

Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

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The Gallant Young Carlyle, from Alexandria

By Mark Hill, Bob Madison, and Jim Bartlinski

Gallant – To be unflinching in battle or action

The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000

George William Carlyle was born on May 27, 1766, the third child of Colonel John Carlyle and his second wife, Sibyl West. George William's half sisters from his father's first marriage to Sarah Fairfax were Sarah (nicknamed *Sally*) and Ann (called *Nancy*). At the time of their brother's birth, "*Sally*" was 9 and "*Nancy*" was 4 years of age. George William's mother, Sibyl, died in childbirth before his third birthday. Because of the demands placed on his father's time from his various business ventures and political dealings, we can presume that servants and his sisters raised the boy for a period. However, both of George William's sisters were married in 1775 when he was only 9, leaving the lad alone in their father's home with presumably little companionship.

The marriage of his sisters left the young man by himself with his twice-widowed father, and at times, a tutor acting as his only role model. As providence would have it, the young Carlyle lived in close proximity to an emerging American hero, George Washington. Washington lived just downriver from George William's Alexandria home. George William knew and, in all probability, admired Washington. The historic record shows that the adolescent Carlyle visited Mount Vernon on a number of occasions and Washington had enjoyed many visits to the youth's Fairfax Street address. In 1774, when George William's big sister Ann had been at Mount Vernon for two weeks, Washington wrote in his diary, "*To Dinner came Master Geo. Carlyle—who went away afterwards*



Continental Light Dragoon
By Don Troiani

with his sister Nancy." It took approximately two-hours by carriage for young Master George to travel the 8.5 miles from Alexandria to Mount Vernon. Washington was obviously amused by such a formal visit by the 8-year-old "*Master Geo.*"

During George William's frequent meetings with Washington it may be assumed that the boy was treated with firsthand accounts of Virginia's champions exploits during England's latest war with France. Washington's romanticized

accounts of trekking through the wilderness that was the Ohio Valley and pitched battles may have predisposed the youth to take up arms against the tyrannical George III upon the death of his father.

Some historians may argue that the tall ambitious Virginia gentleman, who had made a name for himself during the French and Indian War, was the archetype for a unique Southern chivalric ideal that surfaced in Virginia during the mid seventeenth-century and reached its zenith in the nineteenth-century with the personification of those ideals in the legend of Robert E. Lee. Key aspects of this

CARLYLE HOUSE

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distinctive Southern chivalry include an interest in the “*knightly*” sports of riding and the fox hunt, as well as a sense of civic responsibility. Though young, as a member of Virginia’s gentleman class, George William had likely been inundated with these tenets by his father and perhaps to a greater extent from his visits with the iconic Washington. In any event, it is not surprising that when the war for American Independence broke out, young Master Carlyle gravitated toward a “*profession of arms*,” particularly one in the cavalry where these skills would prove useful.

Evidence suggests that although he was born in England, the elder Carlyle embraced this burgeoning Southern code of chivalry. He was a public servant, a colonel in the militia, and apparently considered himself to be a good judge of horseflesh for John was one of the first Virginians to import quality thoroughbreds to the colony. Carlyle even “*managed*” horse races in Alexandria with George Washington. Thus, George William almost certainly became an enthusiastic and accomplished horseman at a very early age – a skill that was prized among Virginia’s genteel society and one that would figure greatly in the young cavalier’s not-too-distant future.

Another aspect of preparing a young Virginia gentleman to take on his “*knightly*” duties was to secure for him a sufficient education. It is known that George William had a tutor, his own private teacher. In his 1780 will, John Carlyle stated that he “*wish[ed] him [George William] to be kept with Mr. Booth or at the best place for education that money can be got...*” The money to pay for the tutor or other means of education was laid out strictly in his will as John instructed his executors to “*pay a particular regard to the Education of my Son and that they not cramp it... I hereby Impower & authorise my Executors to sell any part of my Perishable Estate or any of my Back Lands... for raising the sum of money that may be necessary.*”

Although the colonies had established institutions of higher learning like King William's School in Annapolis, William and Mary in Williamsburg, Yale in New Haven, and Harvard in Boston, it was still deemed

