



Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

June, 2008

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

Recreating Sarah Carlyle's Dress by Katherine Maas

In the never-ending quest to uncover more of the history of Carlyle House, the staff is currently engaged in an extensive new project focused on the women of Carlyle House. Some of you may already know that Carlyle House has in its collection pieces of the dress believed to have been worn by Sarah Fairfax at her wedding to John Carlyle in 1747. Family history states that the dress was remade in a more "modern" style for Sarah Carlyle Herbert, John and Sarah Carlyle's longest-surviving daughter, in the 1790s; the dress was subsequently taken apart and pieces were handed out to female descendants. Thanks to the generosity of current Carlyle descendants, the museum now has six pieces of this dress (one of which is a loan), and the staff is planning to have a recreations of the original dresses made both for display and as part of a wedding reenactment. We are also coordinating a series of events on women's history based around the dress and the women of Carlyle House, especially Sarah Fairfax Carlyle and Sarah Carlyle Herbert. We are thrilled about the prospect of being able to show visitors, up close and personally how Sarah and her daughter dressed- from the style right down to the actual fabric pattern. These dresses will breathe new life into our interpretation of these women- who for so long have been silent- without portraits and few letters to illuminate their lives.

Carlyle House first received a piece of the dress in 1975, as a gift from Carlyle descendant Carlyle Mothersill. This piece is roughly square, about 24" by 20", and is a floral pattern of green, yellow, burgundy, pale pink, and silver threads on a dark blue background. Based on comparisons with other fabrics of the same time period, we now know that the fabric pattern of this dress is probably of Dutch origin, and is not from Spitalfields, England,

as was assumed at the time. This donation was followed that same year by the donation of an even larger piece by Esther Kirk (this piece is about 39" by 20"). These two pieces, along with the family



Two skirt panels

legend that they were pieces of Sarah Fairfax's wedding dress, were all that the museum had of the dress until 2000 and 2001, when two more panels, one given by Sheila Smith Cochran and Carlyle Cochran, and another loaned by Mrs. Fairfax Leary, were added to the museum's collection. The condition of these panels vary: there is considerable fading of color in several of them, from sun and heat exposure over the centuries.

The most recent addition to the collection consists of two parts of a sleeve that were determined, after some analysis, to be two sides of the same sleeve (the button hole in one piece still matches up to the remnants of thread on the other). The sleeve with the button hole, given by Nancy Stowell, was nearly lost to posterity: Mrs. Stowell,

CARLYLE HOUSE

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director
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during a visit to Carlyle House in January of 2008 with other Carlyle descendants, recognized the fabric pattern as matching some fabric she believed she had recently thrown away! Fortunately, the piece had *not* in fact been thrown away and Mrs. Stowell gave it to the Carlyle collection, where it was joined with its other half (gifted by the Homewood House Museum at Johns Hopkins University). The piece given by Mrs. Stowell provides another helpful piece to the dress as well: it has the darkest and most well-preserved color of all six pieces, which will assist in the dress recreation project.



The middle panel of this skirt was created using digital printing technology at Kent State University.

Spurred on by this discovery, the staff decided to once again explore the idea of having Sarah Carlyle's dress re-made—a long-time goal of the museum. Consulting with costume historian Alden O'Brien, a curator of the

Daughters at the American Revolution Museum, we learned that it is possible to have historic fabric scanned and printed, rather than the laborious and expensive process of having someone actually sew the embroidery. Only a few museums have used this technique (see Kent State's dress), but so far it has been very successful. Carlyle House is pleased to be at the forefront of this technology.

The costume and textile specialists Colleen Callahan and Newbie Richardson have agreed to take on this exciting project, which will be done in several stages. First, further research will need to be done on the probable style of the original dress, and of the 1790s update; after they have determined the appropriate styles of each dress, an artist will create drawings of the gowns. These drawings will show the hairstyles and jewelry as well as the dress of the period and will be displayed in the museum.

