

Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

October 2005

Requiem for John Carlyle

by Jim Bartlinski

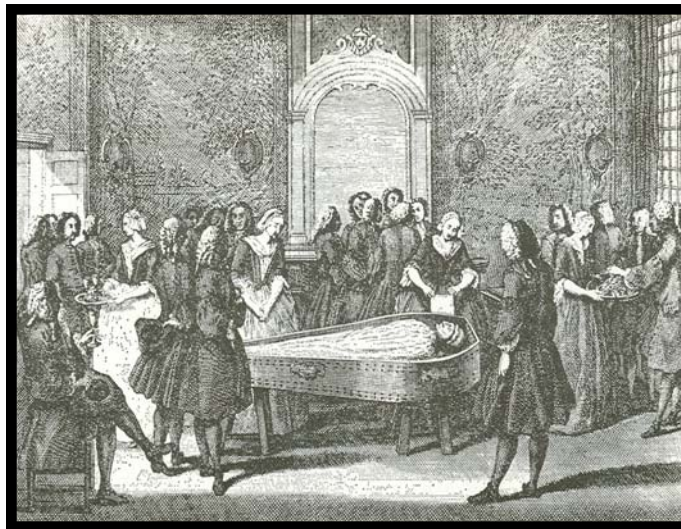
The intention of the following articles is to provide background information for the mourning exhibit commemorating the 225th anniversary of John Carlyle's death.

Within The Winding-Sheet:

Preparing the Deceased for Burial

Soon after Colonel John Carlyle's death in September 1780, his body was likely measured for his coffin, then washed and dressed in a white linen or a flannel winding-sheet (strips of cloth wound around the corpse and pinned in place) or possibly a coffin sheet. When the construction of his coffin was complete, the earthly remains of Colonel Carlyle were most certainly deposited inside to await the late Colonel's final journey to the burial yard of the Presbyterian Meeting House, just a few blocks down Fairfax Street from his home.

Someone called a *streaker*, usually a woman, may have prepared John Carlyle's body for burial. However, it could also have been one of his servants, the attending physician, or possibly even his daughter, Sarah Carlyle Herbert. The women in a family were typically entrusted with this melancholy task. Though, when George Washington died in December 1799, his corpse was likely readied for burial by his manservant, Christopher. In the event of a child's death, it was often the mother who tenderly prepared the body for burial. Perhaps both of Carlyle's wives, Sarah Fairfax and Sybil West, performed this sad ritual for their precious children who left this life all too soon.



By the 1770s, the use of a winding-sheet had almost disappeared in England, to be replaced by a coffin sheet. During the eighteenth century it took time for any new trend to spread from Europe to America. As a result, the remains of John Carlyle were most likely wrapped in a winding-sheet, but it is worth mentioning the development of the coffin sheet. The

coffin sheet consisted of the coffin's primary lining, two rectangular sheets (the length and width of the coffin) tacked to the interior base. Once placed in the coffin, the corpse was provided with a fitted pillow positioned under the head, and the coffin sheet was folded over the body and either pinned or crudely sewn in place. The upper section of the sheet was left open for viewing the face of the deceased until the time came to screw down the coffin's lid. In this way the

departed was placed into the coffin wearing a white "gown, chin cloth, cap," and on occasion, white "mittens, stockings and slippers." All of this gave the body the appearance of being in bed.

Next, the prepared corpse was moved to one of the

CARLYLE HOUSE

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

first floor rooms, which was customarily the most important room in the house. According to some 18th - century sources, candles were often placed around the body. In the case of Colonel Carlyle's household, this space was almost certainly his stately wood paneled Dining Room, where Major General Edward Braddock had convened, 25 years earlier, the "*Grandest Congress ever known on this Continent.*" When the coffin was completed, the deceased was placed inside. Afterward, the body would lie in state for a period of three to four days so relatives, friends and acquaintances traveling from afar could pay their last respects. There was also a widespread fear of premature burial that prompted many people, including George Washington, to request that their bodies not be interred for a few days after death to ensure they were, in fact, dead.

The family and close friends of the departed took turns sitting in a separate room, where mourners expressed their condolences over their loss. Among those who may have taken turns receiving mourners in the Parlor of their late relation's home are Sarah Carlyle Herbert, her husband William Herbert and their three year-old son, John Carlyle Herbert, Henry Whiting, Sarah's late sister Ann's husband and their two-year-old son, Carlyle Fairfax Whiting and Carlyle's only surviving son, George William Carlyle, not to mention John Carlyle's mother-in-law, Sybil West.

