



# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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### *The Architectural Precedents and Context of Carlyle House*

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You all probably learned at some point that Carlyle House stands out as Alexandria's only Georgian-Palladian mansion, but what exactly does that mean? Where did this architectural design originate? How did we get from basic temporary shelter to stone mansions? Completed in 1753, Carlyle House embodies the Georgian style of architecture in the United States, which gained ascendancy in Virginia circa 1700. By most measures, Georgian is the first European "style" of architecture popularized in Virginia. Pre-Georgian structures tend to be vernacular, although there are a handful of extant seventeenth-century examples of Gothic design.<sup>1</sup> In Virginia, Georgian was a natural outgrowth of the existing vernacular, yet it also represented something more. Those who built in the Georgian style proclaimed their elite status. They were not backwards colonists; they were just as refined and cultured as those they left behind in Europe, especially England.

Georgian architecture did not appear in Virginia overnight. The majority of Virginia's earliest European immigrants built crude and simple dwellings,<sup>2</sup> usually one-room affairs, often with dirt floors, thatched roofs, and "catted" chimneys made of tiny logs. Construction materials varied according to means. The least

expensive houses were built of log construction. Do you know the difference between a log cabin and a log house? A log cabin was a temporary structure built of rounded logs for speed of construction. Settlers built log cabins to get a roof over their heads as quickly as possible. Although laymen refer to "log cabins," architects and architectural historians prefer the term "impermanent architecture." A log house was built for permanence, with hewn (squared off) logs. While it is likely that many log houses survive from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is doubtful that any log cabins survive. Most individuals of middling means constructed frame dwellings clad in weatherboard or clapboard.<sup>3</sup> More expensive dwellings were brick. Builders used stone based on its availability and proximity to the building site. Most considered stone a very high-quality and high-status building material. Stone was so desirable that many early Americans with wood frame houses scored the wood boards to look like stone blocks, and added sand to the exterior paint to mimic the textured appearance of stone. George Washington did this at Mount Vernon.<sup>4</sup> By building Carlyle House in stone, John Carlyle proclaimed his wealth and social status to all. Stucco served as weatherproofing, adding a layer of protection from the elements.

By the early eighteenth century, settlers began constructing dwellings more expansive than a single room, many based on the British hall-parlor plan, which came to dominate Virginia domestic

#### **CARLYLE HOUSE**

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construction for centuries. A hall-parlor plan consists of two rooms, placed side by side, under a continuous roofline, with a fireplace at either or both ends.<sup>5</sup> In this type of arrangement, the main room, known as the hall, was the more public of the two rooms. The hall normally contained the primary entrance, the principal fireplace, and the stair or ladder to the upper floor, if there was one. This room often had a second smaller entrance. The hall had higher-quality embellishment than the inner chamber, or parlor. The parlor, generally used as a sleeping chamber or private sitting area, had a smaller fireplace, although it was not unusual for a parlor to be unheated in Virginia, Maryland, and parts of Delaware. The parlor had no exterior entrance, and was accessed from the hall by a door in the dividing wall. Now you know why we use the term “passage” instead of “hall” in Carlyle House tours.



Hall had a specific connotation in John Carlyle’s time, very different from today’s use of the term. In the first quarter of the eighteenth century, even the wealthiest families resided in hall-parlor dwellings, with their slaves and indentured servants housed separately. By mid-century, prosperous gentry expanded the hall-parlor plan, adding rooms and features to accommodate their changing needs and to proclaim their prestige.<sup>6</sup> Around 1720, the passage came into general usage, providing circulation and entertainment space between the hall and the parlor. The passage served as the primary entrance, often with a door at each end. It provided flexible entertainment space, especially during the hot summer months when both doors could be open to catch breezes. The introduction of the passage created a higher level of privacy for the hall and the parlor, allowing for a new hierarchy of space. The passage became the public space; most visitors who came to the door could enter. Only those of sufficient status were permitted into the hall, and only family or very close friends were admitted to the parlor, now usually

a bedchamber.

The addition of a passage between the hall and the parlor created the “I-house,” which ultimately became the most common floor plan in the country. This simple, one-room-deep, layout pervades time and place. In eighteenth-century Virginia, most I-houses had exterior end chimneys and a high cellar. The I-house represented the earliest form in this country of the Georgian plan house, and was often referred to as the “poor man’s Georgian.” The American Georgian plan derived directly from the English Georgian plan, which looked to the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods for inspiration.<sup>7</sup> In general, seventeenth century Virginians did not pay much attention to architectural style. By the eighteenth century, however, the Virginia gentry had achieved a comfortable level of status and wealth. They began to heed architectural rules and conventions as one way to demonstrate social equality with their English counterparts.

John Carlyle built his Alexandria house at the height of Georgian popularity. The Georgian period in Virginia began around 1700 with the Wren Building at the College of William and Mary, and ended circa 1780, when Thomas Jefferson’s Virginia State Capitol ushered in the Federal period. The Wren Building was the first structure in this country to employ sash windows instead of casements. More importantly, the Wren Building, attributed to Sir Christopher Wren or one of his apprentices, introduced Wren’s design style to the American colonies. After the 1666 Great Fire of London, Wren rebuilt fifty-two churches in the city over the next forty-five years. Wren looked to the Italian Baroque period for inspiration, and his churches put an end to medieval-style architecture, setting a new architectural precedent in England and the American colonies. After the construction of the Wren Building, wealthy colonists rejected medieval and vernacular design in favor of this newer style, the basis for American Georgian design.

