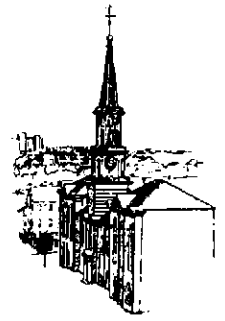
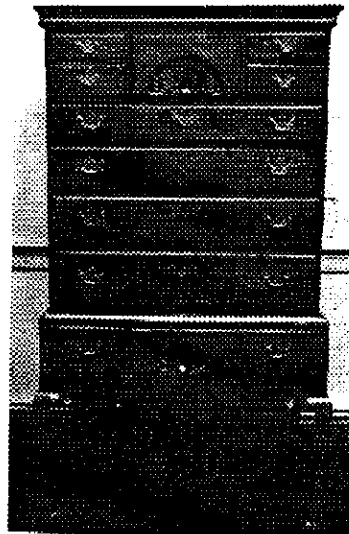


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Courtesy of Gadsby's Tavern Museum

18th-century chest of drawers

Inventories from Alexandria: What Personal Objects Reveal About our Historic Buildings and Their Owners

by William Seale

This article is third in a series of papers presented by leading academicians at the history symposium "The Foundations of Future Prosperity, Alexandria 1749-1819." The symposium, held at The Lyceum on October 15-16, 1999, was sponsored by the City of Alexandria 250th Anniversary Commission and featured presentations by eight scholars, including this paper by author and historian William Seale.

Mr. Seale has analyzed surviving inventories which detail the possessions of Alexandria residents at the time of their deaths in the late 18th century and early 19th century. Here, he shares his speculations on how Alexandrians kept their dwellings and how those buildings reveal details of the community's past.

Alexandria's old streets present architectural survivors of two and one half centuries. It is a remarkable heritage, nestled so close in a mighty urban sprawl, yet separate enough from it to remain a town visually. The variety of circumstances that led to the survival of the oldest parts of Alexandria have increasingly interested us, especially in this 250th year of our city.

Of course, all of our buildings have gone to modern use. Indeed, they have survived in many instances because they can be reused. The battles which have resulted from how the buildings are used have been many, and at the mere mention of the idea distant cannonades echo in the mind. By and large we have been lucky, I think, as so much has survived.

This issue is sponsored by Mr. Oscar P. Ryder

With an old city so energetically used in modern life, one wonders from time to time what it must have been like beyond the doorways along the old streets. We have our memoirs, letters, and various other firsthand accounts or recollections, but we also have legal records, notably inventories. Alexandria's files of inventories are extensive, ranging from houses to shops to the storehouses of our many merchants in the late 18th and early decades of the 19th century.

An inventory is a particular sort of record. It usually involves a death after which, in determining the division of property and taxes, a full accounting is made of an individual's possessions. In the early 19th century - before the era of mass production - household contents had certain resale value. As a result, important parts of an individual's estate were the chairs, tables, pots and pans of the domestic scene. In the 20th century, inventories were fewer because the market for used furnishings was very small. The late composer Virgil Thompson spoke of leaving Europe in the 1970s after living for 50 years in Paris. "I had no trouble divesting myself of furniture. A stool or table could be put out on the sidewalk with a price attached and a knock would soon come at the door. In the United States it was not that way, of course; old things like that went to the trash."

Not so, of course, in pre-industrial America. And so many of our Old Town houses that we pass every day date from that time which was so utterly different from our own and lead us to wonder what these houses were like on the interior. Inventories give us a glimpse at possible scenarios and present a particular level of excitement in viewing the past because they deal with physical objects. On one level they give one the sense of entering a

sunken ship or a lost place. Someone long ago has walked through the house and noted what was there, object by object. The results, long yellowed, all persons involved with them long dead, and the rooms in question long emptied, are subject to the same scrutiny as any historic document that can be misinterpreted or interpreted well.

Jean Taylor Federico has provided me with about 100 inventories from the late 18th- and early 19th-century city records. Those were times when one could have put out a stool or table and probably could have received a penny or even more for them. I have reviewed the inventories and would like to make a few remarks about them and how they describe the way some Alexandrians lived.

In beginning, it is necessary to remember that in order to leave an inventory a person had to have property. Many Alexandrians had no property, yet the inventories do not symbolize just the very few who did own property. Instead, they provide a cross cut of what we might call lower middle class to "upper" class financially; they show the tradesmen, businessmen, and the professionals. They show women of property and women who worked.