During the night it was customary for someone to hold a nocturnal vigil over the corpse, as did Virginia indentured servant, John Harrower and "*Company*" on the evenings of March 11 and 12, 1775. Harrower describes the deceased as "*Being drest in ... Calico*" and lying in a "*black Walnut Coffin lined with Flanen*" with "*pinchback handles. The corps has also a sheet round them.*" On the morning of March 13th, John Harrower "*screwed down the lid of the Coffin*" and drove it to the "*grave Yard*" for burial. To date no record has been found to indicate how events transpired upon the death of Colonel Carlyle, but it is safe to assume that the preparation of his body for burial was typical for the period. Since Carlyle was a wealthy and prominent resident in Alexandria and Fairfax County, we can speculate that his corpse was well turned-out in a style befitting a man of his social rank.

Sources:

Peter R. Henriques, *The Death of George Washington: He Died as he Lived*

Julian Litten *The English Way of Death*

Robert L. Madison *Walking with Washington*

Edward Miles Riley *The Journal of John Harrow*



Rachel Weeping
Charles Willson Peale 1772-76

The Unseen Guardian of Carlyle House

During the restoration of Colonel John Carlyle's home in the 1970s, it was discovered that a "*good luck charm*" of sorts had been incorporated into the foundation of the structure's southeast chimney. Apparently before the completion of his Fairfax Street residence in 1753, Colonel Carlyle or someone associated with the home's construction sought to stave off misfortune from visiting his Alexandria estate. This amulet against disaster was a mummified, or more accurately, a dried cat. Folklorists believe that the ritual of entombing a cat in the foundation or chimney of an abode harkens back to the *Dark Ages*, and may have been thought of as defense against evil. Regrettably, there had been numerous deaths associated with the Carlyle family prior to 1753. Maybe the unfortunate cat was placed there to keep death at bay? As it turns out, the animal proved ineffective at protecting the family from harm, for death was no stranger to John Carlyle's Aquia sandstone home.

Richard Sabin, Curator of Mammals for London's Natural History Museum, suggests that "*it may have been a common practice to bury cats in the foundations of houses to ward off evil spirits*" Sabin goes on to say that this practice "*was a northern European tradition*" possibly brought "*to England when the Saxons came*



over or maybe earlier.” Therefore, it stands to reason that this macabre ritual would have followed British colonists to the American colonies. Evidence of this ghoulish practice can also be found in the former British colonies of Canada and Australia.

Whether one believes this superstition or not, the fact that a cat was found in the foundation of the southeast chimney during the restoration of Carlyle’s Alexandria address indicates that either John, his first wife Sarah Fairfax, or a workman associated with its construction accepted this gruesome ritual as fact, or at least did not want to tempt fate. The exact motive behind the interment of this feline talisman in the chimney’s foundation may remain a mystery, but if it was truly meant to shield Colonel Carlyle’s kith and kin against misfortune, it failed miserably. From 1753 when John Carlyle and his family took up residence at 121 North Fairfax Street, until his own death in 1780, he had lost six of his eleven children, two wives, and at least ten of his enslaved “famely.”

As previously stated, the interred cat did not offer much protection to Colonel Carlyle or his household. But just maybe this unfortunate creature did not entirely fail in its task to defend the house against calamity, for the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority did rescue John Carlyle’s once grand mansion from neglect. After the cat’s discovery, it was photographed and documented, and then the hapless feline was returned to its tomb to continue its work as the home’s “supernatural” guardian.



The Coffin

Prior to the 1700s, the majority of people in Europe and settlers in the American Colonies were buried in a simple winding-sheet. By the first quarter of the eighteenth century, the basic winding-sheet burial had mostly died out in England, as well as, across the Channel and the Atlantic. As American colonists became more affluent and the populations of urban areas like Boston, Philadelphia, Alexandria, Williamsburg and Charleston increased, coffin burials gradually became the norm. By the time of Colonel John Carlyle’s death in September of 1780, coffin burials had become the standard and as expected, the

materials used in their construction were a direct reflection of ones wealth and status in the community.

