

# Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

## Storing and Caring for John Carlyle's Clothing

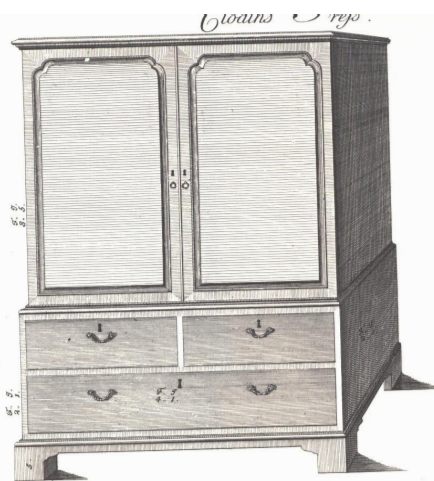
As modern shoppers, we don't think twice about purchasing new items of clothing and adding them to our already full closets. If a favorite shirt is ruined by a ketchup stain, that even the most potent stain remover can't get out, we simply go to a store or catalog and replace it. In the eighteenth century, acquiring items of clothing was much more time consuming and a larger financial investment. As a result, even the wealthy eighteenth-century consumer took great care in the storing of and caring for their clothing.

The 1780 probate inventory of John Carlyle's possessions gives historians some insight into the types of clothing he wore. His eighteenth-century inventory is one of the few from the Chesapeake region that lists the items of clothing individually, instead of as a lump sum. The inventory not only tells us what he wore, but also gives us an idea of how John stored and cared for his attire.

John's inventory lists 2 *walnut Cloths presses*. According to Betty Leviner in her book, *Furnishing Williamsburg's Historic Buildings*, "A clothes press, an eighteenth-century word for cupboard, was a large case piece outfitted with drawers or shelves on which clothes were laid." Instead of hanging clothes in closets, wealthy men and women laid their clothing flat in either a clothes press or chest of drawers. Often the shelves in a clothes press slid out so that clothing was more readily accessible. Doors on these pieces of furniture not only hid the clothing

from view, but also protected the clothing from dust.

Clothes presses were only owned by very wealthy people, who possessed enough clothing that they required a piece of furniture for storage. Many of John Carlyle's contemporaries in the Chesapeake region



listed clothes presses on their inventories. The inventory of Jesse Ball of Lancaster County, Virginia, is one of the few other examples that list the clothing item by item. His inventory also contains two clothes presses - *In the chamber ... 1 clothes press and Over the Dining room ... 1 small clothes press*. Lord Botetourt, the Governor of Virginia, had 2 *mahogany clothes presses with apparel* listed on the inventory taken at the time of his death in 1770. Sometimes clothes presses

or chests of drawers are not listed on the inventories of gentry households. The inventory for the Peyton-Randolph House in Williamsburg does not list an item of furniture to hold clothing. According to Betty Leviner, "In this instance the clothes were probably stored in the built-in closets flanking the fireplace. Clothing stored in a closet might be hung directly on

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### Carlyle House

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## Storing and Caring for John Carlyle’s Clothing (cont’d)



pegs or folded and laid on shelves.”

The clothes press form held great popularity in the Chesapeake region and in the Southern colonies, but it was not found in homes in the northern colonies. This difference in preferences of furniture was a result of the uneven rates of growth in the furniture trade between the northern and southern colonies. Ron Hurst, author of *Southern Furniture 1680-1830*, contends “In the South, most cities remained too small to support full-time cabinetmaking communities until the 1720s, but as towns grew during the second and third quarters of the eighteenth century, they attracted furniture makers recently trained in Britain. These new arrivals brought an up-to-date knowledge of British tastes in household furnishings including forms like the clothespress. Conversely, urban centers in the North were already well established, and large furniture making communities there were more resistant to the influence of immigrant British artisans.” As a result, forms like the high chest of drawers were found more readily than clothes presses in the northern colonies.

The clothes press that the museum recently acquired is made of mahogany and contains four shelves. There are clues which indicate some of the shelves might

have slid out, but now they are all fixed in place. At the top of the clothes press, the three pigeonholes would have been useful to hold small personal items. The clothes press was made in Virginia and is an excellent example of the probable form of clothes press John Carlyle owned.

In addition to storing the expensive fabrics John Carlyle was wearing, someone had to ensure the proper care of these garments. The expensive silks and embroidered fabrics could not be thrown in the washer or brought to the cleaners. Instead, these garments were brushed and spot treated with a variety of stain-removal techniques. Recipes for this were found in cookbooks and handed down by word of mouth. In Hannah Glasse’s *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, she provides her reader with this important information: “A secret against all kinds of spots on cloth or silk, of any colour. Take a water impregnated with alkaline salt, black soap, and bullock’s gall; this composition will take out any kind of spots from any kind of cloth, silk etc. Rinse off with soft warm water.” Robert Roberts, in his book *The House Servant’s Directory*, provided an idea of how eighteenth-century man servants might have cared for their master’s clothing. He writes, *In the first place, if your gentleman’s clothes should happen to get wet or muddy, hang them out in the sun or before the fire to dry. Do not attempt to brush them while*

*wet, or you will surely spoil them, but as soon as they are perfectly dry, take and rub them between your hands where there are any spots of mud, then hang them... then take out a rattan and give them a whipping, to take out the dust, but be careful and don’t hit the buttons, or you will be apt to break or scratch them. When this is done, take your coat and spread it on a table full length. Let the collar be towards the left hand, and brush in your right, then brush the back of the collar first, between the shoulders next, then the sleeves and the cuffs, then brush the farthest lapel and skirt, then the near one, observing to brush with the nap of the cloth, as it runs towards the skirt. This labor intensive process was required to maintain all of John’s coats, waistcoats, and breeches.*

John Carlyle’s inventory provides us with a wealth of information about the man and the types of clothing he wore. It is also an extremely useful document because it helps us understand the ways that the clothing was stored in the house. In addition, looking at the tremendous work it took to keep John and his family’s clothing cleaned gives us a peek at the daily lives of some of the slaves and servants at the Carlyle House. This knowledge makes us look at our laundry in a whole new way.