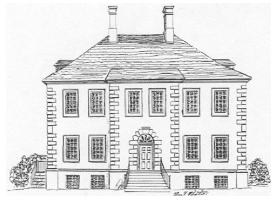
Carlyle House
Docent Dispatch



November 2004

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Colonial Elections

This article appeared in the March 2001 Docent Dispatch. We are rerunning it because the information could be used to augment tours on or around election day this year.

Controversial elections are not a modern day phenomenon. There were no butterfly ballots or electoral colleges in the eighteenth-century, but elections in colonial Virginia presented their own unique challenges to the democratic process. The House of Burgesses was the only elected body in colonial Virginia. Two burgesses were elected from each county in Virginia, and one from Jamestown, Williamsburg, Norfolk, and the College of William and Mary.

1757 Hogarth Print of Election Day

The first step in a general election was the issuance of a writ from the Governor ordering that an election take place. After the writ was sent to each county, the sheriff was responsible for deciding the time of an election and publicizing the writ to all the voters in the county. Copies of the writ, indicating the election's time and location, were delivered to the parish minister and to the readers of the churches and chapels in the county, whose duty it was to publish this information at the close of services each Sunday until election day.

The election was held at a single place in each county, and the law required that it be held at the courthouse. This was a convenient location because many voters would have already been there on that day to transact business, buy and sell land and slaves, and to enjoy the excitement of a court day. The elections were usually held in the courtroom, though they sometimes were moved outside in good weather. A long table was set up and behind the table sat the sheriff, several ranking justices of the county, and all of the candidates. When a poll was taken, the voters presented themselves one by one before the table where the election officials sat. Voters were not registered before elections, and there were no officials to turn back nonqualified voters.

CARLYLE HOUSE

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director
Jim Bartlinski, Curator
Cindy Major, Curator of Education

However, the sheriff could refuse to take the vote of a man whom he knew to be unqualified. In addition, each candidate had the right to challenge any voter and to require a sworn statement that he met the legal requirements. The most common objection was that a man was not a freeholder. A freeholder was a white male who owned 25 acres "with a house and plantation" upon it or 100 acres of unoccupied land, or if he owned a house or lot in one of the towns. (The legal definition of freeholder changed slightly a number of times in colonial Virginia.)

During an election, each freeholder came before the sheriff, his name was called out in a loud voice, and the sheriff inquired how he would vote. The voter replied by providing the name of his choice. The clerk wrote down the voter's name, the sheriff announced it as enrolled, and the candidate for whom he had voted arose, bowed, and publicly thanked him. According to historian Charles Sydnor, "The excitement and tension of close elections was enhanced by oral voting. Simply by listening, one could tell fairly well how things were going." The crowd listened with great interest to each voter's intent. Similar to a crowd at a modern sporting event, verbal arguments and physical fights often broke-out as participants grew frustrated with the possibility of an unfavorable outcome. When the election was close, there were often feverish attempts to bring in voters who would vote on the "right" side. There was not a set time limit for an election, though, and it was at the sheriff's discretion to close the polls. For example, in an election in Alexandria on July 14, 1774, when Washington was a candidate, "the Poll was over in about two hours."

There were many ways in which candidates used to try and get voters to back them. Some candidates chose to campaign across the county in order to elicit votes. In 1758, John Carlyle went out to campaign for George Washington. Washington was standing for election as burgess for Frederick County, but military commitments kept him from campaigning. According to James Munson, "Candidates knew for certain who their supporters were, and the lesser people took their cue from how the gentry began the voting. In the 1758 election, the first four names in George Washington's polling list were Thomas, Lord Fairfax; the Reverand William Meldrum, the county's leading clergyman; Colonel James Wood, founder of Frederick Town, now Winchester; and Colonel John Carlyle." Not everyone found campaigning an honorable pursuit, but they all soon discovered it was necessary to get elected. Colonel Landon Carter, writing in 1776, said that he had once been "turned out of the H. of B." because "I did not familiarize myself among the people," whereas he well remembered his "son's going amongst them and carrying his Election."

Candidates had other means besides campaigning to get elected. Almost all candidates in colonial Virginia relied on the persuasive power of food and liquor (also known as treats) generously dispensed to the voters in order to get elected. The favorite beverage was rum punch. Cookies and ginger cakes were often provided, and occasionally there was a barbecued bullock and several hogs. It was also common practice for candidates to open up their homes to the voters who were on their way to the elections. According to Sydnor, "the law strictly prohibited any person 'directly or indirectly' from giving 'money, meat, present, gift, reward, or entertainment…in order to be elected, or for being elected to serve in the General Assembly,' but in one way or another nearly all the candidates gave treats, and seldom was a voice raised in protest." James Madison felt that "the corrupting influence of spirituous liquors, and other treats" was "inconsistent with the purity of moral and republican principles" and wished to see the adoption of "a more chaste mode of conducting elections in Virginia." Still, large quantities of liquor continued to be responsible for the often rowdy behavior on election day. This practice can also be seen as a great support of the democracy because the prospect of free drink and food encouraged more voters to participate in the voting process. This observation makes you wonder what our voter turn out would be today if this eighteenth-century practice had continued!

Sources:

- *American Revolutionaries in the Making*, by Charles S. Snydor (in the docent library)
- *Col John Carlyle, Gent.*, by James Munson