During the eighteenth century, the occupation of undertaker as we know it today did not exist, so coffins were produced as a sideline by the local carpenter, cabinetmaker, wheelwright, and, in some cases, the shipwright. Before beginning work, the craftsman needed only a few measurements from the corpse: the length of the body from head to toe and its width at the shoulders or elbows. The coffin itself was built of six pieces of wood consisting of the head, bottom, foot, two sides, and lid. The only tools required were a few saws, planes, a hammer, nails, screws and various marking tools. To achieve the classic hexagonal configuration of the coffin, the craftsman skillfully bent the sides into shape with the use of steam and some strategically placed cuts in the wood.

The archeological evidence uncovered in eighteenth-century graveyards in the United States and abroad suggests that the archetypal hexagonal shape was used in nearly all coffin construction of the period. As previously stated, there was as much variation in the size of and materials used in coffin construction as there were in a deceased individuals physical and social stature. The poor, indentured and enslaved people of a community likely went to their eternal rest in no more than a winding-sheet or the simplest pine coffin. These basic coffins were often covered with fabric that was held in place by brass tacks painted black.

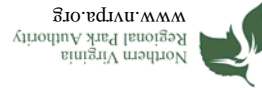
A New England visitor to Alexandria in the 1780s made note of the cavalier attitude some city residents held towards the burial of someone on the lower tier of society: “Among the lower classes they use almost as little ceremony as they [Alexandrians] would on the death of any common domestic animal -- if the poor deceased happens to be a stranger, perhaps a few humane persons will contribute to purchase him a rough Coffin and to defray the expense of interment -- otherwise perhaps they may lie two or three days before authority interferes, in which case the Corps is put on a Dray and drove off by two or three drunken Draymen, with as much noise and as little concern as tho they had a puncheon of Rum on their Dray. Last Autumn a negro Woman drowned in the harbor, ... a few days after she was taken up and laid on the Shore in the most public part of the Town [Market Square], where she lay untill she became very offensive, when some Negroes that were filling a Wharf near by, were ordered to put her into the Wharf and cover her up, which humane deed they performed.”

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

- October 2, 2005
Docent Party 5:00 p.m.
- October 4, 2005 to
October 30, 2005
*Death Comes to Carlyle House:
An 18th-Century Virginia Home in
Mourning*
- October 4, 2005
Exhibit Training for Docents
10:00 a.m. or 7:00 p.m.
- October 29, 2005
*Reenactment of the Funeral of
John Carlyle*
6:00 to 10:00 p.m.
- 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.



Carlyle House
121 N. Fairfax Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
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In stark contrast, a person of means like Colonel John Carlyle, may have been laid to rest in an inner coffin of elm, lined with fabric and encased in lead, with a memorial depositum, or nameplate, in tin, brass, or silver attached to the lid before it was encased in an outer shell of elm or oak. With that done, the whole coffin was upholstered in scarlet or black velvet that was then secured in place with rows of round-headed brass tacks. For example, when Virginia's Lieutenant Governor Lord Botetourt died in Williamsburg in 1770, he had a pine inner coffin and "*one of lead Covered with Crimson Velvet, with a plain plate upon it of silver bearing his Name age & death.*" Upon the death of George Washington in the winter of 1799, Doctor Elisha Cullen Dick, one of the attending physicians at Washington's sickbed, that cold December night, recorded the late president's measurements to ensure his coffin would be a good fit. As noted by Doctor Dick, Washington's measurements were as follows: "*6'3 1/2" length exact... 1'9" across shoulders exact ... 2'9" across elbows exact.*" Washington's dimensions were then given to his private secretary, Tobias Lear who rode into Alexandria to present them to local cabinetmaker, Joseph Ingle. Ingle then constructed a coffin of mahogany, befitting a gentleman of Washington's fame, social rank and wealth.

The coffin that Ingle constructed to accommodate George Washington's earthly remains was of mahogany lined with black lace and bore a silver nameplate. As in the case of Lord Botetourt's coffin, Washington's mahogany coffin was encased in lead. After the president's was sealed in its lead housing, it was then placed in a third coffin "*lined & covered with black Cloth.*" Although not of the status of a Botetourt or a Washington, a well to-do Alexandria merchant and City father such as Colonial Carlyle, could likely have afforded similar accommodations to ensure his comfort for perpetuity.