Always of great interest is the person who took the inventory. Among the possibilities are clerks from court, lawyers, family members, or a merchant deputized for the purpose. I found that often it was not a family member and that a second party was called in. In other inventories I have seen, although generally not the case in Alexandria's documents, I have been delighted that the inventory taker knew nothing about furniture or household objects and struggled with names for things. His mistakes and

misnomers become our treasures! We must try to imagine the inventory taker in his path through the house. That is, if we know the house - often we do not.

In the Chesapeake Bay region, including Alexandria, inventory takers had the most exasperating custom of doing their work by tally. In other words, they would record so many beds, so many tables, so many chairs in the dwelling. This makes it very difficult to figure out which objects belonged in certain rooms. There are instances, however, where the inventory taker may have identified that there were so many Windsors in one place and then so many "common" chairs. Thus, you can detect that he is in two different parts of the house. Clues like that are very important to deciphering how a building looked inside.

Of the 100 inventories provided to me, about 12 are divided according to rooms or suggest such a division fairly clearly. It is also helpful to bear in mind that Alexandria houses had construction plans that were rather predictable so the room layout is generally known. Central hall houses were uncommon, such as Carlyle House, while the side hall was virtually universal. Imagine a narrow side hall - a corridor really - with two rooms to one side, each with fireplaces. The hall widens a little to the rear to accommodate a stair that rises in two ranges to a second floor, very occasionally a third floor, and always an attic, called a "garret" in the inventories. Second floors usually had a large room entirely across the front with a second room behind it. Third floors were added in many cases toward the middle 19th century, usually with wooden partitions.

To the rear of the house was a wing attached by a covered way. This could be either one

room, one room with another above it, or more typically two rooms with a chimney in between. This was the service ell, and in a big house it may have housed servants and the kitchen. Today, we see the wings used for bedrooms above and a dining room and kitchen below. I suspect that in houses where there were servants the frontmost room in the wing was a servants' hall - a work area with table, shelving, and the household bells from the rooms in the front part of the house.

A great many houses in Alexandria were made of wood at the time of these inventories - many more than exist now. The wood houses are, in fact, rare survivals since they have been replaced by brick houses for 40 years now. I call attention to the Ramsay House on South Fairfax and King Streets and the Dr. Brown House a few blocks away on South Fairfax. Here and there in the narrowest areas between old wooden houses one can see the broad split boards that were "out of sight" and used there because these boards were cheaper.



Dr. Brown House at 212 South Fairfax Street

Photo by Barbara Magid

By contrast, a fine uniform beaded board can be found on the front.

Patrick Hagerly Inventory

Was it a small wooden house that was occupied by Patrick Hagerly, whose inventory was compiled in August 1791? Understanding that his wife may have claimed some of the contents as personal property of her own, we still have a picture of an interior apparently complete. It seems to begin upstairs or in a back room with two feather beds, clothing, two silver knee buckles, and two silver shoe buckles. The inventory otherwise suggests two main rooms. The parlor has a dozen Windsor chairs and an old maple desk. The dining room, which doubled as the everyday sitting room, has a dozen lesser chairs with split bottoms and a "broken" dining table, a walnut stand or small table - perhaps for a candle - a sideboard, and an extra pine side table.

One can imagine the parlor with its chairs all around the walls. The floor could have been bare, but that was highly undesirable, thus there may have been matting or a floor covering of some kind. Imagine the walls whitewashed (although paper was relatively cheap) and the chairs lined all around it with the fireplace and desk as the two "vertical" elements.

The second room is the dining table with its homely chairs and a few side tables. It is warmed by a tin plate stove. This may be the kitchen, although there must be a cooking fireplace in addition to the stove, for it is a few years early for a kitchen ranger (called a "ranger" because a range of pots could be cooked on it). The presence of "iron pots and hooks" close at hand would imply a room for both cooking and dining. The cooking implements, which do appear to be in this second room, are not numerous: tinware, a

brass kettle, and woodenware. Listed immediately after the sideboards are six pewter plates and four pewter dishes.



