

Infant Mortality and the Carlyle Family

By Mark Hill

Often, we hear about John Carlyle and his family suffering major setbacks with regards to the very short lives of many of the children. Of the seven children that Sarah Carlyle and four that Sybil Carlyle bore, only three, Sarah, Ann and George William, survived past the age of three. In addition, John and his brother, George, were the only children, of ten borne to Rachel and William Carlyle that lived beyond early childhood. These Carlyle tragedies give rise to the question as to whether there was some genetic malady that would have served as the cause of such a high rate of infant mortality within the Carlyle family. That question will not be answered here, and may never be answered, but does serve as a convenient entry point for a discussion on topics such as infant mortality rates experienced, as



Death of William

well as the rate of death of child-bearing women and what childhood diseases were prevalent during John Carlyle's time.

First, some background information on the deaths of the Carlyle families' children. Of the eight children of Rachel and William Carlyle who departed at an early age, six are recorded as dying in infancy; one died at age three or four years; another perished after two or three years. Incidentally, George and John

were the first and third children borne to Rachel; after John, Rachel and William would not have another child that would survive early childhood. John Carlyle's children who did not live beyond the toddler stage numbered eight as well; five dying after a few months of life; one miscarriage; one living until about two years; and another who survived until two and a half years of age.

While it is well understood that infant mortality rates in the 18th century, whether within the American colonies or in Great Britain, was rather high even in the latter portion of the 1700s, it was substantially below what the Carlyles endured. In the mid to late 18th century, the infant mortality rate was in the 30-40% range; in comparison, John Carlyle's "family" experienced nearly a 75% rate, about double that of the average for the America and England. We should also note that the Carlyles, John and his parents, were of a higher station and one may expect that the infant mortality rate would be higher for the lower classes versus the gentry class.

It is difficult to ascertain what caused the death of so many Carlyle children. Speculation suggests that a genetic disorder was the cause, but there were many diseases that ran rampant during the 18th century throughout Great Britain and the American colonies and any of these could unleash

CARLYLE HOUSE
Sarah Coster, Site Administrator
Helen Wirka, Site Specialist
Lacey Villiva, Education Assistant



a devastating blow on children. One disease, "Consumption", or what we refer to today as tuberculosis, caused nearly 25% of all deaths in



Rachel Weeping (1772-6) Charles Wilson Peale. Peale and his wife Rachel lost their daughter, Margaret, to an epidemic of smallpox in 1772.

Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries. Others included: diphtheria, called the "bloody flux" — basically an often fatal disease of the upper respiratory tract brought on by bacterial infection

induced by water or food contaminated by fecal matter; dysentery, a form of diarrhea that particularly hit hard against the new-born, weakening its victims to a state where secondary infections would eventually take hold and deliver the final blow; scarlet fever; malaria and typhoid. The young, in particular, were susceptible to these diseases. In addition, yellow fever reared its head several times throughout the mid to late 1700s. Yellow fever, a virus spread via mosquito, was most devastating in 1793 in Philadelphia, but in several instances in the mid-1700s there were other outbreaks of yellow fever across the colonies. It is known to be a tropical disease and likely found its way from ships travelling from the West Indies. Influenza, a viral infection of the respiratory tract, also impacted several areas within North America during the mid to late 1700s. Measles, viral in nature and primarily a resident in the respiratory system, found many infants and children for victims throughout the colonies during the 18th century.

