

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The Reminiscences of  
Laura Carpenter

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Laura Carpenter conducted by Interviewer Anna Schwartz on March 29, 2012. This interview is part of the New York Preservation Archive Project's collection of individual oral histories.

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Laura Carpenter became the director of Van Cortlandt House Museum in 1994. In this brief interview, she primarily speaks about the renovation and restoration projects the museum has undergone during her tenure there. There has been a mix of preventative and reconstructive projects, such as updating the heating system and the roof, as well as historic interpretative projects such as the dining room. She also shares her experiences working the National Society of the Colonial Dames, managing funding from a mix of public and private sources, and the joint management of the Van Cortlandt House Museum between the city and the Colonial Dames.

Laura Carpenter is director of the Van Cortlandt House Museum. Her background is in American studies, archive management and historic preservation. Before coming to the Van Cortlandt House, she worked with the Old Westbury Gardens on Long Island. While at Van Cortlandt House, she oversaw several restoration and renovation projects.

Transcriptionist: Unknown

Session: 1

Interviewee: Laura Carpenter

Location: Unknown

Interviewer: Anna Schwartz

Date: March 29, 2012

Q: This is Anna. I'm sitting with Laura Carpenter, the Director of the Van Cortlandt House Museum. Hi Laura.

Carpenter: Hi Anna.

Q: Can you tell me a little about your background and how you came to work at the Van Cortlandt House Museum?

Carpenter: I have a bachelor's degree in American studies from Heidelberg University in Tiffin, Ohio and then I have a master's degree in material culture from University of Notre Dame where I had the immense pleasure of studying with Tom [Thomas J.] Schlereth, who is sort of like the guru of American material culture studies. I also studied a summer school session at the Preservation Institute at Nantucket. Those three things all sort of came together, especially my studies at the Preservation Institute at Nantucket. While I was at Notre Dame—I had worked at the archives there—one of my projects was to create finding aids.

I get done with graduate school and all that, and there was this job out on Long Island at Old Westbury Gardens for an archivist and a registrar to establish an archives there, and again because I could read a blueprint and had this experience with historic preservation and had

established a finding aids catalogue for architectural materials, that was really what they needed there. So I had this bizarre combination of experience and schooling. I was there for about seven years, just under seven years, and then came here in September of '94. Been here ever since *[laughs]*.

Q: I know there have been a lot of restoration projects since you've been here. So, can you talk a little about the ones that occurred during your time? I know there are two current projects, the dining room and the kitchen. What were the goals and challenges you faced in these projects?

Carpenter: How long do you have *[laughter]*? I'll just talk about all the projects and not necessarily divide them up between restoration, preservation, and capital projects just because they have been so many different projects. Within the first eighteen months of arriving at the job, we started a full rehabilitation of the roof of the main structure of the house. That was a humongous learning curve. I came into the project well after the design phase was finished. It was pretty much this is how it is going to happen, and so I had virtually no input whatsoever. I kind of just had to stick it. You know, deal with what was going on because it was a capital construction project, and traditionally the Historic House Trust and individual house directors haven't had a lot of input, to the best of my knowledge, with capital construction projects. That was almost eighteen years ago so again, I was very green. I came in at the tail end of the project. Are there things I would do differently? Absolutely. The general contractor on the project was not a terribly nice person. He had a great subcontractor, and there were some things I would have done differently, but again a lot of that is just because this much time has passed.

Then after that, we had what was called a requirements contract to replace the roof on the smaller part of the house. Again, it was through the Parks Department [New York City Department of Parks and Recreation]. It wasn't a capitals project, but it was a requirements contract, which is it was a standing line item that exists in the Parks Department budget that, essentially, if a structure requires a new roof they'll see if it can fit into this line item. It's for requirements. If the building required all new bathrooms there might be a line item for required new bathrooms, that sort of thing. Again, I had very little input into the process. Would probably do things differently the second time around. Had a miserable contractor again and it was pretty contentious, but again did not have a lot of input.

Chronologically, I can't remember what happened next. I think it was that we restored the chamber on the second floor, the bedchamber, the East Bedchamber. It was not a full-scale restoration. It was primarily to address the cosmetics of the room. There was a lot of map cracking on the interior walls. The ceiling was falling, not falling in, but the paint was peeling, and we were coming up on a big anniversary of the house, two hundred and fifty years of it being built, so the push was to get that room done. That was a very fulfilling project. I think the biggest challenge on that was into the process we found some very stable asbestos, but we still had to go through the whole process of making sure it was not of the harmful variety and that it could be mitigated, but again it didn't really slow us down instrumentally. We had a great contractor we worked with on that project.

