

# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

### *Carlyle and the Tobacco Trade* by Steve Kimbell

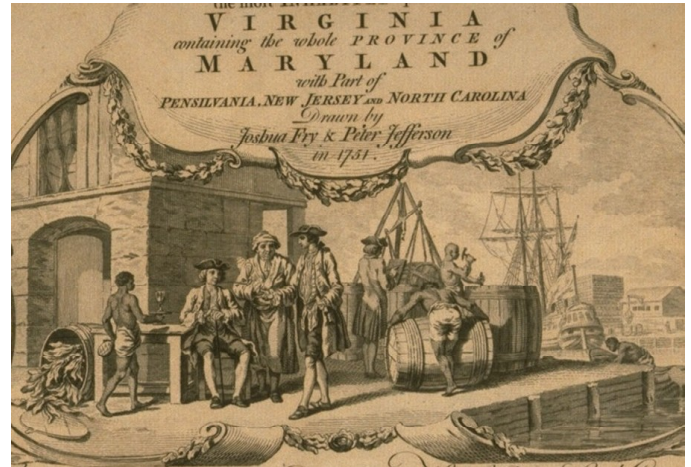
John Carlyle came to Alexandria from the northern England port town of Whitehaven to participate in the tobacco trade. There, in the late seventeenth century, Whitehaven merchant Richard Kelsick initiated the port's tobacco trade with a series of successful trading voyages. By the time John Carlyle arrived in Virginia the merchants of Whitehaven had grown their trade in tobacco from 1,639,193 pounds in 1712 to 4,419,218 pounds by 1740.

The tobacco plantation culture in Virginia arose after 1612 when John Rolfe of the Virginia Company, showed that tobacco would grow well in Virginia and could be sold at a profit in England.

By the end of the first quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century tobacco came to dominate the economy of England's Chesapeake Bay colonies, Colonial Virginia and Maryland. Tobacco was so profitable that small bundles of leaves constituted a medium of exchange. Clergymen, lawyers, physicians, anyone with even a small plot of land became a small-scale planter. At Jamestown they actually planted tobacco in the streets.

Soon vast swathes of land in the Tidewater regions of Maryland and Virginia were cleared and planted in tobacco. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial America was exporting more than 20 million pounds of tobacco a year. However, after half a century of success the British market was over saturated and tobacco prices sank below the costs of production. During this price slump growers started stuffing tree leaves and even the sweepings from the floors of their homes into the bails of tobacco they were shipping to England. This soon ruined the reputation of Tidewater tobacco and depressed demand even further.

Virginia addressed the problem by passing the Virginia Tobacco Inspection Acts of 1730, which required planters to bring their tobacco crop to an official warehouse where inspectors would sort the tobacco from any trash, and then grade it according to its quality and condition. The



*Cartouche of Joshua Fry and Peter Jefferson's  
A Map of the most Inhabited parts of Virginia, London, 1768*

planter was then issued on official tobacco note stating the weight and value of the tobacco he had stored in the King's warehouse. Tobacco notes could be sold on the spot to an exporter who would assume the risk of transporting the tobacco to England or the planter could retain ownership and ship his tobacco at his own risk and expense in hopes of getting a higher price from tobacco buyers on the London docks. Of course most planters chose to make their profit on this side of the Atlantic and so sold their crop at the prevailing price to a merchant like John Carlyle.

Tobacco was brought to market in barrels called hogsheads. In England a hogshead was used as a liquid measure. A hogshead of wine equaled two barrels or 63 U.S. gallons (238.48 liters) while a hogshead of ale

#### CARLYLE HOUSE

*Mary Ruth Coleman, Director  
Jim Bartlinski, Curator  
Sarah Arnold, Curator of Education*



or beer equaled 1.5 barrels or 51 U.S. gallons (235.68 liters). Only in the American colonies was the hogshead used as a dry measure and only for tobacco.

An “average” hogshead or barrel of tobacco was 48 inches long and had a diameter of 30 inches across the opening. Each held about half a ton (450 kilograms) of tobacco. There was no truly standard weight and volume for hogsheads and barrels since they were hand-made by coopers whose style of construction could cause the volume of a container to vary because the middle of one cooper’s barrels may bow out more than those made by another cooper.

To give you an approximation of what a hogshead tobacco looked like, imagine a stack of five tires for a typical Recreational Vehicle (RV). Each tire is 30.7 inches (780mm) in diameter and 9.5 inches (241 mm) in width, based on Goodyear Unisteel G614 RST.

Alexandria’s Oronoco Street takes its name from the tobacco grown on nearby plantations and it leads directly to the city’s Royal Tobacco Warehouse and Inspection Station operated by Hue West, the father of John Carlyle’s second wife, Sybil. He also served with Carlyle on the Council of 10 men who founded Alexandria in 1749.

