

Welcome to Van Cortlandt House Museum

Note: The house may seem dark to you when you first arrive. This is due to the special shades we use to help protect the items in the rooms and hallways from sunlight which can damage fabrics, wood surfaces, paintings and floor boards even on over-cast, cloudy days. We encourage you to pause for a minute or two in the entrance hall to allow your eyes to adjust. There are green-painted Windsor chairs placed in the hallways throughout the house for use by our guests please feel free to sit in them.

Photographic Policy: You are welcome to take photographs inside Van Cortlandt House for your own personal use. Please use caution when attempting to take “selfies”, especially when using a selfie-stick.

Professional or commercial photographers should contact the Museum before using images of the house or to request special access. Contact information for the museum can be found on our website: www.vchm.org.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/VanCortlandtHouseMuseum>

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When posting to social media please use our hashtag #vchmnyc.

Over -view of the History of the Site

This guide provides a glimpse into the history of the Van Cortlandt family and the lives of three generations who resided within the walls of this house. The history of the family and their house is far too extensive to be contained in these pages. If you have more questions after your tour, please notify the staff and we will do our best to help you.

The story of the Van Cortlandt family in America begins in 1638 when Oloff Stevense Van Cortlandt landed in New Amsterdam. Fifty years later, Oloff was considered the fourth wealthiest man in New York having made his money as a merchant involved in trading, brewing, manufacturing wampum, money lending and shipping. At the close of the 17th century, Jacobus, the youngest of Oloff's seven children, purchased the first piece of land of what would eventually become a large and profitable wheat plantation.

Present-day Van Cortlandt House was built in 1748 by Jacobus' only son Frederick. He chose for his house an English style of architecture adding details to remind him of his forefather's Dutch heritage. The carved grotesque masks set over the windows on the front of the house were added to protect the residents from evil spirits. Sadly, Frederick did not live to see his house completed. After his death, the plantation and milling operations were inherited by his eldest son James.

James Van Cortlandt continued the successful operation of the plantation and mills. Continuing his family's involvement in government, James served at various times as Supervisor of the Precinct of Yonkers and as its Commissioner of Highways. During the Revolutionary War, James served as a member of the Committee of Safety and the Westchester County Militia. He died in 1781 leaving the plantation and mills to his brother Augustus.

Augustus Van Cortlandt lived in lower Manhattan before inheriting his family's plantation and served for 30 years as Clerk of Courts for the City of New York. In the fall of 1776, he received an order from the New York Provisional Congress to secure the city records due to the "alarming state of public affairs". First hiding the records in his back yard, Augustus later moved them to the family's plantation at Little Yonkers. Augustus final hiding place was the family burial vault on a hill north of the house.

During the Revolutionary War, the House and plantation were considered neutral ground with George Washington and British and Hessian officers using it as a temporary Headquarters. In November of 1783 Washington returned to Van Cortlandt House where he stayed the night, before starting his march into New York as the defeated British evacuated.

It is the story of three of these Van Cortlandt men and the history that unfolded during their lives which are portrayed in the interpretation of Van Cortlandt House.

As you begin your tour, please note that the front door of the House faces south. This will help you locate the rooms by name.

The Kitchen remains closed for restoration and reinterpretation.

East Parlor

The most formal room in Van Cortlandt House, the East Parlor would have been the scene of the family's most festive and special entertaining. The highly carved mantelpiece, c. 1760, is the work of two anonymous New York carvers who may have apprenticed or worked as journeymen in London. This decoration is believed to have been added by James Van Cortlandt, eldest son of Frederick, at the time of his marriage. Regardless of the occasion or motivation for the remodeling, it was carried out in the highest fashion of the time.

As the scene for various types of entertainments, the East Parlor would have been filled with beautiful yet versatile furniture. When not in use, card tables and tea tables fold up for placement against the walls, leaving the center of the room open for large gatherings such as a dance.