From Alexandria Archaeology

Archaeological remains of kettle

Patrick Hagerly appears to have been a tradesman who perhaps had been in business a long time in Alexandria, according to the what the inventory reveals to us. His possessions are not vast, but neither are they minimal. He owned two slaves, both children perhaps of parents who died in his service. He had three horses - Jack, Dick, and Jolly, and a three-year-old colt. An old dray and an old broken cart also found housing on his premises. Although I hypothesize about his vocation, it is possible that we can fill Patrick Hagerly out in our imaginations and also deceive ourselves. I am reminded of one of the richest slaveholders and largest planters in Alabama, William Lowndes Yancey, ("The Silver-Tongued Orator of Secession"), whose plantation home was no grander than a two-room wooden house with an open hall down the center and a kitchen house across the swept yard. Appearances can be deceiving, and as a result it is important to consider all possibilities before making a determination about the life of the man or woman whose objects were inventoried and to recognize we can never be certain of our conclusions.

Adam Butt Inventory

Adam Butt, elsewhere in Alexandria, was a brewer on his home premises. His inventory

of 1794 lists the equipment of his trade: a great washing kettle, pewter funnel, pans, and a dozen crocks were on hand when he died, along with other "trumpery." The relatively small inventory implies a small residence. Surprisingly, Adam Butt liked to live in stylish surroundings of items bought at the store. In the room with a pewter crane - perhaps his living and cooking room - he had a corner cupboard with glass doors, a walnut dining table, a mahogany tea table, six green Windsor chairs, and a maple desk. At table he had five silver teaspoons, a dozen tablespoons, a silver salt cellar, and Queen's Ware. The house had two bedsteads, both with featherbeds, and one with a rose blanket. There was also a mirror and framed picture.

Benjamin Shreve Inventory

One is left with a decided impression that many Alexandrians - those who had inventories at least - lived in only specific areas and rooms of houses. Sometimes a shopkeeper lived upstairs, and other times it would appear that the house in question was very small or that the person rented several rooms and perhaps even boarded out.

Benjamin Shreve, a successful Alexandria merchant who lived at 307 S. St. Asaph Street, seems to have been crowded indeed, perhaps into one floor of a house, with his shop below. His inventory could not have filled more than a few rooms. He had seven beds and less numerous other furniture of varying quality, much of which by implication one suspects he might have obtained by auction. These pieces seem mixed in with all the rest.

Margaret Gretter Inventory

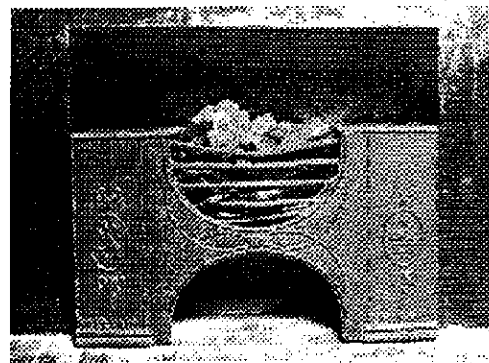
Margaret Gretter's inventory of March 20,

1802, shows a lot of living and a little cooking. Her principal room had a walnut desk, square and round walnut tables, a small table, four green chairs, and four walnut chairs, none of exceptional value. Prints are on the wall and clay ornaments adorn the mantelpiece. There is a bedroom with a large bed with bolster, curtains, pillows, and white sheets. It is a low bed that stands apart from its frame, which is draped.

The inventory taker found the rest indifferent. One lot of crockery and china, trays, candle snuffers, candlesticks, an old carpet on the floor, 22 pounds of feathers not yet sacked into anything, knives and forks in the box they came in, and a tea kettle and small pot. Few of the accouterments of self-survival are found at Margaret Gretter's, suggesting that she rented her quarters, several rooms, and ate either elsewhere in the house or elsewhere in town. Worth noting is Margaret Gretter's contribution to George Washington's funeral - she made his shroud.

Jacob Resler Inventory

There can be no doubt that merchant Jacob Resler had a central heating system of some sort in 1804 or before, for he lists equipment of that sort in value of over \$1,000. He also



18th-century coal grate

Courtesy of Gadsby's Tavern Museum

lists fireplace equipment, but that is likely because the old central gravity systems were activated by the draw of the draft chimneys (a new concept at the time), and productivity of the heating system was enhanced when a fire was in the fireplace to emphasize that draw.

Resler's inventory must have been made just before the furnishings were moved out as everything was pulled into three rooms. The documentation began with three beds, curtains, etc., but moved directly to the plate, as perhaps those items were the most valuable objects in the house. He had lots of silver, from silver tongs to knife cases filled with knives and forks to sugar dishes and cream pots galore. He had a little furniture, the usual mix of things from Windsor chairs to mahogany pieces and an eight-day clock, which in value was rivaled only by a wine decanter and pitcher.