That was a really good project. As I said, it wasn't a full-full restoration of the room.

Historically, there didn't seem to be a lot of unknowns that we needed to look into. It was very

straightforward. We did completely take one interior wall down to the plaster, but the rest of the walls were repaired. We used a couple of plaster buttons on some key spots, but the way the house is constructed lends itself to map cracking along the interior walls, because the house was floored out and the walls were built as partitions on top of that, partitioned walls, they are not low-bearing, and so as you walk across the floor boards they act like tiny little levers and push the walls out of alignment and that causes the map cracking. And it was a couple years until some of the cracks started to come back, but having a basic understanding of what was causing the cracking, there wasn't a lot you can do. It's just the nature of the beast.

Another project we worked on, again through the capital construction, is that we had our boiler unit replaced. That was, again, miserable, really bad. It was originally designed with the intention to sort of replicate the initial system that we have, because again, with the historic house you always have unique situations that come up. The uniqueness of this particular situation is that the heating plan is in the basement of the annex building, the annex of the caretakers building, but the heat has to be pushed all the way to the third floor of the main house, which is a long distance if you are looking at it in linear feet and in terms of the plumbing and the system. It's a steam based system, so in addition to needing the heat to get up, there is inner condensation that builds up in the process of the heating and the condensation has to return to the boiler room and be reticulated so it doesn't sit in the pipes and interfere with the radiators.

So here is a system that was designed by engineers working behind a desk in a different borough in New York City, thinking they were doing the right thing and it was unfortunately designed. Let's just say it that way. And there were a lot of problems once the contractors came on. They

realized it probably wasn't going to work the way it was designed. They were ordered to install it the way it was designed and it didn't work. There was a lot of retrofitting, a lot of changes once the project was installed. There was a lot of going back and re-working things. They had to bring in the manufacturer. It was a very involved process. That was about a year and half process that should have taken, I don't know, at most maybe six months. And for a very long period of time, we had one of those low boiler tractor-trailer units sitting in the yard, which was not attractive and a nuisance.

I think what I mostly learned from the situation—and again, this was another nonsensical thing about the project—is that they installed this brand new boiler, but did not address in any way the fuel coming to the boiler. So, probably \$200,000 worth of equipment and contract by the time the whole project was finished, and it was still drawing oil from the same thirty, forty-year-old oil tank. It just didn't make sense. We immediately began having problems with the heating. It would shut off inexplicably. We were having problems getting a prime to the oil. I don't know how much you know about these systems? I know more now than I really should because of all these problems. It took a couple of years, but finally we were able to qualify for a line item through the DEC, the [New York State] Department of Environmental Conservation, to replace our oil tank because it was of its age, not anything to do with our boiler, but just because the federal government has a program where by a certain, I forget which year it is, everybody who has this oil tank is going to have it replaced.

That was another interesting project. That primarily took place thought the course of—no, I guess we had a temporary oil tank. You know, you try to just let these things fade into a pleasant

blur because you get too worked up. I guess we ended up with a temporary oil tank, but as soon as the ground could be dug into they started that project. That was also another major project. Although, that went very smoothly and we now have an oil tank that will last another one hundred years. And now that we have a better oil feed, we have had virtually no problems with our boiler.

I think the biggest struggle at this point is ongoing preventative maintenance. Although about two years ago, there was a new head of technical services for the Bronx assigned, and he was really—has been very good about keeping up with preventative maintenance, which has been very good. For example, we've gone a whole winter and haven't really lost our heat, where as we would lose it regularly every couple of weeks, sometimes for days on end, which was not pleasant.

Q: It sounds like you've been saying a lot of these reconstruction projects have been preventive and reconstructive, but have any of these affected the interpretation of the house?

Carpenter: We haven't really gotten to the dining room. That one has sort of been creeping along for a very long time. That has affected the interpretation of the house in that it has kept two of our period rooms off limits for quite some time. It's going to change the interpretation of the house dramatically because of the findings in the dining room—original Eighteenth Century paneling, wallpaper. We've just had a paint analysis done. Part of the delay has been bureaucratic red tape, part of it has been structural instability in the house itself, and part of the delay has been caused by the fact that as a public-private partnership there are very clear lines of



demarcation for who is responsible for what part, the interpretation or preservation of the house. The Colonial Dames [The National Society of the Colonial Dames of the State of New York] have had to take a backseat to allow other facets of the project to go along. So, we are coming onto a period of major change.

