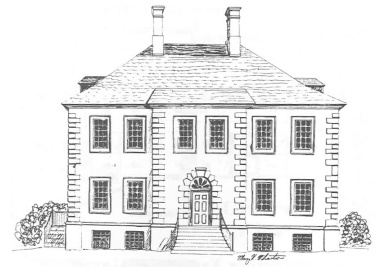


Carlyle Connection

“It’s a fine beginning.”



Sarah Carlyle Herbert’s Elusive Spinet -

The Washington Connection

By Richard Klingenmaier

“My Sally is just beginning her Spinnet”

John Carlyle, 1766 (1)

Of the furnishings known or believed to have been in John Carlyle’s house in Alexandria, Virginia, none is more fascinating than Sarah Carlyle Herbert’s elusive spinet. Research confirms that, indeed, Sarah owned a spinet, that it was present in the Carlyle House both before and after her marriage to William Herbert and probably, that it remained there throughout her long life.

& Co... for Miss Patsy”, dated October 12, 1761, George Washington requested: “1 Very good Spinit (sic) to be made by Mr. Plinius, Harpsichord Maker in South Audley Street Grosvenor Square.” (2) Although surviving accounts do not indicate when that spinet actually arrived at Mount Vernon, it would have been there by 1765 when Washington hired John Stadler, a German born “Musick Professor” to provide Mrs. Washington and her two children singing and music lessons. Patsy was to learn to play the spinet, and her brother Jacky “the fiddle.” Entries in Washington’s diary show that Stadler regularly visited Mount Vernon for the next six years, clear testimony of the respect shown for his services by the Washington family. (3) As tutor Philip Vickers Fithian of Nomini Hall would later write of Stadler, “...his entire good-Nature, Cheerfulness, Simplicity & Skill in Music have fixed him firm in my esteem.” (4)



The story of Sarah Carlyle Herbert’s spinet actually begins at Mount Vernon shortly after George Washington married Martha Dandridge Custis in January of 1759.

“Sally is Learning the Spinet...”

Washington’s diaries and account books reveal that he was soon purchasing toys, clothing, and other personal items from Robert Cary & Company in London for his new family, especially for his step daughter Martha “Patsy” Custis.

On an “Invoice of Sundry’s to be Shipd by Robert Cary Esq.

Beginning in 1766, Sarah (“Sally”) Carlyle, eldest daughter of wealthy Alexandria merchant John Carlyle and childhood friend of Patsy Custis, joined the two Custis children for singing and music lessons at the invitation of George Washington. On August 1, 1766, John Carlyle wrote to his brother George: “My Sally is just beginning her Spinnet (sic) - She sings prettyly (sic)...” In a subsequent letter dated October 16, 1766, John Carlyle further related to his brother: “...Sally is Learning the Spinet - She meets the Master at Col Washington's abt 8 miles of [off] where he Attends the Cols Two Childrun (sic) & he is So kind as to Let Sally Stay Two days...” (5) Washington’s diaries reveal that Sally’s presence at Mount Vernon frequently coincided with John Stadler’s visits. For example, in July 1769, Washington notes: “Sally Carlyle came in the afternoon” ...“Mr. Stadler here.” (6)

When John Carlyle purchased a spinet for his daughter Sally is not recorded. We can assume the spinet was in the Carlyle house by the time she began her lessons at Mount Vernon. In her letter to her uncle George Carlyle dated August 25, 1769, Sally asked her uncle to purchase "... some agreeable tunes I can Learn myself," strongly suggesting that she already had an instrument in her home on which to play them. Her further comment that "My papa only intends to keep me with the Master [Stadler] this season" also supports this suggestion. (7)

