

Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

February, 2011

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

Alexandria's Sun Fire Company and John Carlyle: 1775-1780

By Helen Wirka



A 1736 fire bucket next to a reproduction version, by Steven Laliuff,

Alexandria was not always the predominantly brick and stone city that 21st-century visitors are familiar with, and not all the homes and businesses were as impenetrable seeming as John Carlyle's. He was, in fact, very conscious of the threat of fire that

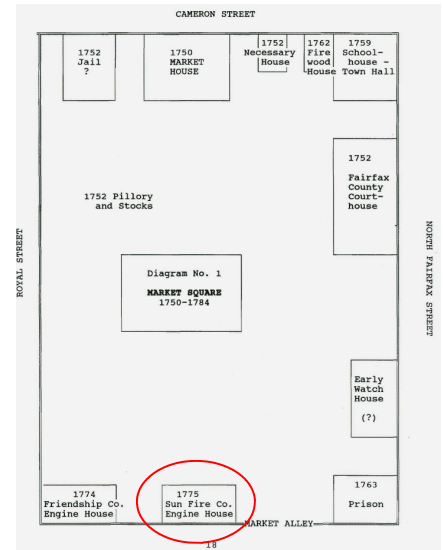
could be visited upon his out-buildings and the interior of his home, as happened to his daughter, Sarah Carlyle, and her husband, William Herbert in 1796. Just prior to the American Revolution, citizens of Alexandria began organizing themselves into various volunteer fire companies to protect their buildings and property. By the end of John Carlyle's lifetime (1720-1780), three fire companies existed in Alexandria: the Friendship Company (1774); the Sun Fire Company (1775); and the Relief Fire Company (1778).

Location, Location, Location:

John Carlyle was one of the founding members of the Sun Fire Company which was organized in 1775. The Sun Fire Company first met and wrote its by-laws sometime prior to March 1775. The "engine house" for the Sun Fire Company was most likely located on what is present-day Market Square. At the time of its founding, the block was divided by a street called "Market Alley" which ran east/west between North Fairfax Street and North Royal Street and parallel to King and Cameron Streets. The building, which would someday house an engine that the company could use to fight fires, would have been situated between the Friendship Fire Company's "engine house" and the prison which was built in 1763. (See illustration.)

Organization:

Although the by-laws are missing from the original Sun Fire Company Minute book, which is now in the possession of Old Town Alexandria's Lyceum, the minutes from the meetings give a good indication of many of their rules and guidelines. The Sun Fire Company met twelve times a year, usually in the last week and a half of each month. In February or March of 1775, the Company voted to limit membership to forty-five individuals, however very often more than two-thirds of the membership would be absent from the meetings. Many of the members in the Sun Fire Company from 1775-1780 were merchants, like John Carlyle, but there were also a few other individuals such as an attorney, bakers, grist millers, a physician, a shipbuilder and a Captain of Virginia troops during the American Revolution. Members would take turns acting as the clerk and recording the minutes with many of them, including John Carlyle, serving as clerk at least twice if not more. The minutes include a narrative of the fines that were collected



CARLYLE HOUSE
Sarah Coster, Curator
Helen Wirka, Curator of Education



from individual members. Fines were incurred for: repeated absences, usually for being absent three months in a row (5 shillings); members who did not have their personal fire buckets, baskets and bags in good order (in proper condition and in the right location in their homes) (3 shillings); not having the list of subscribers in a visible location near the buckets or not in good order (3 shillings); not delivering the minute book to the next clerk within six days of the previous meeting and three hours or more before the next meeting (42 shillings); not delivering the tickets and performing inspections on the buckets, baskets and bags themselves or having another member of the company do this on their behalf, but instead using someone outside the company to deliver and perform the inspection (10 shillings); leaving a meeting before its conclusion and not taking leave of the President (5 shillings); and *“neglecting to put up lights when the late fire happened at Jac[k?] Coopers the fine in that case being 2 shillings the next clerk is desired to Enquire of the several members if they had Candles at their windows and to collect the Fines from such as had not.”* At one point in 1780, the clerk received 1,000 pounds of tobacco as payment for a fine.

