



# 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 2***

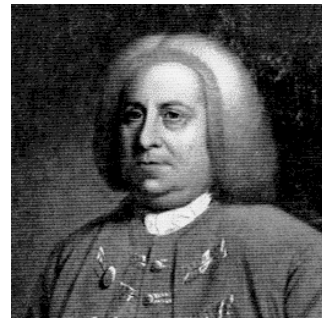
*By Helen Wirka*

*This article is part two of two. It 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.*

Although Carlyle and George Washington were family and friends, they would also take advantage of social opportunities to talk business as well. On the same snowbound visit, mentioned in the previous article, that John and Sarah Carlyle made to Mount Vernon from March 12-15 in 1760, Washington recorded in his diary that "Mr. Carlyle and his wife still remained here. We talked a good deal of a scheme of setting up an Iron Work on Col. Fairfax's Land on Shenandoah..."

We can also document John Carlyle and George Washington's friendship and business dealings based upon correspondence from the French and Indian War (1755-1763), known widely in Europe as the Seven Years War. Carlyle was actually the supplier for Washington's outfit that ventured into the Ohio Country for the second time in 1754. The foray into the wilderness ultimately resulted in the death of a young French Officer named Jumonville. The lasting effect of this encounter, along with other causes, was the French and Indian War. Throughout Carlyle's time serving as a commissary to the British troops, there were great difficulties in supplying them with the proper clothing, wagons, food, arms and ammunition. Contractors who Carlyle had signed agreements with were not forthcoming on

their promises. Carlyle, unused to results such as these and not being able to deliver on his promises, struggled



Robert Dinwiddie, colonial governor of Virginia

in his post to maintain his reputation. Letters from his superiors such as Governor Dinwiddie, General Braddock, Sir John St. Clair and others indicated great

displeasure. However, business relationships that faltered were not always a



*E Braddock*

Major General Edward Braddock, Commander-in-Chief of His Majesty's Forces in north America

reflection of personal relationships. Letters containing reprimands would end on a pleasant note such as the following from Virginia Governor Dinwiddie: "I have a letter from Col. Washington, full of Complaints of ill usage from your deputies...such neglect will ruin the

expedition. The men must have proper supplies, I therefore desire you would not trust to promises but be

**CARLYLE HOUSE**  
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certain of the purchase and of its being properly conveyed to them...these complaints give me great uneasiness, I therefore desire you will prevent them for the future...I fear the waggoners and etc. trifle with you and do not perform their duties...my kind respects to Mrs. Carlyle. I am sincerely, sir, your friend and humble servant.”

Washington had done a good job convincing the Governor that it was not Carlyle’s fault that they were “extremely ill used” but rather that it lay on the shoulders of his deputies and not at the door of Carlyle himself. He had written to Dinwiddie that Carlyle “is a gentleman so capable of the business himself and has taken so much pains to give satisfaction—he, I believe has been deceived, and we have suffered by those under him...In a late letter to Major Carlyle I have complained of the tardiness of his deputy’s and desired he would accuse them therewith as I had also done.”

Not only had Carlyle taken on additional duties as commissary to the British, but he was still looking out for his friend’s business interests as well. In a letter to Washington which kept him informed about the health of the family and bolstering his friend’s confidence he wrote “We have great rejoicings on your good success”, and included a postscript: “I have got 4 hogsheads of your tobacco down and have paid off your carpenters, per your order. The tobacco is but indifferent and with some trouble, passed inspection.”

In late 1755 or early 1756, Carlyle resigned his commission as “Store keeper of all the provisions, arms, ammunition baggage of all other kinds” for the British. However, he did continue to be a contractor, supplying goods to the army. Except now he was no longer in charge and struggling with the difficulty of keeping suppliers in line as he had while in the role of commissary. Carlyle and Washington had many business dealings

outside the war. Carlyle helped maintain his friend’s domestic affairs and bought slaves from Maryland and elsewhere in Virginia; supported Washington’s campaign for office, especially in 1758 when he was stationed out on the frontier; organized the sale and shipment of Washington’s tobacco; forwarded letters and a suit of clothing that came from Williamsburg; ordered items from London and stored them in the Carlyle and Dalton warehouse. They also participated jointly in business ventures such as buying mining shares on Abraham Barnes’ Sugarland Run tract, and the company of Carlyle and Adam which shipped flour and meal was supplied with wheat from Washington’s farms.

One last note on shared interests between Carlyle and Washington, was that of horseback riding. Not only did Carlyle and Washington go fox hunting, according to a note in George’s diary, and the fact that Carlyle had a horn in his inventory commonly used for hunting when he died in 1780, but they also took enjoyment from organizing horse races for sport.



“The Portraiture of Fearnought the Property of His Grace the Duke of Bolton,” ca. 1750, Carlyle House Collection.

In 1760 and 1761, notices appeared in local newspapers, such as the following:

“To be Run for on Thursday the 28th day of May, on the usual Race Ground at Alexandria; a purse of fifty pounds, three times round the ground (being near three

miles) the best in three heats, by any horse, mare or gelding...And on the day following will be run for on the same ground and distance a purse of twenty five pounds by four year old colts...the horses to be entered on the



Monday before the race with the managers, Mr. George Washington, Mr. John Carlyle, and Mr. Charles Digges: each horse to pay fifty shillings on the first day and twenty-five shillings the second and those who do not enter their horses on the Monday aforesaid to pay double entrance....”

One of the most famous references made to John Carlyle by George Washington, was that of the “Bread and Butter Ball.” Although Washington eventually purchased land in Alexandria to build his townhouse, it was not completed until 1769. Until that time, he would have stayed at the home of friends when special evenings occurred. In his February 15, 1760 diary record, Washington wrote:

“Went to a ball in Alexandria—where music and dancing was the chief entertainment. However in a convenient Room detached for the purpose abounded a great plenty of bread and butter, some biscuits with tea and coffee which the drinker of could not distinguish from hot water sweetened. Be it remembered that pocket handkerchiefs served the purpose of table cloths and napkins and that no apologies were made for either. I shall therefore distinguish this ball by the style and title of the bread and butter ball.

The proprietors of this ball were Messrs. Carlyle, Laurie, and Robert Wilson, but the doctor not getting it conducted agreeable to his own taste would claim no share of the merit of it. We lodged at Col. Carlyles.”

To conclude, John Carlyle and George Washington helped build Alexandria to be the city that it is today. The familial relationship lasted beyond death, as Washington continued to visit young Sally Carlyle, John and Sarah Fairfax Carlyle’s eldest daughter, who grew up to become Mrs. William Herbert. She and her family were among the last visitors to Mount Vernon before the death of George Washington. She also maintained a friendship with Martha

Washington and had loaned her a spinet, likely given to her by her father, later in life. The relationship between the Carlyle and Washington families is an excellent example of how individuals with passion, drive and dedication to their friends and family and commitments resulted in the successful growth of Virginia first as a colony, and then as a state. We now welcome visitors to Carlyle House, to come see it as George Washington and his family did, and learn more about life in the 18th century through our collection, copies of letters, and living history events throughout the year.



Spinet. Carlyle House Collection.