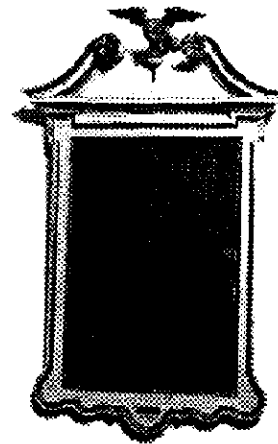
Kenneth Matheson Inventory

More elaborate for the year 1804 was the inventory of the merchant Kenneth Matheson, an owner of the schooner *Betsy*. Here again the inventory taker began with the dining room with its mahogany table, 12 upholstered chairs with slipcovers, and its large carpet. Then he apparently goes immediately upstairs leaving one to wonder if the front rooms downstairs were a business office. The upstairs seems to have consisted entirely of bedrooms rather handsomely outfitted with festoon curtains, an admirable display of textiles, and furniture covered in chintz. The kitchen, inventoried last, has its extensive contents mingled with some secondary tableware.

Dr. James Gillies Inventory

Dr. James Gillies, whose inventory was taken

on October 24, 1807, leaves a clearer record than most because his listing was subdivided by rooms. We begin with the dining room - as is often the case - furnished largely in mahogany with a sideboard, six chairs, trays, knifeboxes, celarette, and a mirror - generally what you would expect in a prosperous household. Tableware was elsewhere and not kept in this impressive room!



Courtesy of Gadsby's Tavern Museum

18th-century looking glass

The drawing room had a harpsichord, a dozen Windsor chairs, window curtains of no description, card tables, fireplace fender, and andirons. Also included was the "dining china and tea china," as well as ten decanters (and decanter slider), 14 wine glasses, four tumblers, two water pitchers, and the silver, which was sufficient to serve nine at soup.



Pitcher from Gadsby's Tavern Museum

Two washstands, listed with the bedroom furniture, imply two bedrooms. According to records, in 1803 Dr. Gillies' house was on Prince Street between Washington and South St. Asaph Street. Four years before his death, we can speculate it was likely his last house and the location of his inventory. It is possible that the two rooms below were offices for the doctor, and that the parlor and a bedroom would have been above the offices, with the dining room in the lower part of an ell wing and the kitchen behind that. Not necessarily, however. Photographs taken in Titian Ramsay Peale's house in Washington, also implied to be such a house, had the dining room upstairs immediately behind the parlor and bedrooms on the ground floor. His workplace was away from home at the Patent Office, that we know. But almost certainly Dr. Gillies had an office at home, immediately accessible to the street.

Samuell Craig Inventory

Samuell Craig, it would seem, was a learned or at least a bookish man. A merchant, he and his wife Joanna rented all or part of a three story brick house on King Street a few doors west of the corner at Pitt Street. Mrs. Craig must have laid claim to all but the drawing room, library, and kitchen, for only those three rooms find enumeration in his inventory of March 18, 1809. The drawing room, which doubled as a dining room, is one of considerable style, although it appears to have belonged to someone who spread out books, newspapers, or prints as well as took some meals there.

This room had a desk, three mahogany tables, 11 Windsor chairs without arms, and two with arms.



Courtesy of Gadsby's Tavern Museum

18th-century Windsor chair

The library's over 100 books may have been housed in this same room, being listed only as "library." There are many volumes on travel, some classic works of Milton and Shakespeare, Montesquieu's *Spirit of Law*, works by Franklin, and many bound volumes of monthly magazines from Scotland and England.

Seth Cartwright Inventory

Seth Cartwright's house, as described in his inventory of April 20, 1811, appears to have been a classic example of the smaller two-story Alexandria house of its time which was basically one room deep and like those seen today along Lee or Princess Streets. "Room Number One" was the parlor with a set of Windsor chairs, a desk, two looking glasses, a candle or Bible stand, a table, fireplace equipment in brass, and in its cupboards - presumably flanking the fireplace - was crockery ware.