As part of that outgrowth, we have been looking at different ways to keep interest in the House while that room is being worked on. One of the things we're looking at is starting more sort of interpretive choices that will allow people to interact with the House on a limited basis because you don't want to harm original fabric or anything like that. For example, in the Dutch Room, which is the room above the dining room, we are in the process of getting the nook bed tightened up. Children and families will be allowed to climb in the lower compartment. We are also going to interpretatively return that room to its original appearance from 1917 by having some of the furniture swapped out.

Then when we reopen the kitchen, we are looking to have that be a hands-on site where families, and children, and school groups can come in and can actually interact with reproduction kitchen items. The ultimate goal of this is to sort of tie us back to the one portion of the life on the plantation that we have kind of lost, which is the production of wheat and flour, and tie it all back into the role of bread and wheat throughout the house. We are also looking to have an outdoor bake oven built, possibly get some interpretive signage down where the mill buildings use to be, but again because that's out in the parks, that is sort of a Parks Department thing we sort of have move along with.

Q: I know in 1990-1993 there were some archaeologically excavations on the property. How were those finds incorporated into the house?

Carpenter: Those finds weren't brought into the house. That was prior to my tenure here, but one of the problems was the we couldn't necessarily bring them in too much because the house was already pretty well furnished with intact items, and at the time things were excavated, very little came out whole or to a point where it could be exhibited. There was just a massive quantity of objects that came out of the site, a massive amount, because what happened, there were two underground grain silage—what we believe is grain silage—what would normally be above ground towers beneath the ground, that when the family gave up the house they took a lot of things they didn't want in the house or get rid of and just chucked down into the earth. So a lot of the objects are also beyond our interpretative period. We still don't know what we're going to do with them. They are living a life over at Brooklyn College, and we live in fear of the day that Brooklyn College says, okay you got to get this stuff out of here, because realistically the boxes would take up half this room.

Q: Yes.

Carpenter: A massive amount of stuff.

Q: What is the relationship between the house museum and the surrounding Bronx community?

Is it difficult to get people involved in the house?

Carpenter: Involved in the house on a volunteer basis, on just an engaged basis?

Q: Yes, and visitor-ship, in programming. I suppose that is a struggle of any historic house museum.

Carpenter: It is absolutely a struggle. I think there is a unique amount of struggle in relationship to a couple of things. One is that for many, many years because the Colonial Dames have had, for lack of a better word, custody of the house, had responsibility for the care and maintenance of the house, and the interpretation and the operation of public programs, and all that. For many, many years the Colonial Dames were very insular. Not in a purposeful way, it was just their MO [modus operandi]. The philosophy and the feeling behind it was such that, you know, they took tremendous pride in having taken on the house, and when the Colonial Dames take something on, especially back in their early formative years, when they took on a cause, they took care of it.

If we're going to make a commitment to take on this house, we are by golly going to make sure we don't have to go with our hand out except to our friends and family and a small group of people asking for donations. We're not going to rely on government support. We're going to pull up our bootstraps and take care of this house ourselves. So, there was not a lot of need to engage the community from that standpoint—not a lot of need to engage elected officials. And for many, many, many years, it's not even in the local psyche. A new elected official doesn't even look back in his files and think, "Oh, I need to pay a visit because we want to worked with them." Part of that is also because the constituency of the Colonial Dames, in terms of their voting, is that they don't live in this neighborhood. So for an elected official to want to reach out and try and

woo the Colonial Dames because they are going to vote for him or her, it doesn't happen in the paradigm. And that is kind of unfortunate.

The other problem is the Colonial Dames is one of the most grossly misunderstood organizations. Period. Now granted I am more of a fan than the average person because I worked for them, but for having worked for them for eighteen years, I have had a lot of chances to think about this, you know, quiet moments. There has got to be a way, to sort of turn on the switch. One of the problems is that the Colonial Dames don't work here. They are white older ladies of a certain—for the most part—of a certain status of a level of society, and there is not a lot of connection with the surrounding neighborhood, the school children who are coming here, the people who use this park, and the Colonial Dames.