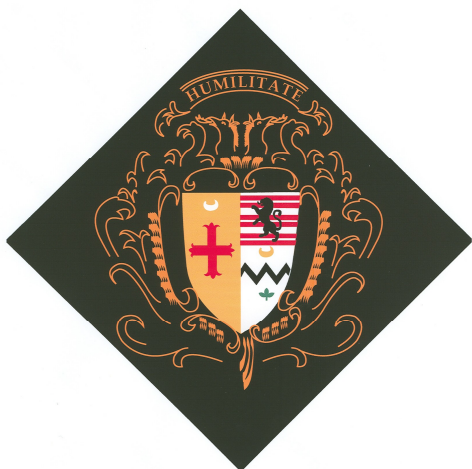
John Carlyle's business pursuits are a potential of the Carlyle's high rate of infant mortality. As a merchant, he often traveled to various places, such as the West Indies, Charleston, Annapolis, Philadelphia and New York, all loci for disease. It could have been the case that through his exposure to environs and people within larger population areas that he contracted diseases, via airborne or direct contact means, and brought them back to the Carlyle House. From 1741-1763, there were no fewer than 30 outbreaks of diseases such as smallpox, dysentery, diphtheria, influenza and yellow fever. Between 1735 and 1740, mostly in New England, there was also an outbreak of what was termed "throat distemper", to which small children were especially susceptible.

John Carlyle's extensive travelling regimen notwithstanding, practically everyone in substantial populated areas throughout the colonies was likely to be highly susceptible to such diseases, especially without the practice of modern personal hygiene in place. It would be a tough argument to support that these diseases were the purely the province of the travelling merchantman only.



Death at Birth

The infants and children who did not survive did not



The hatchment at Carlyle House. Images like these would be displayed on homes where death had recently taken place. This one shows that John is dead as well as his wives Sarah and Sybil. Both women died of complications of childbirth.

hold a monopoly on tragic circumstances. During and shortly after childbirth, mothers suffered as well. While we do not know the exact cause of death for both Sarah, her daughter Ann, and Sybil Carlyle at childbirth, it may have had

something to do with the lack of sanitation during the birthing process. Note that for mothers in the 18th century, one of the biggest fears was contracting “puerperal fever” during child birth. Also known as “childbed fever”, which was brought on by an infection within the genital tract, it was responsible for most of the maternal mortality cases. Incidents of puerperal fever can be traced to the abstinence of the simple practice of doctors and midwives washing their hands. It wasn’t until the late 1800s that the medical community embraced this practice. Note that the mortality rate of women during child birth in colonial times was about one out of 200 births. In comparison, the John Carlyle family experienced two deaths of mothers for a total of 11 births. Today, the rate for women giving birth is one out of 10,000.

It is difficult to imagine the hardships that the Carlyle families endured during and soon after the deaths of their children. But for each, some offspring lived long enough to produce subsequent generations that continue to this day...and represent many “a fine beginning.”

Selected Sources:

Caulfield, Ernest, *A History of the Terrible Epidemic*, 1938.
Coffman, Amy Virginia, “*To the Memory of Sweet Infants*”, *Eighteenth Century Commemorations of Child Death in Tidewater Virginia*, Masters Thesis, 2009.
Mays, Dorothy, *Women in early America: struggle, survival, and freedom in a new world*, 2004.
Munson, James D., *Col. John Carlyle, Gent., A True and Just Account of the Man and His House*, 1986.
Purvis, Thomas L., *Colonial America to 1763*, 1999.

A Note from the Curator

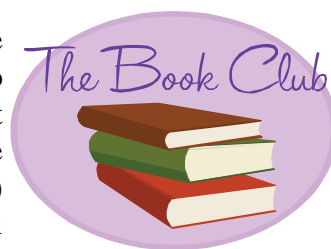
Dear Docents:

Are you interested in participating in a historical non-fiction book club with your fellow Carlyle House docents? We would like to plan a book club event for Monday, November 14th. We are interested in hearing what time of day works best for you to meet: morning or afternoon?

Here is a link to a survey online and we will email you the link directly: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/39P3XSP>.

Please indicate your level of interest and what your availability is like or if you would like to come to a book club event in the future. If you would like to fill out the survey, please do so by October 10th.

Feel free to contact me with any questions or to sign up and I will send out more details (such as the book title for November) once I have collected all the responses.



~Helen