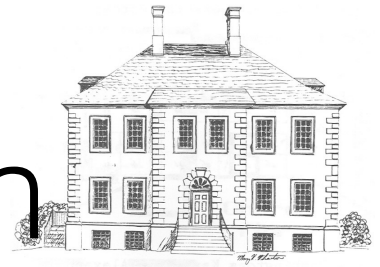


# Carlyle Connection

"It's a fine beginning."



## *Keeping Warm in Early America*

*By Richard Klingenmaier*

**"We all keep fires...." "It was so cold as to freeze almost anything even by the fire's side."**

There is nothing more charming than the image many Americans today have of eighteenth century life during the winter season -- the family gathered around a blazing fire...and presumably, cozy warm. The historical record, however, reveals that image of warmth and comfort is more imaginary than reality. As Mrs. Royal Tyler wrote in her memoirs late in the nineteenth century, "Truly the people of this age know little of the horrors of winter." Trying to stay warm in winter was a daily challenge. Most homes relied exclusively on wood burning fireplaces that on the coldest days would not always bring the room temperature above freezing, even with a fire burning all day long. Most of the heat of those early fireplaces went straight up the chimney.

While it is easy to assume that such extreme weather conditions prevailed only in the Mid-Atlantic region and in New England, diary accounts of Virginia inhabitants show quite the contrary. Philip Vickers Fithian, a plantation tutor residing at Nomini Hall in Westmoreland County, recorded in his diary in January 1774 after returning from social event at a nearby plantation: "Evening sharp and cold! -- I handed the Ladies out, [from the carriage] waited on them to a warm fire, then ran over to my own Room, which was warm and had a good Fire; oh how welcome!" Several days later he noted, "Still very cold/snows some..." Again, on the 28th of January he records, "Snows this morning briskly...Depth about five Inches..." In fact, he could easily relate southern weather conditions to the northern colonies when he noted: "The Weather is as wintry here in every Respect as I have ever known it in New-Jersey." Fithian subsequently recorded the early arrival of winter 1774/1775, when on 22 September he

wrote: "A pure cold northerly wind still blows, & we all keep fires...."

In 1795, a Virginia resident complained "...the wine was constantly frozen in the bottle, the very cheese cakes and jellies were stiff frozen in the pantries." Anna Maria Thornton, residing in Washington, DC in 1800 wrote in her diary, "Cold and clear/froze in the house." Even Thomas Jefferson expressed his sensitivity to cold weather in 1822. He wrote to John Adams: "I shudder at the approach of winter, and wish I could sleep through it with the dormouse, and only wake with him in spring, if ever." "When I recollect on the one hand all the sufferings I have had from cold, and on the other all the other pains, the former preponderate greatly."



Southern families relied on family sitting rooms, bed chambers and parlors as sanctuaries for warmth. Whichever room the family chose, it was invariably small, as the more spacious rooms were impossible to heat adequately. The situation was never ideal. As Faith Silliman related in December 1835, "...with a fire in the hearth things will freeze in the sideboard and with the largest fire we can make in my room, water will freeze within Six feet

of it.” Charlotte Taylor wrote that in winter her face and back were never warm at the same time. How early Americans dealt with the “horrors of winter” varied little regardless of their economic circumstances or where they resided. Living spaces during the coldest months of the year were constricted and “...people lived and moved and had their being in one room in winter.”

Eighteenth and nineteenth century diarists often spoke of “warmth,” but just what did that term really mean?



Today’s idea of warmth and early America’s version are two very different interpretations. Today’s room temperatures in winter usually range between 68 and 76 degrees. This level of heating in winter was all but impossible to achieve 200 years ago. On 21 December 1797, John Innes Clark of Providence, Rhode Island described this first month of winter as follows: “This month has been more pleasant. It is however, exceeding cold, the thermometer in our dining room with a good fire being about 48 degrees.”

How did early Americans survive not only the frigid nights but the daytime hours as well when the necessities of living had to be carried out? Rebecca Smith of Philadelphia complained in September 1792 that she could scarcely keep from freezing in the house even though she was in the middle of fall cleaning. In addition to keeping active, people wore thick layers of woolen clothing and often

slept in them along with flannel night shirts and caps on the coldest nights. Most people, including the wealthy, went to bed in unheated bed chambers.

