Carlyle House
DOCENT DISPATCH
Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority
December 2006

'The triumph of Hope over experience': Second Marriage in Colonial Virginia

by Erin Adams

The family of the 18th century was in a state of flux. Coming out of a century of low life expectancy, a slowly-stabilizing economy and the beginning of the American experiment, society began to see pronounced shifts in traditional marriage patterns. Advancements in agriculture, economy, and politics satisfied people that the hopes and visions for the New World were indeed coming to fruition. The nuclear family began to accept the weight of being the foundation for the growing nation. Disruptions in the nuclear family became social disruptions, forcing widows and widowers to skillfully balance their personal, familial, and societal obligations.

One View of Remarriage

Widowhood and remarriage have been common throughout history, at all times and in all cultures. Despite the frequency of second marriages, high mortality rates, and the emphasis on keeping the nuclear family the basis for society, remarriage was always personal. Diaries, letters, and oral traditions demonstrate that second marriages were rarely made lightly or without a great deal of emotional encumbrance. One prominent lexicographer of the day had a very decided opinion on second marriages: '*The triumph of Hope over experience*' was Dr. Samuel Johnson's contribution on the subject. Had John Carlyle been asked for his opinion, it is not unreasonable to think that he might have offered a similar answer.

John Carlyle married twice, first to the prominent Sarah Fairfax of Belvoir Plantation, and then to Sybil West, daughter of Alexandria businessman Hugh West. In both instances, the marriage was a union between what one historian called 'power families'—folks of the gentry class cementing their social position by marrying like individuals. The Carlyle-Fairfax union carried the additional bond of love, which John expresses in his well-known letter of January 1748. Was the Carlyle-West marriage so unified? In the absence of much documentary evidence, an exploration of the nature of second marriages in Colonial Virginia may have to suffice in providing a window to their relationship.

The Marriage of Stephen Beckingham and Mary Cox. William Hogarth. c.1729

Frequency of Second Marriage

Family historians have noted that by the middle of the 18th century, an increase in the life expectancy of both partners and a greater equality in the division of the sexes—as well as the increasing stability of the colonial economy and society—produced longer-lasting marriages. According to Colonial Williamsburg, marriage lasted an average of twenty to twenty-five years during the 18th century. The dissolution of the marriage was virtually always the result of the death of one partner. Divorce, being frowned upon by society and unsupported by the law, accounts for less than one percent of concluded marriages. The Carlyle-Fairfax marriage dissolved upon Sarah's death at the age of 30, in the thirteenth

CARLYLE HOUSE

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director
Jim Bartlinski, Curator
Erin Adams, Curator of Education

year of their union. Distressed at the thought of his two children being parentless at such a tender age, John married again within nine months of his first wife's passing. For Sybil West, daughter of a prominent businessman and fellow city trustee, this marriage marked her first and only marriage.

Judging by the surviving documentation, second marriages were conducted in much the same way first marriages were. Centuries of English custom had finally coalesced into legal practice under Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753: Banns were read publicly for three consecutive Sundays at the church for the parish in which both parties resided. This public announcement of intention to marry gave all parishioners the chance to raise legal objections to the marriage before it took place. If a couple chose not to have the banns read, then they must apply to the Church for a marriage license. (The Church, despite having been the only legal registrar of marriages, has surprisingly few records to support the number of banns read or ceremonies conducted under its oversight.) Once banns were concluded or the license obtained, the traditional Anglican ceremony could be conducted at home or the parish church. According to numerous letters and journal entries of colonial Virginia residents, most of these ceremonies took place at a home, where friends and family members gathered for days of celebration. For those marriages not accompanied by celebrations, holiday seasons took on added importance when distant family and friends could be summoned to honor the couple.

A Husband's Expectations

Usually a marriage came about when a young man was ready to create his patriarchy, the founding block of colonial Virginian society. The incidents of impetuous marriage on record are few—generally the result of an unexpected pregnancy or a case of youthful hotheadedness. A suitable marriage partner was found either by the suitor himself or through extended social connections, and an arrangement was reached between the respective families. Through his first marriage, John Carlyle was already established in Alexandria as a patriarch: head of a family with living descendants, owner of property, acknowledged leader in the community. The contemporary definition of family generally included all members of a household—servants and slaves as well as kin—and John Carlyle uses this term quite contemporaneously in letters to family and associates. The death of the mistress of the family placed John Carlyle's patriarchy in a precarious light.

We do not know exactly how John went about securing his second wife, although we may make an educated guess. As the daughter of a prominent citizen, Sybil was doubtless groomed from childhood about her role as a woman in Virginia society. The frequency of her family's interactions with the Carlyle family educated Sybil about John's personality, connections, and civic position in Alexandria. As a suitor, John would have presented Sybil with a list of requirements that may have read something like this epitaph George Mason wrote for his wife Ann in 1773: "*an easy & agreeable Companion; a kind Neighbour; a steadfast Friend; an humane Mistress; a prudent & a tender Mother; a faithful, affectionate, & most obliging Wife; charitable to the Poor, and pious to her Maker; her Virtue & Religion […] unmixed with hypocrisy or Ostentation*." In other words, a wife who would keep his domestic affairs seamlessly in order, raise his children according to the standards of the day, and promote his reputation in community affairs.

