



Carlyle House

Docent Dispatch

January 2003

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Tobacco: A Twist in the Life of John Carlyle

Tobacco did more than fill the pipes and snuff boxes of colonial Virginians. It controlled the lives of planters, filled the coffers of the King, and brought many people indentured, enslaved, and free to the Chesapeake region. Tobacco was such a vital part of the colonial economy, its going price during a given season had ramifications for all levels of society. This article is going to look at why this plant was so important to the colonial world and how it would have affected the life of John Carlyle.

The demand for tobacco in the European markets in the eighteenth-century was staggering. In 1700, Maryland and Virginia had exported about twenty million pounds. By the 1730s, that amount had grown to eighty million and by 1775 the total export of tobacco was two hundred and twenty million pounds. Because tobacco was the main cash crop in the Chesapeake area during this time, it had a major impact on all facets of colonial society. According to John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, “the Chesapeake economy was export led, for the fluctuating fortunes of the tobacco industry reverberated throughout the entire economy and affected the pace of immigration, the advance of settlement, the extent of opportunity, government policy, experiments with other staple exports, the spread of manufacturing, and the level of material well-being in the colonies.”



Merchants like John Carlyle were at the center of this tobacco driven economy. Up through the 1750s, planters and merchants operated within a consignment system. A planter would give his tobacco to a merchant. The merchant would sell the tobacco to a European manufacturer and then receive a commission on its sale price. Historic records indicate John Carlyle was involved in this consignment system. An ad placed on September 18, 1760 in the Maryland Gazette states, “The Brigantine Hawke, John Craig, Master, now lying at Alexandria, will take in tobacco for Liverpool at twelve pounds per ton, with Liberty of consignment. She is one year old and a prime sailor. For freight or passage apply to the master or Carlyle & Dalton.” John was also involved in the sale of George Washington’s tobacco. He writes to Washington in 1754, “I have got 4 hhd of your tobacco...The tobacco is but indifferent & with sum trouble passed inspection.”

Taking tobacco on consignment was sometimes very risky. In the case of a shipment of tobacco Carlyle had on a ship called the Cophthorne in 1758, he writes, “I have yet given up hopes of the Cophthorne, I

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have ten hhd's on board without a penny insured." The situation appears to be resolved later that year when he writes, "I have the Pleasure to acquaint you that the Copthorne is arrived Safe at Bristol tho' its said he has Damaged sum of his Tobacco." Other sources indicate the important role tobacco played in John's business life. In the first three Carlyle companies, one of his silent partners was James Dunlop, one of the Dunlop merchants in Glasgow who primarily dealt in tobacco.

In addition to Carlyle's merchant dealings in the consignment of tobacco, he also played a role in the transportation of tobacco to the inspection warehouses. As a result of the 1730 tobacco Inspection Act, planters were required to transport all their tobacco to inspection warehouses before it was sent to Britain. The advertisement of an auction after his business partner, John Dalton's, death indicates that the two men played an active role in the transportation of tobacco. The ad placed in the Maryland Gazette in April of 1777 states, "The death of Mr. John Dalton dissolving the partnership of Carlyle and Dalton, there will be sold at public sale in Alexandria, Monday the eighteenth of May, being Fairfax court day, eight Negro men; one of the others is a waterman and pilot in the river and bay...At the same time will be

sold two large tobacco flats, one of 45 hogsheads, the other of 25 hogsheads, with their rigging sails, &c." We also know that Carlyle ran a hauling business on land that assisted planters who were a greater distance from a waterway in transporting their tobacco to inspection warehouses.

Carlyle also played an important role in the regulation of the sale of tobacco. As town trustees, he and William Ramsay were asked to calibrate the weights and scales at both the Hunting Creek and Falls public tobacco warehouses. This was a very important job because the weight of the tobacco would determine the sale price of a shipment of tobacco. Carlyle was also in charge of the payment of bounties on wolf heads in tobacco. In 1697, the state papers record that "It is too Evident That Woolves Do Greatly Increase, and are Very Disstructive to the Increase of most sorts of useful Creturs In this Country...[therefore] all such persons may be allowed for Each Woolve thay shall so take & Destroy at Least 300lbs Tobacco..." In 1749, records indicate Carlyle paid William Thornton bounty on seven wolves heads.

Despite the popularity of growing tobacco in the Chesapeake region, many large planters began to diversify their crops by growing grains. Depressions of tobacco prices as well as the large investment of time, money and

manpower began to make tobacco a less attractive crop. Many factors contributed to the decline of tobacco profits for Chesapeake planters. According to Historian Allan Kulikoff, "Increasing Continental demand for tobacco led Chesapeake planters to over produce, and these surpluses magnified the impact of the depressions." With the surplus of tobacco flooding the markets, European tobacco manufacturers were able to reduce the costs of tobacco to their consumer. The decrease in price caused an increase in tobacco by Europeans which even further benefited the European merchants. The colonial planters found themselves investing more in the production of the tobacco and receiving less money for their investment. Also, after a few years tobacco plants use up the nutrients in the soil and a new field must be opened up. This need for new farming land, led tobacco planters further south and west.

Even though tobacco was such an important part of Carlyle's business dealings, he was a very savvy businessman. As tobacco became less profitable and more Chesapeake planters switched over to growing wheat, John capitalized on this trend by purchasing three mills. Look for next month's article which will focus on his business activities in wheat!