The portrait to the left of the fireplace is of the third owner of the house, Augustus Van Cortlandt (1728-1823), painted by John Wesley Jarvis, c.1810. Augustus held the important position of Common Clerk of the City of New York between 1751 and 1783, a period of 32 years. It was in this capacity that Augustus, in the late summer of 1775, received a request from the New York Provincial Congress to safeguard the public records of the City of New York. This would not have been an easy order to comply with because he would have been working for the English government at the time. Augustus first hid the records in a cellar under the garden of his city residence near 11 Broadway, but later transferred the records to the family's plantation, then under the ownership of his brother James. To make this risky move

less suspicious, Augustus made the trip to his brother's Lower Yonkers plantation with the excuse of paying a visit to his elderly and somewhat infirm mother. The records were hidden in the burial vault established under the terms of their father Frederick Van Cortlandt's will. The city records remained on the plantation until 1784 when Augustus was ordered to turn them over to the newly appointed clerk of the City and County of New York.

The table beneath the large gilt mirror is a recent gift to Van Cortlandt House Museum. It is a five-legged mahogany card table made in New York c. 1760 and is unusual in that it has 5 legs rather than the 4 usually found on folding card tables. It is this 5th leg that indicates to curators and collectors of antique furniture that the table was indeed made in New York. A gift of Mr. William H. Savage in loving memory of Carolyn Mackie Savage and Carolyn Van Cortlandt Martin, the table has been passed down through several generations of the Van Cortlandt family.

West Parlor

This less-formal parlor would have hosted family meals and casual gatherings. The bright orange and blue paneling is the exact color of the room at the end of the 18th century as determined by microscopic paint analysis. In this less-important room, decoration was achieved with color rather than expensive carving, as in the East Parlor.

The Dutch tall case clock was made in Amsterdam c. 1680 by the clockmaker M. Buys. Most often referred to as a "grandfather clock", this term did not come into popular use until late in the 19th century. These clocks were previously called either "standing clocks," "tall-case clocks," or "hall clocks." But in 1876, a man named Henry Work wrote a song called "Grandfather's Clock", which was one of the most popular songs of the day.

This clock was designed with a number of special features including windows indicating the day of the week, the month, and the phase of the moon. The clock also brings life to the house with its comforting ticking and the cheerful songs played on the hour and half-hour. The clock's movement includes a series of carefully crafted brass bells which are struck by tiny hammers to play each set of tunes. The noises made by the clock are in a code which indicates to listeners the time in 15 minute intervals. For example between the hours of 1:00 and 2:00 the clock will strike in the following pattern: as the hands reach 1:00 o'clock a long song will play followed by 1 ding to indicate the hour; at 1:15 the clock dings one slightly quieter ding; at 1:30 the clock plays a shorter song followed by 2 dongs indicating that it is 1:30 going on 2:00 just in case the listener couldn't tell if the song was a long or short song; and finally at 1:45 the clock dongs one slightly quieter dong. There are 6 different sets of songs that can be changed by the clock keeper. When the clock is in running order, we change the tunes at random intervals so you never know which ones you'll hear.

The Dining Room

After extensive research and painstaking restoration, the Dining Room has been brought back to how it appeared during the ownership of the house by Augustus Van Cortlandt (1728 – 1823) the youngest son of Frederick and third owner. Augustus inherited the house upon the death of his brother James in 1781.

The room as it is seen today represents the height of post-Revolutionary War Federal elegance. The side wall and border papers, found preserved beneath later wall finishes, is a copy of the original French paper manufactured by the firm *Jacquemart y Benard* c. 1820. The earliest wallpaper discovered during the exploratory phase of the restoration project was dated c. 1750 based on George II tax stamps found on the back of the paper. The other major changes to the architectural finishes of the room were removal of the c. 1840 Greek Revival plaster molding and a mantel that research indicated was not original to the room but was given to the National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York in 1896. These features were removed because remnants of the original crown molding and fireplace wall paneling were discovered during restoration of the room. The crown molding was recreated as was 2/3'ds of the fireplace wall paneling. The original paneling is the section to the left of the mantel. You may also notice there is a small area where the ceiling is higher. This shows the original ceiling height. During the c. 1840 renovations to the room, the ceiling was lowered to help visually minimize an east to west slope that developed over the years as the house settled. To restore the entire ceiling to the original height proved to be too great a challenge so the decision was made to show it in this one corner which also revealed the full height of the original paneling.

