

# Docent Dispatch

November 2018



## A snapshot of the 1750s: Carlyle and Washington from 1754-1759

Lee Rodrigues 10/5/2018

Hello, Carlyle House! Some of you have been seeing a lot more of me recently, and I thought I'd take the opportunity to give you an update on the exciting project I am working on with our curator, Kerry Mitchell.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Lee Rodrigues. I've been a supervisor at Carlyle House for four years this month, and have been engaged in Alexandria history and archaeology for much longer. If you volunteer with us on weekends, you've probably run into me.

Since late August, I have been going through the digitized papers of George Washington, starting in 1754 and going through to his death. If you're interested in perusing them yourselves, they are publicly available, along with others, at <https://founders.archives.gov/>. The objective of the project is to locate every direct reference to John Carlyle or his immediate family in Washington's papers. I'm compiling all of these references with links and brief synopses, and once it is all done there will be a binder in the

docent lounge with every relevant letter I have found as a resource for you to use and peruse.

So far, I've gone from 1754 to February of 1760. Out of 1900 letters, orderly book pages, and diary entries so far, John Carlyle or his wife, Sarah, have been named in 128 of them. The first 97, from 1754-1757, almost all deal with the French and Indian War and Washington's desperate need for supplies from Carlyle, his commissary for some (though not all) of this time.

Reading through the letters, it becomes apparent that John Carlyle is a canny merchant first, loyal soldier second. Scores of exchanges involve Washington complaining about the lack of supplies, delays in shipments, poor quality of goods, and excessive prices. At first John Carlyle shifts the blame for these problems to his subordinates. When that stops working, he begins to insist that he needs payment before continuing supply shipments. At a point undisclosed in the letters, Carlyle resigns as commissary, leaving Washington and the Virginia Militia stationed at the front in a lurch.

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#### CARLYLE HOUSE

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The strength of Washington and Carlyle's friendship is reflected in their continued warm correspondence after John leaves George in that tough spot. A new commissary is appointed, but Washington doesn't like the man and ask Governor Dinwiddie to re-appoint Carlyle. Diniwddie's venom cuts to the quick. "You recommend Messrs Carlyle & Ramsay to be Commissaries in the room of Mr Walker, which I by no means approve of—the first resign'd when formerly appointed, & when most wanted, I do not incline to give him that Opportunity again; the other I doubt not is a Gentleman of Capacity, but a Stranger to the Business, & not sufficiently acquainted with the People to make Purchases, therefore not eligible." Washington then schemes to have John Carlyle and William Ramsay named co-commissaries. The letters reveal that Ramsay is appointed, but no clarification as to whether Carlyle regains his title or simply is used by Ramsay for fulfilling commissions.

Outside of this, John Carlyle is apparently not only a friend of George Washington's but quite close with the family. John Carlyle is closely involved with the settling of Lawrence Washington's estate, takes care of his personal purchases and orders from England, and keeps George apprised of the gossip back home. The two of them meet up frequently when George is back from the front, with George Washington spending the night at Carlyle House on occasion after services at Christ Church, or when weather is especially foul.

This research, in addition to answers questions about the relationship between Carlyle and Washington, has also raised a few questions about John Carlyle's life. One in particular comes to

mind: In 1758, John Carlyle had a ward named Hannah Guley. He and William Ramsay negotiated her marriage to Charles Eskridge of Fairfax County on December 20 of that year. I've seen no other references to Hannah Guley in the material, nor heard of her at all before starting this project. Just who was she? And how did she come to be John Carlyle's ward? This seems like a perfect topic for another intrepid researcher among the Carlyle House ranks to take on.

As I continue with this process, I am sure many more questions will be answered, and perhaps a few more mysteries will be revealed. Look for periodic updates in the coming months as this research continues.

1. 1756\_12\_15 To George Washington from Robert Dinwiddie
2. 1754\_12\_10 I
3. 1754\_10\_23 Invoice, and others
- 4.
5. 1757\_05\_06 To George Washington from William Fairfax, and others
- 6.
7. 1760\_02\_15 Diary entry, and others
- 8.
9. 1758\_08\_23 To George Washington from John Kirkpatrick

