



Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

Committees of Self Governance

By Penny Waite

Although the port of Alexandria did not experience battle during the Revolutionary War, it was a strategic destination for much needed supplies to the colony. John Carlyle's stature as a successful merchant, experienced commissary, and civic leader allowed revolutionary leaders, such as George Washington and George Mason, to capitalize on his talents to help further the Revolution. Though we know Carlyle was not a young man, Edmund Randolph wrote, "The old who had seen service in the Indian War of 1755, roused the young to resist the ministry." During the Revolutionary period, John Carlyle's merchant activities were significantly impacted by the trade embargo against England called for by the First Continental Congress in 1774. Though most of the records and journals of the committees have been lost, we can get

formed May 26, 1773 to "consider the British claims as a common cause to all, and to produce a unity of action." Governor Dunmore had dismissed the Assembly with bills undone. Suspecting that Dunmore would suspend the Assembly again in 1774, the delegates were elected to meet in convention whether or not the legislative session was dismissed by the Governor.

Surely the prominent members of Alexandria were abuzz with the uncertainty. A letter dated May 29, 1774 was sent by the Committee of Correspondence for the Alexandria Town Committee and signed by John Carlyle and John Dalton on behalf of eight other members. It states that the committee was "formed for the purpose of communicating to each other, in the most speedy manner, their sentiments on the present interesting and Alarming situation of America."

There was, in all probability, a secret element to the work of this committee and the committees formed by the local counties. During the summer of 1774 and later, the counties of Virginia appointed committees whose job it was to organize for revolutionary action. Information on the government and events was passed among the colonial committees and then acted upon on a local basis. County committee members were instructed, probably by the recently dismissed House of Burgesses, to "collect the senses of their respective Counties" throughout the summer of 1774. For



Join or Die Broadside, Courtesy of the Williamsburg Foundation.

glimpses of his revolutionary activities from 1774 through 1776 from some of the extant petitions to the conventions and letters to the Committee of Safety.

A Virginia Committee of Correspondence for inter-colonial communication with the other colonies was

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Fairfax County, this “sense” culminated in the Fairfax Resolves of July 18, 1774, the most detailed and influential among the other counties. It called for establishing non-importation with England and the formation of a continental congress. The eighth signatory of the Fairfax Resolves was John Carlyle.

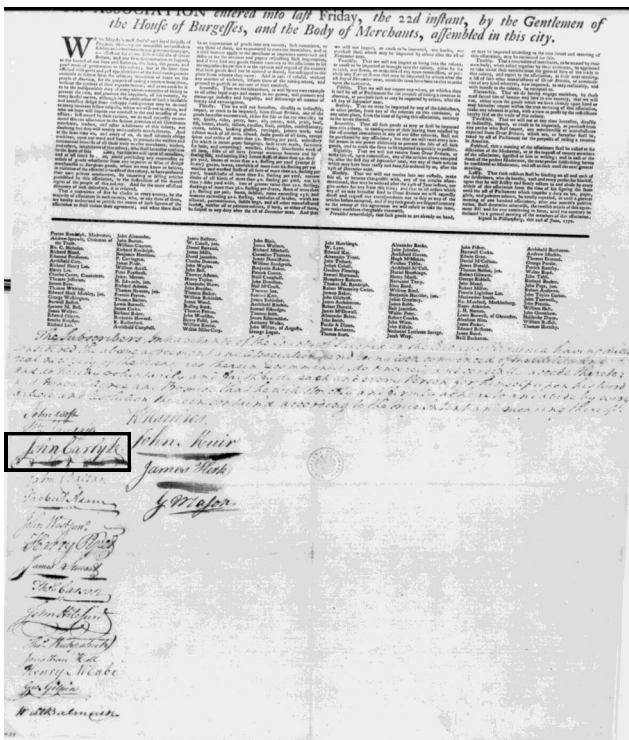
During that July 1774 general meeting approving the final version of the Resolves, a 25th resolution was adopted for Fairfax, but not included in the body of the document. A committee of twenty five men headed by George Washington with the “power to call a General Meeting and to Concert and Adopt such Measures as may be thought most expedient and Necessary” was selected. The Fairfax County Committee of Safety’s members included John Carlyle, John Dalton and George Mason. Their duties were to audit merchants to be sure there were no items on the prohibited list of imports brought in to the colony. By October 1774 the First Continental Congress called for an election in every county, city, and town by those qualified to vote for a local committee of safety to observe the conduct of any persons breaking the boycott on commerce with the English. If caught, the individual’s name was to be

published in a gazette and all business and dealings were to be broken off with him.

On December 19, 1774, the Fairfax County Committee of Safety wrote an order to auction Irish linen that had arrived. The owners that imported the linen requested it be “sold agreeable to the tenth article in the continental association.” It was sold to the highest bidder under the direction of any three of five committee members, of which John Carlyle was one, and the extra proceeds were to be sent to the “poor inhabitants” of Boston, known to be “suffering under the Boston port bill.” The owners were reimbursed for their costs.