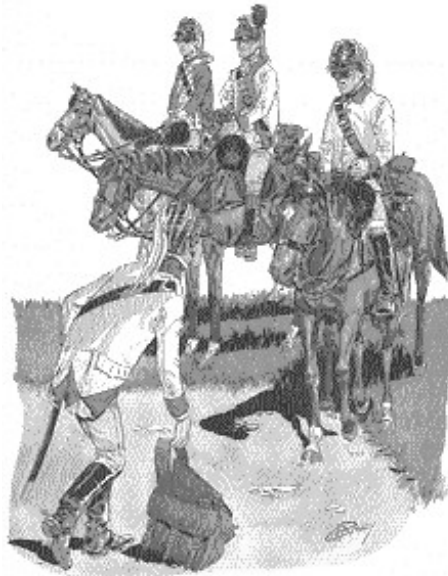
“*provincial*” to be educated in America. Apparently, John Carlyle was no different from his contemporaries in this regard, for it is known from a letter to his older brother George that John had intended to send his son to England to be educated. It is clear that by age 14 George William’s father had already decided his son’s future. It was to carry on the legacy of wealth, power, and high social standing that John had worked so hard to attain in his adopted homeland. Therefore, we can surmise that young Master Carlyle was expected to be sent to England for a proper education. John probably had hoped his son would attend the elite Eton school in the shadow of Windsor Castle, and possibly go on to Oxford or Cambridge followed by a stint at the Inns of Court in London to read law. But the outbreak of hostilities with the Mother Country ended that dream.

Based on these primary sources, it is safe to assume that the elder Carlyle never intended his only son to pursue a military career. A profession at arms was much more suited for a second son, not the heir to the family fortune. Obviously, John desired more for George William and wanted his heir to take his place amongst Virginia’s privileged class.

Not only did Virginia’s colonial gentry view education as an instrument to obtain and maintain their affluence, they held individual civic responsibility in the highest regard. As an educated landholder, a young gentleman like

George William would be better prepared to manage his own affairs, as well as those of the “*common*” people he was to eventually lead. Entering politics and holding a public office was seen as one of the most respected and rewarding endeavors to which a Virginia gentleman could aspire. But Master George Carlyle evidently had other plans.

On July 18, 1774, John Carlyle attended meetings chaired by George Washington to discuss the Fairfax Resolves at Arell’s Tavern and the Court House across the street from Carlyle House. Colonel Carlyle signed the Fairfax Resolves, which set forth the rights of Virginians, called for a Continental Congress, and petitioned for the non-importation of goods from England. It is possible that young George William walked across the street to listen to these impassioned discussions and got caught up in the Revolutionary zeal. In any event, the boy undoubtedly sat through many long





dinners at his fathers side while he discussed with the leading citizens of Alexandria and Fairfax County the events leading up to (and the progress of) the American Revolution.

John Carlyle died in September 1780 when George William was only 14, leaving him the bulk of the Carlyle fortune including thousands of acres of Virginia land. As heir to his father's estate, the boy became the modern-day equivalent of a teenaged multi-millionaire. Nevertheless, George William obviously fell victim to the spirit of the Revolution and volunteered to join the fight for American independence. Given that Carlyle so fervently stressed in his last will and testament that his son continue his studies, it may be that John would not have been pleased with George William's choice to join in the fray. The historic record suggests that the elder Carlyle wanted to keep his child out of harm's way. But within five months of the death of his father, this exuberant adolescent had joined the militia.

Unfortunately, we know little about George William's military service. An officer's mess list dated February 24, 1781, for the Fairfax Militia shows the lad as a mess member along with Charles Little, one of the executors of John Carlyle's will. On that date, it appears the Fairfax Militia was preparing to march south to combine with other Virginia units to fight against His Royal Majesty's forces led by the infamous Benedict Arnold in the Virginia tidewater region. On February 17, 1781, Virginia Governor Thomas Jefferson had sent a letter requesting several northern Virginia Militias to form and proceed to Williamsburg. In obedience to Jefferson's directive the unit made its way south through Fredericksburg to Williamsburg during March and April 1781. As yet, no further references to George William's service in the Fairfax Militia have been found. Although likely, it is not clear if George William traveled from his hometown to Williamsburg with the militia; however, mention is made of "Captain Little" during this

expedition.

