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Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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Needlework and the Female Domestic Routine by Sarah A. Arnold

With the Girl's Bed Chamber back in place, now is an appropriate time to reconsider how we interpret daily female life and education in the eighteenth century. Because the majority of the evidence we have about the history of Carlyle House is from John Carlyle's own perspective, it is easy to forget the strong female presence that would have been at the house. John's two wives, Sarah Fairfax and Sybil West would have been responsible for running the household and caring for the children. After Sybil's death, though only twelve years old, Sarah Carlyle felt a great responsibility to manage the domestic affairs and was only hindered by her young age. She writes to her Uncle George, saying that if Sybil "had lived a few years longer that I might have been Intrusted to have taken the care of papas house Opon my own hands, which is too much for me as yet."

What was a typical day like for Sarah and Sybil. What were the duties involved in being an urban gentry housewife of the eighteenth century? New research by Colonial Williamsburg provides insight into a typical schedule.

About 6 AM the housewife rises and awakens her family. She sees that breakfast preparations have begun and dresses with the assistance of her personal maid. She then surveys the house and the kitchen to determine what tasks must be accomplished that day.

At 8 AM breakfast is served. The meal typically lasts about a half hour, and it is the lady of the house's responsibility to preside over the meal. After breakfast, the housewife might wash the fine glass and porcelain used that morning or the day before, and select the pieces for that day's dinner table. After the slaves finish eating breakfast, she instructs the cook on the evening meal and measures out the ingredients for each dinner dish. She then instructs the other servants and slaves on the day's chores.

Gilbert Stuart
Anna Dorothea Foster and Charlotte Anna Dick, 1790–91

From about 10 AM to 2 PM she supervises work around the house. If her children are not attending school, she instructs them in their lessons. The typical daily household chores include cooking, cleaning, and gardening. Two to four times a month washing and ironing, exhausting tasks, were done. Other tasks included

CARLYLE HOUSE

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director
Jim Bartlinski, Curator
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Portrait of James and Sarah Nourse, c. 1752. Notice how Sarah holds up the silk she has made, declaring herself as well educated, just as her husband hold a quill pen. (Courtesy Dumbarton House).

sewing slave clothing and marking household linens, spinning and knitting, and preserving fruits.

About 2 PM dinner is served. Dinner was the largest, longest and most formal meal of the day. After dinner the woman of the house sees that the kitchen is put in order and directs the afternoon's baking of hot breads for supper and of desserts and breads for next day's dinner.

Beginning about 4 PM she has three hours or so of her own time. She shops at local stores or pays visits to friends, the sick, or the needy. If she stays home, she might give needlework lessons to young daughters, practice music, read, or entertain friends.

At about 7:30 PM she checks on the preparations for supper, which was generally little more than a snack and very simple to get ready. 8 o'clock is suppertime for the family and possible guests, and afterwards she sees that the kitchen is put in order and fires are banked for the night.

From 8:30 PM until 10 or 11 PM the housewife, her family, and guests socialize at home or with neighbors. Their evening activities include conversation, singing, listening to music, reading aloud, and playing cards. Occasionally, the housewife and her husband attend plays, lectures, or balls.

Did you notice the amount of time spent both doing needlework and sewing for practical things (repairing family and slave clothes, marking or initialing linens) and instructing her children? Needlework was a vital part of any girl's education in the eighteenth century.

Regardless of their age or financial standing, women were required to make the clothing for family and servants, mark the linens and personal items, and embellish gifts and household items with ornamental stitchery. Repairing holes and adjusting hems was a never ending task for housewives, as garments needed to be reworked as children grew taller and adults grew larger. In 1755, Esther Burr writes that she is buy "altering old Cloths, which is very hard work," (Garrett, 165).

It was important to begin learning basic needlework at an early age. Girls began learning to sew as young as age five. Young boys also learned basic sewing, in order to help around the house and strengthen their fingers in preparation for penmanship.

Early Americans considered sewing not only practical, but also proper and beautiful. It exemplified the "ideal woman," with her pretty posture, relaxed, but her hands "dutifully occupied." A young woman looking for a suitor could sew while in conversation, showing her industry. "She needed to be busy, so as not to appear too eager to be wooed, but doing fancy needlework was a pretty business, meant to encourage a suitor," (Swan, 79).

Scholars know that by the beginning of the

This sampler was embroidered in silk on linen by Esther Copp of Stonington, Conn., in 1765, when she was 10 years of age. (Courtesy National Museum of American History).

sixteenth-century, needlework samplers were established customs, although their exact origins are unknown. By the eighteenth-century, all girls who received any schooling worked an alphabet sampler, and these sample forms survive in the greatest number. As Sarah Anna Emery recalled in *Reminiscences of an Nonagenarian*, "every girl was taught to embroider letter in marking stitch. One was considered very poorly educated who could not exhibit a sampler," (Swan, 13). She goes on to describe how "some of these were large and elaborate specimens of handiwork; framed and glazed, they often formed the chief ornament of the sitting room or the best chamber." More than just exercises in stitching, samplers were not easy or quick to make. Like many aspects of eighteenth century education, samplers were a form of discipline.

Most girls learned needlework, as well as other disciplines at home. Only the most affluent families could afford to formally educate their girls. The majority lacked access to formal schools. Historians estimate that at the beginning of the nineteenth century nearly half of the female population in America was illiterate.

Dame school was the child's first experience with education outside the home. The teacher generally accepted boys and girls age 3-8 and taught reading, writing and a small amount of arithmetic. Teachers conducted the schools in their home and were single, married or widowed women. A girl's next step might be a "venture" or "adventure" school ran as a business by a man or woman who tailored their curriculum to the client's wishes. It was here that a girl could learn ornamental needlework and painting.

Sadly, we know little about the exact details of Sarah and Ann's educations at Carlyle House. It is likely that they were taught basic sewing and needlework from their mother and stepmother as well as reading and writing and numbers. We know they were also taught to read and play music. In 1766 John Carlyle writes to his brother George that "Sally is Learning the Spinet. She meets the Master at Coll. Washington's about 8 miles off, where he attends The Cols Two Children & he is So kind as to Lett Sally Stay Two days."

John Carlyle felt that his daughter's education was important enough to send her off to Mount Vernon for several days at a time. It is easy to imagine Carlyle House alive with the sights and sounds of learning, be it arithmetic, music or needlework.

A Harpsichord Recital at Count Rumford's, Concord, New Hampshire. Watercolor by Benjamin Thompson, c. 1800. *(Courtesy National Gallery of Art).*

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