



# Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

October 2001

*Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority*

## *Blest Be The Man Who Got The Pease*

**By Bob Beaulieu**

During the French and Indian War, poor food, abysmal living conditions and disease proved to be as dangerous as the enemy to the American militia. In the summer of 1758 Obadiah Harris was a militiaman with a Massachusetts regiment engaged in roadwork. A lack of supplies had brought the regiment to a stand still and the men close to desertion. When provisions arrived on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August, Harris celebrated the event in “Fourteeners.”

And now the provisions come again,  
And we have some to eat;  
Blest be the man who got the pease  
And he that got the meat!

The bread also to us is come,  
And rice enough, in store;  
And some fresh beef for our relief:  
What can we wish for more?

Now we begin to live again-  
The butter, it is come,  
And for our money we can have  
Our bottles filled with Rum.

It is not surprising that Harris would celebrate the arrival of food with a ballad. Most militiamen of his day spent a good deal of their time hungry and preoccupied with thoughts of food. The poor diet weakened the men, making them susceptible to disease and affecting their behavior. Militiaman Joseph Nichols wrote in 1758, “The spirits of the

men seem to fail. We are losing our courage that in years past we had credit of. It is a common saying that money makes the man to go, and I make no doubt if in our case our natures was refreshed with diet agreeable to what we are used to, our strength and courage would come to us like an armed man.”

Quantity of food was only part of the problem. The diet was deficient in B-complex vitamins, vitamin C and several necessary minerals. A lack of vitamin C caused scurvy. British officers were familiar with the disease and the methods to combat it. They issued molasses to the militiamen for the brewing of “Spruce Beer” as a preventative, but that was ineffective. The soldiers, being hungry most of the time, would often eat the molasses ration rather than brew the beer. The shortage of B-complex vitamins lowered resistance to disease and caused the diarrhea that plagued soldiers throughout the war. Soldiers garrisoned in forts could supplement their diet by gardening, hunting and fishing. They could buy from local farmers and settlers. Unfortunately, militiamen were usually far from garrisons engaged in roadwork or fort building and much preferred to spend what money they had on rum.

Bad weather and unsanitary living conditions caused dysentery, diphtheria, typhus, typhoid fever,

*(Continued on page 2)*

### **Carlyle House**

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



## Blest Be (Con't)



and other “camp distempers.” Joseph Nichols described conditions in his regiment; “The bloody flux prevails in our regiment very fast. Several of our company reduced very low. It’s imputed to the season of the year’s changing: the nights and mornings begin to be cold and we often have cold rains. Our tents begin to be of little service, for they will not shed rain, but let it through very fast.”

Even though commanders issued orders to promote sanitary camp conditions, most seem to have been ignored by the men. Lieutenant Colonel Burton described Fort William Henry in 1756; “about 2500 men, 500 of them sick, the greatest part of them what they call poorly. They bury from five to eight daily, and officers in proportion. Extremely indolent and dirty to a degree (that) the fort stinks enough to cause infection. The camp nastier than anything I could conceive. Their necessary houses, kitchens, graves and places for slaughtering cattle, all mixed through the encampment.”

Personnel hygiene was just as bad. Commanders issued additional orders promoting sanitary practices. All men were ordered to wash their face and hands daily and wash their shirts weekly. Practice among the men

seldom followed policy. John Woods, a typical private, washed his clothes only twice in 1759; the second time was after finding lice. He wrote, “washed my jacket and shirt, and boiled them out to kill the lice, for I found several about me; so I gave them a dressing.”



Governor Francis Bernard summed it up in 1763, when he reported to the Board of Trade: “In the beginning of the late war many perished by the sword, but much more by the diseases incidental to a campaign. In 1760, when I came to this government, I was surprised to (s)ee what havoc disease alone made among provincial soldiers in the course of, and especially towards the end of, a campaign. And yet I remedied this mischief by three provisions only: having them well clothed, keeping them from rum, and supplying them plentifully with

spruce beer. If these regulations had been established in the beginning of the war, many hundreds (I may say some thousands) of lives would have been saved.”

### Reference:

Fred Anderson, “A People’s Army,” 1984