



# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

### *John Carlyle and George Washington: Founding Alexandria through Friendship, Family and Business Part 1*

By Helen Wirka

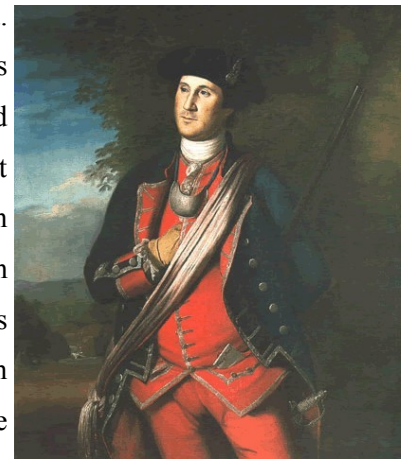


*This article was originally a presentation given by Carlyle House Curator, Helen Wirka, in February 2013 for the "Agenda: Alexandria" meeting that took place at the Holiday Inn on Eisenhower Avenue in Alexandria, Virginia.*

John Carlyle, John Hesselius of Annapolis, 1765. Courtesy of Sir Fitzroy and Lady Maclean. Not very many people know about the role that John Carlyle, Merchant, Alexandria, had in George Washington's world, or how close the two families were. On a tour at the museum one time, I had a visitor ask me a not-so-surprising question: "When George Washington visited the Carlyles, did he sleep in the finest room of the house and have his host and hostess give up their bed?" The short answer to this question is "No." The slightly longer one is this article (published in parts one and two). Our first president was often a visitor to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle, but he did not become the famous leader and president until many years into their friendship. It was 9 years after the passing of John Carlyle that Washington became president. During the time that he was growing and learning and becoming that great man, Washington was a local Alexandrian who likely looked up to his friend, relative and business associate, John Carlyle. John Carlyle and George Washington would probably have first met when Carlyle was approximately 21 years of age and the young George was about 9.

In 1741, John Carlyle was recorded in documents as coming to Alexandria in the role of factor, or agent, for a British merchant named William Hicks of Whitehaven, England.

Though Carlyle was from a town called Carlisle (different spelling from his own name) in Northern England just across the border from Scotland, he had gone



to Whitehaven as a second-born son to make his way learning the trade of a merchant. Starting as an apprentice and later becoming a factor, it was Carlyle's job to establish business connections for William Hicks in the area which would become Alexandria in 1749. Carlyle established firm friendships early on with his future father-in-law, William Fairfax; the man who would be Best Man at his wedding in 1747, Thomas, the Sixth Lord Fairfax, who was Baron of Cameron and

*George Washington, Charles Wilson Peale, Washington-Custic-Lee Collection, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia.*

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the largest landholder in all of Virginia (with over 5 million acres of land); his future brothers-in-law, George William Fairfax and Lawrence Washington; John and Hugh West, prominent landowners and business men in the area; and John Dalton, a fellow agent for William Hicks who would become Carlyle's business partner for over 25 years.

Having first rented property near the Holiday Inn's location on Little Hunting Creek, Carlyle bought two prime half-acre lots facing onto Fairfax Street and bordered by Cameron Street when Alexandria was being formed and lots of land were sold to establish a proper town. This location in Alexandria was a well-sought after one due to the fact that these roads were intended as the



"A Plan of Alexandria now Belhaven." Drawn by George Washington, 1749. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Market Square, and faced the Potomac River on the eastern side of the property.

This was all very ideal for Carlyle, a man who wore many hats. In his lifetime of 1720-1780, Carlyle was: town founder; member of the Board of Trustees; a surveyor; a founding member of the Sun Fire Company; an Undertaker for Christ Church and the Old Presbyterian Meeting House and many other locations, (which in the 18th century was defined as an individual who undertook

two main thoroughfares in town named for Lord Fairfax, Baron of Cameron. They were situated across the street from what was destined to become

building contracts); a justice of the peace; a merchant importing sugar, rum, race horses and many other items as well as exporting flour, grain and wheat; planter; buying and selling slaves for his own household as well as his three plantations and friends and business associates such as George Washington. Carlyle was a strong and capable business man. He established himself firmly in the community as someone who was trustworthy and good to work with. He married well, twice. The first time he married Sarah Fairfax, the daughter of William Fairfax, and upon her death he courted and married Sybil West, daughter of Hugh West, another prominent Alexandria businessman. Carlyle and Sarah Fairfax had seven children over the course of their 14 year long marriage, but sadly only two daughters, Sarah and Anne (also called Sally and Nancy by friends such as the Washingtons), lived into their adult years. When Sarah Fairfax died in childbirth, Carlyle remarried, this time to Sybil West. Of the four children which Sybil conceived, only one son, George William, survived into his teenage years.

There are multiple accounts from George Washington's diary in which he recorded his interactions with the Carlyle family, both in Alexandria and at Mount Vernon. The two families had a close connection, as Sarah Fairfax was a sister of Anne Fairfax Washington, the wife of Lawrence Washington George Washington's half brother. This was a very close relationship in the 18th century, and it is likely that George looked up to John as a brother/father figure, especially once his brother, Lawrence, passed away in 1752. When Anne Washington married for a second time, to George Lee of Stratford Hall six months after her husband's death, George Washington took over the management of Mount Vernon and rented it from his sister-in-law until her death in 1761, when he inherited the property. Also, Sarah Fairfax's brother, George William



Fairfax, was married to Sally Cary Fairfax. George Washington and George William Fairfax were best friends, and it was this Sally Fairfax with whom George Washington flirted and corresponded so famously. Belvoir Plantation, home of the Fairfax family, was situated close to Mount Vernon. The Carlyles would often combine visits to one side of the family while visiting the other side as well. Often, they would stay the night, and sometimes the children would go visiting on their own. Letters from John Carlyle to his brother, George Carlyle, even mention how his “Sally” (who was 8 years old at the time) was taking spinet lessons from the music master at Mount Vernon. It did not make sense financially to engage a tutor for lessons for only one child when there were several in the neighborhood who could benefit from tutelage. Sally would sometimes spend the night, as it was 16 miles roundtrip from Carlyle’s home to Mount Vernon. The second installment of this article will discuss Carlyle and Washington’s role in the French and Indian War, and the business side of their relationship.

(To be continued in July...)