II. METHODOLOGY

In April 2003, the Dumbarton House Board adopted its current mission statement which states in part that "Emphasis is placed on Joseph Nourse… and his family, and their occupation of the property from 1804 through 1813." The questions resulting from this new focus set in motion the work which has resulted in this report.

The Dumbarton House Board and staff wished to address questions related to how the individual rooms in Dumbarton House would have been furnished during the Nourse family occupancy and what the furnishing choices would have said about the lifestyle and world view of Joseph and Maria Nourse. Modern scholarship in the fields of decorative arts, material culture, archaeology, and architectural history has opened a window into the domestic world of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This work, and the methodologies that derive from it, allow modern house museums like Dumbarton House to address questions not only about what was in the home and how it would have been assembled, but also how the choices reflected the world in which the residents lived. Imaginatively interpreted, an accurately furnished domestic interior allows modern visitors to connect not only to the intimate world of the home but also to the wider world in which it existed. An accurate and well interpreted interior can give visitors a personal connection that makes the past real.

The research that underpins the recommendations found in this report relied upon three types of resources. First, and most important, was the material directly related to Joseph Nourse and his family. Fortunately a wealth of Nourse manuscript documents including extensive family correspondence and significant numbers of Joseph Nourse's private expense accounts survive. For example, room designations were determined based on information contained in Nourse family letters and on the way Joseph Nourse's contemporaries utilized space within their homes. Also considered were a small but important group of objects with a Nourse family provenance. An analysis of the Nourse manuscript materials can be found in Chapter V of this report. Those surviving objects that bear directly on the household furnishings are discussed in the appropriate room sections. A list of Nourse manuscript materials and family objects is attached as an appendix to this report.

Second in significance was a study of early 19th-century Washington, D.C., probate inventories. This portion of the research was shaped by work done by two other area museums. Scholar Barbara G. Carson's work for the Octagon Museum guided the inventory selection process and the inventory database developed by Richard and Barbara Farner as part of the *Gunston Hall Room Use Study* served as the model for the detailed analysis of the inventories selected.

Probate records for the portion of the District of Columbia ceded by the State of Maryland are, for the most part, found in Record Group 21 at the National Archives.[1] The *Inventories and Sales* volumes begin in 1799 and run in apparently unbroken succession through May of 1826. The subsequent volume, which covers the period of June 1826 through March of 1830, is missing, as are various volumes from the decades that follow. Unfortunately, the volumes from the 1840s and 1850s, which might contain probate inventories for Joseph and Maria Nourse and their son Charles, are among the lost. However, an adequate number of inventories from Georgetown and Washington City representing the households of Joseph Nourse's contemporaries survive for a valid study.

Historians have long recognized probate inventories as invaluable tools for analyzing and understanding America's past. Usually taken in the weeks or months following an individual's death, they generally record the personal property, including household furnishings, of the deceased. Taken by court-appointed members of the community, these records represent a frozen moment in the life of a household. Recording everything from the best furniture and textiles to the everyday cooking utensils found in the kitchen, they offer an unparalleled glimpse of the material world at a particular place and time.

Employing them as research tools is not without its problems, however. Among the most difficult issues is deciding how to use them for comparison among a group of households representing differing wealth categories. While the obvious answer might seem to be comparing total values, this exercise can often skew results. Households whose total wealth was found primarily in large holdings of slaves, livestock, or agricultural products might in fact have very little in common with households of similar total value whose assets were derived from fine mahogany furniture, silver, and numerous tablewares and other consumer goods. Fortunately, Barbara G. Carson, in her groundbreaking volume, *Ambitious Appetites: Dining, Behaviour, and*

[1] The probate materials for those sections of the District of Columbia originally located on the Virginia side of the Potomac were returned to those jurisdictions when they were retroceded to Virginia in 1846and were not used in this study.

Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington[2] written to accompany the 1990 Octagon Museum exhibition "The Taste of Power: The Rise of Genteel Dining and Entertaining in Early Washington" realized that there was, for this period at least, another way of categorizing comparable households. Dining practices, and the necessary furnishings associated with dining, had, by the last quarter of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, become social yardsticks by which one could be measured for a place in genteel society.

Carson divided inventories into five categories, based on the numbers and types of dining furniture and tablewares listed. She designated these groups as:

"Simple"—No knives, forks, or spoons were listed, suggesting that the decedent ate with his or her fingers or with utensils of such poor quality as to have no value in the eyes of the appraiser.

"Old-Fashioned"—In these households, spoons were apparently the table utensil of choice. This practice did not, in many households, reflect an inability to purchase knives and forks, but rather a conscious decision to dine in a manner long out of style by even the middle of the 18th century.

"Decent"—Spoons, knives, and forks were found in the furnishings belonging to the decedents in this group, as were a range of assorted other tablewares. However, they owned too few examples to be able to serve large numbers of diners. The presumption here is that only the members of the household and perhaps a few close friends could be accommodated at table. Based on the numbers and quality of tea wares found in this group, it is likely that the tea table represented the social nexus of these households.

