



Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Shedding Light on Colonial Illumination

Artificial or natural light in the eighteenth century was a valuable commodity. In fact, the amount of light available dictated the length of a workday and had a profound effect on the life of everyday Virginians. Today with the flick of a switch a room goes from dark to light. As a result, it is difficult for us to understand what life would have been like without the convenience of electricity to illuminate a room. John Harrower gives us a good idea in the story he recounted in his diary, “Last night after I had put out the candle and gone to bed I was obliged to get up again and put on my cloaths and sit up all night by reason of a snake having got under my pillow, which made me afraid I having no light to clear the bed of him.”

Other than natural light, candles were the primary forms of lighting used in Colonial Virginia. The hierarchy of candles was determined by a number of factors including how long candles burned, how cleanly they burned, the brightness of their flames and the odors that they emitted. Tallow candles were the least expensive and were made from the fat of sheep and cows. They could be purchased or manufactured at home. These candles burned unevenly, smoked profusely, smelled bad, and sometimes melted on hot days. Tallow candles also required frequent “snuffing” which was cutting the end of the wick while the flame still burned. According to Brett Charbeneau from Colonial Williamsburg, “The braiding of modern wicks along with waxes of higher melting points, ensures wicks are consumed as they burn. Before such improvements, wicks had to be trimmed. Otherwise,

they drooped and folded against the edge of the candle forming a spillaway. The candle guttered; the molten fuel ran down the side instead of being burned.” Candles that were not regularly snuffed did not burn for very long. John Carlyle had *two pair of steel snuffers* on his inventory, which would have allowed him to trim the wicks of his candles.

Wax candles were one step up on the candle hierarchy from tallow candles and were more expensive. They did not melt as quickly and were made from a variety of materials including beeswax, bayberries, or spermaceti. Beeswax candles could be left unattended for long periods of time but were not plentiful because of their great expense. Bayberry candles were popular because they gave off a pleasant odor. These candles were made from the berries of the bayberry shrub. In the fall, the berries were harvested and boiled until the wax rose to the surface. The wax was skimmed off and strained until cakes of wax were formed from which candles were made.



Spermaceti were the most

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Carlyle House

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expensive candles and were made from the head of the sperm whale. They gave out three times as much light as tallow candles. They had a flame four times as large and never dripped. They were not accessible to the average Virginian, though, because of their exorbitant price. For example, in May of 1759, George Washington ordered 50 lbs of spermaceti candles from Robert Cary & Company, Merchants, London.

The lighting equipment used to hold candles was equally important as the candles themselves. The most prevalent lighting device was the candlestick. Candlesticks were primarily made of brass as well as iron, tin, copper, and a combination of brass and iron. Another popular lighting device was the lantern or lanthorn. John Carlyle's inventory lists a variety of lighting equipment including: *2 small plated candlesticks, 6 brass candle sticks, 2 brass flat candlesticks(one broke), 1 japand candlestick, 4 brackits & 2 branches with sconces, 1 p brass sconces, 1 glass lantern (sound), 2 glass lanterns (cracked).* William Ramsay of Alexandria on his 1785 inventory lists, *2 pr. Fluted Candlesticks, 5 old Brass candlesticks, and 5 pr. Snuffers and 2 stands.* John Dalton's 1777 inventory only lists *1 glass lanthorn and 1 brass candlestick*

for lighting equipage.

Room by room inventories from the eighteenth century can also tell us a lot about where lighting devices were stored. Most inventories show that portable lighting devices were stored in the kitchen. This makes sense because the kitchen provided a space where candlesticks and lamps could be easily cleaned, readied for use and distributed to other rooms as needed. In addition, the kitchen provided the most active fire in the house which could always be used to light candles. In rooms other than the kitchen, candles were often kept on or near a fireplace. This was a precautionary measure because if the candle got knocked over it would land on the brick hearth of the fireplace where it could do the least damage in a room. Candles were also placed in locations that could best reflect their light, such as in front of a mirror. Sconces, like the ones on the Carlyle inventory, were placed on walls throughout the room and could make the best use of a projected light.

Even with a candle present, the eighteenth-century idea of a brightly lit room was very different from our modern notion. Phillip Vickers Fithian wrote, "The room looked luminous and splendid; four very large candles burning on the table were we supp'd, three others in different parts of the room." Anyone who has seen the Carlyle House during Candlelight Tours realizes that seven candles do not

give off a lot of light. Yet Fithian refers to the room as being "luminous." This description makes you wonder how dark the average Virginians home would have been.

Discussions of light in the eighteenth century could be easily incorporated into your tour. Point out the candlesticks in the servant's hall and how important it would be to clean the candlesticks and prepare the candles for evening use. Talk about the use of light for entertaining in the Large Parlor and point out how the two new pier mirrors would have been used to reflect light. You might want to quote Fithian and discuss a room being luminously lit with seven candles. Incorporation of light into your tour will even further *illuminate* your visitors' understanding of everyday life in colonial Virginia.

Sources Consulted

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- "Domestic Lighting in 18th-Century America" by Monta Lee Dakin
- [The Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian](#), edited by Hunter Dickinson Farish