



Carlyle House

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January, 2009

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

Piecing it Together: What we Know about John's Two Sallys

by Katherine Maas

Sarah Fairfax Carlyle

Sarah Fairfax was born 31 December 1730, married John Carlyle (1720–1780) on her seventeenth birthday (31 December 1747), and died on 22 January 1761, at the age of 30. She bore seven children, five of whom died before they reached the age of 3: Rachel, Ann (I), William, George Fairfax and Hanah. Her daughter Sarah Carlyle Herbert (discussed in further detail below) was born 4 January 1757, while her daughter Ann (II) was born on 21 January 1761, the result of Sarah Fairfax Carlyle's final and fatal pregnancy. Both of these daughters lived to adulthood: Sarah bore seven children of her own, but Ann died giving birth to her only child, a son, in March of 1778.

Sarah Fairfax Carlyle's life was one of privilege, but also of ill health and depression. She was born into one of the wealthiest Virginia families at the time, and married one of Alexandria's founders, who was in the process of making a not inconsiderable fortune himself. She had a large house in town, a fairly large staff of servants and slaves to oversee, social events to plan and attend, and connections to make and maintain. Her sister had married George Washington's brother, and the Carlyle family maintained a close relationship with the Washington family throughout Sarah's life. She wrote an admiring letter to Washington in June of 1754, wishing him encouragement in his attempts to preserve "your Country from the Insults of an Enemy." She was aware of and involved in the events in the struggling colonies by virtue of her station, her family, and her connections.



Mrs. William Bowdoin nee Phebe Murdock by Robert Feke, 1748

All of this privilege, however, did not prevent her children from dying. John wrote to his brother, George, about Sarah's difficulty in breastfeeding and about the "low state" of her spirits. After the death of their second daughter, Ann (I), in April of 1752, John wrote, "My Wife has been In A Very Low State ever Since her being brought to bed, & Likely to go into A Consumption but of late Seems to Recrute by rideing out every day & takeing Sum Powders given her by A Phisician that I Consulted on her Case." Later that

year, John writes of her "bad State of health," although she recovered sufficiently to bear a healthy son, William, in August of 1753. By July of 1754, she was "Not In So Good a State of health as" John "could Wish." By the birth of her fourth child, George Fairfax Carlyle, John describes Sarah as being "Indifferent the Whole of the Nine months," although he hoped that "her Nurseing may be of Service to her" (letter of 15 August 1755). As was common at the time, Sarah would have spent her thirteen years of marriage pregnant, recovering from pregnancy, or attempting to get pregnant. Her apparent inability to nurse several of her children (William and Sarah at least were sent

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out to wet nurses), despite her best efforts, was probably something of a concern for her—in his letters John certainly indicated his preference for having Sarah nurse her children herself.

John and Sarah seem, at least from John’s perspective, to have had a respectful partnership. He referred to her as an “Agreeable Partner” in an August 1753 letter to his brother, and clearly took her ill health to heart. He wrote her epitaph when she died, calling her “amiable thro’ Life as a Affectionate Parent Indulgent Mistress Faithful Friend Sincere Christian” who was thus “justly lamented by All Who knew her.” Unfortunately, we do not know how exactly Sarah felt about her life or about John. We do not know whether she shared his desire for a large family, or whether she would have preferred other, perhaps more intellectual, pursuits.

Sarah Carlyle Herbert

John Carlyle was left a widower in early 1761 with a newborn (Ann II) and a four-year-old daughter (Sarah). He remarried less than a year after Sarah died, to Sybil West, another wealthy young Virginian from a good family. Sybil and John had four children, only one of whom survived: a son named George William, who was born in 1765, when Sarah would have been about 8. Sarah Carlyle thus grew up in a house with a younger sister, a little half-brother, a stepmother, and her father. Sybil, however, also died in childbirth, in 1769, leaving twelve-year-old Sarah to run the household. Sarah, in a letter written to her uncle (John’s brother George) in August of 1769, refers to her “great loss in my Late Mamma[;] it is a great Loss to my sister & me[.] she was a tender Mother and wish she had lived a few years longer that I might been intrusted to have taken the care of papas house upon my own hands, which is too much for me as yet.” Sybil’s death must have reinforced young Sarah’s awareness of the inevitability of death and the uncertainty of life. John suffered from this awareness as well: in a letter to George in December 1769, he expresses his dissatisfaction with his life, and his fears for his children: “I live a disagreeable life & keep little Company[.] I am Afraid of Leaveing my Little ones which keeps me Constantly at home.” John’s children were certainly aware of their father’s



(understandable) concern about their health.

