

Carlyle House

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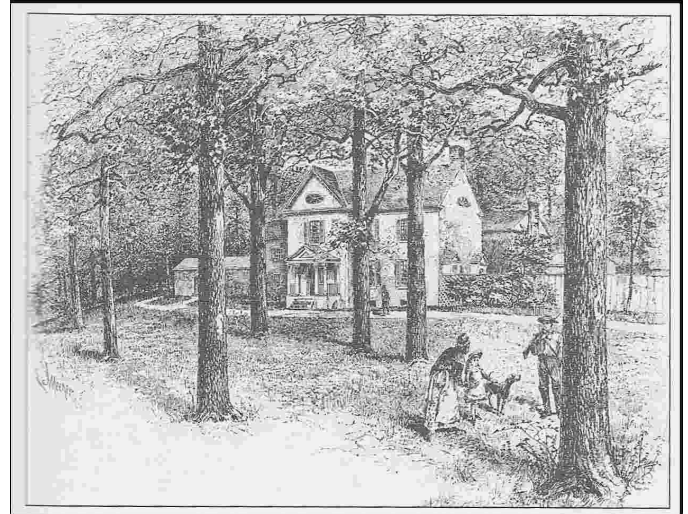
Before Kings and Presidents Went to War: Family and Social Life in the Chesapeake 1800-1812

By Helen Wirka

Life for Sarah Carlyle Herbert in the Federal Period was pleasant in spite of the difficulties that were coming in 1812. John Carlyle's daughter and grandchildren experienced many delights in Alexandria as did their contemporaries in Washington, D.C. and in Maryland.

Sarah Herbert and her young family thrived in the busy port city surrounded by the comings and goings of leading citizens and commodities being exchanged. The archives at Carlyle House contain eleven letters written between the years 1802 and 1805 to Margaret "Peggy" Herbert Fairfax by family members including her mother, her husband, Thomas Fairfax the 9th Lord Baron of Cameron, and two of her sisters, Ann "Nancy", and Lucinda Herbert. There is also a letter from Mrs. Hannah Warner Washington to Sarah Herbert. Mrs. Washington was the mother of Thomas Fairfax's second wife, Louisa, as well as his aunt.

Margaret Herbert Fairfax (b. 1784, d. 1858), the eldest daughter of Sarah Carlyle and William Herbert, married Thomas Fairfax (b.1762, d. 1846) on December 31, 1800. They shared the same wedding anniversary as that of her grandfather and grandmother, John and Sarah Fairfax Carlyle. Margaret and Thomas had ten children: Albert; Henry; Orlando; Raymond; Eugenia Cary; Ethelbert; Aurelia Herbert; Lavinia; Monimia; and Reginald. The couple lived in various locations after their marriage, including Charlestown in Jefferson County. They also made extended visits to Fairfield, Virginia to tend to Aunt Washington. Eventually, the family settled at Vacluse plantation in Fairfax County, about three miles from Alexandria. Vacluse was first owned by Dr. James Craik and was positioned on a hill in the vicinity of the



Vacluse, torn down during the Civil War by Union Forces.

Virginia Theological Seminary ("Seminary Hill"). Family tradition states that Margaret's sister, Ann Herbert, refused to leave Vacluse when the Civil War came to Northern Virginia. Union officers came to tear down the home and make way for a fort. But Ann stayed in her chair next to the warm fire until two Union soldiers lifted her, chair and all, and removed her from the building.

Margaret and Thomas also lived in two confirmed locations in the city of Alexandria. They rented 301 South St. Asaph Street, from 1828-1830. Before the Fairfaxes were tenants, the Marquis de Lafayette stayed there when visiting Alexandria for a month as part of a trip to the United States in

CARLYLE HOUSE

Sarah Coster, Site Administrator

Helen Wirka, Site Specialist

Lacey Villiva, Education Assistant



1824. In 1830, the Fairfaxes then purchased 607 Cameron Street and lived there until Thomas's death in 1846. The house on Cameron Street, (known in the community as the "Lord Fairfax House"), was built in 1800 by William Yeaton. Mr. Yeaton's architectural skills were so impressive that he gained the attention of the Washington family for whom he "designed and erected [their] family tomb, which contains George Washington's body at Mount Vernon today."



607 Cameron Street, the "Lord Fairfax House."

The Herbert and Fairfax families were very close as can be seen by this series of letters. Sarah Herbert often wrote to her daughter providing her

with the news of who was in town, the fashions and sending her love to her grandchildren. Plagues and epidemics were discussed and the difficult roads between Alexandria and Fairfield in particular. In her letter of September 22, believed to have been written in 1803, Sarah wrote "It appears seven or eight months must pass before I can hope to see you? The roads are bad until May, & then unless you make a very long stay – that is, *the summer* – you must have very warm weather to return. The fall is the best time of the year to visit Alex'a." Sarah went on to encourage a fall visit for that year, hoping to move her daughter's trip forward to a few weeks after the letter was written. In spite of the difficulties of travel, Margaret was able to make extended stays in Alexandria and there is a letter from June 1, 1804 written by her husband while she was staying at her father's house (Carlyle House). Thomas wrote shortly after the birth of their second child discussing the death of his aunt, Hannah Washington, and Margaret's return home after

giving birth to their second son. Interestingly enough, the letter was written one month after his birth and they called him "nameless" until deciding to christen the child as "Henry." Another important aspect of life in the early 19th century was personal hygiene. Sarah wrote a most instructive letter to her daughter discussing personal hygiene and advised her daughter regarding brushing her teeth: "I hope you take care of your teeth – for my sake, endure the Bark dayly as a tooth Powder, for indeed your teeth is getting very bad. Mine threaten'd at your age [21 years of age] in the same way, & by cleaning them constantly since with bark, they are very little worse since that time. I am sure but for that I Shou'd not now have one tooth in my head."

