

“The Great and Stately Palace”

Inventories of the Estate of John and Elizabeth Tatham

WHEN John Tatham died in Burlington, West New Jersey, in July, 1700, he bequeathed to his wife Elizabeth “all my Estate both real & personal whersoever & whatsoever & to her Heirs & Assigns for ever.” Two months later, on September 26 and 27, an inventory of Tatham’s property was prepared, including the contents of the mansion house, real estate, and outstanding debts. The total evaluation amounted to the very sizable sum of £3,765 18s. 3d.¹

Elizabeth Tatham was not to enjoy her inheritance for long. Being pregnant, and “Drawing near the time of my Delivery, and not knowing how it may please God to dispose of me under my p[re]sent Circumstance,” she, in turn, made her will on October 15, 1700. Her foresight was well taken, for she died in childbirth a week later.

On January 31, 1700/1, the second inventory of the Tatham house within a year was completed. Perhaps because the property was to be divided among her children who were minors, Elizabeth’s inventory was recorded in far greater detail than her husband’s, although both follow much the same pattern. It is interesting that the appraisals in the second inventory were consistently lower, reducing the estate evaluation to £3,407 2s.

The Tatham inventories amply bear out Gabriel Thomas’ 1698 description of the mansion as a “Great and Stately Palace,”² for they list the contents of fourteen rooms, including the garret and cellar, and, through their use of such terms as the “long gallery” and the

¹ See Henry H. Bisbee’s article, “John Tatham, Alias Gray,” in this issue of the *Magazine* for a biographical account of John Tatham of Burlington. The real estate and debts, listed in bulk sums in John’s inventory, are itemized in Elizabeth’s.

² Gabriel Thomas, *An Historical and Geographical Account of the Province and Country of Pensilvania; and of West-New-Jersey in America* (London, 1698), 17–18.

"hall" (or main living room), indicate that the house was certainly modeled on that of a large English estate. There was a parlor and dining room, several bedrooms listed as chambers or lodging rooms, a kitchen and pantry, and a number of closets, which, judged by their contents, must have been large. The "palace" also boasted a separate "nursery," a most unusual feature in a colonial home. When it is realized that the vast majority of houses of that period, particularly in the northern colonies, had only two to six rooms, the pretentiousness of the Tatham mansion can be appreciated.³ Near the house stood outbuildings, of which only the bakehouse and what was apparently a carriage house were inventoried.

Of the two listings, Elizabeth's holds the greater interest because of its detail. Nothing in the house was overlooked. It is quite extraordinary to find that the contents of trunks, and chests, and drawers were itemized—even to the extent of listing a "parcell of decayed Cinnamon (at 8s.), and torn, worn, and motheaten clothing. As another instance of this detail, John Tatham's inventory simply notes "his Library of Bookes" at £50, plus "Bookes large and small bound" at £15, but Elizabeth's inventory includes a shelf listing of her husband's impressive library of more than 550 books—valued, *in toto*, at £30.

To modern eyes, this library evaluation seems very modest. On the other hand, certain other items were appraised at what appear to us surprisingly high figures. Fabric items, for example—clothing, bedding, and table linens—invariably had high evaluations; such values, however, were typical in 1700. One notes that Mrs. Tatham owned "1 rich silk Gowne faced wth blue Velvet & 1 Pettycoat of same Silk richly lac'd with Silver lace," worth £14. Compared to this were "20 Sheep (2 of them being old)," worth £9 10s. Twenty-eight sheets, two of them coarse and three old and ragged, were valued at £12 2s., while a dozen Turkey chairs (Turkey work being a needlework upholstery fabric) in the parlor were appraised at only £7. One silk cradle quilt was appraised at £1 10s., and two large damask tablecloths at £3; a small oval table with drawers, on the

³ Mrs. Martha Gandy Fales of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum was most helpful in pointing out unusual features of the Tatham inventories and in providing specific information on such items as the candlesticks, looking glasses, teapot, and other household goods.

other hand, had a value of but £1 15s., and a pair of brass andirons, £1. In view of the value placed on cloth or "soft" goods, it is not surprising that they were often specifically willed to family and friends.⁴ Furniture, in turn, was generally appraised at higher values than the "hard" goods of fireplace, kitchen, and estate maintenance (tools and farm equipment).