While it is generally assumed that John Carlyle purchased the spinet for his daughter Sally, it is quite possible that the instrument was already in her parents' house. It may have initially belonged to either her mother Sally Fairfax Carlyle or her stepmother Sybil West Carlyle, possibly brought to the house at the time one of them married John Carlyle. Both women came from genteel families where their educations would have emphasized domestic arts, religion, dancing, and most likely, training on a musical instrument. As 19 year old Eliza Lucas (Pinckney) of South Carolina wrote to her father in 1742, she would "...endeavor to make myself mistress of the harpsichord." (8) In reality, "A very tight self regulation of activity in the name of 'maintaining reputation' limited musical options for women..." to harpsichords, piano fortes, and spinets. Many wealthy women owned these instruments on which they practiced and performed for family and friends. (9)

Sarah "Sally" Carlyle married William Herbert, a prominent merchant and banker in Alexandria, probably in late 1774. The exact date of Sally's marriage remains unclear. It has been variously reported to have been in 1775 or 1777. Although Martha Washington refers to her as "Mrs." Herbert in a letter dated Cambridge, Massachusetts, December 30, 1775, it would appear a more plausible date for her marriage was sometime in 1774. (10) The birth of her eldest son, John Carlyle Herbert, took place on August 16, 1775 suggesting that conception most likely occurred in late 1774, presumably after her marriage. (11) She most likely took her spinet to her new home at the time of her marriage, since it does not appear in John Carlyle's estate inventory taken six years later. Sometime shortly after her father's passing in 1780 Sarah, her husband, and their children moved into her father's former house. We can only assume that her spinet once again found a prominent place in the parlor, dining room, or passage.

On April 6, 1789, George Washington left Mount Vernon for his presidential inauguration in New York City. His wife Martha would follow a month later along with her two grandchildren, Eleanor Parke "Nelly" Custis and George Washington Parke "Wash" Custis. The accompanying wagon contained only baggage; any furniture was to be shipped separately by water. This included Patsy's "old Spinet," now for use by Martha's granddaughter Nelly.

Nelly's spinet would arrive in New York in early May, and almost immediately Washington had it sent to an "Instrument Maker" for evaluation, possibly due to its age. (12) Washington's account book for May 9, 1789 notes a charge of "1/1/4" [one pound, one shilling, four pence] ... for drayage of a Spinnett (sic) from Mr. Bowen's Store to the Instrument Makers..." On June 30, 1789, Washington's accounts show a payment to a "Mr. Dodd for a Piano Forte for Miss Nelly Custis, 16 Guineas, 4 Guineas being allowed for an old Spinnett (sic)..." (13) Martha Washington was to write to her niece, Fanny Bassett Washington, that summer: "Nelly shall begin Musick next week." (14)

In late 1790, the United States Capital was moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1792, Washington placed an order for a harpsichord for Nelly with a London firm, "Longman & Broderip, musical instrument makers, No. 26 Cheapside, and No. 13 Haymarket, London." The order specified a "top-of-line double - manual instrument." (15) A subsequent shipping bill dated September 30, 1793, recorded the arrival in Philadelphia "...from London on board the ship George Barelay, John Collet master, one case containing a harpsichord to be delivered to His Excellency General George Washington, President of the United States." (16)

Upon conclusion of George Washington's second term as President in March 1797, the Washington family returned to Mount Vernon. Nelly's harpsichord would arrive at Mount Vernon and find a place in the "Common Parlour" [called the small parlor today]. Nelly would write enthusiastically to a friend, "When my harpsichord comes, I shall practice a great deal." (17)

During the nearly eight years the Washingtons were away from their plantation home during Washington's presidency, Martha corresponded frequently with her niece, Fanny Bassett Washington (Lear), who was living at Mount Vernon. Among Fanny's duties were to oversee the



*Nelly Custis' Harpsichord
In the "Common Parlour", Mount Vernon*

servants in the mansion as well as to ensure the house was ready for the Washington family when they returned for vacation visits. One of those family visits occurred in September of 1793.

