The Governor Bellingham-Cary House

Self-Guided Tour of the First Floor

Welcome to the Governor Bellingham-Cary House. The house is named after some of its notable past residents. In 1659, Governor Richard Bellingham, a colonial governor in the very early years of the Massachusetts colony, built a hunting lodge here when the area was mostly forests surrounded by marshes. Later, it was owned for over 150 years by several generations of the wealthy and well-connected Cary family. Their names were recorded, their stories carefully preserved, and long ago, people decided this house should be preserved to honor them and their contributions to American history. But this place holds so many more stories—stories that weren't always written down or seen as important at the time, but that also deserve to be told.

Some people lived here in comfort, making decisions that shaped the community. Others worked the land, cooked the meals, or cared for the home—often with little choice. Enslaved people labored here. Tenant farmers rented the property and farmed the fields, orchards, and cared for the animals. There were once herds of sheep roaming this area. During the American Revolution, Continental soldiers stayed here and reported to General George Washington himself. The residents of this house witnessed Chelsea's transformation into an urban city, and then, in the 1900s, two massive fires that nearly wiped it out. Before any of them, for thousands of years, Native peoples fished, hunted, and gathered food in these lands.

We offer you this brief guide, pointing out what you will see when walking through the first floor of the house. We hope that it will help you to consider all of the people who lived here, and what their lives might have been like.

KITCHEN

The kitchen is the oldest part of the house. In the 18th century, it was a multi-use workroom. In prosperous homes like this, kitchen labor was typically done by enslaved people, indentured servants, or tenant farmer families. Slavery ended in Massachusetts in 1783. Former slaves often continued similar work for low wages or as indentured servants.

Wood fires were maintained by kitchen workers. These fires heated the room, cooked food, warmed irons for smoothing clothes, and melted tallow for candle making. Water was heated for cooking, cleaning, laundry, and bathing, and had to be carried from a well, as there was no indoor plumbing.

Candle molds: Candles were necessary for light, and were manufactured in the kitchen, using animal fat to create the wax. The cleanest burning fat was that from cattle or wild game. The candle wicks were made of twisted cotton or sometimes linen or hemp.

Spinning wheel: Households spun wool from their own sheep, and cultivated flax and hemp for cloth. There were two types of spinning wheels—one for wool, the other for flax or cotton. Flax/hemp wheels were larger to twist the straight fibers tightly. Wool spun more easily and required a smaller, simpler wheel. Spinning was slow, difficult work to make sufficient thread or yarn to weave cloth for clothing and blankets.

Fireplace, bake oven and reflector oven: Multiple small fires cooked food. The bake oven (beside the fireplace) baked bread and kept food warm. A fire heated the bricks, then the ashes were removed before baking. The reflector oven (inside the fireplace) roasted meat by reflecting heat and catching drippings for soups or sauces. Used from the mid-18th to 19th century.

Snowshoes: Worn for travel over deep snow in the absence of paved roads.

Lanterns: On display are lanterns from the 18th and 19th centuries, using whale oil or tallow candles.

Servant Bells: Bells connected to various rooms allowed family members to summon servants.

WEST PARLOR

The West Parlor served as a space for the Cary family's evening gatherings and for entertaining guests. Typical entertainments included musical recitals on the pianoforte or violin, lively discussions, and readings aloud from books. The family also enjoyed dancing to fiddle music played by Pompey, a servant and formerly enslaved man who had worked for the Cary family in Grenada and later in Chelsea.

Pianoforte: This pianoforte was a wedding gift from Samuel Cary to Sarah Gray Cary in 1772. Crafted in London by renowned instrument maker Adam Beyer, it was a rare and costly item when it was purchased and shipped to the Colonies. Very few of Beyer's instruments still exist today.

Oil Painting: Boy with Flute: This portrait is believed to depict Lucius Cary, son of Samuel and Sarah Cary. Born in 1782 in Grenada, Lucius moved to Chelsea with his family around age nine. Though the artist is unknown, such portraits were common before photography, often including meaningful objects or

backgrounds. Here, the flute symbolizes the family's appreciation for music, while the landscape may represent property or heritage.

Fireplace: This fireplace provided warmth and, unlike the kitchen hearth, was designed to be smaller and more decorative, reflecting the room's social purpose rather than utility.

EAST PARLOR

The East Parlor was traditionally used for morning and afternoon gatherings. Filled with natural light, it was ideal for activities that required clear vision, such as reading and needlework. Wives and daughters of the landowning family often spent time here practicing or learning textile arts like embroidery, needlepoint, and crochet. Girls typically began at a young age by creating samplers—decorative pieces that demonstrated different embroidery stitches. These samplers often included alphabets, Bible verses, poems, or moral sayings, blending artistic skill with education and personal expression.