Despite that fact a July 4, 1781 letter from Major James McHenry (who was then near Williamsburg) to General Nathanael Greene of Rhode Island warmly recommends a "Mr. Carlyle" who expected to be named a cornet (the cavalry equivalent of a second lieutenant) in Lieutenant Colonel William Washington's 3rd Continental Light Dragoons. William Washington, a very capable cavalry commander and seasoned veteran, was a second cousin of George Washington. Major McHenry avows in his correspondence to Lieutenant Colonel Washington that George William is "full of zeal, and if it can be procured let me entreat that the appointment may be only through your influence. But if it cannot, he intends playing the volunteer until something offers in the line of the army." McHenry asks that Mister Carlyle be made "one of your family [an aide to Nathanael Greene] for a few days till he can be properly attached." James Mc Henry (who later served as Secretary of War under Presidents Washington and John Adams, and for whom Fort McHenry in Baltimore is named) had just completed an assignment as an aide to General George Washington and was now an aide to General Marquis de Lafayette, the youthful but very effective French officer who was one of George Washington's military "sons." The young French aristocrat was only 8 years George William's senior.



William Washington

By Charles Willson Peele

It appears that George William, now 15, carried this letter, together with dispatches from the 23-year-old French general, to Nathanael Greene in South Carolina. George Washington handpicked Greene in late 1780 to lead the Southern Campaign, which included all American forces in Virginia and the Carolinas. The Lafayette dispatches carried by young Carlyle contained very important information on the American military engagements against Lord Cornwallis in Virginia, and they notified General Greene that additional Continental troops were on their way to the Carolinas. While en route to South Carolina, George William stayed at the southern Virginia (Mecklenberg County) home of Robert Munford, a militia leader at the major battle of Guilford Courthouse (March, 15 1781), a member of the

Virginia House of Burgesses, and a leading dramatist of the day who had written two major plays in the 1770s.

In a July 24, 1781, letter, General Greene informed McHenry that George William had arrived at his headquarters on July 20 and that the General “*shall pay particular attention to Mr. Carlyle.*” The last known official documentation for George William’s military service is the casualty report from the September 8, 1781, Battle of Eutaw Springs, South Carolina, signed by General Greene’s aide, Colonel Otho Williams of



The Battle of Cowpens
By Don Troiani

Maryland. On the casualty list under Lieutenant Colonel William Washington’s “*Cavalry*” (the 3rd Continental Light Dragoons), it lists “*Mr. Carlisle[a] Volontier Killed.*” George William most likely lost his life in a cavalry charge against the British right flank. In that action, His Royal Majesty’s forces killed, wounded, or captured over half of Lieutenant Colonel Washington’s 60-man cavalry regiment, including all but two of its officers. William Washington’s horse was shot out from under him and Washington himself was wounded and taken prisoner.

As a result of the action at Eutaw Springs, the British withdrew to Charleston, never again to venture outside that city for the remainder of the War. This Battle was not only one of the bloodiest of the Revolution, it was the last significant military engagement in the South before Yorktown (October 1781). Other than the casualty report, it is unfortunate that no other contemporary account of George William’s death has been found.

It appears that George William’s death must have been both heroic and spectacular, for more than 30 years after Eutaw Springs, “*Light Horse Harry*” Henry

Lee makes particular mention of it in his memoirs of the Revolution. After all that time, and keeping in mind that approximately one-quarter of the Americans engaged in this battle were killed or wounded, Lee still specifically remembered the 15-year-old boy’s death as he wrote: “*The gallant young Carlisle, from Alexandria, a cadet in the regiment, was killed, and half the corps destroyed...*” Thus ended the short life of George William Carlyle; a young and chivalrous Virginia cavalier.

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Lecture and Book Signing at Gadsby's Tavern

Museum Gadsby’s Tavern Museum, 134 N. Royal Street, Old Town Alexandria, is pleased to announce “*Clothing and Textile Collections in the US: A CSA Guide;*” a lecture by noted costume historian and author Sally Queen. The lecture will be followed by a reception and book signing. This event is open to the general public for \$12. The date is June 7, 2006, doors open at 7 p.m. and lecture begins at 7:30 p.m. You may purchase your copy of limited edition “*Clothing and Textile Collections in the U S A CSA Guide.*” \$32 presale, \$40 at the door. Reservations are recommended. 703.838.4242. Tickets can also be purchased online at www.GadsbysTavern.org by clicking on ‘Ticket Sales’