In the passage was a settee - probably a wooden piece - and a sofa, along with one dining table and a cupboard with crockery ware. The dining table, one presumes, could have been set up in the parlor for dining or in

the hall, which was described as a "passage" and which was not a broad "hall." On into the rear wing was the kitchen simply described as having "kitchen furniture." There was a bedroom over the parlor and one over the kitchen. Upstairs in the attic was one large bedroom spread across the full width of the house that held three beds.

This house was probably purely residential, its yard filled with utilitarian outbuildings and perhaps chickens running about and maybe a milch cow - as so many inventories show - that was taken out to graze. In the back was not, I think, the tucked-away garden we might expect today, although a few rows of vegetables might have been present seasonally if the sun was right. A wash pot or two were fairly staple in the yard, sometimes adjacent to a wash shed that doubled as wood storage.

Inevitable among the outbuildings was a privy. We have had some grand privies made of brick with inset wooden louvers here in Alexandria, but only one or two survive. An old house on King Street shows the outline of the former privy in its tall alley additions. There were tradesmen who cleaned privies, just as there were tradesmen who cleaned chimneys. Inside the privy was a bucket of lye and a dipper, and a scoop of this powerful inducement to decay and barrier to odor followed each use of the facility. How our archaeologists love these privies! Their discoveries add color and life to the rambling words of the inventories.

Mathias Perrin Inventory

Of course everyone with money did not live grandly. Mathias Perrin's inventory offered a splendid listing of the materials on his shop's shelves and in storage. Let us imagine his

shop was in the front room of a row house with its own door. A second door would have led to the passage or hallway. After listing hundreds of items he had for sale, the inventory taker ventured into the dining room, which was the principal room of the house. I am puzzled by its three curtains, which I originally suspected meant it was the room across the front upstairs. Not so, apparently; as it seems this house was at least in part free-standing. The dining room was the second room going back on the ground floor at the time of Perrin's death. The dining room showed he liked to eat and maybe to entertain with table and chairs, a considerable amount of silver, china, and dishes of all kind.

The "front room upstairs" may in fact have been the dining room at some point because it had a sideboard. The rest of the furniture consisted of bedroom furniture, but perhaps the sideboard remained because it was too difficult to move down a narrow stair. The front room had five windows with curtains, framed prints on the wall, and a group of French books.

The second room back in the upstairs portion of the house was also a bedroom with a bed, clothes press (wardrobe), looking glass, and chairs. The only other room listed on the inventory was the kitchen. One assumes that the other rooms were occupied with shop stock and bedrooms in the rear wing or perhaps the attic for the two house slaves listed, Peggy and Sarah, who were set free in the will.

John Dundas Inventory

The uses of rooms in plans that are more or less familiar is sometimes surprising. Take, for example, the inventory of John Dundas

from September 15, 1813. He was a merchant and left a widow, Agnes, who inherited his property. Their house was a relatively rare one that had a central hall plan. One entered the hall or passage and found Windsor chairs and a settee, probably also of the Windsor variety, an old carpet, and an iron safe.

Living rooms seem to have proliferated. On both sides of the hall were rooms with several chairs. One had a backgammon table and four card tables. On the other side of the hall was a room with a dozen stuffed chairs, elbow chairs, easy chairs, mahogany bookcases and cabinets holding Queen's Ware, knives and forks, and various pieces of table silver. "All the silver has been much used," is noted on the inventory, perhaps at the insistence of the widow Agnes.

A dining room was behind this second room with two "old mahogany tables," a "slab" (meaning a marble-topped piece of furniture or wall-mounted shelf), and Windsor chairs. On the second floor were three rooms, one used apparently as a study with two writing desks, and the other as bedrooms. The garret had two bedrooms with beds where the trunks were stored. Down in the kitchen, workshop, and yard was an "old four wheel carriage with harness" and a bay horse.

William Newton Inventory

In the inventory of the dry goods merchant William Newton the inventory taker began in the attic. Here he found three grates for coal fires. Coal was rather common in this area at an earlier date than elsewhere because of the existence of Virginia coal. After the development of the Pennsylvania mines around 1808 it was better known elsewhere. Descending the stairs to the third floor

revealed two bedrooms, one with two beds, and in the passage was a clothes press.

Down on the second floor he found the drawing room across the front, three window curtains to designate the familiar three windows across, a dozen chairs, two card tables, three large prints, mantel ornaments, and a carpet which is more valuable than anything else in the room. Behind this room was a bedroom with two beds and a crib, all ornamented with framed prints, a carpet, and a fancy dressing table.

