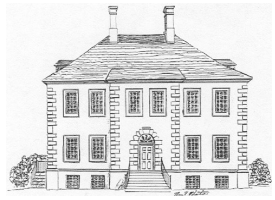
Carlyle House
Docent Dispatch



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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

The First Nine Months of 1780: John Carlyle's Last Days

By Henry Desmarais

The year 1780 saw the production of two documents of importance in interpreting the life and times of John Carlyle. On April 5 of that year, Carlyle wrote his last will and testament, which provides important information about his personal values (e.g., the importance of a good education and of attending to the needs of the poor) and some of his valuable assets. And, on November 13, an inventory of his household was taken. This document is of immeasurable help in re-furnishing and interpreting John Carlyle's grand house. But what were the first nine months of 1780 like for John Carlyle?

In March 1780, General George Washington designated Alexandria as one of four collection points for Virginia's quota of supplies for the Continental army. The town was to serve as the depository for 40,000 gallons of rum, 80 tons of hay, and 40,000 bushels of corn, all considered essentials in 18th-century warfare. From a military perspective, 1780 was a most discouraging year for American patriots, such as Carlyle. Charleston surrendered to the British on May 12, giving the British not only this key southern city, but 5,000 prisoners of war and much military equipment. According to historian John Selby, "[a] lmost the entire Virginia Continental line was lost at Charleston." Later that month, most of the remaining Virginia line was "virtually annihilated" at Waxhaws, South Carolina, where the British cavalry "massacred many Virginians after they surrendered." Then, on August 16, 1780, the Americans suffered yet another major defeat at Camden, South Carolina, when forces under the command of General Horatio Gates were soundly thrashed, in what Hallahan has called "the greatest American disaster of the war; the beginning of the end many predicted." American dead and wounded on this occasion totaled about 800, with another 1,000 captured. And since the British had raided and burned Virginia communities in 1779 (Portsmouth and Suffolk, and surrounding towns and plantations), there must have been more than a bit of unease in the Potomac River community of Alexandria. For the Americans, the military situation would improve only after Carlyle's death--we should never forget that John Carlyle wrote his last will and testament--and died--not knowing how the American Revolution would turn out.

From an economic perspective, 1780 was a most dreadful year for the thirteen United States. Selby summarizes the situation by observing that "shortages, inflation, militia duty, and rampant self-interest sapped morale… by 1780, the question became how long Virginians and other Americans could hang on." Among other things, a British blockade was making it difficult for ships to enter and leave the Chesapeake Bay. This probably means that Carlyle's plantations and miscellaneous business ventures were far more important as sources of goods and revenues at this time than was his merchant business.

From a governmental and political perspective, the year 1780 was one of significant change for both Virginia and Alexandria. Thomas Jefferson was serving the first of his two one-year terms as Virginia's governor. In April of 1780, Virginia's capital was officially moved from Williamsburg to Richmond. This change was made because Richmond was more centrally located (given the westward movement of the population), situated on a navigable river, and erroneously believed to be less "exposed to the insults and injuries of the publick enemy." Since Carlyle had

CARLYLE HOUSE

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in earlier times done business in the Williamsburg capital and directed letters there to the royal governor and others, he must have had mixed emotions about the change in capital. (In 1783, the Virginia House of Delegates itself would reconsider the wisdom of the move; a motion to return the capital to Williamsburg was defeated, with 39 delegates voting in favor and 55 voting against.)

Closer to home, Alexandria's appointed (and oligarchic) Board of Trustees, on which John Carlyle had served for about 30 years, was replaced by an elected City Council in elections held in February 1780. The city council, in turn, elected the mayor, Robert Townsend Hooe (the merchant from whose store John Carlyle had purchased rolls of green varnished wallpaper back in 1773). In 1779, the Virginia Assembly had approved legislation incorporating Alexandria and providing for changes in its form of government. This action was taken in response to a petition signed by 104 prominent Alexandrians, including John Carlyle's son-in-law, William Herbert.

Dr. Jim Munson, in his history of early Alexandria, speculates that John Carlyle was not among the petition's signatories because he was "miffed" since he and other sitting trustees were "technically targets of the petition." However, rather than an indictment of the years of service provided by Carlyle and his fellow trustees, the petition and the requested change in Alexandria's form of government appear instead to have been part of "a strong move for popular representation" sweeping a nation that was fighting for independence. In any case, the Alexandria Board of Trustees, with John Carlyle in attendance, held its last meeting on March 8, 1780, mainly to settle accounts. These included expenses totaling 38 pounds, 11 shillings, and 4 pence previously incurred by the combined account of Messrs. Carlyle and Dalton (with John Carlyle certifying the account's accuracy on behalf of the already deceased John Dalton), and separate expenses totaling 86 pounds, 5 shillings incurred by John Carlyle alone. In effect, the Board was agreeing to reimburse those who had previously covered town-related expenses from their own personal accounts.

While available documentation regarding military, economic and governmental developments during the first nine months of 1780 provides some insight into John Carlyle's final days, there is obviously much more we would like to know. For one thing, how did John Carlyle die? At this point in time, we simply can't say for sure. Carlyle's biographer, James Munson, tells us that he wrote his will in April 1780 "probably as a result of illness." We know Carlyle was ravaged by a serious illness in 1755, probably scarlet fever or some other infectious disease (two of Carlyle's children died in November of that year). The same bacteria responsible for scarlet fever (and the more common strep throat) could also cause rheumatic fever, damaging heart valves and leading to serious problems down the road. We also know that Carlyle suffered from gout, a condition that can be associated with high blood pressure or kidney disease, either of which can have fatal complications (e.g., stroke, congestive heart failure or renal failure). Also, in the fall of 1780, an epidemic, possibly influenza, swept the eastern portion of Virginia but probably occurred after Carlyle was already dead. In any case, Colonel John Carlyle died in September 1780. He was 60 years old. As was his wish, he was laid to rest in the burial ground adjacent to the then very new and now Old Presbyterian Meeting House. As far as John Carlyle was concerned, the year 1780 was now over. For the first time since its founding, Alexandria would just have to get along without him. And, of course, it did.

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