The general public's perception of the Dames isn't that they have this remarkable role as the stewards of historic preservation not just here in New York but all across the country. You know, there are forty-four state societies and each state society supports at least one historic property. It all started with the New York Society of Van Cortlandt and then spread. Its PR struggled because the Colonial Dames are just so much more than what initially pops into your head when you think of the Colonial Dames. They still exist *[laughs]*? So, there's that. The other problem we have is that Van Cortlandt Park is a destination park, not because of the museum but because of soccer, and tennis, and golf, and cross country, and cricket, rugby, softball, baseball, a swimming pool. It's a destination park that if you were to count the reasons why people come here, the historic house has got to be really low on the totem pole.

Q: Does the Parks Department work with you at all to try and bring people who come to the park for these other recreational activities and needs, and try to do some sort of programming—

Carpenter: No, no, because it's almost impossible. These people who are coming here, they come, they do their thing, they go. It's like Giants [Metlife] Stadium during the week—there is nothing going on there, but when there is a football game going on, hey, yeah, there are thousands and thousands of people. It would be very difficult to tie those things in. As a matter of fact, during cross-country season we try to avoid having big events because there is such a toll on the park. And then the Parks Department budget has been severely cut over the past, I won't say during [Michael R.] Bloomberg's tenure, but during every mayor's tenure, but Bloomberg has made some pretty severe cuts. And what are you going to do? Your hands are tied. You have to balance the budget. Do you take money away from school children, or do you take money away from the Parks Department?

We also have a unique neighborhood in that there is some very great wealth in the neighborhood and those people tend to have houses that have their own backyard, so they aren't coming to the park for recreation. They have a dog, the dog is walked in the neighborhood or let out in the yard. They are not coming to the park to walk their dog. Their children may play soccer here, but their kid may play soccer in one the fields at school, at the Hill Schools. Then we have a lot of competition for deep pockets with Wave Hill because their houses are in this neighborhood and they have a real vested interest in keeping that place pristine and beautiful from a real estate, from an investment standpoint. For many, many years Wave Hill had a very beloved, dynamic head of horticulture, and he was just enchanting and a real juggernaut in terms of attracting

people to his personality to the magical gardening things he did up there. It's a beautiful sight and it's hard to compare. It might be easier if we ever could get a mutual board member; that might make a difference. But again, Wave Hill is getting their board members from their own backyard because that is where their voting constituents is. So, we have a lot of challenges.

Q: Where does the funding for the dining room and kitchen projects come from?

Carpenter: Part of the money came from the city because we have structural problems. Just to very basically divide our responsibilities: The Historic House Trust is responsible for very little financially. They provide a lot of guidance and technical service, but the City of New York is responsible for the physical structure of the house because they own the house. So if something structural goes wrong, if it's the boiler, the walls start crumbling down, they are responsible for that. One of the problems we had in the dining room was we had some structural stability problems with the wall, the chimney wall, so those things needed to be addressed. The good thing is throughout the long period of time we have been investigating the room and getting everything in order we have had a good period of time to fundraise.

Everything else, now that the structural problems have been addressed, is on the dime of the Colonial Dames. We're going to spending quite a bit of money, but fortunately we have a pretty good pool of money to spend. Within the Colonial Dames, it hasn't been too difficult to fundraise for special projects. Once you can create a very compelling narrative for why something needs to be done, and I think we'll be able to get people behind the kitchen, because it's going to become a fun area, and it's not the original kitchen to the house, so we have some

leeway there. I think one of the nice things too, is because we are a small group, and we can think a little creatively and makes you able to do things on a shoestring, we can do an awful lot in there for a couple thousand dollars—some good text and guinea pig families to come in to see if this is working or not working.

Q: When you do interpret or re-interpret the kitchen, what sort of source material will you be using, historic documents—

Carpenter: Oh yes, we'll go back to primary source material, not necessarily anything directly related to the house because we have had so little. We'll go back to studying manuscripts, cookbooks, we'll look at the material culture of that time period, probably about 1760, the way in which wheat was used in the kitchen. And because we will have a bake over, we'll probably look at it from the standpoint of bread, you know, bread from farm to table, something along those lines. We'll probably have measuring activities for the kids. Probably not using flour because flour can be messy, maybe substituting grains of rice or ceramic pie weights, so the kids can measure out and look at different weights and measures from the time period, and then look at different recipes for bread, allow them to take home recipes, and at certain times of the year we'll have guest bakers and actually making bread and they can come in and—not necessarily make the dough—but watch as the ovens are heated, the dough is made, put into the ovens, probably on a quarterly basis. We are on the cusp of some important things.

Q: Thank you so much for your time.

Carpenter: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]