Furnishings in the Dining Room have also been reinterpreted to represent those which may have been used in the room during Augustus' ownership. Some of these furnishings, Van Cortlandt family objects, were used in the previous interpretation of the Dining Room. The tall chest of drawers between the windows to the right of the room and the knife boxes on the side board are both Van Cortlandt family objects. The table, four of the chairs, and the settee were formerly in storage at the Headquarters of The National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York, quietly waiting restoration and a return to useful life at Van Cortlandt House. The other two chairs were purchased at auction to match. These pieces have all been upholstered in horsehair, a very common textile used on seat furniture in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Second Floor Rooms

East Chamber

N.B. *Also continue through the East Chamber To the Dutch Chamber.*

In the 18th century, celebrations and social gatherings, such as a ball, frequently lasted for more than a single evening. Because of the great difficulty with travel, party guests would have been offered lodging with the host. When offered lodging, most guests, whether due to distance traveled or reluctance to leave a festive party, accepted. The East Chamber has been made ready for visiting guests who have traveled to Van Cortlandt House with an infant child.

The East Chamber is “furnished” or hung with bed and window curtains made from a reproduction of an English, wax resist-dyed fabric which many New Yorkers used in their homes. This style of upholstering a room matching fabric is called “*en suite*” with furniture and curtains created from or covered in a single fabric. This style was very popular in the 18th century. An elaborate display of imported fabric such as this was possible only in the home of a wealthy family.

The William and Mary chest of drawers, in the far corner, and matching dressing table, between the windows, were both made in New England c. 1710. A looking glass usually hung over a dressing table where men and women sat to apply make-up and groom themselves for appearances in polite society.

Dutch Chamber

This room is a representation of a 17th century dwelling in New Amsterdam, the Dutch colony established on Manhattan Island. It was created in 1918 by The National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York from what was originally a 3rd bed chamber.

An all-purpose chamber such as this provided cooking, eating, and sleeping space for a middle-class family. The traditional Dutch nook bed kept parents snug in the top compartment and children warm below by keeping body heat inside. You are welcome to crawl inside the lower compartment to see what it was like to sleep in such close quarters. Some may find it to be a cozy space while others may feel too closed in for comfort. If you’re feeling adventurous, you may climb inside the lower compartment of the nook bed.

- The painted kast, or cabinet was made in the Hudson River Valley c.1700. Only 6 of these painted kasten (plural of kast) are known and each was made for a family of Dutch descent. A similar kast is on exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Kasten were used to store linens and valuable textiles.
- Painted pine bed steps were made in Hindelopen, Holland in the 18th century.
- The painted “priksled” owned by Jacob Hop was used by the child on ice and snow and propelled with short poles resembling ski poles.

West Chamber

This bedchamber, the “best” bedchamber, is the one most likely used by George Washington on his various visits to Van Cortlandt House. Keep in mind, though, that the furnishing and decorations in the room were not here during Washington’s time. The furnishings in this room, and throughout the house, were collected for the museum based on the choices that would have been available to a family such as the Van Cortlandts in the second half of the 18th century and the early years of the 19th century. Furnishings which were known to have been in Van Cortlandt House or were once owned by a member of the family are pointed out in this guidebook.