Fines that were collected were frequently used either for parties or for equipment. This is reflected in the minutes when bills for poles for the fire hooks arrived as well as for *“2 chains and locks with proper staples for securing the ladders (4) under the piazza of the court house.”* From 1752 up until approximately 1784, the Fairfax County Courthouse stood directly across the street from John Carlyle’s home. It was positioned in-between Cameron Street and Market Alley facing North Fairfax Street, so John Carlyle was in a very good location in terms of participating in civic activities. This is reinforced by the fact that also across the street from his home, at the corner of North Fairfax and Cameron Streets, was a building called the “Town House,” built in 1760. The Town House was not only the home of the Alexandria School on the first floor, but also played host to meetings on the second floor in various meeting rooms. The Presbyterian community in Alexandria used this space for their Sunday services, and town trustees met there as did groups such as the Sun Fire Company: *“July 29, 1777; The succeeding clerk is desired to provide what spirits, sugar & Candles may be necessary for the next meeting and that the same be held in the Town House.”*

Equipping Oneself:

As early as April 1775, the Sun Fire Company passed a



Image from a 1749 broadside advertising John Broadbent’s fire engines.

motion to *“consider propriety of purchasing an engine.”* However, it was not until December 22, 1783 that there is a notation in the minutes where it is *“Order’d that the Treasurer be requested to import from London on account of this Company a fire Engine, value from Seventy to Eighty pounds Sterling cost as soon as he can conveniently and that the present clerk give him notice thereof.”* The engine which the Treasurer may have ended up importing was very likely a Broadbent engine (see broadside) or a Newsham engine. Both engines could provide a constant flow of water onto flames and were small enough that they could allow the fire fighters to get as close to the blaze as possible, sometimes even fitting through a doorway. Bucket brigades were still used to fill the cisterns which were partially open at the top to allow for easy filling. This was necessary as the most powerful of the Newsham engines, and the largest, could pump up to two hundred gallons of water per minute onto a fire.

According to the Cincinnati Fire Museum there was a law in that town similar to what another Alexandria fire company required, *“to have two fire buckets hung conspicuously in his house, to be made available in case of fire. Furthermore, under penalty of law, male citizens [in Cincinnati] between ages 16 and 50 were required to man bucket brigade lines. If you were unable to work in the brigade, your buckets were to be put in front of your house to be picked up in baskets and re-distributed at the fire scene, to ensure a ready supply.”* In 1788, the Alexandria Relief Fire Company records stated that:

“These buckets shall be procured in the best terms possible and they shall contain 2 and ½ gallons. Also to be furnished to each member two bags, made as directed in the rules, and twelve baskets, which shall be kept at the house of the Clerk for the time being. Each member shall keep in some convenient



part of his dwelling two leather buckets in which shall be two bags, each bag one and a half yards in length and three quarters of a yard in breadth; both buckets and bags to be marked with the owners surname at length and his Christian name as convenience may require, and a bed key, all in good order under a penalty of ten shillings....”

Usually the “salvage bag” was made out of canvas or linen and like the fire buckets it would have the owner’s name and the fire company on it as well as the bag number, if there was more than one used. Bed keys were a type of wrench that homeowners would have on hand in order to quickly dismantle their bed and save it from the fire. Beds were frequently among the most expensive items in a home during the late 18th-century, and therefore it was very important to remove them when a fire threatened the property. John Carlyle, as a member of the Sun Fire Company, owned the items required by his own company as was reflected in the inventory taken when he passed away in the fall of 1780: “1 Small Brush; 4 fire Buckets; 1 Baskett & 2 Bags.” Six lines down from these fire fighting implements there was also listed “A Small parcel Tools in a drawer” which could have included a bed key to dismantle a bed in case of fire. Today, the Carlyle House has 4 fire buckets in its

collection and 2 bags on display next to the door opening onto North Fairfax Street. They do not have names painted on them, nor do they display the logo for the Sun Fire Company, as historians are unsure what the logo may have been or what Sun Fire Company members were actually required to put on their equipment.