The "front room downstairs" where shops often were was the dining room in this house of 1815. Here the clerk found a sideboard, dining table and chairs, a breakfast table and chairs, sofa, carpeting, two window curtains (remember the door formed the third bay on the front), framed prints, candlesticks, and a pair of knife cases. These items were listed in addition to fireplace equipment, which was presumably for coal.

In the passage outside the dining room were eight chairs and a carpet with a carpet runner. It would appear that the second room back from the dining room was simply a storage room where the silver, china, and other tableware, which was extensive, was stored on shelving and in cabinets. The room was called the "store closet." The kitchen was beyond this part of the house, perhaps in a wing that also housed the six male slaves. Many a small-to-middle-sized late 18th- and early 19th- century row house fits this inventory well, notably houses along Captain's Row, in addition to others.

John Yeaton Inventory

Arguably the most opulent of Alexandria

houses was the John Yeaton house, which we know today as the Lord Fairfax House on Cameron Street. It is a handsome three-story red brick house that is essentially one room deep.

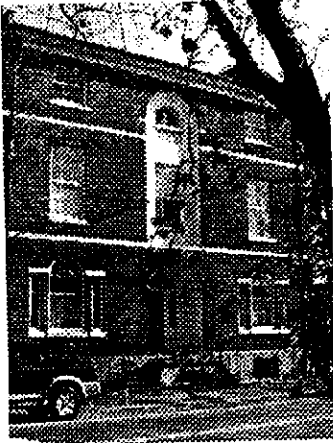


Photo by Barbara Magid

Lord Fairfax House

In England this house might have been called a “casino” and built in town by country people who used it to entertain or spend the night.

A humble version of this house on the same street is George Washington’s little wooden townhouse, (where there exists now a replica).



Photo by Barbara Magid

Replica of George Washington's Townhouse

The Yeaton house seems to have had two rooms as the main floor with an offset elliptical stair that rose to a skylight. On the right of a broad central hall was the dining room and on the left a reception room or parlor. On the second floor, upon leaving the circular stairs, one faced the drawing room doors. Elsewhere on that floor was a small central room over the entrance hall and a bedchamber. On the third floor were several bedrooms beneath arched ceilings. The kitchen was apparently entirely in the basement.

The “inventory” is really not that, at least not a death document exactly, but a recounting of household goods inherited by William Yeaton from his father and transferred to another relative to relieve indebtedness.

The house was carpeted. A dozen chairs lined the walls of its entrance hall, and the hall was lighted by an Argand lamp (“patent lamp”). Glass chandeliers hung in the drawing room upstairs and in the dining room on the main floor. The reception room had a secretary, a pair of pier tables, a clock, 12 picture, an easy chair and slipcover, and nine other chairs.

The dining room was richly appointed with a pair of sideboards in its arched niches, a dining table with a dozen chairs, and a green baize crumb-cloth on the carpet beneath them. The accumulation of china punch bowls, tea sets, ice cream sets, and various accouterments of table service and silver implements were not the grandest in Alexandria, but they came close. There was fine French porcelain and blue and white china for lesser use. No less rich was the upstairs drawing room with its Italian engravings, its six copies of Hogarth prints in frames, a dozen “historical” pictures, large

and small looking glasses, cherry chairs, mahogany cases, a sofa, and more chairs.

Four wash stands indicate four bedrooms. There were two mahogany bedsteads and six featherbeds with two sets of bed drapery, the disposition of which I'll leave to you! Perhaps the "mahogany lady secretary" and the fancy card tables were in the middle room on the second floor. The kitchen below had two tables and all sorts of flesh forks, pots, pans, oil pots, water pots, Dutch ovens, stew pans, roasters, and the like. I had expected an iron range in such a house but find none. Perhaps it was considered a fixture and therefore not part of the movable property of the house.

What we have seen is the barest sampling of the inventories of early 19th century Alexandria. Rarely can they be taken alone as documents of a house. We cannot assume that they are complete. For one thing, survivors might be likely to remove items to avoid taxes, or a widow or widower might claim some objects as their own, which I think probably accounts for some of the "missing" rooms. There were undoubtedly objects which even the inventory taker could not see the point of listing - the odd items either broken or homemade or things so everyday that they had no value at all. By the time our inventories were made, the evidence of a consumer culture was clear. Much is naturally missing of the props of everyday life.