The furnishings of the Tatham mansion were rich. Each room, of course, had its necessary fireplace equipment, and most rooms had carpets. There were four handsome bedsteads, which with their bedding—featherbeds, silk quilts, blankets, pillows and sheets—ranged in price from £10 to £37. These beds had curtains and valances, the curtains hanging from a "head" fastened to the wall and projecting out over the bed like a canopy. The most elegant of the beds is described as having "1 Downbed & bolster 2 pillows wth Cases 1 Sett of Camlet Curtains & double Vallens lin'd with Silk Tester & head lin'd with Silk Vallens below, 1 pr good sheets 1 blankett 1 silk Quilt 1 Callico Quilt, 1 good Sacking bottom bedstead wth large wrought head." Only one bed with posts, "wanting ye sides," is listed, and that at 6s. The parlor and dining room each contained a dozen chairs, and an oval table, one of which was of walnut. Walnut was the prized wood for furniture, mahogany not being used until around 1725. There were also several items made of olive wood, including one "rich Ollave inlaid Table" in the "Lodging Room," evidently the master bedroom.

Most well-appointed houses of the period contained a half-dozen candlesticks; John Tatham owned thirty made of silver, pewter, and brass. His looking glasses, of which he had ten, were valued at from 15s. to £4; the average evaluation in New England in the late 1600's ranged between two and six shillings.⁵ Of special interest is the teapot in the dining room, a very rare item since tea drinking was only just coming into fashion in England at the end of the seventeenth century.

The house furnishings, although fine, were for the most part utilitarian, but it is interesting to note refinements in decoration. The Tathams had flower pots, delftware, "rich needlework Pictures

⁴ Elizabeth Tatham flower "all my wearing Linnen, & all my Best wearing apparrell" to her daughter Elizabeth.

⁵ Martha Gandy Fales, "Looking Glasses Used in America," in Helen Comstock, ed., *The Concise Encyclopedia of American Antiques* (New York, 1958), I, 72-78.

& other pictures," a landscape screen, japanned ware, needlework cushions, a clock and case (in the nursery, interestingly enough), curtains, and, naturally, silverware. Color is mentioned occasionally, especially green, which was popular at the time, but there were also red bed curtains, a yellow "rug" or blanket, and "sad" or drab colored chairs.

Always of interest in inventories are the unexpected items. The Tatham inventories include an apple roaster, a tooth picker, a "close stool" with two pewter pans, a child's "going stool" (the counterpart of today's walker),⁶ silk sweet bags or sachets, a "pockett pencil book with a Silver pencil & clasps," a "Pastboard box wth Wafers" or seals, used on letters and documents, and a "Parcell of Chocolate Balls." Most unusual is the "Church Plate gilt," the Roman Catholic religious items belonging to John Tatham. Although it has been suggested that he had a private chapel in his home,⁷ no indication of this can be found in either inventory. There is no chapel furniture—a *prie-dieu*, for example—which surely would have been noted had it existed.

For travel, the Tathams owned a "Chariott," or small, light carriage, "wth Appurtenances," and a cart with iron-bound wheels, which may have been used either for passengers or, more likely, for hauling. John, at the time of his death, had twenty-two horses and mares, some of which must have been riding horses. Elizabeth's inventory lists blue, red, and green velvet saddles, both men's and women's, two saddles having embroidered holsters, an "ivory handle & silver whalebone whip," stirrups, and pillions. After her husband's death, she apparently sold many of the horses, for her inventory lists only three "drawing" horses, possibly those used for the carriage, and one black colt. Since the Tatham property fronted on the Delaware River, a major highway then as now, John Tatham owned a boat to carry him across to Bucks County where he had real estate interests, and down river to Philadelphia. It was made of

⁶ See Ralph Edwards, *The Dictionary of English Furniture* (London, 1954), I, 24 and 25, for a discussion of "baby-cages" or "going-carts." These items might well have been called "going stools," for they look like stools set upon roller bases. In the February, 1951, issue of *The Magazine Antiques*, 140, a "standing stool" or "go-cart," dated about 1700 and possibly of American origin, is pictured. I am indebted to Mrs. Fales for these references.

