

Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

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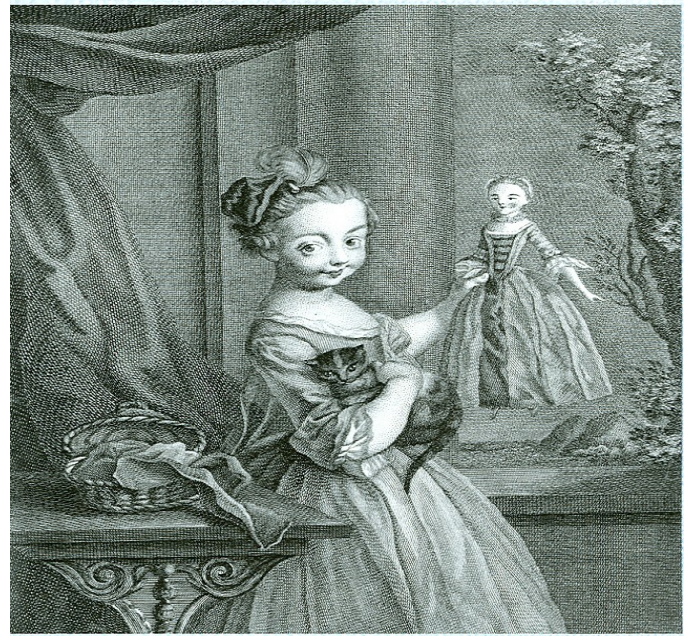
An Abbreviated Youth: the Early Years of Sarah Carlyle Herbert

by Erica Nuckles and Erin Adams

On December 31, 1747, John Carlyle wed Sarah Fairfax, a member of the prominent Fairfax family of Virginia. Surviving accounts of the marriage express John Carlyle's fond wish that his life with Sarah in Virginia would be prosperous and that their marriage would be blessed with a family: "*I Shall be [...] Thoroughly Settled With My Dr Partner,*" he wrote to his beloved brother George of Carlisle, England. As John and Sarah Carlyle worked towards establishing a home and family in Alexandria, many obstacles met them, particularly the inability to sustain their children through their earliest years of life. By the tenth year of their marriage, the couple had experienced the loss of all four of their children, each within their first months of life. Young Sarah Fairfax Carlyle was born January 4, 1757 and proved to be the exception to this trend. In a letter written in August of 1757 to brother George, John wrote of his new daughter who was by this point well into her first year of life: "*My Losses is in Sum Measure made Up In A Little Girel too Who is Very healthy, We Luckily gott A Very healthy Young Nurse & Am In hopes She may be Spared to Us-*"

Sarah's early childhood included the birth of her sister Hanah, in August of 1759. Five months later, however, when Sarah was barely three years old, her baby sister died. One year later, on January 21, 1761, her mother gave birth to a daughter, Ann, who did survive. Sarah's mother, unfortunately, died the day after the delivery. Her death was attributed to complications from childbirth, a common killer of women in the eighteenth century. The death of the Carlyle matriarch sent a deep shock through the family. John was left to care for a toddler and newborn with the help of his slaves and servants, but his daughters needed a mother. Later that year, on December 22, 1761, he married Sybil West. Although little is known about Sybil, and even less about her relationship with Sarah Carlyle's children, the recorded sentiments expressed by John Carlyle and his daughter Sarah indicate an harmonious household.

The responsibility of educating Sarah fell on Sybil Carlyle's shoulders, although her father had very decided opinions about it. Sarah's education seemed to be typical to other Virginia girls in a similar economic bracket. As her childhood progressed she became literate. The letters she wrote that have survived are proof of this education.



L'enfance, Childhood, engraved by Simon François Ravenet, after a painting by Philip Mercier, Britain, 1750-1760.

Following her father's lead, young Sarah wrote numerous letters to her Uncle George, and to her cousins living in England. Along with books, she also learned to read music. Music was a common aspect of female genteel training, but John Carlyle indicated that he thought music a companion to all the arts—drawing, in particular. Sarah learned to play the spinet as well as sing. She was nine years old when she began

CARLYLE HOUSE

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director

Jim Bartlinski, Curator

Erin Adams, Curator of Education

her spinet lessons, a fact made clear through a letter her father wrote to her Uncle George in August of 1766: “*My Sally is just beginning her Spinnet She Sings prettily, but you know I am no judge...*” Sarah followed her father’s letter with a request of her own, “*I see you have desired me to write to you for any musick that I want. [...] my papa only intends to keep me with the Master this season & I am in want of some agreeable Tunes that I can learn myself.*” Her lessons were generally conducted at Mount Vernon where the music tutor “*attends The Cols Two Childrun.*”

Aside from reaching the educational objectives which society had designated proper for someone of Sarah’s class and gender, she was also taught how to run a household. Training of this manner would have been the duty of Sarah’s stepmother, Sybil, who guided her eldest charge to become a proper hostess, able to manage a home attended by servants and slaves. Spending time with the Custis children at Mount Vernon allowed Sarah to form friendships in the highest levels of colonial society, and to hone her etiquette skills. Sarah, in turn would help to raise her other siblings, especially her sister Ann, in their proper place within genteel society.