Now imagine hogsheads of tobacco pulled by teams of horses rolling down the road to Alexandria’s official tobacco inspection station. Roads like Oronoco were called rolling roads. For instance, today’s Rolling Road takes you from Braddock Road near Burke to Pohick Church on U.S. Route One, but starting in 1753 Fairfax

County planters used the path to move their hogsheads of tobacco from their plantations to the old port of Colechester.

Virginia planters grew two varieties of tobacco. Sweetscented tobacco, as the name implies, has a sweet taste, a light texture, and a pale color. It was in greatest demand among smokers in London where it brought a higher price than the competing variety called Oronoco.

Oronoco originated in Central America and was imported by northern Virginia planters when they found it flourished in the upper Potomac’s heavier soils. The leaf of the Oronoco plant was dark brown in color, rough textured, and very strong tasting, but it was preferred over the sweeter tasting tobaccos by smokers on the European continent and so had a huge market compared to the lighter Sweetscented tobacco brands. The preferred variety of tobacco indicated on Tobacco Notes issued at Hue West’s warehouses was “Oronoco”.

Besides supplying European smokers with their preferred brand, Alexandria had another advantage in the tobacco trade. It was the major port city located in the heart of the Oronoco growing uplands. Since the lowland soils of Tidewater Virginia, along the banks of the lower Potomac, the James, the York, and the Rappahannock Rivers were light and sandy they were better suited to the cultivation of Sweetscented variety.

Growing tobacco was a labor intensive form of agriculture and trading tobacco was carried on in an extremely volatile commodity market. In his “Viaggio 1785-87” the Milanese traveler Luigi Castiglioni writes that when he visited Virginia; “The main, and almost only, item of trade is tobacco, a native plant of that region, used as a medicine by the Indians before the arrival of the Europeans. The cultivation of this plant calls for a great deal of care and employs a large number of slaves during most of the year.” This lengthy production process contributed to the gyrating market price for the crop.

Colonial planters were prohibited from selling their crop directly to Continental European traders. The Scottish and English merchants in cities such as Glasgow and Whitehaven set the prices and controlled the market in as much as there were any restrictions. Over production by the planters however, invariably assured the mercantilists a hefty profit.

The crop regularly sold for a penny a pound or less right



*A modern hogshead replica.*



Seventeenth century tobacco ad by Francis Bedford

up to the passage of the 1730 Tobacco Inspection Act. In 1731 Virginia exported 34 million pounds of tobacco that sold for as much as 12 shillings 6 pence per hundred pounds. A previous all-time record crop of 29 million pounds was produced in 1709 despite the fact that four years earlier many planters took one quarter of a penny per pound for their crop.

Following further restrictions imposed by the General Assembly tobacco sold for 15 shillings per hundred pounds in 1736.

During the early 1750's tobacco was selling for 20 shillings per hundred pounds despite bumper crops of between 38 and 53 million pounds a year. During the French and Indian War the fighting interrupted tobacco production and when Virginia started printing paper money inflation caused tobacco prices to rise to 20 shillings per hundredweight. After the peace prices dropped back to three pence per pound.

During the American Revolution the General Assembly cut off all tobacco exports to Britain. The wars of the 18th century and overproduction caused wild price fluctuations and a wartime shortage of British ships Chesapeake Bay Colony planters lost market share to foreign growers. Records show that during the American Revolution (1776 to 1782) total tobacco exports failed to equal a single year before the rebellion.

During the Revolution tobacco prices went from 18 shillings per hundred pounds in 1775 to 2,000 Continental shillings in 1781 but bumper crops following the peace depressed prices once again. By 1800 Virginia tobacco sold for \$7.40 per hundred pounds and exports topped more than 78 thousand hogheads.

Even before the American Revolution brought a temporary halt to the tobacco trade a shift in the agricultural economies of the Chesapeake Bay Colonies was well underway.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the fastest growing new market was that for food. Virginia's exports of food grains, corn and wheat, more than tripled after 1740 while tobacco exports rose by only 15 percent. Much of the grain came from new lands opened up on the western frontier, which was then known as the Shenandoah Valley. Even in tobacco growing areas the higher prices for surplus food exports encouraged established planters to shift land and labor away from tobacco to more lucrative wheat and corn.

In the post Revolutionary War era America's breadbasket were the fields of corn and wheat nestled in the valleys of the low lying Appalachian Mountains of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley and western Maryland's frontier counties. As southern agriculture continued to diversify the growing of rice and indigo increased in importance. But it was ultimately one crop that came to dominate when "King Cotton" came to rule the agricultural states of the south.

**Selected Sources**

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***Docents Needed to Volunteer at Soldier's Christmas***



Help welcome the local community who will be touring Old Town during the Scottish Walk parade by volunteering to interpret our museum rooms!

**When:** Saturday, December 6th. Shifts are from 12-2pm and 2pm to 4pm

**What:** Volunteer for two hours as a guide stationed in the rooms to explain the history of the house and answer visitor questions.

**How:** Sign up in the office or call 703-549-2997