

Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

November 2005

The Center Passage

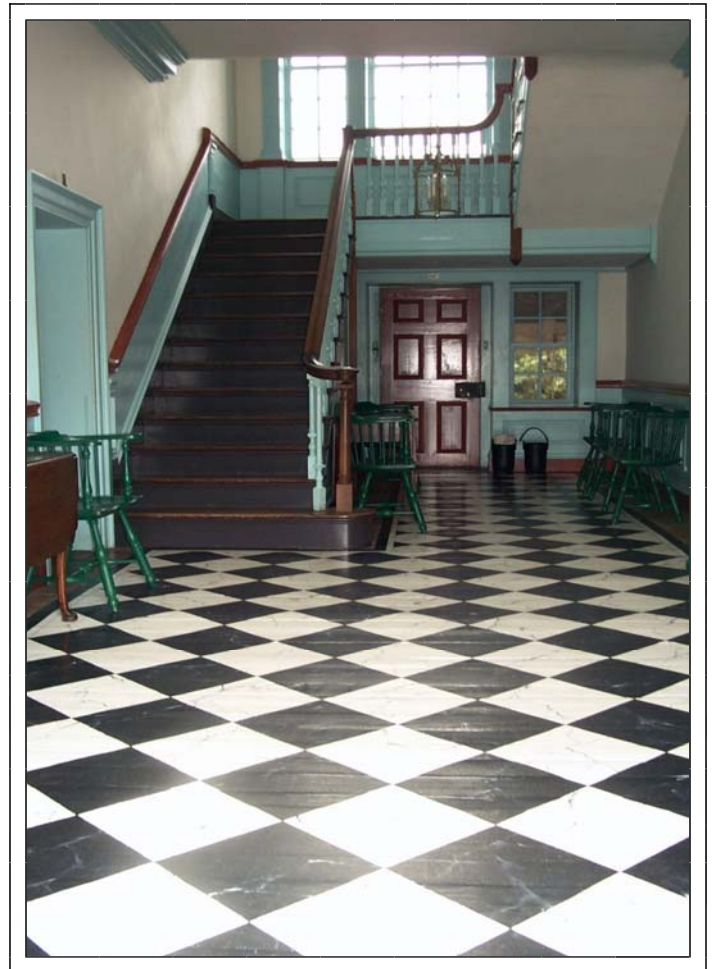
by Cindy Major

In two previous articles of the *Docent Dispatch* we discussed the usage of the private spaces in colonial homes. Our new furnishings study has led to changes in the way we interpret the rooms on the south side of the first floor. There has been no change in the furnishings of the center passage at this point, but it is a very important space and this article will review what we know about its usage in the 18th century and how it will be furnished in the future.

John Carlyle was in the generation of Virginians that first incorporated the center passage into their floor plans. Previously, the homes of even wealthy colonists typically consisted of a main room in which one would enter the house referred to as the hall. This was a multipurpose room where cooking, eating, chores, sitting, entertaining and even sleeping frequently took place. Before 1720, most homes had only one other room. This space was generally smaller than the hall. It was called by a variety of names including parlor, chamber, or inward room. The second room, whatever it was called, was used for the families more private activities .

The introduction of the passage in the early 18th century caused major changes in room usage. It divided the house into distinctly public and private areas, it afforded a mechanism of sorting out who could enter these spaces, and it introduced more specialized for the other spaces in the house. The transition of the hall to the passage continued until the 19th century. The terms and usage of the space varied depending on the area and personal preferences.