Typically, a young girl’s training in this manner prepared her to run her own household once she married. Sarah, however, found herself in the role of hostess far earlier. Sybil had borne three sons, John, William, and George William, although only the latter survived beyond his first years. When Sarah reached the age of twelve, her stepmother died from the miscarriage of a daughter. The same letter—August of 1769—that Sarah writes to Uncle George, requesting music, provides an insight into Sarah’s feelings of her loss and the void that had been left upon her stepmother’s death:

“I Suppose my papa before this has acquaint’d you with our great lofs in my... Late Mamma it is a great Lofs to my sister & me she was a tender Mother and wish she had lived a few years Longer that I might been Intrusted to have taken the care of papas house opon my own hand which is too much for me as yet.”

Sarah was left to care for her sister Ann, age eight, and brother George William, age three, in addition to her domestic responsibilities.

Sarah seemed destined to fulfill the social mandate set aside for a gentlewoman to take care of a family and a home of her own. Her childhood had been cut short when her stepmother died, requiring Sarah to fill the void left by her sudden absence. She prematurely fell into the role of mother, hostess, and manager taking care of her brother, sister, and father. This abbreviated youth, however, would prepare her to raise a family of her own with her husband, William Herbert, within the walls of her own childhood home.

Sources

Norton, Mary Beth. *Liberty’s Daughters*, 75.

John Carlyle, Alexandria, Virginia to Doctor George Carlyle, Carlisle, England, 25 January 1748. Carlyle Family Papers, Library and Manuscript Collections, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

John Carlyle, Alexandria, Virginia to Doctor George Carlyle, Carlisle, England, 10 August 1755. Carlyle Family Papers, Library and Manuscript Collections, VA Historical Society.



H. Pickering, ‘*Eleanor Frances Dixie*,’ c. 1755.

Companion Exhibition: Consider visiting the Lyceum’s exhibition “*Treasures of Childhood*” which explores the material culture of childhood in Alexandria. The exhibition has recently opened, and will be on view through Labor Day. The Lyceum is at 201 S. Washington Street. Admission is always free.

“Question of the Month”—will be revived in future newsletters. Please submit questions to the Museum Supervisor or to Erin. Due to space, only one question can be addressed. More will be answered as space permits.



The Virginia Thoroughbred: Bred for Strength, Speed, Stamina, and Courage

John Carlyle was one of the first Virginians to import quality Thoroughbreds to the colony. By 1750, John was making arrangements with a “Mr. Singleton” of Kendal, England to export Thoroughbred horses to Virginia. However, eighteen years earlier, Samuel Gist of Hanover County had set the pace and is reported to have been the initial person to introduce Thoroughbreds of Arabian blood to Virginia in 1732. Gist had imported to Virginia *Bulle Rock*, an Arabian horse descended from the sire-line of *Darley Arabian*. *Bulle Rock* is said to be the first Arabian in British-America. *Bulle Rock*’s introduction to Virginia was the beginning of a rapid increase in the quality of the racing and hunting stock to be found in 18th-century America. Thoroughbreds are spirited horses bred to carry weight at a sustained speed over an extended distance. These qualities made them well suited for racing, the hunt, and more ominous sport.



Fearnought, 1755-56.

Apparently John Carlyle’s interest in fine horses mimicked that of Samuel Gist, for he too went beyond importing them to America. During the 1760s we find John sponsoring organized races “*on the usual Race Ground at Alexandria*” with the likes of George Washington. What’s more, at some point in the early 1770s Carlyle’s zeal for Thoroughbred horses is made more evident, for the historic record indicates that he started breeding his own stock at his Four Mile-Run plantation, *Thorthorwald* named for an ancient Carlyle seat in Scotland near current day Shirlington, Virginia.

By 1774, all Thoroughbreds in Virginia, including John Carlyle’s are thought to have been descended from thirty-five mares and three Arabian stallions imported into England from the Mediterranean region of the Middle East and North Africa during the late 17th and early 18th-centuries. The Arabian stallions were *Byerley Turk* brought to England during the 1680s, *Darley Arabian* introduced to England in 1704, and *Godolphin*

Arabian imported into England in 1729. Like their blue-blooded counterparts in England, America’s emerging aristocracy began to take a more avid interest in Thoroughbreds and many of the gentry, like Carlyle imported the finest blooded horses they could find into the American colonies for racing, hunting as well as breeding. By the 1750s, a number of these Thoroughbreds were in Virginia. They included *Jolly Roger*, most likely brought to Virginia in 1751. *Jolly Roger* is said to be the first horse to give genuine distinction to Virginia’s racing stock and is descended from *Partner*, supposedly the best racer and Thoroughbred stallion of his time. *Jolly Roger* died in 1772 at the age of 31, leaving behind many descendants.

