

# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

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### The "Residue of my Estate": An Account of Penny

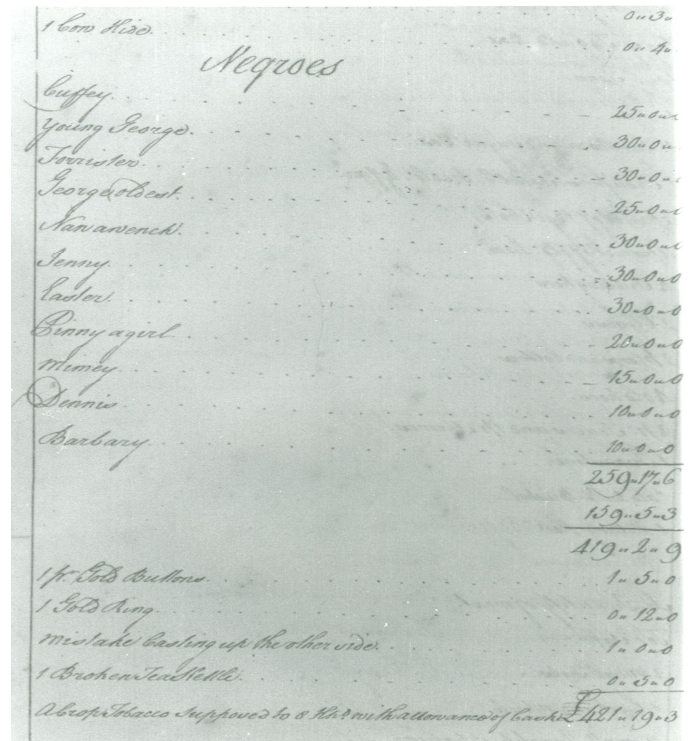
by Jim Bartlinski

Curiously enough John Carlyle's April 5, 1780 "last Will & Testament" is completely devoid of any direct reference to his slaves. The closest John comes to mentioning the people he owned or their fate can be gleaned from the following sections presented in his will:

- ◆ "I give and Devise all the rest & Residue of my Estate Real & Personal unto my son George William Carlyle [his] heirs & Assigns forever."
- ◆ "[It] is my most Earnest Request to my Executors to pay a particular regard to the Educatio[n] of my Son and that they ... sell any part of my Perishable Estate ... for raising the sum of money that may be necessary."

It is implied that when Carlyle writes of "the rest & Residue of my Estate Real & Personal" and "my Perishable Estate" that he is alluding to his enslaved persons as well as other sundry items in his possession. To find a direct reference to the individuals held in bondage by John Carlyle, one needs to examine other documents including his correspondence with his older brother Dr. George Carlyle, tax lists for Fairfax County, ads in the Virginia and Maryland newspapers for hiring out slaves or rewards for runaways, estate sale records, and more specifically, the inventory of his property compiled soon after his death.

On November 13, 1780 an inventory was taken of the recently deceased "Colo John Carlyles Estate Real & Personal." This detailed account of John's property was carried out, or at least supervised, by his son-in-law, William Herbert and cousin, Charles Little who were appointed executors of his will before his death. This thorough accounting of John's property by his two kinsmen included items present at his Alexandria home and plantations Torthorwald and Bridekirk. Omitted from this inventory is Carlyle's property called Lymekilns which is mentioned in his April 1780 will as the "Track of Land in Berkley County ... on the neck on Potomack River near the mouth of Opeckon Creek" that



Inventory of Richard Osborn, April 1750.

he bequeathed to his grandson, Carlyle Fairfax Whiting.

