

A History of the Roof of Carlyle House Alexandria, VA

The Board of Architectural Review has acted on an application made by the Northern Virginia Parks Authority (NOVA Parks) to replace the wooden shingle roof on the historic Carlyle House with a metal one.

The John Carlyle House was built in 1752. While there is no reliable documentation of what the original roofing material was, there should be no question that the original roof was not metal.

Skipping ahead 130++ years in time, a historian at NOVA tells us that various maps from 1885 through 1912 show the roof to be noncombustible.

That is irrelevant. One works to develop as closely as possible what the original material was, if possible, or most likely may have been.

NOVA has announced that it “would like to change the roof from wooden shingle to metal as the metal will last longer, will be less prone to storm damage with high winds, and will provide increased fire protection.”

There are no suggestions that the wood slat roofing has been damaged by high wind. There is also no acknowledgement that there is a fire station located only two blocks from Carlyle House.

There is also no acknowledgment that wood slats were almost certainly used on the John Carlyle house.

As stated on the Mount Vernon website:

Wood was the overwhelming choice for Virginia roofs in Washington's day. Washington purchased hundreds of thousands of shingles for Mount Vernon during his lifetime, most of them split from cypress trees cut in the Dismal Swamp of southern Virginia. Cypress is naturally rot resistant, and an old-growth cypress roof was expected to provide cover for 50 years or more.

Besides choosing one of the best woods for his shingles, Washington also knew the importance of shingle care. Sun and rain gave roofs a beating, and the practice of painting roofs with tar or oil-based paints was an attempt to extend the life of shingles by sealing them and replacing their natural oils. The red stain used on Mount Vernon's roofs today was matched to the color preserved on an original shingle found in the mansion attic, apparently dropped during shingle replacement in the 1800s.



Note that Mount Vernon was built approximately 50 years after the Carlyle House; hence, the supposition that the earlier dwelling had a wood slated roof is very strong. (Slat was used occasionally, when it was available; however, if it had been used here, it would probably still be in good shape.)

The NOVA expert has not discussed Mount Vernon but has suggested that Carlyle might have known about metal roofs in 1752 because Thomas Jefferson used them at Monticello sixteen years or more later. That is pure, and arguably misguided, conjecture.

Additionally, the Old and Historic Alexandria District Design Guidelines for roofing state that “Original or existing roofing

which has acquired historic importance over time should be preserved and repaired whenever possible.”

This is exactly what the Historic Alexandria Foundation was advised to do when it had to repair a wood slat roof on its historic property, Alexandria Academy, on Wolfe Street. It was also pointed out that, at this very moment, Gadsby’s Tavern is getting a new wood slat roof.

To top it off, one more example popped up after the BAR voted 4-0 to deny NOVA’s application, when we learned that Gunston Hall had just installed a new wood shingle roof.

Guidelines provide that, if there is no solid determination of the composition of the original roof, “replacement materials that match the original roofing material should generally be used.”

If the original roofing material is missing and cannot be determined, roofing appropriate to the architectural style and period of the building should be used. The Board discourages replacing original and historically appropriate roofing material with modern alterations.

The NOVA historian also defended the use of a metal roof on the Carlyle House by citing recent work on the Murray Dick Fawcett house on Prince Street-- while remaining silent on the fact that wood shakes were used on the front of the house.

There was a very good reason why both materials were used. To quote Al Cox, who supervised the restoration of the M D F house:

We used a metal roof on the rear of the MDF house because it had been in place there for over 100 years and had become a character defining feature during the period of significance of this house, which extended from 1774 well into the 20th century, while it was still in the Cheeseman family's ownership.

Al went on to explain that the “period of significance” of the Carlyle House ended decades ago; a position bolstered by the National Register listing which states that its significance is in the 18th century and not for an ongoing time after that. In other words, the restoration of the Carlyle house by the City prior to its transfer to NOVA was intended to restore it to the period when John Carlyle lived there.

“Therefore”, Al states, “a metal roof which was never used on Carlyle House is not historically appropriate for the mid-18th thru early 19th century period of significance of this house.”

Of course, the elephant in the room—which no one spoke about, knowing the rules—neither the BAR, or the Council on appeal, is

permitted to consider finances when making their decision and may only consider historic architectural appropriateness.

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