The frequent complaint of diarists that their faces and backs were never warm at the same time often led to the employment of fire screens to block cold drafts, hold in heat, or on occasion, to insulate the body from too much heat as the person sat as close as possible to the fire. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s fictionalized description in *Oldtown Folks* of Aunt Lois standing with her back so near the kitchen fireplace as to be uncomfortably warm, yet found her dishtowel freezing in her hand while she dried a teacup drawn from almost boiling water, might seem an exaggeration. However, William Bentley’s account in January 1810 that on the side of his bed chamber farthest from a brisk fire the thermometer read “16 below freezing”, adds credibility to Stowe’s version. In fact, in South Carolina in January 1857, Thomas Chaplin reported that the thermometer read 20 degrees in the house at 8 o’clock in the morning and that everything was frozen hard including eggs, milk, and ink, and every piece of crockery was cracked that had water left in it overnight.

### The John Carlyle Family

Winter for the Carlyle family was no doubt uncomfortable. It made little difference that their house was constructed substantially of sandstone or that it had more fireplaces for heating than most other dwellings in town. Those very fireplaces, lacking dampers, allowed heat loss up the chimney and chilling downdrafts of cold air when fires were not kept. The structure’s numerous multi-paned



windows added further to winter's intrusion. High ceilings, beneficial for summer living, served to make rooms more difficult to heat in the winter. In short, life for the Carlyle family became highly constricted - limited to that part of the house that could be kept relatively warm.

Daily life during the coldest days would have been spent in the private side of the house; the lower passage would have been dark and frigid, its use as a living space given up until spring. The public rooms - the parlor and formal dining room - were kept closed and likely, rarely heated except when visitors were expected. We know the Carlyles used coal on a grate as an additional source of heat in both the parlor and the large dining room. As the weather became more severe and family living space more constricted, one of those grates may have been moved to John's office where the family would have spent the majority of their day. While coal did burn more slowly than wood and without the attendant heavy smoke and frequent sparks, it did not necessarily guarantee a warmer room. Harriet Martineau of Boston recalled that even with anthracite coal burning on a grate in her bedchamber, "...everything you touch seems to blister your fingers with cold."

The door leading to the private quarters from the frigid lower passage, as well as the individual doors to the study and master bedchamber would have been kept tightly closed. During the coldest days, except for those individual chambers that saw fires, other rooms, side passages, stairways, and the upper passage would have been frigid and uninhabitable. Throughout the house, interior window shutters in unoccupied rooms were likely kept closed throughout the winter; during the day, those in occupied spaces probably were open to some degree to avoid having to burn candles before sunset. In any event, once the family retired for the evening, all shutters would have been closed to further reduce the infiltration of cold air.

The family's daily meals would continue to be served in John Carlyle's study or perhaps in individual bedchambers for those who chose to keep fires during the day. It is quite possible that John and his wife entertained their closest friends in their bedchamber, as did William Pyncheon on 12 January 1785, when he and his wife had tea with two other couples in "Mrs. Pyncheon's chamber."

The household servants working in the servants' hall

probably kept a fire going throughout the day both for warmth as well as for reheating the family's food prior to taking it upstairs. Given the location of the servants' hall directly below the master bedchamber, the Carlyles would have benefited at this time of the year from the extra heat rising through the floor boards. However, we can only imagine how uncomfortable it may have been by early morning for those servants who may have slept on the dirt floor of this space. While the clothing of household servants was generally of a better quality than that worn by field hands, usually made of wool and linen and worn in layers for added warmth, nevertheless, sleeping on straw



mattresses in the cellar of the house would have been quite uncomfortable. Perhaps during the coldest weather they slept "above stairs" or in the attic spaces. The cook who spent the day in the detached kitchen, where a fire was likely kept all day long, would have slept in the loft above and benefited somewhat throughout the night from the residual heat radiating from the well heated bricks of the chimney. Even in the detached kitchen, though, keeping an unattended fire throughout the night would have been discouraged.

Unless servants stayed awake and personally tended fires, the bedchambers for both parents and children were probably without fires while they slept. Curtained bedsteads, along with the use of brass bed warmers, hot water bottles, or wrapped heated bricks would have provided protection from cold drafts and helped to retain body heat. If fires were kept in bed chambers during the day, some residual warmth from heated chimneys might have radiated into the chambers for at least a portion of the night. Like other Alexandria residents, the Carlyles also would have worn layers of woolen or flannel garments, woolen stockings, and some form of head cover, as well as



covering themselves with layers of blankets. However, as Warren Johnson of Johnstown, New York recalled, "...in bed people are cold even with ten blankets on."

Rising in the morning was yet another uncomfortable experience. In some gentry households, servants mitigated the impact of a frigid house by rising early and starting a fire in the room where breakfast was to be taken. Clarissa Packard in 1834, provides a vivid description of such a morning event. When she arose at eight o'clock, she "...found snow patches in every crevice of my windows, a tracery of frost work on the panes of glass, and the water in the ewer a mass of ice." "With chattering teeth and purple fingers I descended to the parlour...[where]... a cheerful fire blazed on the hearth..." Perhaps John Carlyle's office/study provided a similar refuge.