Most breed historians who have researched the bloodlines of Thoroughbreds view the Arabian *Fearnought* as the foremost sire in 18th-century Virginia as well as in the American colonies. Born in England in 1755, *Fearnought* arrived in Virginia in 1764. Sired by *Regulus* a son of *Godolphin Arabian*, the Thoroughbred *Fearnought* introduced much needed size, stamina and courage into the American Thoroughbred stock. For this reason, many of his progeny found themselves as mounts in various dragoon regiments, including the 3rd Continental Light Dragoons and ended up as casualties of war. One of *Fearnought*’s most celebrated sons *Regulus*, named for his paternal grandsire, gave his life in the fight for American independence. In an action that occurred in May 1782, *Regulus* the beloved mount of 4th Continental Light Dragoon Captain Erasmus Gill of Virginia is mortally wounded. Gill recounts the loss of his faithful steed in a letter: “Yesterday ... we had a charge against our Enemy and ... my favorite horse, *Regulus* ...received a butt from a blunderbuss [a short musket of wide bore and flaring muzzle, used to scatter shot at close range] on his forehead, which occasioned him instantly to Expire – which he did in my arms.”

Evidently several other Virginia Thoroughbreds saw service during the American Revolution. The Fitzhughs and Pages two of Virginia’s leading families as well as breeders of Thoroughbreds, provided quality horses to the 3rd Continental Light Dragoons for a period. It is quite possible that John



3rd Continental Light Dragoon, Don Troiani

Virginia Thoroughbred, Cont'd

Carlyle did the same as the Fitzhughs and Pages and provided horses of Arabian blood to the Continental Army as well as Virginia's mounted forces before his death in September 1780. Besides supplying Thoroughbred mounts with distinguished lineages to the army, all three of these leading families of Virginia had sons that served with the 3rd Continental Light Dragoons.

After his short stint in the Fairfax Militia, during the winter and summer of 1781, it is plausible to suggest that when Carlyle's teenaged son, George William rode off to volunteer in Lieutenant Colonel William Washington's 3rd Continental Light Dragoons, that he did so on one of his fathers Thoroughbreds. It is also likely that when the gallant young Carlyle made his last charge against the enemy on September 8, 1781, at the Battle of Eutaw Springs, South Carolina, that the boy carried out his final duty astride the back of a Virginia Thoroughbred.

Docent Refresher Training II

During Docent Refresher Training Part Two, Jim Bartlinksy will be giving an in-depth tour of the house including information about room uses, preservation, and paint colors. This special curatorial tour will be held Tuesday, August 8. Dinner will be served at 6:30, with the tour following at 7:00. Summer is a great time to take a fresh look at information and update your tour. Please sign up in the office if you plan to attend.

If you know anyone who you think might like to become a docent, please let them know about the training and pass on their contact information to a staff member. We will be glad to call any prospective docents and give them more information about our volunteer opportunities.

Join CHAD!

The Carlyle House Association of Docents was formed to provide you, with additional benefits and rewards. Dues are paid annually, to fund lecture series, training materials, special trips, monthly newsletters, and a museum shop discount of 10%. This year, we have decreased the dues to \$5. Once you have paid your dues, we will provide updated directory information, docent membership card, and send you more details about upcoming events. Don't forget—a CHAD membership card will get you free admission at many of the local museums and historic sites.

Please update your contact information. There is a list of names, addresses, etc. in the Docent Lounge on a clipboard for your review.

Library Update

Two new books on our shelves may be of interest:

George Washington's Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour In Company and Conversation. MVLA, 1989. As a young man, GW copied out 110 rules of civility. These rules reflect the social codes that would have been important to John Carlyle as a member of the Washingtons' social class.

A New Encyclopædia of Freemasonry. Arthur Edward Waite. University Books, 1970. With the funeral exhibition, interest about the role of Freemasons in colonial Alexandria has been piqued. Refer to the *Docent Dispatch* of November 2005 for information about Carlyle's membership.

Newsletter Changes

This month, we are sending the *Dispatch* both as an electronic file and a paper copy. Please acknowledge your receipt or non-receipt of the electronic file. We are still testing out the efficacy of electronic newsletters.

Free Walking Tour

Carlyle House Docent Bob Madison, author of *Walking With Washington*, will give his walking tour to docents and their family and friends at 10:00 a.m. on Monday, September 18 and at 1:30 p.m. on Sunday, September 24, weather permitting. Plan on over two and one-half hours, as he will be adding some John Carlyle tidbits at some of the sites. Both tours will leave promptly from Carlyle House. Sign up in the office.

Special Thank You

I am thrilled to be continuing my work here at the Carlyle House. The last two and one-half years have really shown me what a small historic house museum really means to its visitors, to the community, and to the museum field. The level of collegiality found at Carlyle House impresses me. My fellow staff members have been encouraging and instructive. In short, because of you all, I know I have made the right career choice! As I continue in my new roles—Curator of Education and Museum Shop Manager—please know that I am always available to you. Feel free to drop in, email or call me I look forward to my time with you,

Elin Adams