"Aspiring"—Entertaining at dinners was a social option for this group. They owned enough tables and chairs, plates, glasses, knives, forks and spoons, and other tablewares to entertain at least a group of ten. Matching sets was not a requirement for inclusion in this group but fashionable descriptors for this group's household furnishings indicated that some effort was made to set a genteel table, with specialized forms indicating a knowledge of table etiquette.

"Elite"—Households in this group could seat and serve twenty or more people at the dinner table. Fashionable dining tables and large sets of chairs were the norm. Storage and serving forms such as sideboards and knife boxes were standard household furnishings.

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[2] (Washington, D.C.: The American Institute of Architects Press, 1990), pp. 30-52. For a detailed discussion of the inventory categories described below, see Chapter 2, "Ways to Take a Meal."

Numerous examples of genteel, elegant tablewares, often described with terms that indicated expense and quality, were included among the wide range of consumer goods listed in these inventories. Both the members of households and their guests were expected to be confident actors in the theater of the dinner table.

Using these criteria, it was possible to assemble a group of inventories predicated upon social usage and lifestyle rather than bottom-line value. Some subjective judgment does come into play using this methodology. Because inventories were rarely taken by the same group of individuals, differences in descriptive language and format must be taken into account. How many is in a "set" of knives and forks? Does a "dozen" knives and forks mean six or twelve of each form? What effect on categorization does a listing for non-specific "glassware" or "china" have on the group into which the decedent is placed? Clearly, this method is not as objective as a strictly value-based grouping. However, knowledge of period social practices and consistency about how various types of objects are handled—i.e., a "dozen" knives and forks is always counted as 12 of each form—allows a cohesive sample to be assembled.

The framework for inventory use for the *Dumbarton House Historic Furnishings Plan* was derived from the work done by Carson, but expanded upon her core sample, which was limited to the years 1818 through 1826. This was particularly important since the period of focus for Dumbarton House is 1800 to 1813. By beginning in 1800, the Dumbarton sample includes the Nourse family's first years in Georgetown, prior to the move to Dumbarton House in 1804. Ultimately, all known recorded D.C. probate inventories between 1800 and 1830 were reviewed in order to select the inventories used for this study. Post-1813 inventories were included as these often reflect the interiors of households assembled at an earlier date. The post-1813 inventories also provided an increased number of room-by-room examples. All inventories designated as Elite were included, as were the most detailed and descriptive of the Aspiring inventories recorded in a room-by-room format. Ultimately, a group of 28 probate inventories was assembled for this study. A list of the inventories used for this study is in Appendix V and transcribed copies of the inventories can be found in the Dumbarton House curatorial files.

One of the stumbling blocks to using even as limited a group of inventories as the 28 pulled together for the Dumbarton House study is the sheer volume of material to be analyzed. Even if one were to choose only a single category of objects, chairs for example, the number of variables to be addressed is huge. How many chairs were there in each of the selected households? Of what woods were they made? Where were they found in the home? Were some chairs part of sets? What was the seat material? What type of finish did they have? What form of chair were they—arm, side, easy, rocking, Windsor? Multiply such questions by the numbers of different types of objects found in an Aspiring or Elite household and the range of discrete pieces of information to be analyzed and shaped into a unified group of recommendations numbers in the hundreds, if not thousands. Fortunately, the advent of the computer database has provided modern scholars with tools to address this problem.

A database program designed for the research phase of the *Gunston Hall Room Use Study* was used for the *Dumbarton House Historic Furnishings Plan*. Using an approach built around a nomenclature incorporating both decorative arts and material culture perspectives, the database was designed to organize information in a way that would facilitate analysis from a house museum point of view. Each object in an inventory and all of its accompanying modifiers—i.e., number, color, wood, etc.—are entered into separate fields of the database. Individual objects are identified by category, subcategory, and type—e.g. category—furniture; sub-category—table; type—dining.[3]

A majority of the inventories selected for analysis in the Dumbarton House project were recorded in what scholars refer to as a room-by-room format. This means that the appraisers clearly moved from room to room recording the furnishings in a specific space before moving to the next area. In the best of all possible worlds the rooms are identified with names that give room usage—e.g., parlor, dining room, passage, etc. In many of the examples, however, the spaces are simply identified with non-usage related designations such as by number—e.g., Room #1, #2, etc.; by color—e.g., blue room, green room, etc.; or by location—e.g., southwest room, north east room. In a few of the inventories, there was no format break between rooms but content analysis allowed for judgment calls on where such room breaks occurred. In those cases, for purposes of analysis, room usage was assigned based on factors such as specific furnishings listed, either individual objects or groupings, the relative values of room contents, or clues found in individual object descriptions. Marked copies of the transcribed inventories with the assumed room usage designations can be found in the Dumbarton House curatorial files.

[3] A copy of the database on CD together with installation and use instructions for the Dumbarton House version, the *Early 19th-century Washington, D.C. Probate Database*, is on file in the curator's office.

