



# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

### ***John Carlyle and the Founding of the Presbyterian Meeting House***

*By Rosemary Maloney*

#### **Early Protestant Worship in Virginia**

During the 1700s in Virginia, the Anglican Church was the established church. Presbyterians and other Protestant dissenters were subject to rules regulating their worship services. They could meet only on certain days and in certain designated places called meeting houses, and could not meet at night. During meetings, doors had to remain open at all times and in all weather. The Alexandria Presbyterians met in the Assembly Hall located on the northeast corner of Market Square, at the junction of Fairfax and Cameron Streets. An historic plaque on the brick wall on the Fairfax Street side marks that location.



*The Meeting House Today. This image of the Meeting House was drawn by Betty Heiby, a member of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House congregation, in 1974.*

#### **Rev. William Thom is Called to Alexandria**

William Thom (1750-1773) began his career in 1771 as a Presbyterian part-time “supply” minister to pulpits in Pennsylvania and the Shenandoah Valley. Such service was a common practice in the Presbyterian Church at that time for trained preachers who were serving a

probationary period. The Alexandria Presbyterians, who had been served by part-time supply ministers for more than a decade, invited William Thom to be their

permanent minister. In December 1772, Thom was ordained by the Presbytery of Donegal, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The Alexandria Presbyterians were represented at the ordination by Richard Arell, a property owner in the City of Alexandria.

#### **Acquiring the Land**

On July 12, 1773, parts of Lots 90 and 91 in Alexandria owned by Richard Arell and his wife Eleanor were sold to Rev. Thom for the sum of one shilling Sterling. The deed, witnessed by John Carlyle and William Ramsay, designated that Thom and his successors would preach “in the Presbyterian Church to be built and erected on the land.” The property referred to is located between Fairfax and Royal Streets next to Lots 82 and 83 of the original survey, within easy walking distance of Carlyle House.

Rev. Thom’s promising career in Alexandria, which had begun when he was only 22, ended abruptly at age 23, on August 8, 1773, less than a month after the sale of Lots 90 and 91. The young minister died of smallpox as did his widowed mother, Mary Thom, who had accompanied him to

**CARLYLE HOUSE**  
*Sarah Coster, Site Administrator*  
*Helen Wirka, Site Specialist*  
*Lacey Villiva, Education Assistant*



Alexandria. But Rev. Thom’s connection to the congregation did not end with his death. In his will, for which William Ramsay was co-executor, he left £60 to the Presbyterian community. John Carlyle witnessed Thom’s will and, with William Ramsay and others, posted bond for the administration of Thom’s estate.

### Building the Meeting House

With Rev. Thom’s bequest and contributions by the Presbyterians and Alexandrians of other denominations it was now possible to start construction of a permanent meeting house.

*The Maryland Gazette* of May 11, 1775, published a notice dated “Alexandria, April 11, 1775,” in which John Carlyle and William Ramsay sought bids to begin construction:

To be let to the lowest undertaker, the building of a brick church (in Alexandria, on Thursday the first day of June next) of the following dimensions: sixty foot by fifty foot, and twenty-eight foot pitch. A plan may be seen, and the terms of payment made known, by application to