However the Carlyles chose to face the cold, they could not escape winter's discomfort entirely. They could only persevere and look forward to the inevitable change of seasons when, as one diarist recorded, I "Sat in my chamber without any fire, went to meeting without a great coat...took off my Waistcoat...took off my flannel... [and]...shifted to finer stockings."

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## News from the Educator

We have had a slow winter and are eagerly anticipating spring's return! In the meantime I have been working closely with our Curator Helen on planning training for our veteran and new docents. We are excited to continue our annual March Madness training which we believed was so successful last year we aim to make it an annual event. Camp Carlyle registration is open and we are already close to filling one session, a big improvement from last year! We will be having three sessions taking place July 6-10, July 20-24, and August 3-7 from 9am-3pm. If you are interested in registering a child ages 7-12 please contact



me at [vherndon@nvrpa.org](mailto:vherndon@nvrpa.org) or 703-549-2997. Like last year we will be taking a special day trip to a local 18<sup>th</sup> century historic house museum on the final day of each session. This year we will be visiting our friends at **Gunston Hall!** I am excited for our third year of summer camp at Carlyle House and look forward to seeing it continue to grow.

~Vanessa Herndon

## News from the Curator

Carlyle House has had a very busy fall and winter full of programs and collections news!

### Programs:

On October 25<sup>th</sup>, the John Carlyle Funeral was a success. Over the course of one evening, we had 82 visitors in the museum and who visited the Old Presbyterian Meeting House. We enhanced the interpretation this year by adding the tunnel beneath the Terrace to the program. Vanessa, Kayla and I cleaned the tunnel and wrapped the railings and we had a volunteer prop master design and build styrofoam walls to camouflage the kitchen cabinets and appliances. The tour company had one of their guides tell tales of water sprites in the well room. Additionally, we acquired a fake cat skeleton that has been wrapped in cheesecloth to help us interpret the story of the cat in the wall year-round.

The Soldiers' Christmas was a lovely event once again on December 6<sup>th</sup>. The re-enactors gave 90 hours of volunteer time, and we had an open house for nearly 300 visitors! Many thanks to all who assisted with this program and to the 1<sup>st</sup> Virginia Regiment for drawing visitors to our museum by doing an encampment in the front yard. Candlelight Tours were also a success on December 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> with a chocolate theme for the program. Once again, this weekend of holiday activity was in partnership with Gadsby's Tavern Museum and Lee-Fendall House Museum. There was a major change this year when we reduced the number of participating sites to 3 from 4. Carlyle House had re-enactors portray soldiers during the French and Indian War at our site and volunteers gave out sample "bites" of the Mars American Heritage chocolate. 1110 visitors came through the museum on Saturday and Sunday. 20 volunteers assisted with this program.

John Carlyle turned 295 this year! Although his birthday was on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1720, we celebrated it on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Twelve re-enactors portrayed a fiddling John Carlyle and his family and friends to commemorate the birth of Alexandria's most important founding father! Although we do not know if John Carlyle knew how to fiddle, we were delighted to have Ted Borek provide music to accompany dancing in the Dining Room. Dance master Corky Palmer and his wife, Cindy, (who lead the balls at

Gadsby's Tavern Museum) taught 300 visitors how to dance in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century style. Visitors also enjoyed pound cake and 18<sup>th</sup>-century syllabub punch at the conclusion of their visit. It was a very festive day!

### Collections:

After careful consideration and with Board Approval, Carlyle House purchased a japanned English pontypool tray from Sumpter Priddy for \$2200. (See attached photo)



Although he had two for sale, the one purchased was selected by staff and the collections committee, comprised of Carole Smith, Oscar Fitzgerald and Patrick Sheary, and dates to

circa 1755-1775. This was an amazing and rare find. Thankfully, Philippe Halbert, now a fellow at the Getty in Los Angeles, assisted us with locating this piece. Rarely do these japanned trays come on the market.

Another amazing find is this beautiful English George II over mantel mirror. (See photo) It retains the original beveled glass and the veneer is in very good condition. The boards on the back are also original. Local Alexandria antiques dealer, Chris Jones, found this mirror at the antiques show in York, PA in late January.



Our HOBOT system is in place to monitor temperature and humidity and is working very well. Kayla records the data every two weeks and staff check it frequently during the week.

Carlyle House is due to be re-accredited by the American Alliance of Museums and we will be working on our self-study for the next three years. The self-study is a major part of the re-accreditation process and it is due to AAM on November 1, 2018.

