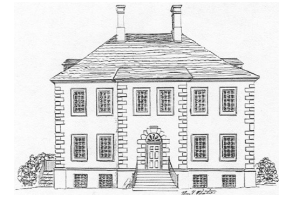




Carlyle House

Docent Dispatch



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Gout: A Colonial Affliction or Man’s “Real Friend”?

By Henry Desmarais

A November 1774 letter to Charles Little from John Dalton, John Carlyle’s business partner and fellow Alexandria trustee, begins by noting that John Carlyle’s gout currently prevents him from traveling and thus a special power of attorney is being sent to complete a deed transaction.

Gout was a relatively common affliction in the 18th century, especially among the upper classes, and Carlyle’s gout condition is said to be one of the reasons why he might have used the bedchamber on the first floor of his house at least during his later years.

According to *Dorland’s Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, the term gout comes to us from the Latin word for drop, *gutta*, because of the ancient belief that the condition was due to some harmful agent or noxa falling drop by drop into a joint. A classic description of an acute attack of gout is provided by Thomas Sydenham, a 17th century English physician, who himself suffered from the disease. Sydenham says:

The victim goes to bed and sleeps in good health About two o’clock in the morning he is awakened by a severe pain in the great toe; more rarely in the heel, ankle, or instep. This pain is like that of a dislocation, and yet the parts feel as if cold water were poured over them. Then follow chills and shivers, and a little fever. The pain, which was at first moderate, becomes more intense... Now it is a violent stretching and tearing of the ligaments--now it is a gnawing pain and now a pressure and tightening. So exquir the jar of a person walking in the room. The night is passed in torture, sleeplessness, turning of the part affected, and perpetual change of posture ...

Gout is a metabolic disorder in which the human body produces too much uric acid and/or fails to

excrete sufficient quantities of uric acid through the kidneys (with underexcretion being the far more common factor). The excess uric acid ultimately forms monosodium urate crystals, which can accumulate in joints, cartilage, tendons, kidneys and other tissues of the body, and cause inflammation. One result is swollen and tender joints, often accompanied by a low grade fever. The condition can strike any joint (or several joints at the same time) but tends to favor joints in the feet and legs, most especially the joint at the base of the great toe. The attacks recur at irregular intervals and may last for days or even weeks at a time. As time passes, the attacks may come at shorter intervals. An attack can be precipitated by trauma, hospitalization or even minor surgery. Gout attacks most often occur in men over the age of 30, but they can also be seen in post-menopausal women. Untreated, the condition can lead to joint deformity. And high uric acid levels can also lead to the formation of kidney stones. High blood pressure or outright kidney failure are also sometimes seen in patients with high uric acid levels and urate crystal deposits in the kidney, but the cause and effect relationships between these various findings is unsettled. In a number of cases, documented genetic defects are to blame for the failure to maintain normal uric acid levels.

John Carlyle was not the only Alexandria trustee who suffered from the gout. George Mason was another. In a number of his letters, Mason tells his family and friends that his gout attacks prevented him from standing, walking or even sitting up in bed.

<p>CARLYLE HOUSE</p> <p>Mary Ruth Coleman, Director Jim Bartlinski, Curator Cindy Major, Curator of Education</p>
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Friend or Foe

Another celebrated victim of the gout in the 18th century was, of course, none other than Benjamin Franklin, who suffered as well from bladder stones, another possible complication of faulty uric acid metabolism. In fact, at about the time of John Carlyle's death in the fall of 1780, Franklin had one of his most severe attacks of gout. Such attacks made it difficult for Franklin to walk or even to travel by carriage. It was while confined by a gout attack that Franklin composed a "Dialogue Between the Gout and Mr. Franklin," a bagatelle in which Gout tells Franklin that his "cruel sufferings" stem from the fact that he "ate and drank too freely, and too much indulged those legs of yours in their indolence" and goes on to argue that Gout is Franklin's "real friend" because the object of his visitations is Franklin's own good.

In the 18th century, a wide range of treatments were used to prevent and treat gout attacks. These included wrapping the affected body part in warm wool; bleeding; taking opium or laudanum; ingesting the herb tansy in brandy or wine; giving the patient a decoction of boiled wormwood flowers and leaves; and taking rattlesnake root in a tincture, which induced either vomiting or sweating. It should be emphasized that at least some of the above treatments were controversial even in the 18th century. And most of the treatments were not uniquely used in gout patients. For example, rattlesnake root was also used to treat rattlesnake bites. Tansy served as an insect repellent and was placed under mattresses and between blankets to ward off fleas. And for women wishing to become pregnant, it was also said to be "their best companion,

their Husband excepted." Also recommended to prevent gout attacks were exercise, temperance in food and drink, and even special diets, including a milk-diet, which among other things involved "nothing but milk and bread" at supper.

