



Carlyle House

Docent Dispatch



May 2005

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

What is a Furnishing Plan Anyway?

by Mary Ruth Coleman

When John Carlyle and his wife Sarah Fairfax completed their new residence in Alexandria, it was undoubtedly meant to be the most impressive house in town. It was the kind of house owned by only the top 2% of colonial Virginia society. When John Carlyle died, in 1780, a lengthy inventory of his personal belongings was filed with the Fairfax County Court. Cumulatively, this document lists nearly 460 items that belonged to Carlyle – furniture, silver, ceramics, prints, maps, etc. – yet it fails to tell us where a single one of them was located. Over twenty years ago, in 1984, the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority commissioned a Furnishing Plan to help interpret the inventory and give the staff direction on how to furnish the house during the time period of Col. Carlyle’s occupancy.

The 1984 report defined a strategy to guide the acquisition and display of the Carlyle House’s decorative arts collection. In the forward, the authors noted that

This historic furnishings plan is first and foremost a long-range planning document which will enable the Northern Virginia Park Authority to direct the future growth of the Carlyle House...This is not to say that the plan is immutable. Research is an on-going process, and the plan should reflect current scholarship in the field of 18th century decorative arts and social history. As new research comes available, it may be necessary to further refine decisions made about the collections in the furnishings plan.

This 1984 plan accomplished a number of essential tasks, and it remains highly relevant today. For a complete understanding of furnishing the John Carlyle House, the original 1984 report will continue to be read, studied, and used by the staff and other researchers. It traces the historical and architectural development of the house, places the Carlyles in

context as consumers of eighteenth-century material goods, and discusses in detail the items listed in John Carlyle’s inventory. With room studies and sections on ceramics, glass, silver, pewter, carpets, wallpaper and lighting devices, the plan defines all the accoutrements needed for a gentry-level house in colonial Virginia.

During the years since the plan’s completion, however, a number of important discoveries have been made that shed new light on the Carlyle House, how its rooms would have been used in the eighteenth-century, and where Carlyle’s original furnishings would have been placed. These include:

- ◆ The discovery of previously unknown documents (Fairfax Family Papers at the Virginia Historical Society) related to Belvoir, the house built by John Carlyle’s father-in-law, Colonel William Fairfax. These have provided new insight into the family’s tastes and consumer choices.
- ◆ The publication of two seminal articles in the journal *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* by Mark R. Wenger. Entitled “The Central Passage in Virginia: Evolution of an Eighteenth-Century Living Space,” and “The Dining Room in Early Virginia,” these articles have altered our perceptions of eighteenth-century room use.
- ◆ The creation of the Gunston Hall Inventory Data Base, a digitized and searchable compilation of more than three hundred probate inventories from Maryland and

CARLYLE HOUSE

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



Virginia between 1740 and 1810. This database has revolutionized our access to the information in these documents and thereby improved our understanding of period room use patterns and furnishings practices.

- ◆ Modern paint analysis by Matthew Mosca in 2001 using advanced microscope technology detected the presence of two previously undiscovered layers of paint. These layers from the Carlyle period predate the later Herbert era colors currently on view. The muted grey and bluish white tones suggest the possible presence of wallpaper and help define room usage.
- ◆ A number of highly important pieces that actually belonged to John Carlyle have been added to the collection since 1984: the Carlyle bedstead in 1995 and the British dressing table, the double chest and several pieces of Carlyle family silver engraved with the Carlyle and Fairfax coats of arms during the 250th anniversary of the house in 2003. The double chest on loan to the museum, though not on the inventory, has a pristine provenance through the descendants of Sarah Carlyle Herbert, and was most likely given to Sarah upon her marriage in 1775 as the family history recounts.

Combined, these discoveries fueled the need to reconsider aspects of the 1984 plan and to suggest revisions, most importantly regarding issues of room use and the allocation of furniture between rooms. The Carlyle House staff, realizing that a new Furnishing Plan had become a priority, hired two well-known scholars in the area of 18th-century decorative arts as consultants of the project. Betty Leviner, former Curator of Historic Buildings at Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and author of *Furnishing Williamsburg's Historic Buildings*, and Robert Leath, the current Curator of Historic Buildings at CWF, joined forces to complete this important task. Funding for this important project came through generous grants from the Donner Family Foundation, Historic Alexandria Foundation and the Friends of Carlyle House.

In completing this report, the consultants have worked closely with the Carlyle House staff over several years and countless meeting, conference calls, and research trips. Together, we have examined the collection to categorize objects relevant to the house's

interpretation and others that might be ripe for replacement and/or deaccessioning. Also, we have identified holes in the collection that still need to be filled. A new acquisitions priority list has been produced as well.

The interpretive period for the John Carlyle House has not changed. It remains the years between 1770 and 1780 when Carlyle lived in the house as a widower with his three children, George William, Sarah and Anne. In completing an overall picture of his life at this time, the rooms should reflect John Carlyle's career as a successful trans-Atlantic merchant, his Scottish family heritage, and his principal years as a consumer, from 1748, the year that begins his marriage to Sarah Fairfax, to 1780, the year of his death.

It is important to note that this revised furnishing plan material presented to you, our docents, is for background information and no one is expected to give a tour entitled "The New Furnishing Plan". In fact it is not clear if the average tourist would even be interested in the details of the changes. To discuss them at length would likely be confusing. They primarily want to know how the rooms were used and to be assured that all decisions made by the museum staff are based on extensive research and in consultation with the best experts in the field. It is likely that you will not have to change the content of your tour much at all. A few rooms will have new names, some furniture will change location, and you will need new transitions as you move about the house, but for the most part you will be giving the same information as before, just in different spaces.

This is an exciting time at Carlyle House. Keep an open mind and join in the excitement. There is still more to learn about the 18th century!



Double Chest



Dressing Table