



# Carlyle House

June 2001

## Docent Dispatch

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

### Colonial Midwives

For the eighteenth-century women, pregnancy and childbirth were integral parts of their lives. According to historian Daniel Smith “Men and women prided themselves upon their numerous offspring, not only because of a belief that they were obeying a scriptural command to replenish the earth and a patriotic duty to add citizens to the Empire, but also because they regarded children as a natural investment, a kind of insurance against old age and misfortune.” It was not uncommon for women in Colonial Virginia, as in the case of Sarah Carlyle, to have an average of seven to eight children. As a result of these numerous pregnancies and laying-ins, childbirth became an important part of women’s social lives. Laura Thatcher Ulrich, the author of *A Midwife’s Tale*, writes, “this was the era of ‘social childbirth’ when female relatives and neighbors, as well as midwives attended the births.” Pregnancies were frequently mentioned in the newspapers and during the actual birth neighboring friends and relatives would come to assist or simply to join in the social atmosphere. At the center of this social occasion was the *midwife*.

A Virginia paper, in mentioning the prominent persons who had died, included “Mrs. Catherine Blaikley, of this city [Williamsburg], in the seventy-sixth year of her age; an eminent midwife, and who, in the course of her practice, brought upwards of three thousand children into the world.” Witnessing such important moments as the births and deaths of children, a midwife developed special relationships with the families whom she

assisted. Midwives were such an integral part of the community, most did not advertise their services in the paper. Knowledge of their skills and services were passed on by word of mouth. References to midwives in local papers are often announcements of a change of address or of their arrival into a new community.

The process of becoming a midwife often began with personal experience. As one eighteenth-century midwifery manual expressed it, “There is a tender regard one woman bears to another, and a natural sympathy in those that have gone thro’ the pangs of childbearing; which doubtless occasion a compassion for those that labour under these circumstances, which no man can be a judge of.” For Martha Ballard giving birth to nine children was an important part of her preparation. Other assisting women were always required during the birthing process and the room was often filled with female friends and family members. Most midwives began as observers in the birthing process. Over time, they might gradually assume a more active role, until one day, they performed without another midwife present.

Most midwives trained by experience, but some women sought additional training. A Mrs. Grant, in offering her services a midwife, declared that she had “studied that art regularly and practiced it afterwards,

*(Continued on page 2)*

**Carlyle House**

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



## Colonial Midwives (con't)



with success, at Edinburgh,' and could produce certificates from "the Gentleman whose lectures she attended, and likewise from the professors of anatomy and Practice of Physick in that City." Another midwife advertised in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1771, "The subscriber having studied and practiced MIDWIFERY for some Time past, with Success, under the direction, and with Approbation of Doctors Pasteur and Gale." In addition, midwives were sometimes invited by doctors to witness medical autopsies in order to further their understanding of anatomy.

Midwives may have felt pressure to further their credentials because of the growing competition with male practitioners in the late eighteenth-century. Realizing the potential for additional income, some men in the medical profession began offering their services. For example, Doctor Gilmer of Virginia advertised in the *Virginia Gazette* his plans of "pursuing, with the practice of Medicine, the art of midwifery" in 1766. Just three years later, John Minson Galt announced that he proposed on settling in Williamsburg where he planned on setting up shop as "a Surgeon, Apothecary, and Man-midwife." Not everyone was supportive of male midwives. A letter was published in the *Virginia Gazette* in 1772 denouncing the use of male midwives. It stated, "true modesty is incompatible with the Idea of employing a Man-midwife." Martha Ballard occasionally mentions her dealings with doctors in the area who deliver babies. (Insert case).

Payments for midwives varied tremendously on the economy of the town. In the case of Martha Ballard, she received everything from '1 M shingles' to 'a pair of flat irons.' Other payments included food, textiles, or household necessities: cheese, butter, wheat, rye, corn, baby pigs and turkeys, candles, a great wheel, unwashed wool, checked cloth, teapots, thimbles, a looking glass, handkerchiefs, and snuff. The most common monetary amount was six shillings. But Martha also

frequently "forgave" the fee in the case a family was unable to afford her services.

One of the most important legal functions for midwives was to bring official testimony to the county court about the paternity of illegitimate children. Midwives would ask women at the height of labor to identify the father of the child. The theory was that the pain and the need for assistance would compel the mother to tell the truth about the identity of the father. This was a means for the woman or her relatives to seek child support from the alleged father. Martha Ballard was called to deliver the illegitimate child of Sally Pierce and she writes, "she was safely delivered a 1 hour pm of a fine son, her illness very severe but I delivered her cleverly & returned...about sun sett. Sally declared that my son Jonathon was the father of the child." Midwives could also be called in to swear the age of children that they had delivered if the court needed verification of someone's age.

A midwife was a very important person in the community. Laurel Ulrich sums it up well when she writes, "Midwives and nurses mediated the mysteries of birth, procreation, illness and death. They touched the untouchable, handled excrement and vomit as well as milk, swaddled the dead as well as the new born." Issues of birth, illness and death wove together the female community together and the midwife was at the central figure in this world.

### Sources:

*A Midwife's Tale*, By Laurel Ulrich

*Women's Life and Work*, By Julia Spruill

*Inside the Great House*, By Daniel Blake Smith

*Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious*

*Patriarchs*, By Kathleen Brown