Much is still unknown about gout. However, today's gout sufferers have access to a wide range of potential treatments, including: non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agents (e.g., ibuprofen); steroid injections; drugs that promote uric acid excretion (e.g., probenecid); allopurinol, which reduces uric acid production; and colchicine, which disrupts the inflammatory response. Nevertheless, most of these treatments must be used cautiously. Patients suffering from the gout are also encouraged to drink plenty of water, and to avoid foods that increase uric acid production, including anchovies, sardines, lentils, and organ meats (liver, kidneys, brain and sweetbreads). They are also advised to limit their intake of alcoholic beverages, especially beer and wine, in part because alcohol inhibits uric acid excretion. Finally, during an acute gout attack, bed rest and immobilization of the affected joint(s) are recommended, as is the application of heat or cold to the affected area, whichever brings relief to the patient.

Thanks to Henry Desmarais for contributing this interesting article. Henry has been a docent at Carlyle House since 2002 and is a graduate of the Yale University School of Medicine. Instead of a traditional clinical career, he has spent the last 25 years working on health policy issues, initially in the legislative and executive branches of the federal government, later as a consultant to a wide range of associations and corporations, and in recent years as a member of the senior staff of the American College of Surgeons and the Health Insurance Association of America.

Sources Consulted:

- ÿ *Gout* by Keith Rott and Carlos Agudelo, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, June 4, 2003
- ÿ *The American Medical Association's Family Medical Guide*, 3rd Edition
- ÿ *Professional Guide to Diseases*, 7th Edition
- ÿ *Letters of William Byrd II and Sir Hans Sloane Relative to Plants and Minerals of Virginia*
- ÿ *Manual for Docents*, Gunston Hall Plantation
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- ÿ *Mon Cher Papa: Franklin and the Ladies of Paris* by Claude-Anne Lopez



Curator's Corner



Among the items listed on John Carlyle's 1780 household inventory is one silver-mounted "Cutteaw." The term cutteau or cuttoe is likely derived from the French word *couteaux* (Noun) – knife. A cutteau is any of a number of short, strong, wide-bladed swords chosen for their utility and effectiveness. Cutlasses, hunting knives or short swords, and hangers are among the various blades that fall under the category of cutteau. Overall, both gentlemen and military officers carried cutteaus as part of their attire. Therefore, John Carlyle may have worn his silver-mounted cutteau in his capacity as Virginia militia colonel or as a civilian.

Sources:

Swords and Blades of the American Revolution
by George C. Neumann

Carlyle's Mt. Vernon Connection

At the Carlyle House, we always try to check and recheck sources and are willing to rethink past interpretations. Recently, we reexamined the letters of George Washington during the period he was away from Mt. Vernon fighting in the French and Indian War. It appears that John Carlyle was not as involved in the repairs and additions at Mt. Vernon during this time as we had previously thought.

In the summer and fall of 1758, letters from John Patterson, a master carpenter; Humphrey Knight, George Washington's overseer; George William Fairfax, friend and neighbor; and John Carlyle all indicate that John Patterson was employed by Washington to direct repairs and improvements, including the addition of the second story to the main house. Letters from Patterson to Washington describe the progress he was making on the project. He advised Washington on the type of wood to be used and mentioned consulting with Col. Fairfax on several occasions. Washington's ledgers show that he was paying Patterson directly.

George William Fairfax wrote to Washington often

keeping him informed about events at home. Fairfax recounted visits to Mt. Vernon where he advised Patterson and described the work in progress. The choice between laying a new floor and repairing the old was carefully laid out for Washington, but Fairfax took matters into his own hands and hired someone to paint the house when he saw that it "is suffering for want of it." Patterson praised Fairfax for his assistance and mentioned that Fairfax had supplied flooring boards when none were available in the area.

John Carlyle sent letters to Washington reassuring him about various business matters. Carlyle also passed on progress reports from Fairfax on the construction at Mt. Vernon. When Washington was concerned by the lack of letters from Patterson, Carlyle assured him that Patterson had posted letters from his store and had the soldier's "Interest At heart as much As if it Was his own." James Munson, in his book *Col. John Carlyle, Gent*, credits Carlyle with buying slaves for George Washington, arranging for the sale of his tobacco, forwarding letters and clothes to the soldier, and supervising the roofing of his plantation buildings. Carlyle also ordered goods for his friend and stored them in the Carlyle & Dalton warehouse until Washington's return. In their book, *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, Robert Dalzell, Jr. and Lee Baldwin Dalzell give a meticulous account of the second floor addition to Washington's house, without ever mentioning John Carlyle.

From the evidence presented here, we believe that John Carlyle was involved in George Washington's affairs during Washington's absence. The credit for the construction of a second story on Mount Vernon, however, goes to John Patterson and George William Fairfax.