Among John Carlyle's possessions inventoried by Herbert and Little at his Alexandria residence were nine enslaved people. These nine human beings owned by Carlyle are inconspicuously recorded between "a small parcel [of] Tools in a drawer," appraised at £2 and "5 vols [of] Rapins History of England" valued at

**CARLYLE HOUSE**

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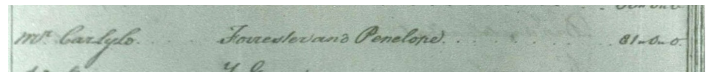
Penny and Forrester were purchased by John Carlyle as a pair, the theory that the enslaved couple were connected in some way is still open for debate. But regardless the relationship between the two or lack thereof, after Forrester's purchase by Carlyle in 1750, evidence of the enslaved man's existence disappears. Forrester is not among the slaves listed on John's 1780 inventory for his Alexandria home, Torthorwald or Bridekirk. It is possible he was at Lymekilns or one of Carlyle's other properties but more than likely Forrester was dead or had been sold by 1780. The fate of this man may never be known.

Although reduced to a commodity to be bought and sold, Penny was a human being with friends, possibly a family, and a name. It was common practice for whites and blacks to be named for personalities of note from classical history, literature, and the Bible. Penny's Christian name was "*Penelope*," the heroine of Greek mythology who was the dutiful and faithful wife of Odysseus. The name Penelope and its derivative "Penny" enjoyed a degree of popularity during the 18<sup>th</sup>-century and most likely was given to the enslaved women by Richard Osborn or an overseer on his plantation. Notwithstanding how Penny received her given name "*Penelope*," it is certain that the irony of her nickname and its association with a unit of currency, the pence or penny, amused a number of people. According to family tradition the double entendre associated with Penny's name was not lost on Major General Edward Braddock when he made John Carlyle's Alexandria home his headquarters during the spring of 1755.

In a letter written by Carlyle descendant Mrs. Helen H. Whiting in 1972, the enslaved Penny is reported to have been the butt of a joke made at her expense by General Braddock in April 1755. The anecdote is as follows:

*"Penny, then young and in that interesting condition [pregnant] about which the eighteenth century never hesitated to jest, was among the servants gathered to bid the General [Braddock] godspeed and to accept his gratuities. He singled her out and called heartily: 'Well, Penny, here is a penny for you – when I return, it shall be two Pennies, eh?' One can imagine the roar from his staff, as the big, ruddy, confident General went down the steps and away, not ever to return."*

If there is any validity to Mrs. Whiting's Braddock anecdote, it can be assumed that the "*Penny*" made sport of by the General in 1755 is the same "*Penelope*" purchased by Carlyle in April 1750, as well as the "*Negro...Penny*" listed on his 1780 probate inventory. The family tradition which suggests that when Braddock quipped Penny would be "*two Pennies*" when he returned from the frontier indicates that she was likely of or near



Carlyle purchases Forrester and Penelope for 81£.

childbearing age when she was acquired by John in 1750 and it is then conceivable that she was with child five years later but as of yet there as been found no concrete evidence to support the claim.

Following the death of John Carlyle and his son and principle heir, George William, Sarah Carlyle and her husband William Herbert took up residence on Fairfax Street. On a 1789 tax list for Fairfax County, twelve "*Negro[s]*" are noted as being owned by Carlyle's son-in-law. In all probability, Penny was among William Herbert's twelve slaves. The last known record of Penny is found in a letter from Sarah Carlyle Herbert to her daughter Margaret Herbert Fairfax, dated January 23, 1804. In this correspondence Sarah mentions how she:

*"Found Poor old Penny almost killed by the doctors when I return'd from Danby. It was the fashion last fall, if a person complain'd of being sick, to bleed, blister, & salivate – accordingly when the old women called a Doctor, tho'x she was upwards Sixty they bled, Blister'd, & put her in so severe a salivation, that when I came home she had sca[ ]rcely any pils. I was obliged to give her a quantity of Maderia wine & take great care of her –."*

Assuming that the "*old Penny*" nursed back to health by Sarah Carlyle Herbert in 1804 is the same "*Penelope*" purchased by her father in 1750, the enslaved woman had served the Carlyle and Herbert families for over fifty years.