In the late summer of 1793, the City of Philadelphia experienced a yellow fever epidemic of devastating magnitude. The "malignant fever" was to kill nearly 5,000 of the city's estimated 55,000 citizens. The Federal government essentially shut down, officials seeking sanctuary in nearby Germantown. Many simply went home. The fever raged until October when frost checked its progress by killing the mosquitos responsible for spreading the disease. Coincidentally, on September 17th of that year President Washington had been scheduled to attend the laying of the cornerstone for the new capitol building in what was to be Washington City on the Potomac River. (18) Sarah's husband, William Herbert, would also participate in the ceremony. Rather than evacuating his family to Germantown during his absence, Washington, at Martha's insistence, chose to bring them with him to Mount Vernon for approximately a month and a half, or until Congress's scheduled return to the Capitol on November 1st.

Since no furnishings were transported to Virginia for this short stay, it appears Martha Washington suggested the loan of a musical instrument for Nelly's use as well as for the family's entertainment during the visit. She knew that her longtime friend "Mrs. Herbert," residing in nearby Alexandria, had such an instrument. It was likely the very one Sarah had learned to play at home while taking

lessons at Mount Vernon with Martha's daughter Patsy nearly thirty years earlier.

In a letter to Fanny Bassett Washington dated Philadelphia, June 15, 1794, Martha Washington wrote: "My dear Fanny, if Mrs. Herbert's spinnett (sic) is not sent home - I beg you will have it carefully (sent) up in the Boat...with many thanks to her for the loan of it - I hope it is not got any injury staying in our house this winter..." (19) The date of this letter and the clear reference to the winter of 1793 - 1794 can only mean that the spinet was "borrowed" specifically for the Washington family's visit to Mount Vernon the previous September. Most importantly, Martha's letter confirms the continuing existence of Sarah's spinet twenty years after her marriage to William Herbert, as well as its return to Sarah's home on North Fairfax street in the summer of 1794.

Correspondence between Sarah and her daughter, Margaret Herbert "Peggy" Fairfax in April 1805, suggests the extent of formal entertainment in the Herbert household during the years of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. (20) On April 8th, Sarah wrote to Peggy: "Wee (sic) had four large dinner parties & evening entertainment." 21 Sarah's spinet very likely played a role in those "evening entertainments." Perhaps it was one of Sarah's three unmarried daughters, still residing in the family home, who now entertained guests on her mother's old spinet.

Sarah's health deteriorated in the years following her husband's death in 1818, no doubt limiting her participation in Alexandria's social life. Indeed, family correspondence indicates she ventured out of her house less frequently as the years went by. Unfortunately, those excursions too came to a sudden end in 1827. As the *Alexandria Gazette* reported in early August: "Departed this life suddenly, on Friday night the 26th of July, Mrs. Sarah Herbert, relict of the late Wm. Herbert, Esq., of this town." (22) Sarah was seventy years old.

Epilogue

To date, neither William nor Sarah Herbert's estate inventories of furnishings in the Fairfax street house have come to light. Surviving family correspondence makes no mention of Sarah's spinet during the years following its return to the Herbert home in 1794 from Mount Vernon.

While the spinet most likely remained in Sarah's house until her passing, its presence there in 1827 is yet to be confirmed.

Source Notes:

