



Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

The Story of the Carlyle Bedstead

Mary Ruth Coleman

Monticello Recreates Carlyle Bed

Monticello is undertaking a total reappraisal of the furnishing and interpretation of the South Pavilion, the first structure on the property and the site where Thomas and Martha Jefferson spent a substantial portion of their early married life. This exciting project has been going on for over two years. A key component of this reinstallation is the bedstead and curtains that will dominate this intimate space. We are delighted to announce that John Carlyle's bedstead was chosen as the prototype for the Jeffersons' bed because it is such a rare and important example of American-made 18th-century furniture.

We were pleased to share the plans for our bed with the staff at Monticello. Harrison Higgins, the same craftsman who made the couch for John's study, has recently finished the bed after visiting Carlyle House to measure, photograph and study the piece. The proportions of the bed have been adapted to reflect



Natalie Larson affixing hangings to the bed in 1995

information from Jefferson's *Memorandum Books* indicating the size of his bedstead at the time he was living in the South Pavilion. Also the cornice will not be covered with material as the Carlyle bed is to reflect their view of Jefferson's taste at the time.

The bed is currently in the hands of textile historian Natalie Larson in Williamsburg where she is creating the hangings. Natalie also produced the hangings for

the Carlyle bed and is the one who recommended our bed to Monticello. It will be several more months before the project is complete and the debut of the bedstead takes place. We will let you know when this is announced. How exciting it will be to view this installation the next time you tour Monticello and know that our museum—and John Carlyle—played an important part.

Carlyle Bed Arrives Home 1995

Thanks to early research by the first Director of Carlyle House, Beth Sundquist, in the 1970's it was long known that the Carlyle family bedstead was owned by Carlyle descendant Miss Sue Herbert Brooke of Virginia Beach. Miss Brooks remembered sleeping in the bed as a child when visiting "Grandmother Herbert" in her Washington Street house in Old Town. Miss Brooke slept her entire adult life in the bed and though she was more than willing to allow the staff to study the bed she stated early on to Ms. Sundquist that



she had no intention of ever parting with it. Thinking that the original bed would never be given to the museum, the staff in the early 80's decided to have the bed copied. The reproduction was painted green so that in the off chance the Carlyle bed **did** come our way the green copy could be moved

CARLYLE HOUSE

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director

Jim Bartlinski, Curator

Sarah Arnold, Curator of Education



upstairs to become one of the four green beds on the inventory. This turned out to be a very wise decision!

One fall day in 1995 Miss Brooke called to announce that she had to move into assisted living and would like to donate the bed to the museum, but we would have to pick it up as soon as possible. After quickly measuring



The bed at Miss Brooke's home.

the green bed to make sure it would fit in a van, former Director, Julia Claypool and I took off on a whirlwind trip to Virginia Beach to bring the bed home where it belonged.

Arriving with tools in hand, we took the bed apart and carefully wrapped it for the return trip. During that visit we met Sue's brother Philip and her sister Anne. All three siblings agreed that the Carlyle furnishings in their family's hands ultimately belonged at Carlyle House. The reminisced about their fond memories of visiting Alexandria as children. The family story associated with the bed is that it had come from Belvoir Plantation, Sarah Fairfax Carlyle's childhood home. We do know that Carlyle purchased an expensive mahogany bed with chintz hangings from at the Belvoir auction in 1774, years after Sarah's death. The staff feels that Miss Brooke's bed, which descended down with pristine provenance through the Herbert family, is indeed the bed listed on Carlyle's 1780 probate inventory. Perhaps Carlyle bought it out of some sentimental attachment to his life with Sarah, or perhaps he simply wanted a new bed—we will never know.

The bed was in basically very good condition with a nice finish. Over the years it had lost its cornice. This is a common fate of 18th-century beds. As ceilings in homes got lower and room heating improved alleviating the need for full bed curtains, cornices were often removed. A new cornice was created for the bed using molding profiles from examples in the Williamsburg collection.

Ron Hurst, Vice-President of Collections at Colonial Williamsburg, has carefully studied the bed, ranking it among the top of all known American-made 18th-century beds. We are delighted to be able to share this important piece of our collection with not only Monticello but with

all our those who visit Carlyle House. Posthumous thanks go to Miss Sue Brooke for her generous gift to Carlyle House.

Note: Our relationship with the Brooke family is a very special one Sue's brother Philip Brooke donated the original portrait of Rachel to us in 1991 and her sister Miss Anne Brooke donated 12 Herbert silver forks in 1997.

Historic Alexandria Events

Historic Alexandria Hosts: Preservation 101

A Series of Workshops and Lectures to Educate Historic Property Owners

To celebrate National Preservation Month this May, the Office of Historic Alexandria is offering a series of lectures and workshops to help educate owners of historic homes. The series features both informative lectures and hands-on restoration classes designed to give homeowners the tools they need to maintain their historic properties.

Preservation 101 classes are open to all and will be held at the Lloyd House, 220 North Washington Street, in Old Town Alexandria. Following is the schedule:

Tuesday, May 6

Lecture: 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m., \$10

Overview of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines by Pratt Cassity, University of Georgia

Saturday, May 10 (two sessions)

Workshop: 10 a.m. to noon, \$15

Ornamental Plaster by Hayles & Howe, Inc.

Workshop: 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., \$15

Wall Plaster by Hayles & Howe, Inc.

Tuesday, May 13

Lecture: 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m., \$10

The Basics of Alexandria Architecture by Al Cox, architect for the City of Alexandria

Saturday, May 17 (two sessions)

Workshop: 10 a.m. to noon, \$15

Repairing Historic Windows by David Gibney, restoration carpenter