FRONT STAIRWAY AND HALL

The second floor is currently closed to visitors. Please enjoy a view of the staircase from the front foyer.

Mirror with Gold Leaf Frame: This 18th-century mirror was slightly modified in the 19th century and was donated to the house by the Montague family—descendants of the Cary family—in the early 20th century. The frame underwent extensive conservation in 2008, during which missing elements were reconstructed and the entire surface was re-gilded.

The mirror glass is likely not original to the frame. Clues include its smooth surface and the uniformity of the silvering, which are characteristic of more modern mirrors. Older mirror glass often shows signs of aging, such as dark spots caused by the oxidation of the silver backing—a common issue in early mirror-making.

BACK HALL AND BACK PARLOR (Added 1769)

This room, along with the one directly above it, was added to the house in 1769. Originally used as a back parlor, it may have served as a private kitchen for the Cary family when the home was shared with tenant farmers. Alternatively, it might have been used for tasks requiring fire and water, such as dyeing fabric or making candles. Evidence for these uses can be seen in the fireplace, which includes iron hardware designed to support a heavy pot over the flames.

When the Carys returned to Chelsea in 1791, the main kitchen was shared by both the Cary family and tenant farmers. This room may have offered additional cooking space for the two households. In later years, household servants would have used the back rooms, attic, and rear staircase for both work and living quarters.

This space was not used as a formal dining room until the late 1800s.

STRUCTURE OF THE HOUSE

The hunting lodge built for Governor Bellingham about 1659 had two stories and was shaped like an L. A powerful man in the colony, Bellingham's main house was closer to the center of political power in Boston on what is now Tremont Street, near King's Chapel Burial Ground. He'd bring friends and political leaders here to stay and hunt.

When the Cary family inherited the property in 1765, Captain Cary commissioned the building of the dining room and the room above it. This changed the shape of the house from an L to a square. The exterior of the house would have looked somewhat as it does today.

HOUSE RESIDENTS THROUGH TIME

Governor Richard Bellingham was born in 1592 in Boston, England. A wealthy lawyer, he came to Massachusetts in 1634 and served as governor several times before his death in 1672. Known for his strict views, Bellingham owned land in what is now Chelsea and used this house as a hunting lodge. At that time, the area was heavily forested and marshy—ideal for hunting and fishing.

After his death, Bellingham left most of his land and wealth in a trust to support churches and train ministers. His family challenged this in court for over 100 years. In 1769, the Cary family inherited the land, which included a farm, two houses, and several outbuildings.

Samuel Cary Jr. married Sarah Gray in 1772 and made the house their home. Hoping to build wealth, Samuel became a merchant and managed sugar plantations in Grenada. After their first child was born, he returned to Grenada, and Sarah joined him the next year, leaving their baby in Chelsea with her mother. They lived in Grenada for 18 years, returning in 1791. During that time, they stayed out of the American Revolution, likely to protect their business interests.

The Carys were involved in the Triangular Trade, a global system that traded goods and enslaved people between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. On their plantations in Grenada, enslaved people endured brutal, often deadly conditions while harvesting sugar.

One of the enslaved people of the Cary family was Fanny Fairweather, taken from Africa at the age of six. She worked in the Cary household in Grenada, along with Charlotte and Pompey. When the family returned to Chelsea, all three came with them. Slavery had been abolished in Massachusetts in 1783, so they were technically free—but opportunities were limited, and they likely continued similar household work. Pompey later married, lived in Medford, worked as a carriage driver, and played fiddle music the Cary children loved. Around 1796, while living in Grenada, Pompey discovered that Samuel Cary had been captured by pirates. He traveled back to Chelsea to alert Sarah. Samuel was eventually freed, and he never returned to the West Indies.

In 1795, after the Carys had already left Grenada, a revolution of the enslaved people broke out there. Many people were killed, plantations were destroyed, and the Cary estate was badly damaged. Samuel never recovered financially. Back in Chelsea, he focused on improving the property — overseeing interior renovations, planting rows of fruit trees on terraces, and draining marshland. Some of the labor for these improvements likely came from formerly enslaved servants who had worked for the family in Grenada.

Samuel and Sarah had 13 children who lived to adulthood. Though not poor, the family struggled financially. Samuel never made a strong profit from the farm, and money concerns followed him into old age.

In 1851, the Cary children sold most of the land—keeping only the house and one acre—to the Cary Improvement Company. The land was divided into small lots as Boston's suburbs began to grow.

In 1912, this house was purchased from Cary descendants by a local non-profit. It opened to the public for tours on Thanksgiving Day that same year.