- 1 Carlyle, John F. The Personal and Family Correspondence of Col. John Carlyle of Alexandria, Virginia, Birmingham, England, March 2011.
- 2 "The George Washington Papers 1741-1799, Series 5, Financial Papers, Account Book 1". The Library of Congress. Note: The spinet maker was actually Rutgerus ("Roger") Plenus, [worked 1741-1772?] who lived in South Audley Street with "ye Kings Arms being over the Door." An auction advertisement for one of his musical instruments stated: "...made by the famous Rutgerus Plenus." He was also the first to make a pianoforte in England. [See: British History Online - Industries: Musical Instruments.]
- 3 Jackson, Donald. Ed. Diaries of George Washington, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1976.
- 4 Farish, Hunter Dickinson, Ed. Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor. The University Press of Virginia, 1978.
- 5 Carlyle, John F.
- 6 Jackson, Donald.
- 7 Carlyle, John F.
- 8 Pinckney, Elise. Ed. The Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney 1739-1762. The South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, 1972.
- 9 Hildebrand, David. "The Colonial Music Institute - Bring History to Life Through Music." Online.
- 10 Carlyle House Archives, Alexandria, Virginia.
- 11 Maryland State Archives, "John Carlyle Herbert." Online.
- 12 Decatur, Stephen Jr. The Personal Affairs of George Washington - From the Records and Accounts of Tobias Lear, Esquire, his Secretary. Boston, 1933.
- 13 Decatur, Stephen Jr.
- 14 Fields, Joseph E. Worthy Partners - The Papers of Martha Washington. Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1994.
- 15 "Pooya Redbon Fortepiano Collection - Longman & Broderip Harpsichord Which Belonged to George Washington." Online.
- 16 "Shipping Bill for a harpsichord signed by Bartholomew Dandridge, Jr, 1793." The National Library for the Study of George Washington at Mount Vernon.

17 Letter: Bequest of Esther Lewis, 1859. Mount Vernon Ladies Association. The National Library for the Study of George Washington at Mount Vernon.

18 Fitzpatrick, John C. Ed. The Writings of George Washington 1741-1799. Library of Congress.

19 Fields, Joseph E.

20 Carlyle House Museum Archives. "Letters From the Old Carlyle House—Sarah Carlyle Herbert" File.

21 Carlyle House Museum Archives.

22 *The Alexandria Gazette*, August 17, 1827.

News from the Educator

For March and April, 228 students participated in school programs. Recently, Lee and I reworked the Road to Revolution school program which has not been offered for quite some time. It focuses on the causes that led up to the Revolutionary War and how the decisions made during that time impacted Colonists. We had our first run through in April and we will have a second test run in August to ensure that we work out any kinks. Once it is finalized, we will again offer it as a school tour option.

In lieu of summer camp this year, we will focus on a few programs for children. The first starts in July. We partner with Alexandria Public Library for Read, See, Do!; a reading program paired with a craft that revolves around historic themes tied in with Carlyle House. In August, will see the return of the Hands On History Tent, this year with a Nautical theme. And in September, we will have a Crafts at Carlyle program, which coincides with the King Street Art Festival. We will set up a tent for children to come in and paint their own designs on floorcloth to take home.

We also had three group tours in March and April, with several more scheduled in the upcoming months. The docent calendar here at the site has been placed completely online, allowing docents to view and edit the calendar from anywhere.



~Allie Kelley

News from the Site Specialist

In December, I was promoted from Educator to Site Specialist. I've been enjoying the new responsibilities and helping Allie settle into the Curator of Education position. We've had a busy winter and spring.

We hosted a Scottish Walk Open House on December 3 with 346 visitors. The following week, we again partnered with Gadsby's and Lee-Fendall for Candlelight Tours, entertaining approximately 650 people. February was also a busy month. On the 4th we celebrated John Carlyle's birthday with 339 guests who braved the chilly weather to enjoy living historians and birthday cookies. The next Saturday we hosted our Civil War open house: Love and Romance between the Lines. This was the best attended program outside of the Candlelight Tours, with over 600 people touring the grounds and 370 through the house. We had living historians inside the house and fife and drum players outside. Dolci Gelati provided hot chocolate.

The St. Patrick's Day Parade Open House took place on March 4th. 169 people visited the house on this chilly day. On April 8th we hosted the annual Braddock Day for over 800 people on the grounds and 345 in the mansion. The weather was perfect and our living historians were great as usual. Our next two events are both teas. Our annual Mother's Day tea is on May 14th with seatings at 12pm and 2:30pm. In June, we will host our Mercy Street inspired tea: the Espionage Tea on June 25th at 2:30pm.