In addition, by September 1774, under a plan, perhaps the first in the colonies, drawn up by George Mason, an independent company of not more than one hundred men was formed to choose their own officers, learn and practice the military for defense. They were called the Fairfax Independent Company. George Washington took the premise of a local committee of safety one step further when, in January 1775, he traveled up to Alexandria to review the “Independent Company”, and chose a committee for the county. By the 17th of January, resolutions, thought to have been penned by George Mason, were passed by this Committee of Safety for organizing, arming and supplying the militia of the county.

By June 1775, Dunmore had dismissed the Assembly six times successively. The requisite fee bill had not been passed so the county courts could not operate. The delegates of the Third Virginia Convention, July-August 1775, invested with the “supreme executive powers of government”, established a Virginia Committee of Safety to coordinate and direct military activities. “County committees were elected by the freeholders of the several counties and corporations; from which district committees were deputed.” The county committees performed various functions corresponding with the Colony committees, including appointment of officers, supervision of recruiting, procuring arms and supplies, and providing intelligence. To purchase arms, the chairmen of the county committees were advised to collect a small tax.



Virginia Non-importation Act signed by Alexandria representatives including John Carlyle. His signature is demarcated by the black box. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, the George Washington Papers.



Reproduction of a Virginia broadside, citing the creation of a militia through the Committee of Safety at Prickett's Fort, VA. By 1775, Committees of Safety had become the functioning governments of the colonies, inflated from their original purpose of keeping watch on royalist governments.

Further correspondence signed by John Carlyle provides context of the conditions of the colony. A letter by the Committee of Correspondence for Fairfax county dated November 23, 1775 to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia referred to the "great distress and discontent" caused by the scarcity of salt in the colony. The letter requested a waiver of the non-importation rules to permit export of country-produce in exchange for salt. An election on November 20, 1775 had just installed newly elected members of the committee for another year, and John Carlyle had been re-elected.

The Instructions to the Convention delegates of December 9, 1775 specify Fairfax County Committee, Alexandria in the heading. The seven signers include John Carlyle and John Dalton. "When ministerial Tools are employing every wicked Machination to accomplish their unjust purposes, tis high time every virtuous Citizen should be on the Watch guarding those Liberties which the Tyrants have mark'd out for destruction." Concerned about the protection of the rivers and bay, the letter asked for a few war vessels. It encouraged the delegates to form a plan in order to provide supplies of arms and ammunition.. "If we are to be govern'd by a council of safety, we do recommend that you give your voice

for a full and equitable representation" for the best results, and "that you be not sparing in the raising of money for the good of the colony but be cautious in the distribution of it for be the Taxes in future what they may we shall cheerfully retrench every other luxury to secure that of being free."

In the same letter, the revolutionary spirit of the committee had been fanned by the actions of Dunmore, who stole the gunpowder of the colony, fled to safety on a British warship in Hampton Roads, proclaimed martial law, and tempted the slaves and servants with freedom if they would join his forces. Yet the letter cautioned of threat to Alexandria. "Lord Dunmore continues to pester us"- an obvious threat to Virginia as he "is daily increasing in force and garrison." The committee recommended the "raising of regulars for the defense of the colony as the minute system is inadequate." The concerns about Dunmore's strategies were almost palpable as they stated "the Bayonet is already at our Breasts." Asking "Why are we left unguarded?" the committee reminded the delegates to the Virginia Convention that Alexandria had proven itself to be "a safe harbor for ships of War and commanding a most material part of the Colony.

A letter signed only by John Carlyle dated May 14, 1776 on behalf of the Committee of Correspondence from Alexandria, assured a Mr. Jenifer in Maryland that a packet intended for the Committee of Safety in Virginia had been received and would be forwarded with the "utmost dispatch". Perhaps many independent actions like Carlyle's in this example were required due to time and location constraints. The time period required a great deal of zeal, flexibility, and organizational acumen demonstrated by the creation of various committees and sub-committees in a fast-changing political atmosphere, organized as needed to provide local governance assisting the Virginia conventions until the constitution of Virginia was complete and the county courts were restored

By July 5, 1776, the Virginia Committee of Safety officially ended via legislation transferring its powers to the governor and council of the Virginia Commonwealth. Although there was an attempt in



November 1776 to introduce a bill in the House of Delegates to dissolve the county committees, it was never officially passed. Yet after 1776, there is very little trace of any committee activities. It is possible, although we have no evidence, as the war became more engaged, the principals involved in earlier public activities needed to lower the public exposure of their involvement due to security concerns.

However, there is evidence in Journals of the Council of the State of Virginia from 1776-79 that refer to John Carlyle's ongoing mercantile activities on behalf of the war effort. An entry dated January 1777, "Ordered that at a Warrant issue to John Carlyle for one thousand pounds upon account to purchase beef and pork for the publick use." Another entry of February 11, 1777 refers to a warrant issued to "a Mr. Roger Chew for John Carlyle for 800[lbs] on account for the purchase of pork and beef for the use of this State."

Certainly, John Carlyle contributed to the revolutionary efforts but not without being aware that he and his associates were within easy reach of any attacking force which might ascend the Potomac. If the war ended differently, the prominence of John Carlyle and his co-members on any of the committees would have been severely punished. As it was, most of them sacrificed and suffered financially for the "common cause". As George Mason wrote, "In such times as these are it is every man's duty to contribute his mite to public service."

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