Sources:

Kevin Cunningham, *An 18th-Century Family Cemetery*
Delaware Department of Transportation, Sussex County,
Delaware

Peter R. Henriques *The Death of George Washington: He
Died as he Lived*

Julian Litten *The English Way of Death*

Robert L. Madison *Walking with Washington*

Edward Miles Riley *The Journal of John Harrower*

Death on Display

This article was contributed by one of our talented interns, Erica Nuckles. Erica is a senior in the George Washington University Graduate Museum Studies program. She plans to continue her education in a PhD program upon graduation. Thank you Erica

The typical gentry funeral in 18th-century Virginia was an important social occasion for those who attended. Extravagant displays of wealth, in the form of mourning decoration, favors, clothing, food, and drink, were the common theme at these gatherings. However, John Carlyle's death occurred in the midst of the Revolutionary War, a time in which such finery was not easily attainable, even by the wealthiest inhabitants of America. The restriction of trade made such materials rare and was an important factor in the shift that occurred in funeral practices of the upper class during this period.

The first signs of mourning were visible simply by observing the front of a house. A funeral hatchment signifying the deceased hung above the front doorway with black crape flowing down its sides. The black crape, typically made of a stiff, matte silk, may have been ordered upon the news of a death. However, funeral hangings may have already been amongst household belongings due to a previous death in the family or they were borrowed from neighbors, either being possibilities for John Carlyle. These adornments announced the death to all that passed by in a respectful, yet public manner.

Upon entering a house in mourning, more hangings would be apparent throughout the public spaces of the house. White fabric covered the mirrors while black fabric, providing a contrast, was draped on the walls.



18th-Century English Funeral



Certain superstitions and traditions contributed to the placement of these hangings. The guests at an 18th-century funeral provided a sober picture. Their clothing would have been primarily drab in color, including the slaves and servants who were provided with proper mourning attire. Traditional mourning dress took place in two stages. The first stage was called deepest mourning and consisted of dark, mostly black, clothing of a lusterless surface, which could have included crape (matte silk) or bombazine (silk-wool mix). Deepest mourning lasted around three months and was followed by second mourning in which shinier fabrics, like silk taffeta, became more appropriate. Despite their glossy finish, these fabrics remained somber in color. This period of mourning could have lasted three months or sometimes longer depending on the relationship to the deceased.

The guests at John Carlyle's funeral may have offered a more colorful picture. According to Mary V. Thompson, research specialist at Mount Vernon, "... during the war Congress had resolved that 'on the death of any relation or friend, none of us, or any of our families, will go into any further mourning-dress, than a black crape or ribbon on the arm or hat, for gentlemen, and a black ribbon and necklace for ladies, and we will discontinue the giving of gloves and scarves at funerals.'" According to this, George William Carlyle and Sarah Carlyle Herbert probably would have chosen their most somber-colored finery and adorned it with black crape and ribbons in order to display their grief.

The gloves and scarves mentioned in the Congressional statement had been typical mourning favors throughout the 18th century. Another common favor was the mourning ring. These rings varied from being jeweled, engraved, or even containing woven pieces of the deceased's hair. Mourning favors would have often been produced in large quantities to be presented to the many guests attending the funeral. Due to the war, however, such items may have been in limited number or absent from John Carlyle's funeral.

Food and drink, often to excess, played an important role in 18th-century funerals. Prior to transportation of the body from the house to its final resting place, guests could enjoy refreshments courtesy of the grieving family. Following the burial, guests could return to the home for a large feast. Drinking also played a large role in funeral gatherings. *The History of American Funeral Directing* reveals an example in which, "the cost of wine at one funeral in Virginia came to more than 4,000 pounds of tobacco."

Essentially, the death of an upper class Virginian in

the 18th century provided another way in which social status could be displayed. However, the Revolutionary War brought about an interesting shift in funeral practices, largely due to restrictions on trade, which made funerals simpler in terms of their adornment. Despite these limitations, John Carlyle's funeral was without question an important occasion for the many who undoubtedly attended the passing of one of Alexandria's leading citizens.

Sources:

Cunnington, Phillis, and Catherine Lucas. *Costume for Births, Marriages, and Deaths*. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1972).

Habenstein, Robert Wesley. *The History of American Funeral Directing*. (National Funeral Directors Association, 2001).

Shively, Charles. *A History of the Conception of Death in America, 1650-1860*. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988).