The West Chamber is furnished with matching bed and window hangings in what is known as a “drapery” style. This style allowed for the curtains at the windows to be drawn up to allow light into the room during the day as needed. The bed was also hung with curtains that could be raised or lowered to help keep the sleeper warmer in winter or for more privacy. While earlier versions of bed hangings were often made of wool or silk, these fabrics were not washable and were often prone to infestations of fleas and bed bugs. By the 18th century bed curtains of wool and silk were replaced with cotton or linen fabrics which could be washed periodically. The hangings in the West Chamber are made up fabric known as chintz which is cotton printed by hand and finished with a light shiny glaze or polish. The pattern of these hangings is from the archives of the Dutch East India Company which was one of the major importers of printed textiles to Europe in the 18th century.

The mahogany knee-hole dressing table, c. 1770, located beneath the mirror descended in the Van Cortlandt Family. It was made in Massachusetts.

The burl walnut chest of drawers to the left of the door is English, c. 1725. It is said to have belonged to Mary Van Cortlandt Horne, a daughter of Frederick Van Cortlandt, who built the house.

Third Floor Rooms

Nursery

For many years it was felt that the nursery had seen the least number of alterations since the house was built in 1748. In the winter of 2001, a closer examination of the room raised many questions surrounding its history. With little evidence beyond the existing wall surfaces, which may date to as late as the early 20th century, these questions may never be answered. The present paint colors were determined through microscopic analysis at several key points in the room. The wood trim exhibited a variety of paint layers with the oldest being the dark blue gray. With few clues as to how or even if the Van Cortlandt family used this space, it was decided to retain the long-standing interpretation of this room as a nursery.

In the 18th century, children seldom participated in the social world of adults. Instead, children were relegated to a room such as this which was used as a sleeping chamber, a playroom and a schoolroom. It is likely that the children ate many meals in the nursery or in the kitchen and did not join their elders in the dining room downstairs.

The dollhouse is one of the earliest known American examples dated c. 1740. It is descended in the Homans family of Boston.

The miniature tea service is earthenware with a Whieldon-type spattered glaze. It was manufactured in Staffordshire, England c. 1760. The service is actually made up of pieces from several sets.

The Unfinished Chamber

This plain, unheated room was most likely used as a storage area and possibly as a sleeping chamber for the enslaved servants who worked in the household. When it was used for sleeping, the chamber was likely furnished with a very simple table and chair and a low bed or a grass mattress placed on the floor.

This room is referred to as the Unfinished Chamber because of the unfinished state of the walls. You can see that the framing of the house was left exposed in this room unlike others in the house which are finished off with plaster or wood paneling. Attic rooms such as this one and the nursery would have been finished off as needed as the family or need for space grew.

Back Outside

The Herb Garden

Most Colonial households kept a small kitchen garden planted with a variety of herbs, vegetables, and flowers for use in the home. Herbs were used both for seasoning food and for medicinal purposes. The formal brick paths and boxwood-lined planting beds of this knot-style garden were laid out in the early 20th century as a display garden for plants which were known to have been used during the Colonial period. You may notice that the Herb Garden is in need of weeding. We are always in search of help to maintain this garden. If you would like to lend a hand, please let the Welcome Center staff know.

- Sage - *salvia officinalis*. Sage is aromatic evergreen shrub-like plant most often associated with the preparation of poultry such as turkey and chicken. Sage leaf has a strong taste that increases when dried. Used sparingly to flavor and aid the digestion of fatty meats, it combines well with strongly flavored foods. Sage leaf tea is an antiseptic nerve and blood tonic. Fresh leaves can be rubbed over teeth to whiten them. Sage can be identified by its long, dusty green, oval-shaped leaf.
- Rue - *Ruta graveolens* 'Blue Beauty'. Rue is an evergreen shrub with yellow summer flowers and deeply divided, bluish aromatic leaves. The bitter leaves, rich in iron and other minerals add a musky tang to food. Medicinally, rue is used as a stimulant, to strengthen capillaries, and has a beneficial antispasmodic action good for treating high blood pressure, epilepsy, and colic. The dried leaf is a powerful insecticide and a germicide for wounds.

Thank-you for visiting Van Cortlandt House Museum - please return this booklet to the Museum Gift Shop or the visitor's service associate.

The information contained in this guide book is available on-line at www.vchm.org