Architectural elements indicate that the two rooms on the north of Carlyle's house were meant for more formal use. Was the passage part of this formal area? Architecturally, it is an important space. Its floor and molding put it second only to the dining room in the architectural hierarchy of the house, but there are very few sources that confirm the notion that formal



Center Passage at Carlyle House

CARLYLE HOUSE

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



entertaining was done there. The preponderance of evidence shows it as a reception area, a summer parlor, and a waiting area for slaves and servants. In his important article "The Central Passage in Virginia" Mark Wenger writes: *This new space, which generally ran through the center of the building from the front to the rear door, transformed the circulation plan of southern domestic architecture, and greatly enhanced the privacy of the house. Before the advent of the passage, communication in the house was from one room to another. The passage provided independent access to all the principal ground-floor rooms and to the upstairs as well. It also functioned as a waiting room for servants and visitors whose social credentials did not warrant an invitation to join the planter or merchant and his family in the main rooms. Soon the advantages of this space as a refuge from summer heat became evident. By the middle of the 18th century, wealthier families spent an increasing portion of their time there.*

One clue that center passages were growing in popularity is that they became wider as the century progressed. References to a variety of activities can be found. In 1773, Landon Carter wrote that he wanted one of *Gale's patent bedsteads on a new plan for my Passage in Summer*. Philip Fithian documents the use of the passage at Mt. Airy for the young ladies playing the harpsichord. Thomas Anburey mentions the use of the passage at Tuckahoe as an occasional ballroom in 1779. One can easily imagine all the uses Virginians could find for these breezy, airy spaces.

It is important to remember that one reference to dancing, playing music, or sleeping does not mean that these were common practices in passages. Inventories describing the way the passages were furnished support the many references to the passage as a waiting space. Considering the many business and civic activities that Carlyle was involved in, we can assume that people from all levels of society coming to Carlyle's house and waiting in the passage to do business with him. They would be away from the private rooms of the house where the family would be carrying on their activities. Thinking about the nine slaves and other servants, it seems the passage would be the most appropriate place for them to wait for assignments or do small chores that didn't require them to be in the rooms occupied by the family. At Gunston Hall, the center passage has two different architectural treatments, suggesting that the front was a formal reception area and the back a more utilitarian domestic

space. During his 2001 investigation of the Carlyle House, Mark Wenger found strong evidence the same usage may have been true at the Carlyle House as well. Original plaster, with long horizontal breaks, survives under the stairs. Similar architectural markings can also be seen in the closet in the main chamber at Gunston Hall where shelving existed. Wenger suspects that the area under the landing in the center passage could have been closed or partially closed off forming a vestibule. The door that now exists, on the east side of the chimney of the dining room, may have originally been a false door and shelves would have provided storage in that area, an indicator that domestic business may have been carried on here. It is hard to imagine how this vestibule would have looked when entering from the land-front door. It would have been an unusual arrangement but Wenger sites other Virginia homes of the period that used the space in this way.

The 2005 Revision to the Carlyle House Furnishing Plan lists items from the inventory that are appropriate for John Carlyle's Lower Passage. You will notice that the looking glass that has adorned our passage is missing from the list. According to the Gunston Hall database of elite households of this period in the Chesapeake area, none had looking glasses in their passages. The table indicates the space was used for dining. One can picture visitors waiting to do business with John Carlyle sitting in the Windsor chairs. The maps and pictures would have announced to everyone who entered that they were in the home of a worldly gentleman. The floor cloths would have protected the floor from the heavy traffic and the lantern would have provided light for evening gatherings.

1 large Round Walnut Table
[8 of] 11 Armed Windsor chairs 12/
1 double a ,r.md. Do do
15 do [Small] do [pictures] Cumberland
prospect
3 large do [pictures] with Black faims
16 large and Small Maps
[1 of] 2 floor Oyle cloths
1 do [Glass] do [lanthorn] Sound

How did John Carlyle and his family use their center passage? They probably used it in many different ways that evolved over time just as room usage in our own homes change over the years. Play



areas become computer rooms and children's bedrooms become guest rooms as the needs and dynamics of a family change. The activities may have changed throughout the day. A quiet work or rest space turns into a gathering place for family meals and then a busy avenue at other times.

Please consider the dynamic difference the center passage would have made in the lifestyle of the colonial household and try to convey its changing role throughout the day to our guests.