⁷ Rev. Thomas C. Middleton, "John and Elizabeth Tatham, of Burlington, N. J., 1681-1700," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society*, VI (1895), 65, 67, 68.

cedar and had a mast and three sails. For minor excursions he used a canoe.

The self-sufficiency of the Tatham estate is clearly evidenced. Carpenter's tools and shoemaker's tools were individually itemized, as were the various kinds of equipment for farming, upholstering, baking, spinning, and sewing (yard goods, as well as thread and trimmings, were noted by amount, description, and price). John's inventory lists a "grinding stone for colours," used, no doubt, in making paints and possibly dyes. Several sets of scales and weights were listed, including one for money, probably used by Tatham in his merchandising. There was also a surgeon's chest with instruments and "phisick" to meet the health needs of the family.

Many items in the inventories, particularly those in the storeroom, were unquestionably part of John Tatham's stock in trade. It does not seem likely that he needed for his own use 25 planes, 34 felling axes, 30 chisels, and 17 muskets and fowling pieces. Twenty-two large Indian hatchets and seventeen "bunches of Indian beads" (wampum) bespeak his trade with the natives. Other items—scythes, hammers, fish lines, nails, a brass blunderbuss, hoes, spades, barrels of tar, cedar shingles, saws, locks and hinges, packthread, chalk, and yard goods of all kinds—may have had both trade and domestic use.

Last, but not least, were the personal belongings of the Tathams, their clothing and jewelry, all carefully listed. John Tatham dressed well, and owned several items indicative of wealth. He had two pendulum watches with chains, silver and gold snuff boxes, a "rich Embroider'd belt wth silver buckles," an "agate haft and Silver hilted sword," silver buttons and shoe buckles, and several rings, including one set with a pearl and two rubies. Elizabeth Tatham must have cut a conspicuous figure in Quaker Burlington in the 1690's. Her apparel was truly elegant—colorful striped and flowered silk, satin, and holland gowns and petticoats, "flowered silk Stayes embroider'd," gold fringe and silver lace; she had a fur tippet or cape, an amber necklace, ivory and tortoise shell combs, and a dozen "gawse" and Alamode hoods and scarves, one enriched with gold flowers. On her dressing table was a "Dressing box being inlaid Olive, wth 2 square and 3 Essence bottles wth silver screws and a good large looking glass." Like their parents, the children were also well dressed.

These notes on the inventories of John and Elizabeth Tatham are designed to highlight some of the features of this significant and fascinating source for the social history of the late seventeenth century. To be sure, the Tathams' way of life was hardly typical of the average American colonist, but their inventories show that the culture and mode of living of the wealthy Englishman had come to America early in the history of the West Jersey-Pennsylvania settlements. The inventories themselves, together with the Tatham wills and other related papers, were published in 1895 in the *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society* and need not be reprinted.⁸ They have not received the attention they merit, however, and in this day of restorations and general interest in the ways of the past, it is worth noting their existence anew.

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania

LOIS V. GIVEN

⁸ Dr. Henry H. Bisbee "rediscovered" the Tatham inventories during his research on John Tatham. The original papers are in Burlington Wills (1700), Office of the Clerk, Superior Court of New Jersey, Trenton. Photostatic copies are in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, together with a new transcription of Elizabeth's house inventory, which corrects a number of misreadings found in the 1895 transcription, and an expanded glossary of terms used in that inventory.