Sarah and her sister, Ann, were both married in the mid-1770s; Ann died in childbirth soon thereafter, as mentioned above. John Carlyle died in the fall of 1780, and his only son, George William, was killed in the Revolutionary War

Battle of Eutaw Springs, in the fall of 1781, leaving Sarah Herbert with no immediate family in the span of only a few years. She and her husband, William Herbert, moved back into the house on Fairfax Street, which had been left (through the perversities of estate law) to their four-year-old son, John Carlyle Herbert. Sarah and William had seven children in all, two boys (John Carlyle Herbert and William Herbert), and five girls (Margaret, Sarah, Ann, Eliza, and Lucinda). Three of the daughters never wed, and would have stayed at home with their mother; one daughter, Margaret (or Peggy), married Thomas Fairfax, a third cousin. Letters to Peggy after her marriage from both her mother and her sister Ann provide what limited insight we have into Sarah Herbert’s personality.

In her letters Sarah was eager for news of the health of her daughter and grandchildren; she provided (probably unsought) advice on health issues, such as “Let me request you not to bath your feet in warm water” (18 October 1803 [?]). When Sarah’s daughter Sarah went to stay with her sister Peggy, their mother instructed Peggy to make sure that the younger Sarah was getting exercise and brushing her teeth with bark daily (22 January 1805 [?]), and, in a later letter, not stooping (26 February 1805 [?]).

Clearly much of this motherly concern was (and probably still is) somewhat universal. There are elements of a stronger preoccupation with health in



these letters, however, that borders on the melodramatic. Sarah writes in her letter of October 1803 that she fears “from some things I have heard that your constitution resembles your mothers—if so, you cannot be too carfull, as I was always obliged to be very much so.” In a letter from February 1805, she states that “I shall not have time to write next week and perhaps the week after (if I live), only a short letter.” In January of 1805, she refers to having taken four doses of opium in one night because she was “ill.” A letter from Ann Herbert to her sister Margaret Fairfax lays out their mother’s preoccupation with illness very plainly: “Mamma’s sperits are more depress’d than when you left her, she has the rheumatism added to her imageinary complaints. I am very much confined as she will not go out and I do not like to leave her.” Just as John felt he could not leave his own children after Sybil died, so Sarah’s daughter seems concerned at going out and living her life, while leaving her mother at home.

Sarah also seems somewhat manipulative in her letters to Margaret, with such statements as “I fear you are wean’d from me and do not love me as you used to do. Excuse me—but I am fretted, when I think you co’d so easily give up the hope of seeing me for so long a time” (18 October 1803). Sarah complains to Margaret that a cousin does not write: “Pray ask Cousin Griffith, what is the reason she never writes to me. She promised sometime ago to write frequently” (24 January 1804). Of course, we have no evidence of how Margaret responded to these letters—and no comparison has been done to other letters from mothers written at the same time period. Seen by themselves, however, such letters indicate a somewhat controlling personality.

All was not illness and death in Sarah’s life, however: she writes to Margaret with great excitement in February of 1805 about her son John Carlyle Herbert’s upcoming wedding to Mary Snowden the following month. A letter between two other young ladies from the previous July described the Herbert family: “On Friday we dine at Mr. Swanns, on Saturday at Mr. Herberts, what a happy family that is at this moment, John is

certainly to be married in the Fall. Father, Mother & Children, are in exctasies, they cannot contain themselves[,] the old Lady talks of it incessantly and sleeping or waking I dare say the blissful prospect is never one moment absent from her thoughts” (Cornelia Lee to Eliza Lee, 19 July 1804). The joy of a wedding (and presumably happiness for her eldest son) probably took Sarah’s mind off of the illness with which she was surrounded.



Portait of Mrs. Richard Brooks by Augustus Earle c1826-1827

Sarah Herbert believed herself to have a weak constitution, and was probably in constant fear of illness. She was an accomplished woman, learning to play the spinet and to sing at a young age (John Carlyle to George Carlyle 1 August 1766 (B); John Carlyle to George Carlyle 16 October 1766); she

wrote to her uncle in 1769 requesting “Musick by one Brimmer In London[—]a book of reals and Country Dances, A Bass for the harpcicord vol the 1st price five shillings, Which I woud be glad to have, its called the Caledonian Pocket Companion.” Later in life, she certainly participated in the social life of the town: her letter to Margaret in February of 1805 describes another local wedding, as well as birthnight ball preparations. Sarah Herbert would have been an institution in Alexandria by the early nineteenth century, and possibly even in the 1790s when she had her mother’s wedding dress remade for her own use. She certainly cared deeply for her family, as demonstrated by her concern for their continued health and proximity.

Despite all her fears to the contrary, Sarah Herbert lived to be 70 years old, before dying in 1827.