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Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Sir William Johnson: Noteworthy Carlyle House Visitor

By Henry Desmarais

James Munson's biography of John Carlyle lists "Indian Agent Col. William Johnson from New York" as one of the participants in the "Grandest Congress" held at the Carlyle House in April 1755. Published in 2005, *White Savage: William Johnson and the Invention of America,* by Fintan O'Toole, provides a vehicle for learning about one of the more intriguing visitors to the Carlyle House.

Sir William Johnson, c. 1760

Johnson was born in 1715 about 20 miles northwest of Dublin. Although born into an Irish Catholic family, he would later become a Protestant, more for social than religious reasons; it was then simply the way to get ahead in the British Empire. An uncle, Sir Peter Warren, another Protestant convert, became a famous British naval commander, ended up marrying into the New York De Lancey family and acquired huge landholdings in New York. Warren invited his nephew to come to America in 1738 to manage his vast estates.

Johnson began to trade (fairly) with the Indians (the term used throughout O'Toole's book, in lieu of today's preferred Native Americans), became reasonably fluent in Mohawk and exceedingly well-versed in Indian rituals, even dressing Indian-style on occasion. By 1742, Johnson had been initiated into the Mohawk nation (one of the Six Iroquois Nations) as a *sachem* (or administrative chief) and given an Indian name. His informal role as a mediator between the Indians and the British would soon be formalized, beginning with his appointment in 1746 as Colonel of the Warriors of the Six Nations by New York Governor George Clinton. Less than ten years later, Johnson would find himself a guest at the Carlyle House. As O'Toole notes,

"In mid-April 1755, [General Edward] Braddock summoned William Johnson to his camp at Alexandria, Virginia [presumably the Carlyle House], where he was preparing his own assault on the Ohio forts. There he announced the new command structure. The Nova Scotia campaign would be led by Brigadier General Charles Lawrence. The expedition against Fort Niagara would be under the command of Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts. To his surprise, and not entirely to his delight, Johnson had been chosen to command the attack on Crown Point. Braddock also gave him a formal commission as Sole Superintendent of 'the affairs of the United Nations of Indians, their allies and dependants'. On 16 April Johnson was commissioned as major general in the provincial army and commander-in-chief of the colonial forces raised for the Crown Point campaign in

CARLYLE HOUSE
Sarah Coster, Site Administrator
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> New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut and Rhode Island."

Unlike both General Braddock and Governor Shirley, Johnson would leave Carlyle House and go on to glory, relatively speaking. While he would not be immediately successful in attacking his objective, he was able to repulse a French force at the Battle of Lake George (the lake so re-named by Johnson himself), taking a bullet in the hip and capturing the then-famous French general Ludwig-August, Baron de Dieskau in the process. Johnson's accomplishments made him an instant hero in England, perhaps a necessary one given everybody else's failures in 1755, and he was named the first Baronet of New York by a grateful George II.

Johnson would go on to become the "ultimate Indian diplomat," helping to keep the Iroquois loyal to Great Britain, and his work with the Indians helped make Britain's conquest of Canada possible. Among other things, Johnson would capture Fort Niagara in 1759 and play a key role in the capitulation of Montreal in 1760. His singular contributions would cause the artist Benjamin West to include Johnson in the now-famous painting depicting the death of General James Wolfe at the Battle of Quebec in 1759—even though Johnson was many miles away at the time. An engraving of this famous painting now hangs above the door to the Carlyle House dining room.

Through the years, Johnson would feud with Governors James De Lancey and William Shirley, two other early visitors to the Carlyle House, and with British General, Sir Jeffery Amherst, then Commander-in-Chief of British forces in America, over military tactics, Indian policies, and more petty matters, and he generally prevailed (Shirley was disgraced and Amherst recalled.) At one point, senior British officials believed that Johnson "was all that stood between Anglo-America and a general Indian revolt which, if it spread through the Six Nations, could virtually undo the British conquest of North America."

The Death of General Wolfe by Benjamin West, c. 1770.

Johnson was apparently a rather colorful individual, reputed to be "an awesomely sexual figure." He had several "wives" and many more mistresses, both white and Indian, with whom he had a number of children. He became one of the largest landholders in America, eventually accumulating 170,000 acres, some received as a direct grant from the Indians. Like John Carlyle, he was both a major slaveholder and a Freemason. Unlike Carlyle, his outlook on the eve of the American Revolution was "essentially loyalist."

After William Johnson's death on July 11, 1774, his family and most of his Indian friends would take the British side in the Revolution. His property would be seized in 1779 by the State of New York. Today, however, two of Johnson's homes in New York's Mohawk Valley are again open to the public. One is a large Georgian stone house, built about 1749 and known as Fort Johnson. The other, built in 1763, was made of wood but with the outside walls painted to look like stone. Docent-led tours are available at both, just as they are today at the Carlyle House.

Sources

James Munson, *Col. John Carlyle, Gent.*, 1986.

Fintan O'Toole, *White Savage: William Johnson and the Invention of America*, 2005.

www.oldfortjohnson.org

www.johnstown.com/Johnson.html

Henry, a docent at Carlyle House generously agreed to allow us to reprint his wonderful article, which originally ran in 2006. Thank you Henry!