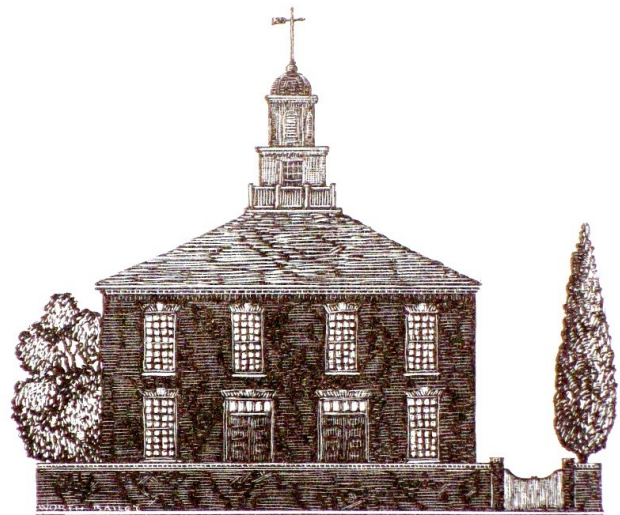
JOHN CARLYLE

WILLIAM RAMSAY

The architectural style of the Meeting House is the “plain style” associated with Protestant places of worship in early America. The original building was a two-story structure with walls 26 feet high, a hipped roof, and a cupola with a bell from a London foundry. The only bell in Alexandria, it called worshippers to service and served as a town alarm. The Meeting House had basically the same dimensions, 60 feet by 50 feet, as Christ Church in Alexandria, and Falls Church and Pohick Church in Fairfax County. The entrance doors faced Fairfax Street, with possibly other doors on the south side of the building. The pulpit was probably on the north side near the Fairfax Street entrance. Enclosed pews and benches with backs and arms provided seating for the congregation. Several of the original benches, sold to the Alexandria Masons in 1789, are in the Replica

Lodge Room in the George Washington Masonic Memorial on King Street.

After Rev. Thom’s death the congregation relied on part-time preachers until the spring of 1780. In March 1780 the congregation called the Rev. Isaac Stockton Keith (1755-1813), who had previously preached in Alexandria, to serve as their pastor, which he did until 1788. Although Rev. Keith was the Presbyterian minister at the time of John Carlyle’s death in the fall of 1780, his part in Carlyle’s funeral is unknown.



*The Presbyterian Meeting House Known to John Carlyle. This image of the Meeting House was drawn by the architectural historian Worth Bailey for Gay Montague Moore’s Seaport in Virginia: George Washington’s Alexandria (1949).*

### A Few Words About William Ramsay

William Ramsay, also directly involved in the creation of the Meeting House, was of Scottish origin and, like John Carlyle, was a merchant, a Presbyterian, and a founder of the City of Alexandria. He purchased Lots 46 and 47, bordered by King Street and Fairfax Street, next to the Carlyle property. To secure title to the land Ramsay immediately put a structure on Lot 47. The Alexandria Visitors Center now at that location is a reconstruction. When Ramsay died on February 10, 1785, his obituary in *The Virginia Journal and Alexandria Advertiser*



stated that he was interred in “the Episcopal Church-Yard,” rather than in the Presbyterian burial ground.

### The Burial Ground

There is evidence that burials of Presbyterians occurred on Lots 90 and 91 prior to the sale of that property in 1773. After John Carlyle’s first wife, Sarah Fairfax, died in 1765, she was buried there near the five children who predeceased her. Carlyle wrote a tender epitaph that presumably was carved on her tombstone, but any inscription is no longer legible. Carlyle’s will of April 1780 directed that he be buried alongside Sarah and their children. The tombstones of John and Sarah Carlyle lie next to each other today. Another early burial was that of Rev. William Thom and his mother, who died within days of each other in 1773. At least 300 individuals were interred in the burial ground, according to church records, but only 40 markers exist today. Shortly after 1804 the congregation established the Presbyterian Cemetery west of South Washington Street and no longer used the Meeting House burial ground.

in the West Family Cemetery, near today’s Eisenhower Avenue. George William Carlyle, the only surviving child of John Carlyle and Sybil West, died in South Carolina in September 1781 in the Battle of Eutaw Springs and probably was buried at the battle site, as were others who died there.

### The 1835 Fire: Destruction and Rebuilding

The Meeting House was damaged over the years by sudden and violent summer storms, a hurricane, and most notably the devastating fire of 1835. On Sunday afternoon, July 26, 1835, just after a rainstorm, a lightning bolt hit the Meeting House. In less than two hours a raging fire destroyed everything but the walls. When the Meeting House was rebuilt in 1837 it retained the same configuration as the original structure.

Known today as the Old Presbyterian Meeting House, the structure serves an active congregation that is a vital part of the town John Carlyle founded more than 250 years ago.



*John Carlyle’s tombstone at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House. A plaque added in the 20th century to reidentify the stone.*

Sybil West, John Carlyle’s second wife, and at least one of their children, are believed to have been buried

Dr. Donald C. Dahmann, Historian of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House, generously contributed time and material to this article. A much fuller history of the Meeting House and the Burial Ground can be found at [opmh.org](http://opmh.org).