



Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Dressing the Bed

In honor of the return of the Carlyle bed this month, we decided to reprint an old article on eighteenth-century beds as a refresher for old docents and important information for new docents!

Any discussion about 18th-century beds would not be complete without mention of the most expensive portion of the bed: the “bed furniture.” These textile components of the bed included the bed curtains, valances and coverlets or quilts. (See glossary at end of article for period definitions.) In fact, using period inventories, low post beds can often be identified by the absence of corresponding mention of these items. Consequently, by looking at various textiles associated with each of the museum’s beds, a hierarchy is apparent.

Bed curtains in the 18th century usually enclosed the bed entirely and provided, both warmth and privacy. Additionally, window curtains, which are most frequently mentioned in bedchambers in period inventories, also provided a modicum of privacy for the room’s occupants. More elaborate beds were made with curtains that drew up drapery style and required pulleys at the top of the bedstead. This type of drapery style hangings can be found on both John’s and the daughters’ bed.

The 1780 inventory listed four sets of bed curtains, and two sets of window curtains. The most expensive set of bed hangings and matching curtains was the suit of chintz bedhangings and window

curtains valued at £ 11 and £ 4 pounds respectively. This is in comparison to the second most expensive set identified as “Blue and White Chintze bed Curtains with Two window Curtains,” valued at £ 6. The significantly higher value placed on the first suit of chintz hangings implies a much more elaborate set. This extra value accounts for the use of a double drapery pattern on John’s bed rather than a single pattern as used on the green bed in the girls’ bedchamber. Aside from the difference in drapery patterns, however, the two beds contain much the same bed furniture.

The creation of a drapery pattern is determined by the number and placement of pulleys within the structure of the bedstead. Cords are run through rings sewn on the backs of the curtains and then through the pulleys and down to cloak pins. The placement of the curtain rings and pulleys determines the pattern of the swags. During the day, the curtains would be pulled up around the bed posts with the cords tied off around the decorative cloak pins. (Note: This is how the museum beds are displayed)

The most elaborate beds were topped with carved wooden cornices, adding to their ornament. The cornice might be painted, gilded, covered with colored

(Continued on page 2)

Carlyle House

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Dressing the Bed (con't)



paper, or as in the case of John’s bed, covered with fabric that matches the bed hangings. The fabric is secured to the cornice by carefully shaping and gluing it to the wood.

Also hanging from the cornice are pieces of fabric called valences. These valences served the purpose of hiding the pulley system in the bed. Similarly, base valences (like our modern dust ruffle) hang between the mattress and floor, covering the side rails of the bedstead.

While field beds did not have valences, they did have bed hangings. John Carlyle’s inventory lists a suit of check bed curtains valued at £ 1, five shillings. This amount is markedly lower than that of the two chintz suits, because of the design of the field bed textiles. This type of bed is designed with testers that curve up in an arch, or angle upward in a tent shape. The hangings for this type of bed consisted of “throw over” furniture. The curtains and tester were sewn together in one piece so it could be dropped over a wooden frame quickly and easily.

Docent hint: The different bed curtains amongst the three beds can be easily identified by simply looking at the textiles and the way they are hung. Thus, incorporating

a discussion of the use of bed textiles for privacy, heat, and even to display wealth, as is the case with John’s bed, is a simple concept to include on your tour.

Glossary

cloak pin— A brass knob that was attached to a bed post around which the cords from the bed curtains could be secured, thus allowing the curtains to drape and hang open. Cloak pins were decorative as well as functional elements. They might also be used at windows to secure the cords of the window curtains.

curtain—A cloth that can be pulled together or left open to admit the desired amount of light. It can refer to the hangings of either a bed or a window. Some bedchambers in the eighteenth century included both window and bed curtains. When looking at inventories, caution must be used in determining the type of curtains to which the entry refers.

en suite— A French term used to denote that a group of objects have a common element and belong together. Most often used to refer to the textiles in a room when they are all of the same fabric.

head cloth—On a high-post bedstead, a piece of cloth that hangs at the head of the bed suspended from a tester frame or metal rod and

in front of the headboard.

tester—On a high-post bed, a piece of canvas, linen or material en-suite with the rest of the bed textiles stretched on a wooden frame that covered the top of the bedstead between the four posts creating a kind of ceiling for the bedstead. This protected the sleeper from drafts and prevented dust from falling on the bed.

valence—The horizontal piece of fabric suspended from the upper and/or lower rails of the bed. These pieced on the upper frame between the bedposts hid the hardware from which the curtains were hung. A high-post bed with its full complement of furniture would consist of both inner and outer valences as well as base valences. The inner valences around the top hid the hardware from the occupant of the bed. The entire ensemble was the same fabric. “Valence” can also refer to the piece of fabric hung across the top of a window curtain that served the same purpose as the bed valance.

Glossary definitions taken from Furnishing Williamsburg’s Historic Buildings, by Jan Kirsten Gilliam and Betty Crowe Leviner.