~Helen Wirka

## Friends of Carlyle House



### Garden Day Herb and Craft Sale

**Saturday, April 18th  
8 am to 4 pm**

**Pre-sale Friday, April  
17th  
11am to 3pm**

**Stop by historic Carlyle  
House during  
Alexandria Garden Day to  
purchase  
herbs, crafts, books, food  
and jewelry.**



## Carlyle House *Upcoming Events*

### **Braddock Day**

**Saturday, March 28; 12 p.m. to 4 p.m.**

**Sunday, March 29;**

Join us on Saturday, March 28th for an exciting program focusing on General Braddock and John Carlyle, with a look at life in Alexandria during the French and Indian War. Visitors are invited to step back in time for a glimpse at this historic event in our modern-day nation's history. Wander through the encampment outside and enjoy the sights and sounds of the 18th-century! The following day, Carlyle House, in partnership with Historic Alexandria, is sponsoring a one day symposium, which will include presentations and conversations on the French and Indian War, General Braddock, and colonial Virginia as it pertains to this "first world war."

### **Garden Day Herb and Craft Sale**

**Friday, April 17 pre-sale; 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.**

**Saturday, April 18; 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.**

Drop by the Friends of Carlyle House Annual Garden Day Herb & Craft Sale on for a delightful experience. You will enjoy the wide variety of plants, as well as a carefully curated selection of items offered by local artisans. Browse through gently used books while enjoying performances by local musicians and snacking on delicious homemade baked goods. It's a real celebration of spring at one of Alexandria's most treasured sites. There is no charge for admission to the grounds; however, if you wish to tour Carlyle House, the fee is \$5 for adults; \$3 for children ages 5 through 12. Admission is free to members of the Friends of Carlyle House and those with an Alexandria Garden Day ticket.

**The entire month of May will be very busy:**

**Hands on History Tent: May 2; 12:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.**

**Attics & Alleys: all Saturdays; 9:00 a.m. to 12 p.m.**

**Mother's Day Tea; May 10; seatings at 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.**

**Please give us a call or check our website next month for more details on our May happenings.**



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Collections



*Carlyle House Historic Park is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums.*

## News from the Site Director

Richard Klingenmaier's feature article definitely strikes a chord this month. On far too many days, the wind chill has driven outside temperatures to below zero at Carlyle House. Richard writes that, "Today's idea of warmth and early America's version are two very different interpretations." I wonder how many of us could make it through an 18<sup>th</sup> century winter without our modern conveniences. Some of you may have read a portion of Richard's article in the February issue of the Carlyle House Docent Dispatch. For space purposes, Vanessa could only include the section about the Carlyle family. Richard's paper so fascinated me that I asked to publish an expanded version here. However, I too had to edit down Richard's original paper for space purposes. Therefore, if you find any awkward transitions or unusual paragraphs, please blame the editor and not the author. If you haven't met Richard yet, please come by on a Tuesday morning and follow one of his fascinating tours.

I am relieved to report that Carlyle House has weathered the winter and its extreme temperatures just fine. The mansion suffered no damage, leaks, or major malfunctions. I can't say the same for our office space next door, which has ceiling leaks and a sewer pipe that failed due to the freezing temperatures. However, repairs are underway and we expect those problems to be resolved shortly.

Groundhog or no, we are busily preparing for spring. Please see our upcoming events on page 6. Helen is creatively reinterpreting Braddock Day, and has added a Sunday lecture program the following day at the Lyceum as well. We look forward to experiencing the new and improved iconic event. As a member of the Friends of Carlyle House, you especially don't want to miss the biggest fundraiser of the year, the Garden Day Herb and Craft Sale on Saturday, April 18. Please see page 6 for more details. If you would like to volunteer to work the event or bake for the bake sale, please either email [carlyle@nvrpa.org](mailto:carlyle@nvrpa.org) or call me at 703.549.2997 and I'll direct you to the volunteer coordinator. We need extra hands, as most of our docents who volunteer for this event will be busy giving tours in the museum. There are still a few vendor spots available. If you or anyone you know would be interested in selling your handcrafted products or artwork during Garden Day, please contact Rosalind Bovey or Lindsay Borst at [boveyoffice@verizon.net](mailto:boveyoffice@verizon.net) or [Lindsay.borst@gmail.com](mailto:Lindsay.borst@gmail.com), respectively.

I close with some wonderful news. Helen and I managed to entice Sarah Coster to return to Carlyle House and manage the Friends administrative tasks. It's only a few hours here and there, but we love having her back at the site.

~Susan Hellman



*The dogwoods at Garden Day 2014*

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# Carlyle House Historic Park

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