Moreover, as I have said before, it is important to remember that the inventories are not a true cross section of humanity in the town. I pause over the inventory of one Charles Sims, merchant, whose household inventory of May 16, 1820, lists "three old black servants," and gives their value as

"nothing." There was much more to the town than these recounts of mahogany tables and sea captains' trunks can properly cover, but there is here a glimpse that is often sharp.

An inventory is a remarkably useful resource for finding out the manner of living in a given place, and we are lucky when we find them. Alexandria is a modern place that lives today with the architectural remains of the past. Most of the movable contents are gone from the 18th- and 19th-century houses of Old Town and the surrounding area. Yet few historical documents better return us to the ins and outs of domestic life here than our rich supply of inventories.



William Seale is an architectural historian and one of the nation's leading authorities on the preservation and restoration of historic buildings. He is the author of The White House: The History of an American Idea; the definitive two-volume work The President's House: A History; Of Houses and Time, and several other books on American architectural and cultural history. Mr. Seale is currently writing a guidebook on the history of Alexandria as part of the 250th anniversary celebration. The book, published by Time-Life, Inc., is due out in late summer and will feature 250 years of people, neighborhoods, and general history of the city of Alexandria. Mr. Seale makes his home in Alexandria, Virginia.



Gadsby's Tavern Museum: An Historic Inventory and Window Hangings for the Ballroom



by Gretchen Bulova and Ellen Donald

Gadsby's Tavern Museum recently undertook the challenge of replicating curtains in its ballroom based on information found in John Gadsby's inventory. Following is the interpretive bulletin on the curtains, written by the museum's director Gretchen Bulova and decorative arts consultant Ellen Donald, which demonstrates the analysis of an historic inventory.

In 1999, new window curtains were installed in Gadsby's Tavern Museum's historic ballroom. The curtains represent three years of fundraising and four years of research into period curtain styles. The following is a synopsis of the research process that determined the style, fabric, color, and embellishments for reproduction curtains appropriate to the late 18th-century Ballroom.

Documentation

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, both public buildings and private homes often had no curtains at all. However, an inventory of the City Hotel furnishings taken in 1802 by tavern keeper John Gadsby lists, as part of the ballroom furnishings, "8 Large curtains with Lath Leds & Lines compleat" valued at \$9.00 each. The value of \$9.00 per window is six times more expensive than the curtains found in the City Hotel's best bedchambers. This difference in the value may be explained by the use of the word "compleat." Based upon other period documents, John Gadsby probably included both the curtain hardware and some type of simple cornice, as well as the curtains

themselves, in his value. It is also likely that the curtains were of a more substantial type of fabric and more expensively trimmed than those in the bedchambers.

Style

The reference to "Lath Leds & Lines" tells historians that the ballroom curtains were raised and lowered using a system of lines and pulleys. In this period, two basic curtain forms could have been described in this manner - festoon and drapery curtains. Both types, when lowered, covered the window opening with a flat expanse of fabric.

Festoon curtains, resembling what today might be referred to as balloon curtains, were made to draw straight up to the top of the window into a series of festoons or puffs. The lines used to pull up the fabric were gathered together and attached to a single cord which was then tied off on one side of the window frame.

Drapery curtains, were made of panels of fabric drawn up to either side of the window, creating a series of swags with tails. Separate cords were often used for each side of the curtain.

Is there any way to know which curtain style was used by John Gadsby? A careful analysis of the original woodwork of the Ballroom, now in the American wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, provided answers.

In January 1997, museum staff examined

Gadsby's Tavern Museum's original ballroom woodwork at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The examination revealed ghost marks from the curtain hardware. Because the woodwork was stripped and repainted when it was installed in New York, only a few layers of paint obscured the evidence. Under a raking light a pattern of marks emerged. Clearly visible were pairs of holes on both sides of the window frame where cloak pins for tying off curtain cords had been screwed into the wood. Cloak pins were necessary because period pulleys did not have self-stopping mechanisms. The presence of pins on both sides of the window at approximately the same height all around the room indicated drapery style curtains. If the marks had been only on one side, it would have indicated festoon curtains.

Fabric

One of the best ways to achieve curtains that were both fashionable and practical was with a careful choice of fabric. Because John Gadsby did not name a type of fabric in the 1802 inventory, it is necessary to examine a variety of possible options available to him.

