run tract in Prince William County in 1757. Business was apparently successful enough for the firm of Carlyle & Dalton to purchase additional shares of George William Fairfax and Richard Stephenson's Old Bloomery Company by 1760.

Before the 1750s, production of iron ore would have been a considerable waste of resources. In the early seventeenth century, Britain struggled to create and stabilize new markets for its exports. Parliament's consternation fell on the Chesapeake colonies, who were rapidly capitalizing on iron resources. Mining and using native iron ore undermined the mining industries of England and Wales. Native Americans attempted to drive out the Virginia Company in 1622 by destroying the furnaces at Falling Creek Ironworks in Chesterfield County, Virginia. The consumer revolution of the mid-1730s further convinced Parliament to pass the Iron Act in 1750. But like many other Acts of the 1750s, Parliament repealed this one after acknowledging England's slowed production and the colonies' seemingly inexhaustible fuel resources. Parliament agreed to condone colonial production, and a number of foundries and mining operations sprang up in the Chesapeake area. Foundries have been located in Prince William and Stafford Counties, Virginia, (possibly even Ramsay's or Fairfax and Stephenson's?) dating to the late-1750s.

The iron being mined in the Shenandoah was pig iron—raw ore processed with coke and blasted in a limestone furnace. The process was cheap, and produced a mediocre product. Pig iron was smelted and formed into ingots and processed for shipping to a refinery or bloomery, where it would be purified and shaped. First introduced in 1709, the bloomery was a charcoal-driven smelting process designed for pig iron conversion. Bessemer converters were not patented until 1855, so the iron being mined and used by Carlyle, Ramsay, and others would still have contained impurities. Once the iron ingots reached Alexandria, they were loaded onto ships bound for England or the Caribbean. Carlyle either used or sold those not shipped to Britain.

Bloomeries produced wrought iron, from which tools and basic utensils could be manufactured. Pig iron could be improved to a degree that would be useful for light industry. Hooks made from pig iron varied in size and purpose. The size of the hook generally indicated its purpose. According to Mackay, the size of the hook we are studying would have been appropriate for general

household use—utensil storage, hanging hams in a smokehouse, even holding cooking pots over a fire—but not for heavy industrial use, like supporting block-and-tackle on a ship or the eaves of a house.

The pattern of wear and damage on the hook indicates all these things. It was hammered into a wall: There is a distinct change in color along the top edge, as well as an indentation in the first curve of the hook, indicating that the hook was hammered at an angle. It was broken off of the wall instead of gently removed: Mackay noted that such hooks ended in a nail-like point, and were pounded into a slightly smaller hole. It was probably twisted out, and then snapped off before it was fully removed. Finally, the horizontal cracks are consistent with impurities of pig iron and the bloomery process. Age and exposure to changing conditions would have weakened the hook, making it easy to snap off.

Colonial bloomeries employed a number of blacksmiths. Generally, little is known about them, including their names. Most likely, there was a mix of indentured servants and slaves. From letters and documents we know that Carlyle employed both slaves and servants. Indentured servants could also be borrowed or their services traded with other employers. Carlyle's Probate Inventory of 1780 records the possession of nine slaves at the Carlyle House. Of these nine, five were men. Three of these men were definitely not blacksmiths. Moses was Carlyle's personal body-servant. Twelve-year-old Jame shadowed Moses about the house, learning to be a "waiting man." Charles was probably an errand-runner, coachman, and man-of-all-work. Of Joe and Jerry, the remaining two men, Joe's financial value was placed as high as £85. Carlyle refers to "Smith Jo" in a letter to his brother, George Carlyle. Did "Smith Jo" make this hook? Blacksmiths were among the most skilled of laborers. The job was incredibly dangerous, and required the greatest skills of stamina and technical expertise. It follows that a highly skilled blacksmith would account for the highest figure in the total value of the slaves. But in the nearly forty years that John Carlyle resided in Virginia, many slaves would have come under his ownership. Therefore, we cannot be certain that the hook was made by Joe.

By the 1760s, the colonies contained many talented, itinerant free blacksmiths. Were their services called upon? Since ancient times, skilled craftsmen have usually given their work a distinctive mark. There are no craftsman's marks on this hook. A slave may be less likely to mark an item that would not be attributed to his credit. A few of Carlyle House's architectural elements contain markings that link what we know about the house's construction to its builders as a general group. The hook boasts no such markings.

Although other artifacts recovered from the property do not include any other hooks quite like this one, another hook similar to this one is located in the wall of what is now the Docents' Lounge. It is fastened into a wooden beam, which is directly adjacent to a stone interior wall. Holding the two hooks side by side indicate that our hook is much larger.

So, to review: An antique iron hook is found in a closet corner. There are no marks on it; no records of it in the museum; no way to definitively date its manufacture; no photos or accounts to demonstrate its use. An academic historian might say this hook is worthless to the museum. Instead let us, as public historians who believe in the power of objects to serve as eyewitnesses to the past, use this object to encourage dialogue, propel research, and open a small window into the bustling, thriving community of colonial industry and trade.

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Erin Adams has been at the Carlyle House since 2004 and made so many valuable contributions it is hard to imagine life without her. She has just finished completing an MA degree in Museum Studies and we have benefited from much of the expertise that she has acquired. Thank you Erin for another job well done.