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Carlyle House
DOCENT DISPATCH

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

John Carlyle and the Alexandria Jockey Club

By Steve Kimbel

According to a recent article in the *Alexandria Journal*, John Carlyle was a member of the Alexandria Jockey Club. In fact, he was probably a founding member since the same article credits him with introducing "blooded horses to Alexandria as early as 1762."

We know that John Carlyle was one of several prominent Virginians who imported Thoroughbred race horses from England and that he bred and raised race horses at his farmstead called "Torthorwald."

A photograph of Carlyle's Torthorwald, in 1937, prior to the Fairlington Construction.

Torthorwald is described as "Colonel Carlyle's Farm on Four-Mile-Run" in an advertisement placed by Carlyle's son-in-law William Herbert offering the 330-acre farm for rent in 1787. The property included 250 fenced acres of arable land, a fruit orchard, and 80 acres of meadows with an adjoining gristmill. The outbuildings included a barn and dairy, a cowshed and stables, a kitchen and smokehouse, and a weaver's shop and a blacksmith's shop. There was an overseer's house and a large four-room, three-story farmhouse. Torthorwald's stately farmhouse remained standing until 1942 when it was demolished during construction of North Fairlington, an apartment/townhouse complex in Arlington, built by the Federal government to provide housing for Pentagon workers during World War II.

Besides John Carlyle, other famous Alexandrians were associated with the Jockey Club. George Washington was at one time its steward and his physician, Dr. Elisha Cullen Dick, was its owner in 1803.

The Jockey Club was established in the second half of the eighteenth century and its races drew entries from stables in northern Virginia and the Tidewater as well as Maryland. Gadsby's Tavern was the club's original headquarters with its race track located in rural surroundings northwest of the city. By the end of the century club members were looking for a location all their own. John Gill, who bought property in the 800 block of Franklin Street in 1794, probably constructed the building that became the new home of the Alexandria Jockey Club. The track was also relocated just south of the new Clubhouse. After horse racing and cock fighting were banned within Alexandria's city limits in 1816, the property was sold to James H. Hooe for $7,000.

Fortunately, the Jockey Club's old clubhouse was preserved. It can be seen at number 814 Franklin

CARLYLE HOUSE
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Street, the center structure of the three buildings that comprise the Greene Funeral Home.

The Greene Funeral Home, at 814 Franklin Street. The building pictured behind the sign is on the location of the Alexandria Jockey Club.

When John Carlyle was entering his horses in Alexandria Jockey Club races, it was a sport reserved for the gentry and protected by the courts. Harold B. Gill, Jr., in an article for the *Colonial Williamsburg Journal,* tells the story of the York County, Virginia tailor who wagered 2,000 pounds of tobacco that his horse could beat his neighbor's in a race. The tailor was fined 100 pounds of tobacco in a county court judgment in which the magistrate declared it "contrary to Law for a Labourer to make a race being a Sport only for Gentlemen." Despite this legal ruling, and while only gentlemen like John could bet on them, everyone came to watch the horses race.

By the middle of the seventeenth century horse racing was well established as a weekend diversion for Virginians of all classes. Meetings, as the races were called, were staged at churches, courthouses and local taverns to the enjoyment of large boisterous crowds.

The first races involved riders charging flat out down a quarter-mile-long track. They were therefore called "quarter horses." The breed is believed to be the result of crossing horses from England with Native American ponies descended from a Spanish breed, the Andalusian, which was brought to North America by the Conquistadors.

Today, all Thoroughbred race horses trace their bloodlines to Saudi Arabia where horses were domesticated more than 4,500 years ago. Gill writes that three Arabian stallions imported to England at the start of the 18th century are the source of America's Thoroughbred bloodlines. Specifically, it was an Arabian named Darley who sired Bulle Rock. A Hanover County Virginia gentleman by the name of Samuel Gist imported Bulle Rock from England in 1732. By 1774, Bulle Rock had plenty of company for Virginia was by then home to at least 50 English stallions and 30 mares.

Among the items listed of John Carlyle's inventory is a print of Jacob Bates. Bates was a renowned performance rider during the 18th century.

Horsemen like John Carlyle bred the Virginia Thoroughbred for the endurance, agility, and the strength necessary to run long-distances at top speed. Their horses thundered around a mile long oval as many as four times during a single day's meeting. They raced for a purse of money consisting of the entry fees paid by their owners. The race was won by the owner of the horse that fared best in the day's series of mile long heats. A day at the races might feature three or four heats but on some occasions there was only one high stakes heat of four miles. Half a dozen horses made up the field for most races. However the jockeys observed the old rules of quarter horse racing.

In a modern horse race a jockey can be disqualified if he deliberately causes his mount to bump the horse running next to him. Colonial jockeys were expected to foul their opponents and, if they could, unseat them. They were also not lithesome men like Eddie Arcaro, the only rider in history to twice win the U.S. Triple Crown. For instance, the conditions for a 1752 race stated each horse would carry 10 stone or 140 pounds. Arcaro was five feet three inches tall and 112 pounds. Colonial diarist Philip Vickers Fithian witnessed a 1753 race in which each of the two participants carried 180 pounds. He records that when their jockeys dismounted at the end of the five-mile contest both horses were lame.

Sources:

"Out of the Attic," *Alexandria Journal*, Thursday September 6, 2012, page 26.

"A Sport Only for Gentlemen," Harold B. Gill, Jr., *Colonial Williamsburg Journal*, Autumn 1997.