

Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

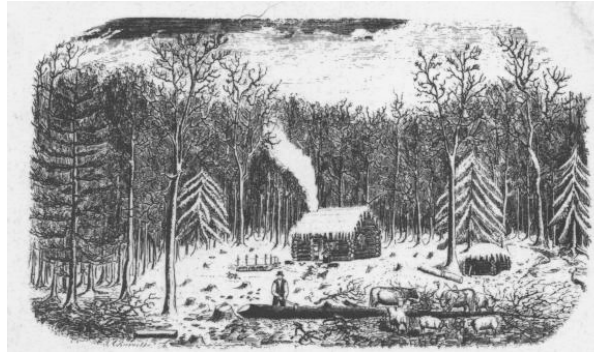
John Carlyle and Wheat

Tobacco is the crop most associated with the eighteenth century economy in Virginia. It was such a dominate force in the early eighteenth-century, that other crops such as wheat and corn are overlooked. But starting in the 1740s many planters made the switch from growing tobacco to wheat for a variety of reasons. First, tobacco fields must be rotated every few years because the crop exhausts the soil, thus new land must be acquired. In addition, over-production of tobacco in the colonies resulted in lower prices in the English market. By contrast, crops such as wheat and corn could be used to help feed the farmer's family and dependants, required less labor than tobacco and also could be easily shipped as either grain or milled flour to the West Indies or Europe. Shortages of these staple crops in Europe also lead to an increased demand for planters to diversify.

Unlike tobacco, which by law had to be shipped to England, wheat could be sent to either Europe or the West Indies without having to pay the expensive taxes. Nicholas Cresswell, a visitor to the colonies, observes the importance of wheat in the colonial economy. He writes in 1774, "Waiting in expectation of getting a wheat commission, but am disappointed. Great quantities of this article is brought down from the back country in wagons to this place, as good wheat as I ever saw in England

and sell from 2/9 to 4/6 sterling per bushel. It is sent to the Eastern markets. Great quantities of flour are likewise brought from there, but this is generally sent to the West Indies, and sometimes to Lisbon and up the Straights."

The increase in production of wheat created a demand for gristmills to process the grain to flour. Mills were such an integral part of the colonial world,



it was essential to create laws in order to protect the public from unfair milling practices. Starting in the seventeenth century, these laws regulated that the miller's toll for grinding grain should not be more than 1/6 the total share. They also required the miller to use a standard set of officially certified weights. In 1706, the House of Burgesses enacted a

comprehensive statute relating to milling, which set forth legal procedures for acquiring land for mills and dictated that no mill can be constructed closer than one mile to another public mill. Similar to barrels of tobacco, wheat casks were required by law to be inspected by officers appointed by Justices of the County Court. Starting in 1772, flour sold in casks and barrels had to be marked by a brand showing the

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quality of the flour or meal, the name of the owner of the mill, the name of the inspector, gross new weights and a large “V”.

Inspectors marked casks F for fine or SF for superfine. Inspectors were paid 2% of the total value of the barrel.

John Carlyle with his instinct for business began to diversify his interests by purchasing not one, but three gristmills. In the eighteenth century, there were two main types of mills, a custom mill and merchant mill. The custom mill ground grain as a service, charging by the bushel of grain processed. A merchant mill actually bought the grain from the planter, processed it, and sold the flour often for export. Sometimes merchant millers would store the grain in the mill until the flour market was favorable. We know that one of John Carlyle’s mills, located at Torthorwald, was a merchant mill. The advertisement in the Alexandria Gazette in 1787 taken by son-in-law William Herbert states, “adjoining the said farm is a MERCHANT or GRIST MILL which will be rented for either one year or a term of years...” Phillip Vickers Fithian gives us an idea of what John’s mills might have been like when he describes Robert Carter’s new purchase. He writes, “Mr. Carter’s Merchant Mill begins to run toady, she is calculated to manufacture 25,000 bushels of wheat a year – I

walked at twelve with the Colonel to view her; it is amazing to consider the work and ingenuity – He told me his Bill for the materials and work was 1450 £.”

John Carlyle was also actively involved in exporting wheat. His partnership with Robert Adams, which formed the company Carlyle and Adams in 1765, dealt primarily in wheat. George Washington was one of their major suppliers, selling them most of his wheat production as long as they were in business. Washington regularly drew on his account at Carlyle and Adams for his cash needs until about 1770 when Carlyle’s partnership with Adams dissolved. For example, on February 16 1768, Washington records going to Alexandria and receiving 75£ as partial payment for the wheat he sold the company.

In December 1768, Alexander Rose writes home to Scotland, “We have gone more on wheat lately than usual owing to the great demand from Europe.” John Carlyle, like Rose, recognized the importance of wheat in the colonial economy. As a successful merchant he not only invested in the purchase of three mills, but started a successful business with Robert Adam exporting the wheat of prominent local planters like George Washington. By looking at this one facet of John Carlyle’s business

dealings, it makes one realize how diversified the successful eighteenth-century merchant had to be.

Sources Consulted:

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- *Colvin Run Mill*, by Ross Netherton
- *The Economy of British America*, by John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard
- *The Diaries of George Washington*, edited by Donald Jackson
- *Col. John Carlyle, Gent.*, by Jim Munson