A company in Pennsylvania will use large high powered scanners to digitally capture the fabric's pattern using the most complete pieces in the collection, and the colors from the darkest (and thus most accurate) remaining piece will be used. The pattern is then printed on silk, creating a very realistic copy of the original fabric. Newbie and Colleen will be recreating both the original 1740s dress and Sarah Herbert's 1790s "remake." They will also make whatever stays and petticoats they deem necessary to complete the ensemble. In addition, they will remount the original pieces of the dress in such a way as to better preserve them for future generations—and to demonstrate the damage that sun exposure can wreak on delicate fabric.

So what events are the staff planning around this dress recreation? Carlyle House Historic Park has long interpreted the life and history of John Carlyle—because men in the eighteenth century tended to leave more evidence. We know fairly little of the individual appearance and personalities of the Carlyle House women. The museum has no paintings of Sarah Carlyle or Sarah Herbert, and very few of their letters. In order to further interpret their lives, the staff will have to rely on what is known about the lives of wealthy women in the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Virginia.

Proficiency in music, needlework, and some reading and writing, along with the demonstrated ability to run a large household and to bear and educate children of one's own would have been marks of an educated young woman in eighteenth-century Virginia. Here at Carlyle House, the staff is planning a full series of events, illuminating early education, through marriage and childbirth, and the social responsibilities of a married adult woman. Possible exhibits and events at



Some of the fragments are in poor condition and will receive conservation care as a part of the project.



Carlyle House would include a music education event (spinet, dancing, or vocal lessons), and a needlework education event (wherein visitors can learn to how to do needlepoint themselves). A lecture about and exhibit of objects related to childbirth and childrearing would further illustrate the difficulties faced by women at this time—the physical and mortal danger of pregnancy and childbirth, the terrible emotional price paid when children died. Other events may include a tea tasting and a fashion show (featuring demonstrations by some of our well-known re-enactors).



An example of a mounted sack back dress- the style of the original Sarah Carlyle dress.

All of these events, which will span at least a year, will center around the main event: the wedding reenactment. Weddings were expensive and much-anticipated events in the eighteenth-century, much as they are today. A bride would have worn the fanciest outfit her family could afford; white wedding dresses were uncommon, because dresses would almost certainly have been worn again for other special events. Brides could have worn jewelry, such as a necklace and earrings, but the bouquet and veil were nineteenth-century additions to the bridal ensemble. There would probably have been a limited number of bridesmaids and groomsmen who assisted the bride and groom in preparing for and participating in the marriage ceremony. Virginia weddings during the colonial period usually took place in bride’s home, probably in the parlor or dining room, rather than at a church. They would have been in the winter, to avoid the agricultural season and Lent, and would usually be held in the early afternoon on a Thursday or Friday—to allow for the maximum number of days for eating and dancing before Sunday. John and Sarah Carlyle’s wedding was no exception. After some quick internet research, staff found that December 31, 1747 was on a Thursday.

Eating and dancing were an important part of the wedding celebration. Although the wedding itself might be witnessed by only a small number of people, many more attended the days-long party that followed the wedding. One description of a society wedding, from 1806, describes the wedding ceremony followed by dinner for 100 people and dancing until 1 o’clock in the morning. Another description, from 1785, describes eating and dancing all day on Thursday, after the wedding, horse-riding and dancing until midnight on Friday, and the same again until 11 on Saturday. Weddings were great social events attended and celebrated by family and friend alike.

At Carlyle House, the staff is constantly striving to find new and different ways to interpret the lives of those who inhabited this elegant house over the centuries. We do this through continued research and study, but also through the continued support of our docents and members, especially the many descendants of John and Sarah Carlyle. Without your passion and interest in the history of Carlyle House, the museum would not be where it is today: ready to embark on a new historical endeavor to further illuminate the lives of Sarah Carlyle and Sarah Herbert. Stay tuned for more updates on the ongoing “Daughters, Wives, and Mothers: Female Life at the Carlyle House” project.

Sources Cited:

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A huge thank you to our intern Katherine Maas for all of her research and dedication to this exciting project.