In between programs, we have completed a lot of collections work, and have more projects planned for the summer. All of our loans pertaining to the Civil War exhibit were updated in January. Allie and I spent a day cleaning and reorganizing collections storage. Kayla came back to rehouse the architecture collection, and Lee is finishing the rest of that project. Lee also finished digitizing accession files. In addition to the annual NOVA Parks inventory, we will rehouse some of the collection. We used money donated to us in memory of Dorothy Claypool to purchase new storage boxes for this project. ~Kerry Mitchell

Upcoming Events



Attics & Alleys

Every Saturday morning in May

This walking tour explores rarely seen spaces in Lee-Fendall House, Gadsby's Tavern, the Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Museum, and Carlyle House. Reservations are required. For information and tickets, please contact Gadsby's Tavern Museum at 703.746.4242. \$35

Mothers' Day Tea

Sunday, May 14th, Seatings at 12:00 p.m.; 2:30 p.m.

Treat that special woman in your life to an elegant afternoon tea on our Magnolia Terrace. \$40/adult; \$20/child (5-13). Visit novaparks.com to reserve your seat. Sorry, it just sold out!

Friends Annual Meeting

Friday, June 2; 6:00 p.m.

Join us on the Magnolia Terrace for refreshments followed by the annual business meeting. Please call the office or email carlyle@nvrpa.org to RSVP.

Espionage Tea

Saturday, June 25; 2:30 p.m.

Discover your inner spy at a special Espionage Tea. Are you as clever and talented as Frank Stringfellow, a real Confederate spy featured on PBS' drama, *Mercy Street*? Visit novaparks.com to reserve your seat.

Read, See, Do!

Mondays in July, 2:00 p.m.

Carlyle House and Alexandria Library are teaming up on a reading program paired with an activity. The books have a historic theme and can be tied in with Carlyle House.

Hands on History Tent

Saturday, August 5 & Sunday August 6; 10:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Join us for a nautically-themed day of fun!

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*Carlyle House Historic Park is accredited by
the American Alliance of Museums.*



News from the Site Manager

I am thrilled to introduce you to our new museum team. As you saw from the other columns, we promoted Kerry Mitchell from Curator of Education to Site Specialist (Curator). She was already doing an amazing job as the Educator, then beat out over 200 candidates for the Site Specialist position. We lucked out when Allie Kelley agreed to join us as Educator. She has a sterling resume, with curatorial experience in addition to her skills as an educator. Kerry and Allie have already made great strides in updating and simplifying our procedures, record keeping, and a host of other issues. They are a dynamic duo!

We had a very interesting Garden Day this year. Long story short, it poured for most of the day. The plant and white elephant sales were safely ensconced under the tent on the Magnolia Terrace, where visitors exiting the museum were a ready audience, but the book and bake sales were under small tents in the front yard. Due to the wind, the smaller tents did not offer the books the best protection from the rain, so we were forced to close down the book sale early. All of the musicians, except for the Irish Breakfast Band who performed on the rear terrace, had to cancel. Despite the weather, the event grossed about \$2700. We don't have the net number yet.

As many of you know, NOVA Parks also owns Cameron Run Regional Park on Eisenhower Avenue. The park includes a waterpark, batting cages, mini golf, and a host of other activities. Cameron Run generates more revenue than most of NOVA Parks' other parks, and provides funding for all of the parks in the system, including Carlyle House. The City is currently reviewing whether or not to extend the NOVA Parks lease on this property. If you would like to learn more and/or voice your opinion, please see the City's summary and survey on the topic: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/recreation/info/default.aspx?id=96029>.

Keep an eye out for your invitation to the Annual Meeting on Friday, June 2 at 6:00 p.m. on the Magnolia Terrace. As always, we will have a brief business meeting followed by a cocktail reception. We hope to see you there!

~Susan Hellman



*Carlyle House on the evening of Candlelight Tours.
Photo courtesy Jeff Hancock*