



Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

November 2001

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Changing Seasons at the Carlyle House

The change in the colors of the leaves and the brisk fall air are a reminder to most of us that winter is approaching. Besides pulling out warmer clothes and adding blankets to the bed, our daily lives are not impacted too much by the change in seasons. The approaching of cooler weather would have brought many visible changes to the Carlyle House in the eighteenth-century. Changes in the appearances of rooms indicated the approaching winter just as much as the falling leaves outside.

Seasonal changes were not always incorporated into homes in Virginia. According to Betty Leviner, "These seasonal variations appear to have had their beginnings in English customs that Virginians increasingly adopted as the century progressed, possibly due in part to the increase in the availability of consumer goods which was on the rise in the second half of the eighteenth century." It is likely, with John Carlyle's access to the latest in consumer goods from England, his home would have reflected this new custom.

One such seasonal change that was commonly practiced in homes in colonial Virginia was to change the floor coverings in rooms. In warmer months of the year, floor cloths were put down to protect the hard wood floors and provide decoration to rooms. As the weather turned colder, many households would replace their floor cloths with carpets. Carpets provided decoration, displayed the wealth of the owner, and served a functional purpose by cutting down on drafts. Two carpets were listed

on John Carlyle's inventory: *1 large carpet and 1 small carpet*. There may have been more carpets in the house but wall-to-wall carpets were not listed on inventories because they were considered part of the house itself. Some day we hope to have carpets as part of our interpretation of the house.

Seasonal changes were also made on the fireplaces in an eighteenth-century home. During the summer, when fireplaces were not used, they were sometimes filled with a large vase or display of flowers. Another option was to close up the fireplace completely with a board cut to fit the opening and decorated with paint or wallpaper. When the weather began to turn cooler, the andirons, fenders and grates would be placed back in the fireplace. John Carlyle's inventory lists a variety of



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Changing Seasons (con't)



fire equipment that would be brought out as the weather turned cooler including: *1 large brass great fender, 2 small brass great fender with iron fenders, 1 pr. Fire dogs with brass tops, 2 iron fenders, 2 p old shovels and tongs and 1 poker, 1 p old iron shovels and tongs with brass heads, 3 bellows, 2 iron grates 1 large and 1 small, 3 p dog irons 2 p wrough and cast.*

The use of fireplaces would require coal or wood. Phillip Vickers Fithian writes in his journal, "Mr. Carter has a cart and three pair of oxen which every day bring in fours loads of wood, Sundays excepted, and yet these very severe days we have none to spare, and indeed I do not wonder, for in the great house, school house, kitchen, etc. There are twenty-eight steady fires! And most of these are very large!" John Carlyle might have been hauling wood in a similar fashion from his nearby plantations.

Changes in the fireplace would also indicate changes in the room usage of the house. During the warmer months the Carlyle's would have used rooms such as the Upper and Lower passage. The lack of a fireplace prevented social use of these spaces during the winter. The small parlor probably would have been the most comfortable space in the house on

a cold winter day with its fireplace and the afternoon sun coming through the windows.

The removal of gauze from important paintings and looking glasses was another change that would have been reflected in the house during this transitional time. During the warmer months gauze was placed over these items to protect them from insects. Without screens in the windows insects could cause serious damage to expensive wall hangings. This practice is alluded to in Lord Botetourt's inventory of the Governor's Palace at his death in 1770 that lists *2 large paintings of the King and Queen gauze covers.*

Gauze or mosquito netting was also used in other rooms in the bedchamber during the warmer months. With no protection on windows that must be left open for ventilation, many bedhangings included mosquito curtains to protect the sleeper. During the colder months, heavier bed curtains replaced lighter summer ones. This change in textiles was an indication that winter was coming. An upholsterer might be called to upper class homes during the fall to replace light summer bedhangings with heavier material that would protect the occupants of the bedstead from the cold drafts of winter.

The primary seasonal changes visible in the Carlyle House today

are the andirons and coal grates in the fireplaces. Many of the other changes mentioned were probably being done during the time the Carlyles lived here and at other eighteenth-century homes. Discussion of changes in seasons is a good way to make the house come alive for your visitor. Try to make them imagine the impact that the weather had on the Carlyles, their servants and slaves when they lived in the house.

Sources Consulted:

- *The Journal and Letters of Phillip Vickers Fithian*, edited by Hunter Dickinson Farish
- *Furnishing Williamsburg's Historic Buildings*, by Betty Leviner
- *The Governor's Palace in Williamsburg*, by Graham Hood