



# Carlyle House

## Docent Dispatch

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

### Widowed, Again

On March 7, 1769, John Carlyle was widowed for the second time in twenty-two years. Harry Piper, one of Carlyle's fellow merchants in Alexandria, noted Sybil West Carlyle's death in a letter written back to England, *We have lost our good Neighbor Mrs. Carlyle, she Dyed of a Consumption.* Although we often think of Sarah Fairfax as the "love of his life" because Carlyle asked to be buried beside her and their children at the Presbyterian Meeting House, it is clear from his writings that he is deeply grieved by the death of Sybil. In the Carlyle family bible John records, *March 7<sup>th</sup> This day Sibyl Carlyle The Second Wife of John Carlyle departed this Life After a painfull illness of many months & Miscarred of A Daughter in Every Station of Life that She Lived in she filled them with Honour & dyed Greatly Lamented by All that know her.* Four months later in his August 21, 1769 letter to George his sadness obviously persists when he states *...I expect you may have Received my last in wich you woud be fully informed Of my great Loss which will not bear mentioning at presaent. Every day I am more & more Sensable of it & truly say yr Brother wants much to be near you to Assist him to bear Up under the Dispensations of Providence.*

Left alone with three children, girls twelve and eight and a son only three, Carlyle the single parent, was clearly worried about them. He wrote to George on August 21, 1769 that, *...When I consider my Lettle Girales now in a time of Life the most Dangerous to be without A proper Directeris ...it gives me great concern.* Later that same year he

again expressed his apprehensions about his children's welfare, *...I am Afraid of Leaveing my Little ones which keeps me Constantly at home...*, indeed a difficult situation for a busy merchant. Unlike many of his contemporaries who found themselves in similar circumstances, this time he did not choose to remarry. We do not know why Carlyle remained single. Certainly, a man of his wealth and status would have been looked upon as an attractive matrimonial prize and indeed his life would have been simplified with the presence of a wife to supervise both the running of his home and the raising of his children.

Whatever Carlyle's reasons for not remarrying, it is clear that the entire family felt the loss of Sybil deeply. Sally, John's oldest daughter and step-daughter of Sybil, wrote to her uncle on August 25, 1769, *I Suppose my papa before this has acquainted you with our great loss in my Late Mamma it is a great Loss to my sister & me she was a tender Mother.* From the August letter, and from Carlyle's statement in his December 12, 1769 letter that his children, *...as farr as They Can Endeavour to keep up my spirits, which is very low sometime...*, a picture emerges of a close-knit family trying to support each other through a difficult period.

It is also at this crucial juncture in the life of the

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**Carlyle House**

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## Widowed, Again (con't)



Carlyle family that young Sally begins to emerge as a person in her own right. Just as Sarah Fairfax Carlyle had twenty-two years before at the death of her mother Deborah, Sally felt the need to try and take on the management of her father's household. If, at the age of sixteen, her mother had found it oppressive to try to run Belvoir (noted in John's letter of January 25, 1747), Sally, at age twelve, realized that she was too young for the task. In the same letter to her uncle which expressed her sense of loss, she continued to say that she wished Sybil *...had lived a few years longer that I might been Intrusted to have taken the care of papas house Opon my own hands, which is too much for me as yet.*

A year later in 1770 the presence of a housekeeper in the household is documented in Mary Ambler's diary. She records tipping a housekeeper during a visit to the Carlyle home. If Carlyle followed the practice of his contemporaries, the housekeeper was probably a paid white servant. Could employing a housekeeper have been an attempt by Carlyle to ease his daughter's fears about running the household? Perhaps an adult female at home would also have given John the peace of mind to be able to resume traveling again for his merchant business. We find that even though the housekeeper

undoubtedly oversaw the domestic functioning of the home, it seems to have been Sally who served as hostess. Mary Ambler records that on the same visit mentioned above she was *...kindly received by Miss Carlyle (her father not at home) in the Aftern Mr. Dalton & his 3 Daughters came to visit them & spent the Eveg with them.*

How Sally managed the trauma of losing her own mother and her step-mother before the age of 13 we will never fully know. What might have prompted John to write in his August 1769 letter, *Sally grows A Woman to fast, which in this Country is Dangerous but have no Reason at preasent to have cause of Complaint Against her...?* Perhaps it is merely another reflection of his apprehension, cited above, at her being *...in a time of Life most Dangerous.* Did he foresee an early marriage? Current scholarship shows us by the mid-eighteenth century the average age at marriage was approximately twenty-four for men and a year or so younger for women. There is a marked deviation from these averages in the marriage of Sarah Fairfax to John Carlyle when she was barely seventeen, in the marriage of Ann Carlyle to Henry Whiting at age fourteen, and in the marriage of Sally Carlyle to William Herbert prior to her eighteenth birthday. Possibly the

deaths of mothers and step-mothers and the burdens of taking over the awesome responsibilities of becoming mistress of your father's house pushed these young