1834 fire bucket marked in the manner proscribed by the Alexandria Relief Fire Company.

By 1796, the Alexandria City Council passed legislation requiring home owners and business owners to “provide at his own expense fire buckets, made of good and suitable

leather holding at least 2 ½ gallons equal in number to the stories of the dwelling.” Also by this time, wardens for the wards would inspect each home every six months to check on the condition of the buckets and then report to the Mayor anyone who broke the law. This was a

departure from the tradition that fire companies checked on their own members and the state of their equipment. Additionally, any individual at the scene of a fire who did not follow orders from the fire official present on the scene could also be fined a large amount. The 1796 legislation was not the first time city government had looked out for the residents of Alexandria. In 1749, legislation that was created at the time of the town’s founding stated that homes could not have wooden chimneys, and if one was built the sheriff for the “County of Fairfax” would have it pulled down.

Fire Insurance Companies vs. Volunteer Fire Companies:

Alexandria’s fire fighting community at the end of the 18th-century was a social group as can be seen by the festive meetings the Sun Fire Company held monthly: “*The Succeeding clerk is desired to warn the Company to Meet next Month at the Ball Room and to Desire the Treasurer to purchase Ten Gallons of Spirits & One Loaf of sugar, candles, &c.—The Clerk to have the room cleaned and put in good order.*” It was a very fraternal organization, as were the fire insurance companies which met in neighboring Philadelphia.

Fire companies in Alexandria did not restrict themselves by putting fire marks on homes as they did in Charleston, South Carolina, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and London, England where fire insurance companies and fire marks first originated. Fire marks were born out of the fire insurance company tradition begun in London after the Great Fire of 1666. Fire marks were made by taking a wooden plaque and affixing a fire insurance company’s logo to it. The logo was cast in lead and then painted according to the company’s selected bright color. Next, the policy number was painted on the wood so the company would know if a building was insured by them. There is evidence of fire insurance companies in New York sometimes rewarding volunteer companies for putting out a fire at a home or business that they insured, but there is no evidence that this was done in Alexandria.

By 1872, any competition that may have existed between the Sun Fire Company and the Friendship Company appears to have dissolved. The two companies served on a joint committee and in the minutes for the Sun Fire Company they “*reported that they had agreed that whenever a fire occurred in the 3rd or 4th Wards, the members of the Sun Company should carry their reel to the fire and act under the direction of the officers of Friendship Company and when fires occurred in the 1st*



or 2nd Wards, the members of the Friendship Company should act under the Command of the Sun Company.”

Do any of the fire mark plaques on the buildings in Old Town belong to the Sun Fire Company?

Several buildings in Old Town have fire marks similar to the ones photographed here, but fire marks appearing on buildings in Alexandria today represent companies that were not in town during the 18th-century. There is no record of what these fire marks represent. According to The Lyceum’s curator, Kristin B. Lloyd, “Fire marks [in early America] were used as advertising by insurance companies, but the presence or absence of fire marks on a building did not dictate response by fire fighters. Although plaques bearing various emblems are seen on houses in Alexandria today, research has not found either written or visual evidence that fire marks were used in the 18th-century to identify houses covered by insurance. The plaques on present-day buildings are probably reproductions popularly available since the 1930’s.”

When at all possible, the risk of fire in the 18th-century was controlled by taking preventative actions such as locating kitchens in exterior buildings and burning fires only when necessary. However, since fires were essential in homes and businesses in Alexandria for everyday use and these buildings were primarily built out of wood, a strong fire fighting presence was indispensable. This need was met by the Sun Fire Company and its fellow volunteer companies, the Friendship Company, and the Relief Fire Company.

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Various fire marks around Old Town Alexandria, most likely dating to the 20th-century.