Thompson, Mary V. "The Lowest Ebb of Misery: Death and Mourning in the Family of George Washington". From a symposium entitled "What Shall I Wear? 18th Century Accessories: Completing the Look" Gadsby's Tavern Museum: October 2, 1999; revised June 29, 2001.

Thompson, Mary V. "Questions regarding Washington Family & Slaves @ GW's Funeral & Decoration of the Mansion" From a memorandum for the Funeral Reenactment Committee. May 25, 1999; last revised September 1999.

Note From Mary Ruth

Kudos to the Curators

I would like to take this opportunity to thank and compliment Jim for his efforts during the past few months to research and plan our exhibit on Death and Mourning. His scholarly approach to this topic, one which was so relevant to 18th-century life, has made us all curious to know more. Very soon after his arrival at Carlyle House, Jim suggested we do an exhibit on mourning. I am delighted that his idea has grown into an exhibit with great excitement surrounding it.

Cindy has been busy and creative this summer, designing and fabricating her timeline project. Her efforts have brought the old video room alive with activity, light, and learning.

Thanks also go to our interns Erica and Kirk, who have been very helpful with both projects. I feel truly fortunate to be surrounded with such a great staff!



John Carlyle in His Own Time

We hope you have had time to explore our new timeline of John Carlyle's life. Our goal is to present an informative welcome to our visitors and provide entertainment before or after tours. Eventually, it will be developed into a lesson plan for students on tour at Carlyle House.

Below the title there is an explanation of the timeline and the images of hatchments that represent the deaths of Sarah, Sibyl and John. Jim Bartlinski's research on death and mourning led to these symbols being used and their explanation. During the month of October, there will be a hatchment displayed over the front door of Carlyle House signifying Carlyle's death. The Carlyle crest is on the left side and impaled on it are the Fairfax family crest and the West family crest. The first wife's family crest was traditionally below, but larger than the second wife's family crest. The first two hatchments on the timeline have black backgrounds for the deceased wife or wives and white background for Carlyle. The last one is all black, indicating Carlyle's death.

The set of cards hanging below the timeline gives the dates of the births and deaths of the Carlyle children during John's lifetime. Sarah Carlyle Herbert is not included because there is not a peg for the year 1827 when she died. The year on each card can be found on the time line by counting forward or backward from the peg representing the year closest to that on the card. For instance, Rachel was born and died in 1750, so the peg to the right of the one labeled 1749 would be 1750. The cards with Rachel's birth and death should both hang on that peg.

The topic of births and deaths of children was chosen to correspond to the October exhibit. More sets of cards will be on display in the future. For the Soldier's Christmas event, on December 3, there will be a set of cards with military events during John Carlyle's lifetime. Erica Nuckles is planning to research fashion over this 60 year period and we are open to any ideas from docents and staff on other topics of interest. Please contact Cindy with your ideas.



New Docent Training

We feel very fortunate to have so many wonderful people interested in volunteering at Carlyle House. On Sunday, November 13th, another group will start training as docents. If you would like to join us for a refresher course, or if you know anyone who might be interested in joining our docent group, please notify Cindy Major. We will begin with coffee at 10 a.m., break for lunch around noon and finish by 2 p.m.

370 is our favorite number.

That was our attendance for Hands-on History Tent.



A Fond Farewell to Gail Kassel

Gail Kassel was always a cheery presence on Wednesday mornings. She and Frank Conrad kept up a lively conversation that was entertaining to everyone. She also was a big help with Hands-on History Tents.

Now Gail is living in a beautiful new house in Woodbridge and is busy making new friends and a comfortable home for her family. We will all miss Gail and wish her the very best.

A Warm Welcome to Roxana Rozek

Some people never seem to have enough to do and that is apparently the case with our newest docent Roxana Rozek.

A retired Federal worker Roxana and her husband Richard live just south of Old Town. They have been in the area for 27 years. Their oldest daughter, Erica, is living and working in the area and their youngest, Jessica, is in college.

Roxana had plenty to do before joining the Carlyle House. She owns two horses, a beach house in Georgia and enjoys taking yoga lessons. She is already a docent at Gunston Hall and serves on their board. Working at the Carlyle House appeals to her because of her interest in the 18th century and also because she can ride her bike here. We are delighted she already feels so comfortable with us that she is willing to fill in as a museum supervisor while Jack Mitchka is out for his surgery. Thank you Roxana.