Sources

Gunston Hall Room Use Study, Susan Borchardt, Mickey Crowell, Ellen K. Donald, Barbara A. Farmer

The Central Passage in Virginia, Mark Wenger

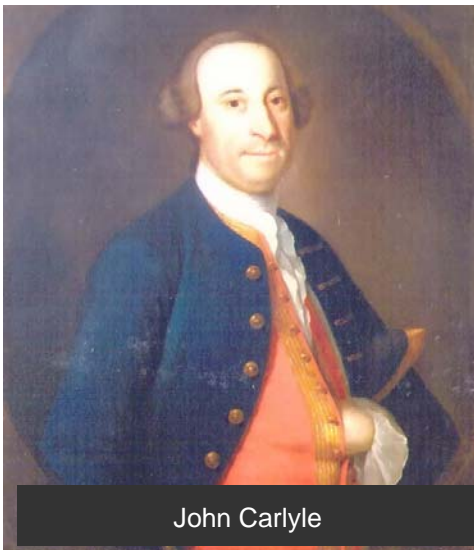
Carlyle House Furnishing Plan:

Foundation for Good Manners and Polite Address (A. Petrie) notes that while standing, a gentleman should "Put one hand easy and free into the bosom of your waistcoat, and the other under the flap of it."

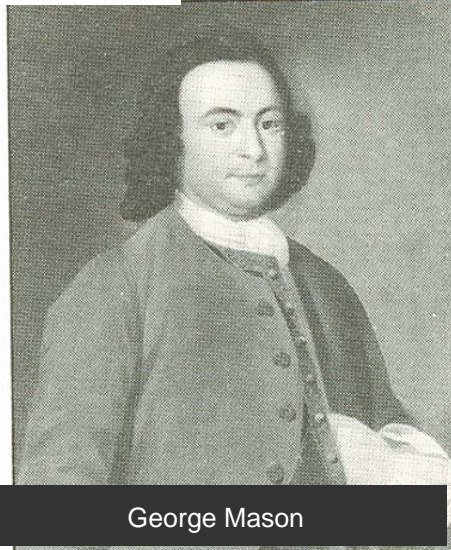
"Easy" is an interesting concept when it comes to eighteenth-century deportment. Writing in *An Elegant Art – Fashion & Fantasy in the Eighteenth Century* (1983), Alicia M. Annas notes: *Whether acquired from dancing masters, conduct manuals, or costumes, the elegant art of movement was something of a paradox. On the one hand, it depended upon a highly complex and precise set of rules whose execution required considerable bodily discipline, while, on the other, it required an "easy" or apparently effortless manner of performance. A child learned very early just how much effort it took to appear effortless, in much the same way a does a classical ballet dancer today.*

So how did some popular "myths-information" evolve about the hand-in-the-waistcoat pose? One common misconception is that "18th century artists couldn't paint hands," a notion which has been taken out of context. In her article, "Re-Dressing Classical Statuary: The Eighteenth-Century 'Hand-in-Waistcoat' Portrait" (Art Bulletin (College Art Association of America), Vol. 77, No.2, March 1995, p.45-64) Arline Meyer writes: *The "hand-in" was one of the most popular of various stock poses portraitists offered their clients, and its prestige was buoyed by the commercial practices of London's major portrait studios. The pose acquired its greatest cachet in the late 1750s as a staple of Thomas Hudson's fashionable studio, where it*

was considered eminently suited to the tastes of "persons of quality and worth" who chose to be painted in a manner deemed "agreeable and without affectation." Hudson, who used the pose so often that his ability to paint hands was called into question, apparently passed his market experience on to his students, supposedly counseling Reynolds that if he wanted to make a fortune, he must put hands in bosom or waistcoat pocket. The type subsequently filtered down and became a staple of second-string painters of the squirearchy and middle classes such as Arthur Davis, whose "portraits in the small" offer numerous examples of the use of the gesture. By mid-century one could call such works



John Carlyle

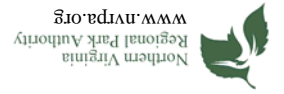


George Mason

Why Do These Men Have Their Hands Tucked Inside Their Waistcoats?