Silk: Since he did not describe the curtains as silk, it is highly unlikely that they were made of this fabric. The inventory, compiled by John Gadsby as collateral for a loan, would have included any fabric description which would have allowed him to claim the highest possible value for curtains. Even in private households, silk was used in only a small percentage of homes.

Cotton: Printed cottons, while fashionable, were not always colorfast or durable.

Wool: A popular choice for fashionable furnishings throughout the 18th century, wool would have been an ideal fabric choice. It

could be woven and finished in a number of ways and took dyes well to produce the strong colors which were fashionable at the end of the century.

Color

There is no existing evidence which provides a clue as to the color which John Gadsby might have chosen for the curtains in the Ballroom. Illustrations of period interiors as well as surviving fabrics show that reds ranging from bright scarlets to deep maroons were among the more popular colors for window curtains. Throughout much of the 18th century, trims were often done in the same color as the fabric. However, by the end of the century contrasting tones were increasingly popular. According to textile historians, the primary decorative effect relied heavily upon "dramatically contrasting colors in linings, borders, and trimmings" with "a marked preference for...strong, almost glaring, colors - rich yellow, crimson, orange, scarlet and blue - often arranged in bold combinations."¹

Embellishments

Trims were an important part of the overall effect of fashionable window curtains. Period illustrations show that fringes and tassels were among the most popular. In December 1801, John Gadsby purchased "3 Doz Curtain Fringes" from a local Alexandria merchant. Based upon the way in which the entry reads and the cost of the purchase, it is likely that he was actually buying tassels rather than fringe. These "fringes" could have been used to refurbish existing ballroom curtains or supplied to a seamstress or upholsterer who was making new curtains.

Putting It All Together

The new window curtains for Gadsby's Tavern Museum's historic ballroom reflect

architectural and documentary information as well as the latest research into 18th-century window treatments. It is important to remember that John Gadsby would have wanted curtains with an impressive appearance that his patrons would have viewed as fashionable. Coupled with a concern for appearance, however, would have been practical considerations. The curtains would have needed to have been sturdy enough to withstand frequent raising and lowering, the effects of exposure to sunlight, and the dirt generated by the constant flow of people inside and the traffic on the unpaved streets outside.

The new curtains in the ballroom reflect the research outlined in this bulletin. Hanging at the windows are drapery style curtains of a deep, rich red color, ornamented with contrasting gold-colored fringe, tassels, and line and topped with fabric-covered cornices. The red and gold colors contrast with the Prussian blue woodwork to create a popular late 18th-century color palette. The cords used to draw up the curtains are tied off on paired ornamental cloak pins made of brass.

Fabric: The curtains are made of a heavy wool fabric with a woven ribbed texture which was referred to in the period as camblet. This type of wool frequently was used for window and bed curtains. The lining is a light-weight, glazed wool called tammy. Tammy is a plain weave used for everything from curtains to coat linings in the period. Both the camblet and the tammy, woven in 30" period width, were dyed authentic 18th-century colors.

Trim: The fringe and tassels used are made from a combination of silk and wool, dyed to match colors available in the period. The tassels were handmade, based upon tassels

illustrated in period prints and paintings.

Cord: Made from the same yarns used in the fringe and tassels, the cord is woven over a jute core to produce a sturdy yet decorative rope to raise and lower the curtains.

Curtain Pins: Called cloak pins in the 18th century, the pins are hand cast from brass. The pin design is based on a late 18th-century prototype which is similar to examples illustrated in period brass trade catalogs. The pin's neo-classical design elements are closely related to those found on the coal grate in the ballroom. A pair of pins is fastened to each side of the window to tie up the cord when the curtains are raised.

Cornice: Period prints show that cornices, often covered in the same fabric from which the curtains were made, were a popular treatment at the top of curtains. The decision to include cornices as part of the window treatments is based in part on the high value which John Gadsby assigned to the ballroom curtains in his 1802 inventory.

I. Jane Nylander, *Fabrics for Historic Buildings*, 4th edition. The Preservation Press, 1990, Washington, D.C., 77-78.



Gadsby's Tavern Museum is part of the Office of Historic Alexandria and is located at 134 North Royal Street. Funding for the research, fabrication, and installation of the curtains was generously donated by Gadsby's Tavern Museum Society and the Alexandria Association. For more information on Gadsby's Tavern Museum and its programs, please call (703) 838-4242 or visit its website: <http://ci.alexandria.va.us/oha/gadsby>.



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