

Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

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A Brief Account of Sarah Walker Fairfax, the Mother of Sarah Fairfax Carlyle

by Jim Bartlinski

While much has been written about John Carlyle, Major-General Edward Braddock, and George William Carlyle, the wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters associated with the family have been little noticed by history. None more so than the elusive Sarah Walker Fairfax of Nassau, New Providence Island, The Bahamas. Sarah the mother of Sarah Fairfax Carlyle married 31 year-old William Fairfax at Nassau on March 27, 1723 when she was twenty-three. Sarah was William Fairfax's second wife, his first wife, whose name thus far has been lost to history, died childless sometime between 1718 and 1723 in England. Sarah Walker was born in the Bahamas about 1700 and reportedly was dark skinned. While no existing primary sources confirm it, several historical accounts state that Sarah Walker's mother was either a former enslaved person or a freeborn woman of color.

Wilson Miles Cary, a descendant of Sally Cary Fairfax published in his 1916 book, *Sally Cary: A Long Hidden Romance of Washington's Life* an excerpt from an 1802 letter Sally wrote to a nephew. In the letter Sally alludes to the controversy surrounding the race of her mother-in-law and the children she had with William Fairfax. Sally recounts how her brother-in-law William Henry Fairfax was denied the inheritance of a piece of property due to "*an impression that my husband's [George William Fairfax] mother was a black woman, if my Fairfax had not come over to see his uncle and convinced him he was not a negro's son ... Sometimes I've been almost convinced that the strange claim is by agreement to answer some family purpose that I am not informed of; be this as it may, I've the satisfaction to know that I have set the truth before you ...*" Although this claim has not as yet been substantiated, it endures and merits further investigation.

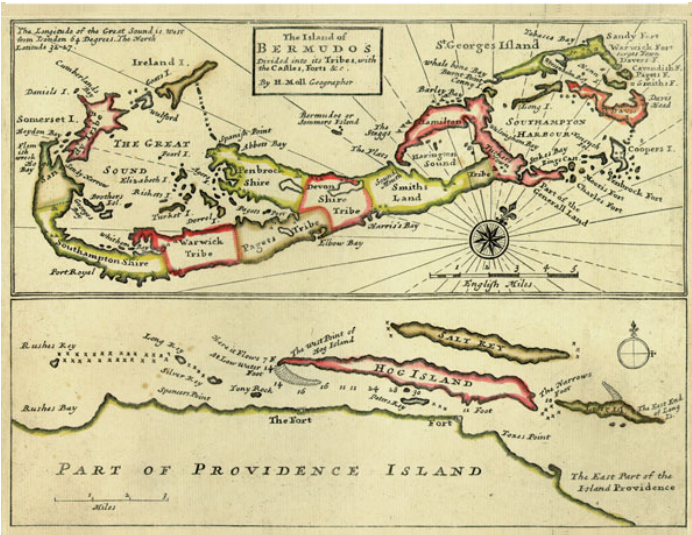


Fort Montague, Nassau, Bahamas. Completed in 1742.

Sarah Walker Fairfax's father was Captain Thomas Walker of New Providence. Before the arrival of Captain Woodes Rogers and William Fairfax to the island in July 1718, Captain Walker valiantly attempted to maintain law and order in New Providence on the strength of an expired commission as Judge of the Vice-Admiralty. Just prior to the start of the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1713), known in the American colonies as "*Queen Anne's War*," the West Indies had become a rogue outpost of Great Britain's burgeoning empire, particularly the port of Nassau on New Providence Island. Nassau, named for King William III of England, Scotland, and Ireland, a member of the House of Orange-Nassau, had become a haven for pirates and a base from which they could prey upon the Empire's West Indian and American trade. By 1700, Nassau had become

CARLYLE HOUSE

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1727 Map of Bermuda, with the bottom half showing “Part of Providence Island.” Notice the red “hog island,” named for its use as an area for farming and livestock.

a place for “lawless riot and drunken revelry.” Edward Teach, the infamous “Blackbeard,” called Nassau home.

In 1717 Captain Woods Rogers was named first Royal Governor of the Bahama Islands by the Lords Commissioners of Trade and Plantations, also known as the “Board of Trade.” By 1721, Captain Rogers, along with Thomas Walker, William Fairfax, and His Majesty’s Royal Navy restored order to the West Indies. Besides serving briefly as the de facto governor of New Providence, Walker was Chief Justice of the Bahamas. Walker died on New Providence Island in the fall of 1722, at about the age of 63. In his will dated August 21, 1722 and proved on September 4, 1722, Walker left his entire estate to his wife and three sons: Thomas, Charles and John. Due to the conventions of the period, Sarah Walker being unmarried at the time of her father’s death would have to rely on her mother and/or brothers to provide for her until she wed. Fortunately for Sarah, she married William Fairfax within seven months of her father’s death.

Sometime between June and November 1729, Sarah and William moved with their family to Massachusetts. William’s new post was that of Collector of Customs for the Crown in Salem and Marblehead. Sarah Walker Fairfax did not long

survive her husband’s transfer to New England. Sarah died at the age of 31 in Salem on January 18, 1731, likely from complications from the birth of her namesake, Sarah Fairfax, on December 31, 1730. The infant Sarah was baptized on January 28, 1731, only ten days after the death of her mother. She herself would go on to die at the age of 30 giving birth to her seventh child, Ann, on January 22, 1761.

William and Sarah Walker Fairfax had four children:

- 1724: George William, husband of Sally Cary
- 1726: Thomas, who was killed off the coast of India in 1746 serving in the Royal Navy during the War of Austrian Succession
- 1728: Anne, wife of Lawrence Washington
- ◆ 1731: Sarah, the first wife of John Carlyle

On October 28, 1731, nine months after Sarah Walker Fairfax’s death, William married his third wife Deborah Clarke of Salem. William and Deborah had three children together: Bryan, William Henry and Hannah. It is recorded in various sources that William’s marriage to Deborah was in compliance with his wife Sarah’s dying wish that he marry her friend.

Although little is known about Sarah Walker Fairfax, she leaves an extraordinary legacy of her own. Sarah’s offspring emerged as prominent citizens of Virginia, conscious of their civic duty, and took their place as political, social, and economic leaders of their immediate community and of the colony at large.



Sally Cary Fairfax, wife of George & William Fairfax, son of William Fairfax and Sarah Walker

Sources

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George William's Uniform

Many of you will remember our former display of George William's military jacket, a loan which as since been returned. Due to the generosity of Bob and Joanne Madison, a reproduction uniform has been created based on the most specific research. The new uniform includes a waistcoat, shirt, and helmet. The helmet is leather with white horse hair crest. Britches will be made out of suede to give the impression of leather.

The uniform will be off display while we have a costume form created for it. The form will have a head to it to allow the helmet to be displayed properly. Joan Merow has kindly donated the funds for the mannequin, britches and boots.



Watch out for the uniform in mid- to late-summer. This will allow us to interpret George William's life in a much more visual and close-up way. Thank you to Bob, Joanne and Joan!

Join the Friends of History

Are you interested in history? Would you like to find a group of women that share your love of the past? The *Friends of History* is a newly formed group of women that gathers monthly to hear a presentation on an historical topic.

The group meets the fourth Sunday of every month at 5:30 pm at the Apothecary Museum in Old Town Alexandria. The Apothecary is located a few blocks from Carlyle House at 105 South Fairfax.