The following article was written by Donna Boulter. Donna is employed at Mount Vernon and is a board member of the Gunston Hall Docent Association. She wrote the following article about the portrait of George Mason that was painted by John Hesselius. The portrait of John Carlyle is also by John Hesselius and the same pose is used. Thank you, Donna!

The "hand-in-waistcoat" pose seen in many eighteenth-century portraits was very popular, but why was that the case? An eighteenth-century deportment book, *The Polite Academy or School of Behavior for Young Gentlemen and Ladies* (Intended as a



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"commonplace" portraits, for, as in the case of the formulaic entries in commonplace books, the authority of the type came from sanctioned usage. (You can read Meyer's article in its entirety – complete with footnotes – on the web at: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0422/is_n1_v77/ai_17011388).

Did it really cost more to have your hands painted in a portrait? Yes and no. During the eighteenth century, portraits made on commission were priced according to the canvas size as well as materials and labor involved. Standard canvas sizes were full length (80 x 50 inches), half-length (50 x 40 inches), "bust" (30 x 25 inches) or the "kit-cat" (36 X 28 inches). The Kit-Cat Club was a London political and literary club, active 1700 to 1720. Its name came from the tavern where it originally met, operated by Christopher Cat (or Kat). The membership included leading Whig politicians and London's best young writers. It also included artist Sir Godfrey Kneller, who painted portraits of his fellow members. Kneller's portraits, painted 1702-21, were commissioned by the publisher Jacob Tomson, the club's secretary, for a room in his house in which its meetings were then held. Sir Godfrey Kneller was a master of the English baroque portrait. He popularized the 36 x 28 inches format used for his Kit-Cat Club portraits and it became known as the "kit-cat." The "kit-cat" allowed the artist to include not just the bust but the hands in a life-size portrait. So yes – it would cost more to have a "kit-cat" size portrait painted as opposed to a "bust" portrait. But no, you couldn't save money by tucking your hand inside your waistcoat so that it didn't need to be painted.

Did artist John Hesselius mess up? After all, he has painted George Mason's hands as being tucked inside a still-buttoned waistcoat. Take a closer look. Rather than unbuttoning a few buttons, and tucking his hand inside the resulting gap, George Mason has the majority of his waistcoat buttons undone. Rather than tucking his hand under the buttonhole side (which is where you'd normally tuck your hand if only a few buttons were undone), Mason has tucked his hand under the button side.



The Mason and Carlyle portraits are both approximately 25 X 30 which is described in the previous article as a "bust" portrait. The fact that they both include a hand of their subject must mean that they are not life size.

A Note from Mary Ruth

Super Surprise

Thanks to all of you for the wonderful surprise celebration for me at the recent Volunteer Appreciation Party. I will mark 15 wonderful years at the Carlyle House in November and I truly appreciate the recognition given to me by the Friends, docents and staff. The flowers were spectacular, the cake was delicious and the Memory Book is so very special. I have so enjoyed reading everyone's thoughts on how the museum has changed since my arrival in 1990. Someone said my biggest accomplishment was to finally get heat in the bathrooms!

Please know how much I have enjoyed knowing and learning from each of you over the years. Together we have helped Carlyle House grow and prosper. Thanks again for the good wishes and words of appreciation. I will cherish my Carlyle House Memory Book and the associated memories for years to come.

Plans for 30th Anniversary

Recently, Jim came to me with some great ideas about how we can celebrate the 30th anniversary of the opening of the house as a museum in January of 1976. We are making plans now and hope to make what is often a very slow winter month into one filled with media interest in the museum. Stay tuned for more information about this important milestone in the house's history.

Sign-up for Holiday Events

Docents are needed for a variety of activities during the Christmas season. On December 3, we will once again hold a *Soldiers' Christmas* at Carlyle House from noon to 4 p.m. For this event we partner with the First Virginia Regiment to present an interesting day with a focus on the colonial militia. On the afternoon of the the Scottish walk there are always many visitors in town so we will need a lot of help.

On Friday evening, December 9, the Friends of Carlyle House will be holding a private Candlelight Tour Open House for members and their guests from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. We will need docents on hand. Sign up for this event and go out to dinner in Old Town afterwards.