Carlyle House has a very typical full Georgian domestic floor plan, as it is two rooms deep, not one like the I-house, and is two stories tall with stairs in the center passage. Most Georgian dwellings have five to seven bays, or openings, across the front elevation on each floor. Carlyle House does not



exactly fit this criterion, as it is five-bay on the first floor and six-bay on the second, although the center two windows on the upper floor are centered on the door below. This is not particularly unusual, as American builders rarely got English architectural details perfectly correct. Carlyle House has several other imperfections in its design.<sup>8</sup> Other typical Georgian characteristics include rigid exterior symmetry, river and land entrances with the passage running the full depth of the house, stone quoins<sup>9</sup> and lintels, painted pine paneling in important public rooms, interior broken pediments to display oriental vases, simple fireplaces without a mantel shelf, a space above the fireplace for a landscape painting, and detached outbuildings. In more elaborate dwellings, hyphens<sup>10</sup> sometimes connected the main house with wings and/or outbuildings.

The addition of hyphens and wings was more common in rural areas, which had fewer site constraints than urban areas. Mount Vernon follows this trend, with colonnaded hyphens connecting the mansion to the outbuildings. In many instances, hyphens are enclosed, creating additional interior space. As you know, John Carlyle did not add hyphens and wings to his city house. Instead, his outbuildings stood apart from the house. Although a great deal of archaeological evidence was lost during the 1970s restoration of the site, we know that Carlyle House originally had several outbuildings. These included an office and a kitchen. While Carlyle House has a fireplace in the cellar, the room most likely did not serve as a kitchen, and the fireplace may not be original.<sup>11</sup> Although early Virginians cooked meals in their dwellings, by the end of the seventeenth century the kitchen was generally housed in a separate outbuilding. In addition to creating a fire hazard and being extremely hot in the summer, an in-house kitchen created unwanted racial integration. As white indentured servants were replaced by enslaved workers from Africa, Virginia gentry desired to keep family members separate from slaves. Hence, many household functions were relegated to outbuildings.<sup>12</sup> A number of outbuildings also decreed the wealth and social authority of the owner. Gentry deliberately placed outbuildings on their land in a way to impress the visitor.<sup>13</sup>

John Carlyle built his dwelling to impress, following

the socially acceptable and elite architectural norms of his time. His house and his entire property in Alexandria served to place him on level with his English peers. But where exactly did Carlyle find inspiration for the design of his house? And with all this talk of Georgian, where does Palladian fit in? Teaser: I don't really think it does. I'll explain why next time. Tune in to the spring issue for the conclusion of this tale!

Endnotes:

1. Two examples include Saint Luke's Church in Isle of Wight County, which is the only surviving Gothic building in the United States, and Bacon's Castle in Surry County.
2. You will note that I do not use the term "home" in this article. That word did not exist in John Carlyle's day. It came into common usage after the Civil War, and should not be used in reference to houses built prior to ca. 1865.3. The best source for information on early Virginia architecture is Cary Carson & Carl L. Lounsbury, eds., *The Chesapeake House: Architectural Investigation by Colonial Williamsburg* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013). Best book ever.
4. Yes, there is a difference between the two. Weatherboarding is a more generic term for any exterior board covering, including long sawn boards. Clapboarding is riven (split), not sawn, is thinner than weatherboarding, and is nailed to either the inside or outside of a structure. Clapboard is generally cheaper and flimsier than weatherboard. See Carl R. Lounsbury, editor, *An Illustrated Glossary of Early Southern Architecture and Landscape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 81.
5. Speaking of Mount Vernon, several people claim that Washington wanted a house like Carlyle House, and tried to remake Mount Vernon in Carlyle House's image. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to support that claim.
6. See Gabrielle M. Lanier and Bernard L. Herman, *Everyday Architecture of the Mid-Atlantic: Looking at Buildings and Landscapes* (Baltimore, MD: The



Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) 16-21 for an excellent description of the hall-parlor plan and its characteristics.

Slave dwellings in particular impressed the visitor, as they not-so-subtly reminded the visitor of the number of slaves on that estate.

7. See Dell Upton “Vernacular Domestic Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Virginia” in Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach, eds., *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1986) 315 – 335 for a fascinating discussion on the evolution of architectural forms in Virginia.

8. Fauber Garbee, Inc., Architects, “The John Carlyle House, Alexandria, Virginia: Restoration Report for the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority” (unpublished manuscript, July 1980). This is now available online on the City of Alexandria website. It goes into fascinating detail on the extant structure of the house.

9. A quoin is the external angle of a wall, especially the stones or bricks that form the corner of the wall. Decorative quoining sometimes employed raised or rusticated quoins, whereby bricks or stones projected beyond the surface of a wall and generally had beveled edges. See Lounsbury, *op.cit.*

10. An architectural hyphen serves the same purpose as a grammatical hyphen. Just as a grammatical hyphen links words, an architectural hyphen links building parts, generally the main block of a house and its wings.

11. The Fauber Garbee report notes that the fireplace is original, but gives no evidence for that conclusion. Based on several factors it is unlikely, but not impossible, that this fireplace is original. More research is needed.

12. See Lounsbury, *op.cit.*, page 201 for more details.

13. Vlach, John Michael, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Vlach’s book mostly focuses on rural plantations, but is a fascinating study in the use of architecture and site planning as a means to display wealth and power.