Once room divisions for each inventory were determined, the specific furnishing forms found in each type of room were tallied, using both the database printouts and the old-fashioned pencil and paper method. The number of rooms counted for each type of space varied based on the information found in each inventory. For example, some households did not contain a formal dining room, while others lacked secondary family parlor/dining spaces. In one inventory, while the public spaces were identifiable by usage, all the bed chamber furnishings were tabulated together—i.e., all the bedsteads, all the chairs, etc.—making it impossible to determine how many chambers were found in the house and what the distribution of the furnishings was among the sleeping rooms. These types of variation led to a disparity in the number of parlors, dining rooms, passages, etc. used to tabulate the percentage of furnishing forms found with each room. However, in no category of room was the difference felt to be so marked as to invalidate the methodology.

It is important to note that all percentages cited in the report were rounded down to a whole number. Thus, calculations which resulted in a 16.2% finding and those that resulted in a 16.7% finding would both be cited as 16% in the text. While this does mean that the overall totals might not add up to 100%, it was felt that the consistency of treatment would offset the minor discrepancies. Such variations were deemed acceptable as the percentages represented but one component in determining the final recommendations.

The third research area examined the larger context in which the Nourse family home existed. Generally speaking this meant exploring local and regional primary source material such as merchant account books, newspapers, governmental records and personal papers, such the letters and accounts of contemporaries. All of these types of records were explored to some degree. The process was both sped and hampered by the fact that the years of interest—1800 to 1813—represent a very tight time span. This period covered the Nourse family's arrival in Georgetown in 1800, their move into Dumbarton House in the summer of 1804 and their subsequent departure in the summer of 1813. This short time span, coupled with the transient nature of Washington's population from its very earliest years, significantly shrinks the number of surviving primary sources. In the early years of the 19th century, Georgetown and Alexandria, both founded in the mid-18th century, were small though flourishing communities and Washington City barely existed. Mrs. William Thornton, in her diary of 1800, noted that "Went to a shop in New Jersey avenue, to look for some black Chintz. A poor little store—there are too few inhabitants for any business to be carried on extensive."[4] Therein lies much of the problem for modern scholars—fewer inhabitants means fewer original primary sources to begin with and a much smaller rate of survival into the 21st century.

However, a systematic review of primary manuscript sources in the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and Georgetown University did yield some materials of interest. Unfortunately, the April 2007 fire at the Georgetown Library occurred before a comprehensive survey of their collections could be made. Estimates of survival of the collections are projected to be roughly 80%, most of which were placed in frozen storage to lessen the effects of water damage. When conservation is completed on this invaluable collection and it is available to the public again, every effort should be made to investigate these holdings. While the collections had been used on previous occasions for other projects, an investigation focused specifically on resources pertinent to the *Dumbarton House Historic Furnishings Plan* should be undertaken.

Period newspapers for Georgetown, Washington City, and Alexandria were also utilized. Project-related surveys were made of several local newspapers including *The Washington Federalist,*[5] *The Georgetown Independent American,* and *The National Intelligencer,* which was the primary Washington paper of the period. Of particular help were newspaper advertisements already pulled from other regional newspapers for similar projects in the research files of Gadsby's Tavern Museum in Alexandria and Gunston Hall.

The files of these museums also have in-depth collections of primary source materials related to the material culture of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Copies of pertinent materials from their files were made and have been placed in the Dumbarton House curatorial files.

Prints and paintings of household interiors and period objects were also consulted. These types of graphic images provide insight into period furnishing and room use practices, as well as sometimes depicting types of objects that are rare survivals in the 21st century. However, care must be taken when using these sources. Many of the surviving pictures of room interiors depict houses of English or European aristocrats, spaces far removed from the reality of even the most

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[4] Anna Maria Thornton, *Diary,* January 27, 1800, published in *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Vol. 10,* (Washington, D.C., 1907), p. 99.

[5] Intern Lana Housholder surveyed the entire surviving run of *The Washington Federalist* (1800-1809) in the holdings of the Library of Congress. She photocopied advertisements reflecting the range of material goods advertised for sale as well as any reference to members of the Nourse family. These photocopies were then sorted by subject matter and placed in the Dumbarton House research files by interns Melissa Archer and Emily Jennings.

elaborate American interior. Some, like the popular cottage interiors of the late 18th century, were very much the product of the story the artist wished to tell. Paintings by amateurs and school girls, though seeming more straight forward, often copied elements from popular print sources or were constrained by societal expectations of acceptable subject matter.
Trade cards, trade catalogs, and engraved bill heads were intended to be used as marketing tools. Like written records, pictorial sources are the products of the person and the society which produced them. Nevertheless, with such caveats in mind, it is possible to extract useful information about period interiors. Copies of images are included with this report and others have been placed in curatorial files for further study.

The observations in this report about the Nourse family are drawn from both what does and does not survive in the Nourse primary source record. These findings are coupled with information about comparable households gleaned from the *Early 19th-century Washington, D.C. Probate Database* and from contextual materials such as newspaper advertisements, merchant account books, personal papers and even the occasional work of fiction. Taken together, like the scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, this information has created a picture of the Nourse family's life at Dumbarton House in the early years of the 19th century and has guided the recommendations in this report.