Letters between the Herbert and Fairfax family members can be compared to the letters of other contemporaries, such as Rosalie Stier Calvert. Mrs. Calvert was an émigré from Belgium whose family settled just outside of the Federal City after first living in Philadelphia and later Annapolis. She married George Calvert a descendent from the Lords Baltimore who first founded the colony of Maryland. Her letters to her family, some of whom returned home to Belgium and others who moved to Alexandria, were filled with information ranging from investments and her father's banking relationship with the Bank of Alexandria where William Herbert was personally involved in the care of her father's accounts, to the daily chores of a plantation mistress and the state of the family's priceless art collection, as well as new babies and the latest in hair fashions. Gossip abounded as well, especially regarding the younger brother of Napoleon Bonaparte and his wife who was an American. The variety of topics goes on and on. Letters to Margaret Herbert Fairfax from the same time period echo some of these same topics, though the date range and number of letters is smaller. Unfortunately, we don't have any of Margaret's letters that she wrote – only a few of the ones that she received.

Margaret's mother and sister wrote to her regarding her brother John Carlyle Herbert's impending nuptials to Mary Snowden of Montpelier as did Mrs. Calvert in her own letters. We also learn from a



Empire Waist Dress popular in the Federal Period.

letter written in 1807 by Mrs. Calvert to her brother, Charles Stier, an investor in the Bank of Alexandria, that John Carlyle Herbert was a friend of Charles and a good neighbor of Mrs. Calvert's. She wrote: "Do you talk of America sometimes, and what do you think of this country? The greatest failing I perceive in Americans is their heartlessness. They do not seem to feel anything deeply and are too prudent and

reasonable to be lovable. We have a very nice little circle of neighbors who we see often and unceremoniously. Your friend John Herbert who married Miss Snowden has built a house six miles away." John Carlyle Herbert was apparently in that "very nice little circle of neighbors" and accepted in spite of being an American.

Entertainments in the Federal Period were many. Dinners and parties, dances and extended visits with family kept the Herberts and Fairfaxes quite active and busy. According to the book *Parlor Politics*, Alexandria held more "civilized charms" than Washington, which the residents of the Federal City could escape to. Life was often gay and when Dolley Madison took on the White House entertainments just a few miles up the road from the Herberts and Fairfaxes became more frequent and enjoyed great popularity. Every Wednesday evening for eight years, Mrs. Madison held her "Wednesday Night Drawing Rooms." Between 200 and 300 guests would visit these affairs and sometimes even more than that would attend.

The region was prosperous with growth in all quarters, including an active social and political role for women. "Dove Parties" were held for the wives of Cabinet members to gather together and talk about current events and philanthropic projects. Mrs.

Madison drew the elites to these parties, including Marcia Burnes Van Ness, the wife of New York Representative John P. Van Ness, where the women could officially meet to "implement projects of benefit and interest to local society and the entire Washington community." Though we do not have evidence that members of the Herbert or Fairfax families attended these activities, it is possible that they did so since they were part of the elite upper class and held political office.

When war came to America in 1812, it is worth considering how it affected the Herbert and Fairfax families' relationships. Although Thomas Fairfax, with his father, Bryan Fairfax, were among the last guests at Mount Vernon, on December 11, 1799 before Washington died, he was still a member of the House of Lords. How were Thomas and Margaret treated in Virginia during the War of 1812? Thomas had been a Lord since 1802 yet had grown up with George Washington and his father and grandfather being friends and relatives. It would then make sense that he could have not wanted to ally himself when Britain and America met in war. But it is difficult to say for certain which side he stood on, if any. His brother-in-law, John Carlyle Herbert, was a Federalist and served in the Virginia House of Delegates and later in Maryland's House of Delegates and was elected to the House of Representatives after the war. Another possible point of contention for the family was that William Herbert, Thomas Fairfax's father-in-law, was the former mayor of Alexandria and on the Committee of Vigilance which ultimately surrendered the city to the British.

This may have made for some interesting conversation between the gentlemen, and also the female members of their family. Although, perhaps Thomas, John and William shared a similar attitude as that



THOMAS, NINTH LORD FAIRFAX. (THE "TOMMY" OF THIS CHRONICLE.)

Thomas, Ninth Lord Fairfax



expressed by “Ellis and Allan”, a mercantile firm that was located in Richmond, Virginia. The firm wrote to an individual it did business with in Bristol, England to say “Let Kings & Presidents war and fight but not old friends.” Most likely, the Herberts and Thomas felt a need to continue along amicably rather than create a distressing situation for the family. However, the period of war occurred after the letters archived at Carlyle House were written so we do not know the details of the family dynamics at that point and time. But we do have an idea of how Federalists and Alexandrians felt about the war. In fact, the editor of the *Alexandria Daily Gazette* was a strong advocate for peace and frequently spoke out against the war.

The letters of Margaret Herbert Fairfax and her family are an important part of the story of Carlyle House and provide valuable insight as to what life was like in the beginning of the 19th century prior to the War of 1812 when “kings and presidents” went to war. However, life in the Chesapeake, and particularly Alexandria can be explored not just through letters but also in newspapers and journals that date back to the 19th century. To learn more from a primary source about life and politics, as well as consumerism and fashion, visit the Maryland State Archives website to access the *Maryland Gazette* online: <http://www.aomol.net/html/mdgazette.html>.

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