



Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

December 2002

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

John Carlyle: The Presbyterian

After realizing the impact that religion had on everyday colonial Virginia, it makes you wonder how all the religious fervor that was occurring during the Great Awakening would have impacted the Carlyle household. With all of the information we have about Carlyle's public and personal life, there are unfortunately only a few clues that reveal the role religion played in John's life. Specifically, how being Presbyterian affected his daily activities.

The Rev. Charles Green's 1749/50 List of Tithables officially lists Carlyle as a Presbyterian. Considering John Carlyle's Scottish heritage, it makes sense that he was Presbyterian because the Presbyterian Church was the official church in Scotland in the eighteenth century. In a world where the Anglican Church was central, it appears that Carlyle carefully balanced Anglican responsibilities with his Presbyterian beliefs in order to successfully navigate colonial society. As an official dissenter, Carlyle would not be able to hold any positions in the Assembly or on the vestry. According to an Act of General Assembly in 1744, colonists were required to attend the Anglican Church at least once a month or else they would be fined. Records indicate the John Carlyle was never fined for not attending to his monthly requirements. Carlyle

probably attended the required services because he would not have been able to hold either his justice of the peace or militia commission without being in good standing with the Church of England. Carlyle was also required to swear an oath to the Church of England in order to hold these positions. John Carlyle went one step further in meeting his required duties. When Christ Church (the Anglican Church in Alexandria) was constructed, John Carlyle was listed as having purchased one of the most expensive pews.



Despite Carlyle's flawless monthly attendance and expensive pew purchase, records indicate that John also attended local Presbyterian services. Before the Presbyterian Meeting House in Alexandria was constructed in the fall of 1774, Presbyterian worshippers met in the city hall. Mary Ambler, a

visitor to Carlyle House in 1770, wrote in her diary, "A Cold Day this Morg went to Church in the Court House, dined with Colo Carlyle & sett off in the Aftn for Mount Vernon." The Presbyterians in Alexandria did not have to meet at the courthouse for long. An act defining religious toleration was passed in 1772, which

(Continued on page 2)

Carlyle House

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director
Heidi Miller, Curator
Caroline Neely, Curator of Education



John Carlyle (con't)



was generally regarded as having given Alexandria Presbyterians encouragement to build their Meeting House. Some historians claim that Carlyle was directly involved with the construction of the Meeting House. But according to Dr. Jim Munson, no records exist that directly link John Carlyle with the actual construction of the Presbyterian Meeting House. The only piece of evidence that exists is a newspaper ad placed by John Carlyle and William Ramsey in the Maryland Gazette on April 18, 1775 requesting bids to construct a new brick Meeting House. We don't know if John was an undertaker for the project or not, only that he was involved in the early planning stages.

Another aspect of John's Presbyterian beliefs is the connection between the Presbyterian Church and democratic ideas. The link made between the democratic structure of the Presbyterian Church and revolutionary ideals is reinforced by Nicholas Cresswell, a visitor to Alexandria in November of 1774. Cresswell was a supporter of the King and did not agree with much of what he saw during his trip to the colonies in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War. He writes during his stay in Alexandria, "*Went to a Presbyterian meeting. These are a set of scoundrels, nothing but*

political discourses instead of religious lectures." One can't help but wonder if John Carlyle was present during this Presbyterian Meeting and what he thought. The two gentlemen might have even discussed what took place less than two week later. Cresswell writes in his journal, "*Drank Coffee at Col. John Carlile's, a gentleman from Carlisle in England.*"

Despite Carlyle's forced affiliations with the Anglican Church in the early years of his life, John definitely makes a statement in his will towards his Presbyterian beliefs. In his will he writes, *Item I give & bequeath the Intrest of Five hundred pounds to the Poor of the Presbyterian Society in or near Alexandria.* He also requests that his final burying place be in the Presbyterian Meeting House. *And as to my Body I desire it may be intered under the Tombstone in the enclosed Ground in the Presbyterian Yard near where my first wife and Children are intered.* Despite a life balancing Anglican responsibilities with his Presbyterian beliefs, John declares his affiliation with the Presbyterian Church in his final resting place. John Carlyle's civic and mercantile activities required that he find a balance between his Presbyterian beliefs and the governing force of the Church of England. It appears that he managed

to find a compromise between these two conflicting needs in order to successfully manage his personal and political life.

Works Consulted:

- The Transformation of Virginia, by Rhys Issac
- The Journal of Nicholas Cresswell 1774-1777, The Dial Press, New York 1924.
- The Diary of Mary Ambler, 1770. Virginia Historical Magazine, 1937 Vol. XLV. pg. 152-171.
- Col. John Carlyle, Gent. by Jim Munson
- Can These Bones Live? by William Randolph Sengel