Benjamin and Eleanor Ridgely Laming. Charles Willson Peale, 1788.

A Wife's Reality

On October 22, 1761, John realized the continuation of his patriarchy in Virginia. Married to Sybil West, John had a companion; the neighbors had a friend; the household had a mistress; his two tiny daughters had a mother. If as mistress Sybil was not the holder of the strings that controlled the family, she was the one to ensure that they did not snarl. Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to his daughter, in which he advises her "*never suffer yourself to be angry with any body*." The level of self-denial required to fulfill that dictum was immense, yet incumbent on well-bred Virginia mistresses. Many women left behind for us a record of their daily lives as mistresses of prominent households that inform our view of the lives of gentlewomen.

Sybil's married life paralleled Sarah Fairfax's in many ways. As a first-time bride, Sybil would have brought John a suitable marriage gift that could have included money, land or slaves. She was expected to be a fully functioning member of the Carlyle household, fulfilling all of her social duties in the most exemplary manner. A wife was expected to be, amongst other things, a conspicuous consumer of goods. While John certainly had access to the finest objects from Europe, Sybil was required to know what to do with them and how to display them to the household's advantage. Recent paint analysis has revealed to us that there may indeed have

been an extensive redecoration process after Sybil's marriage.

Like Sarah before her, Sybil was required to manage a household of servants and slaves while making her own likes and dislikes in household management known. The children Sarah left behind Sybil had to raise properly and try to establish some sort of affectionate relationship. When Sybil's own children began arriving in 1763 with the birth of "*little Jackey,*" John's patriarchy was further secured with a seeming male heir. As John's wife, Sybil would have been expected to also show a proper attention to his family, despite the distance between the two brothers. Numerous instances in John's letters to George indicate that "*my Mrs. Carlyle […] Joyn me in Affectionet Compts to You My D Sister & Little Couzens.*" Sybil would have been expected to further support John's relationships with extended family during the numerous services rendered on behalf of distant cousins living in the colonies. Perhaps most importantly, Sybil would have been required to support the continuation of John's relations with the Fairfax and Washington families—his former in-laws.

Asking too much?

From the surviving letters written during the period of the Carlyle-West marriage (1761-69), none are between John and Sybil. We have to accept John's assessment of affairs to believe that life was generally harmonious in the Carlyle household. John's business affairs seemed to be a bit volatile, as he relates a number of instances in which ships are sunk, letters not received, or business deals gone awry. References made by John regarding Sybil are generally emotionally neutral, simply reporting her comings or goings or including her good wishes in letters to family. Perhaps in light of what we now know about a second wife's duties, we may glean more than the surface would lead us to. On August 1, 1766, John informs George that "*God has blessed me with another Son* [George William]" who was a very healthy child. He also provides George an update on the two girls "*who are Rely Fine Childrun,*" thanks in large part to Sybil's attentions to them. On October 16, 1766 John assures George that Sybil "*woud Wrote by the Oppertunity*" had she not been visiting at "*Coll. Washingtons*" during Sally's music lessons, taking "*a good deall of Trouble to get our Children Educated*." To all appearances, Sybil was accomplishing the plethora of expectations placed upon her by family and society.

Again widowed at 49, John Carlyle accepted the life of a single father, allowing his eldest daughter Sarah to assume the role of mistress. Surviving correspondence provides us with clues regarding his emotions around this event: "*I Expect you may have Received my last*" John writes to George Carlyle, "*In which you woud be fully. Informed of my great Loss which will not bear mentioning at preseant Every day I am more & more Sensable of it*." Written in August of 1769, five months after Sybil's death, John was still unable to articulate the muddle and confusion of his own emotions. Although "*my last*" letter has never materialized, we can infer that George's response encouraged John to have a care for his well-being at such a time. "*You blame me for not going to the Springs again, I must own I wish my business woud Allow me but cannot Leave my Little famely So Long At this Time—* "

Was a third marriage was asking too much of Hope?

Sources

Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. *Becoming Americans: Redefining Family*. 1997.

Demos, John. *Past, Present and Personal: Family Life in American History*. 1998.

Garrett, Elisabeth Donaghy. *At Home: the American Family, 1750-1870*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990.

John Carlyle to George Carlyle, August 21, 1769.

Munson, James D. *Colo. John Carlyle, Gent*. Fairfax, VA: NVRPA, 1986.

Special Thank You!

The staff would like to express their gratitude to **Carole Smith** for spearheading this year's holiday table. Her knowledge of 18th-century social customs and use of the formal dining wares allows our visitors to appreciate the splendor and elegance of this most joyous season. Thank you, Carole!

Visit to Mount Vernon

Finally, an opportunity has come for us to go and view the new Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center at Mount Vernon. Mark your calendars for Monday, January 8, 2007. We will meet at the Texas Gate at 10:00 a.m. and view the new center together.

The museum and education center reflect several years of intense work and planning. The space serves as an orientation center for visitors who have just arrived, an education center that hosts children's programs, and most importantly, a tremendous showcase for the museum's vast holdings of original Washington family pieces. Mary Ruth, Pam Hardin and I had the privilege to get an early sneak-peek of the museum prior to its opening. Ambitious and inventive, the museum illuminates many creative ways to interpret and display 18th-century artifacts, many of which appear on John Carlyle's inventory.

Lunch will follow in the food court area.