



Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

May 2006

Carlyle Redecorates This Spring

By Mary Ruth Coleman

As the Millennium approached, the staff was preparing for several important milestones - the 25th anniversary of the creation of the museum (2001), the 250th anniversary of the construction of the house (2003) and for AAM re-accreditation in (2004). It became obvious during this period that it was time to re-open the investigation of several important categories of research completed over twenty years before. One of these was paint analysis.

In 1976, as part of the restoration of the Carlyle House, a young but well respected historic paint analyst, Matthew Mosca, was hired to investigate the existence of paint finishes on the remaining original walls at the museum. His findings from that time – spectacular Prussian Blue and Blue Verditer, with grained doors and window seats – currently grace the walls of the Dining Room and Parlor. Over the years scholarly articles and symposia have shared with museum professionals the great information that could be gleaned from follow-up paint studies. It was time for Carlyle House to open the door to twenty-first century technology.

In 2001 Matthew Mosca, now a world renowned Historic Paint Finishes Consultant and first rate scientist, was again commissioned to analyze the original walls and woodwork of the Dining Room and Parlor. The project was funded by the Friends of Carlyle House and a generous grant from the Historic Alexandria Foundation. We waited excitedly for his work to be completed.

Carlyle Dining Room



As Matthew states in his 2002 final report, “having much better microscopes at my disposal now, I have been able to identify paint finishes that I had originally thought were undercoats.” This means that during John Carlyle’s lifetime the woodwork in both the Dining Room and the Parlor were consistently painted in a light palette of whites and grays which in 1976 Matthew thought were primers or undercoats for the bright blues he found on top.

The first layer dates from construction, 1753, and shows whites and grays in both rooms with grained window seats and baseboard fascia. The second finish, which dates from around 1762 or Carlyle’s remarriage to Sybil West, a reasonable time for redecorating, shows the light palette but with moderate brown window seats and base. The gray colors were also found on *both* sides of the original doors stored in the attic, which had not been analyzed in 1976. This suggests that the light palette was used in much of the house, ie, the center passage, as doors

CARLYLE HOUSE

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director
Jim Bartlinski, Curator
Cindy Major, Curator of Education

were painted the same color as the principal woodwork of the room on which each door opened.

The discovery of this light palette may also indicate the possibility that the walls of the Parlor and Center Passage were papered in the Carlyle period, possibly even at construction. (Note: the Dining Room has original wood paneling, ruling out the possibility of any wallpaper ever existing in this space). Extensive research by Margaret Pritchard, Curator of prints, maps and wallpaper at Colonial Williamsburg Foundation shows that during our interpretive period, 1753-80, wallpaper was consistently paired with light or neutral woodwork colors, not with the post 1780 bold colors currently on view in the house.

Evidence exists that Carlyle bought five rolls of green varnished wallpaper and matching border from an Alexandria store in 1773, more than enough to paper the Parlor, not nearly enough for the Passage. We also know that in 1763 George William Fairfax, Carlyle's brother-in-law and owner of Belvoir Plantation, ordered green varnished wallpaper and gilt border for his Parlor. But we must ask ourselves, why was Carlyle redecorating in 1773, after the deaths of both of his wives? Perhaps it was the coming of age of his two daughters, Sarah and Ann, who could have been courting during this period? We know that both girls were wed in 1775.

For many years the fact that the first paint analysis found vividly painted woodwork on the remaining original woodwork leads us to believe that the green varnished wallpaper would not have been in the room with the Prussian Blue woodwork, now designated the Parlor. In 1997 the green varnished paper was hung in the "Family Dining Room" (now Carlyle Bedchamber). However, the completion of the Revised Furnishing Plan in 2005, the renaming and changes in room usages, coupled with the new paint analysis, convincingly show us that the green wall paper should be installed in the Parlor once the woodwork is painted the appropriate bluish white.

Part of our decision making is science and some is educated, well thought out conjecture, and in twenty more years, who knows, new research could indicate the need for more changes. But for now, Spring 2006, our best evidence leads us to the fact that the Parlor and Dining Room should be repainted in the lighter colors, the green varnished wall paper should be moved into the Parlor, and research should begin on wallpaper appropriate for the Passage.

A Note from Mary Ruth



Painting



We are very excited that painting is scheduled to begin on the Dining Room and Parlor on May 15 and is set to continue for 13 working days. Chris Ohrstrom and a team of very experienced painters from Adelphi Paper Hanging and Paint Stainers will be working from 7 am to 7 pm each day to complete this project.

First the rooms must be cleared of all furniture and wall hangings and all the floors will be covered. The wood surfaces will be lightly scraped and prepped to remove any failing paint. They will not be stripped or sanded or filled with any putty or fillers in an attempt to retain as much original material as possible.

The ceilings will be primed. Then two coats of traditional (chalk, water and animal glue) white Distemper paint will be hand applied with a bristle brush.

The wood surfaces will be brush primed with an alkyd oil-based primer tinted to match the final surface color. Then they will receive one coat of traditional linseed oil paint applied using traditional bristle brushes mixed to match as closely as reasonably possible the color provided by Matthew Mosca in his paint finishes report. The linseed oil will not contain lead.

There will be some disruption in tours during the painting process. Docents will not be able to take groups into rooms where painting is going on, however, your visitors may look into the room as you explain the interesting new discoveries that have been made in our interpretation. Over and over again I have found that visitors are fascinated with these "behind the scenes" glimpses into the inner workings of the museum. And far from being annoyed, they are usually delighted to be included in an exciting new project. The outer doors will be left open as much as possible to avoid a build up of paint fumes. If anyone knows that they are particularly susceptible to paint irritants, please call in and rearrange your docent schedule to avoid these days. We thank you all for your cooperation and can't wait to see the finished product!