If "*old Penny*" was "*upwards of Sixty*" as Sarah writes in 1804, she may have been born sometime in the late 1730s or early 1740s. This would make Penny at least 10 to 17 years older than Sarah Herbert who was born in 1757. Sarah lost her mother, Sarah Fairfax Carlyle, in 1761 when she was merely a child of four and her stepmother, Sybil West Carlyle, in 1769 when she was 12. It can be assumed that the young Sarah and her little sister Ann looked to Penny as a surrogate mother of sorts and had developed a deep affection for her. If this is the case, Penny was possibly the only constant female presence in both Sarah's and her sister's lives.

However as Sarah and Ann neared adolescence, John discouraged his children's interaction with the slaves, like many white slaveholding parents of the period. In a 1769 letter to his brother George, John Carlyle voices his concern over this contact: "*Servants...may Rather Corrupt than Improve their [his two daughters] Morells.*" John's fear of his slaves corrupting the morals of his children indicates that he may have believed that his enslaved people were similar to undisciplined children

and had no control over their baser instincts and therefore should not be left alone with them to “*Corrupt ... their Morells.*”

This paternal though patronizing attitude John Carlyle had formed towards his slaves is never more evident than when he writes to his brother George in November 1752 about the delays he has encountered in building his Alexandria home:

*“Its a Pleasure to build in England but here where we are obliged To Doe Everything With one’s own Servants & thise Negros make it Require Constant Attendance & Care - & So much Trouble that if I had Suspected it would been What I have meet with, I believe I should [have] made Shift with A Very Small house.”*

In a 1769 letter to older brother George, John’s use of the euphemism “*famely*” when referring to his enslaved people is further evidence of his patronizing opinion of them. The practice of identifying one’s slaves as “*famely*” was common throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-centuries and carried with it a condescending tone.

With that said it can be assumed that Sarah Herbert developed over time a maternalistic way of behaving towards Penny as well as her other slaves, similar to her father. This is not to say that real feelings of friendship or even affection did not develop between the Carlyles and Herberts and the people they owned, but it may never be known.

When Sarah Herbert writes in 1804 that she “*was obliged to give her [Penny] a quantity of Maderia wine & take great care of her –*” her use of the words “*obliged*” and “*take great care of*” hints of more than just a slave owner’s feigned or patronizing concern for her property. Whatever her motivation, it appears from the letter that Sarah does exhibit a degree of “*motherly*” concern over “*Poor old*” Penny’s well being. It surely was not because of Penny’s monetary worth, for the old slave woman’s value certainly had depreciated since 1780. The only conclusion is that Sarah not only felt a moral obligation to care for Penny, but that over the forty-seven years the two spent together, a true fondness for one another must have developed between them.

By the early 1800s, Penny’s appraisal at £50 in 1780 would have been greatly diminished. Penny, now in her declining years of productivity (in financial terms) was worth next to nothing. Evidence of this decline in value for an older slave exists on the 1780 inventory for Torthorwald. Listed under the category of “*Negro*” on Torthorwald’s inventory are two enslaved men called “*Lame Jack*” and “*old Jack.*” The appraised value for

“*Lame Jack*” was £10 and “*old Jack*” was assigned no value at all. The 1833 - 1834 inventory for the vast holdings of the late Charles Carroll of Carrollton lists two enslaved individuals ages 62 and 67 at \$1. Thus it can be assumed that as of 1804 “*old Penny*” now in her sixties had little or no financial value as well.

Despite the lack of primary source material concerning the lives of Penny and the remainder of the enslaved people owned by the Carlyle and Herbert families on Fairfax Street, the impact of their involuntary servitude is still felt to this day. Without his slave laborers John Carlyle’s Aquia sandstone house could not have been built. Nor could the household have functioned smoothly without the daily toil of slaves like Penny, Moses, Cook, Nanny and the nameless others who worked their lives away to maintain the gentry lifestyle of their master. The very act of Carlyle’s slave “*famely*” enduring the indignity of their situation still inspires us and touches our imagination.

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*Cartouche from the Fry-Jefferson Map. 1755.*