Our regular public Candlelight Tour will only be held on one night this year. Saturday, December 10 from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. Get into the Christmas spirit by volunteering for this popular annual tradition.

Mary Ruth



Colonel John Carlyle's Masonic Apron

Listed on Colonel John Carlyle's 1780 household inventory is one "freemasons ... aprons." Traditionally made from lambskin, the Masonic apron is considered to be "the badge of a Mason," and is symbolic of "purity" and "innocence." In addition, the apron of a Freemason can be interpreted as the emblem of a "servant" and "craftsman." As a Mason, it is likely that a Masonic apron was part of Carlyle's funerary rites. Therefore, it is appropriate that "the badge of a Mason" adorn the Colonel's coffin during the museum's *Death Comes to Carlyle House* exhibit, which commemorates the 225th Anniversary of his death.

During John Carlyle's formative years, Freemasonry was pervasive throughout Northern England and Scotland. Therefore, it is reasonable to suppose that Carlyle was first exposed to the "Brotherhood" in his native land. We do not know when or where Colonel Carlyle was initially made a Mason, but the appearance of a Masonic apron on his probate inventory indicates that he may have been involved in the "Fraternity" throughout his life. Many of the Colonel's most influential connections were likely made through Freemasonry.

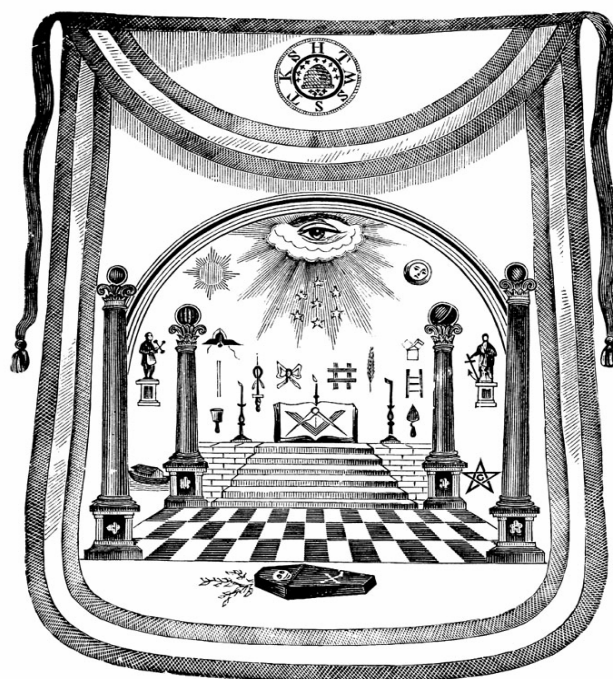
Given the scarceness of 18th - century Masonic aprons, Carlyle House intern Erica Nuckles, reproduced a Freemason's apron for the museum. This Masonic apron is based on examples from the Carlyle period, found in the collection of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial. The addition of the Freemason apron expands the museum's interpretation of Colonel John Carlyle as a prominent and influential citizen of Alexandria.

Sources

"Inventory of Colo John Carlyles Estate Real & Personal Taken 13th Novmr 1780" (The Carlyle Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia)

James D. Munson, *Col. John Carlyle, Gent., A True and Just Account of the Man and His House* (Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, 1986)

Mark A. Tabbert, *American Freemasons: Three Centuries of Building Communities* (National Heritage Museum, Lexington, Mass. and New York University Press, New York and London, 2005)



"The Lafayette Apron"
presented to George Washington by the
Marquis de Lafayette in August of 1784.

CALENDAR

November 13, 2005

New Docent Training
10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

December 3, 2005

Soldier's Christmas
Noon to 4:00 p.m.

December 10, 2005

Candlelight Tours
6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Training for New Docents

Don't forget that on Sunday, November 13th, at 10:00 a.m. our next new docent training session is scheduled. All veteran docents are welcome to join us, but we need to know if you are coming. Please notify Cindy Major by Monday the 7th. We will begin with coffee at 10:00 a.m., break for lunch around noon and finish by 2:00 p.m.

