



Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

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121 North Fairfax Street: A House in Mourning

From 1753 through 1780, Death visited the Carlyles no less than nineteen times. At his residence on Fairfax Street, John mourned the loss of six of his eleven children, two wives, and at least ten of his enslaved “famely” until September 1780 when Death came calling for him. In the twenty-seven year period that John Carlyle and his family occupied his Aquia sandstone residence, there was a death associated with the household about every one and a half years.

Sadly, Carlyle had encountered Death many times before his arrival in Virginia and subsequent move to his new Alexandria mansion in 1753. John Carlyle saw eight of his siblings die before they reached the age of four. In the summer of 1744, John’s father William kept his inescapable rendezvous with Death, and six years later Carlyle and his first wife Sarah Fairfax tragically lost their first born, Rachel on August 9, 1750 at age 2 months. John and Sarah would experience the devastating loss of a daughter again when their second child, Ann, at age 1 month passed away on April 1, 1752. Regrettably this would not be the last time the “King of Terrors” would hold court with the Carlyles.

Seventeen fifty-five was a particularly eventful and traumatic year for John Carlyle and his family. From March 26 through April 20 Major General Edward Braddock, commander-in-chief of His Majesty’s forces in North America, occupied Carlyle’s

Alexandria residence playing havoc with the home’s furnishings, servants, etc. The General would lose his life that July in the wilderness of what is now Western Pennsylvania, when his force was decimated in a surprise attack by a small band of French soldiers and their Native American allies. Braddock’s remains were buried unceremoniously in an unmarked grave in the middle of a road to be forgotten for a hundred years. In addition to the tension and damage Braddock caused in Carlyle’s home that spring of 1755, John had received word that his mother, Rachel Murray Carlyle, had passed away. November 1755 was especially tragic for the Carlyles. On November 8, John and Sarah’s third child William also died at age 15 months and, alas, a fortnight later, on November 22, their four-month-old son George departed this life. Unfortunately, the Grim Reaper would spread his pall of death over the Carlyle residence many times over the next

twenty-five years.

There is no known record left behind to indicate how John Carlyle personally viewed death or the afterlife. However we do know that he lamented



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greatly over the loss of his two wives and children. Upon the death of his first wife, John writes in the family Bible: “Jan 22 [1761] at 7 past one in the morning Sarah [Fairfax] the Dr Wife of John Carlyle departed this Life in Childbed. Much lamented by all that knew her... She was a dutiful and Loving Wife.” Eight years later John would pen in the family Bible a similar epitaph for his second wife: “1769 March 7 This day Sibyl [West] Carlyle ... departed this Life after a painful Struggle of many months & miscarried of a Daughter. In every station of Life that She lived in She filled them with Honor & dyed Greatly Lamented by all that knew her.” The passing of his second wife Sybil and their third child (they had four together) in March, coupled with the already high mortality rate in the Carlyle household, prompted John to write his older brother George in December 1769: “I Live a disagreeable life & keep little Company ... To increase my dejection death has been very Common in my house ... Since Mrs. Carlyle was taken from me, I have lost Ten slaves, young & Old, and have had a Very Sickly famely [slaves] ... It brings Me to Reflect that all wordly Enjoyments are nothing.”

It is apparent from his correspondence that the seemingly unceasing deaths that plagued John Carlyle’s household had taken their toll. In August 1766, Carlyle wrote George a heartfelt letter concerning the loss of his and Sybil’s first child, John, at two years of age: “... My Dr Little Jackey [John]. To my great Greaf ... was taken from me in February [1766] ...he was above

Every Child of his Age I Ever saw: too good, too sensible for me & only fitt for what he is-an Angell. I Never felt Such a Loss... I have fallen Away in my flesh & am Really an Old man,” Carlyle was only 46 at the time he penned this letter. Two more of Colonel Carlyle’s offspring would pass away outside the walls of his Alexandria home. John’s daughter, Ann Carlyle Whiting, at age 17, (the seventh child of John and Sarah) died as a result of complications during childbirth on March 21, 1778, and, one year after the Colonel’s own death, his 15-year-old son from his second marriage, George William, was killed in South Carolina at the Battle of Eutaw Springs on September 8, 1781.

Not unlike his younger brother, George Carlyle was also well acquainted with Death. George had endured the passing of two wives and three (possibly four) of his six children in infancy. George Carlyle departed this life four years after John in 1784. With all the deaths associated with the Carlyle family, one would begin to believe that the clan suffered from some ancient Scottish curse, but in actuality the mortality rate in the Carlyle’s family was the *status quo* for the period. It is believed that one quarter of all children born during the eighteenth century died before they could walk and half the children died before the age of nine.

Status quo or not, it is evident that John Carlyle and his family suffered greatly from their many losses. Consequently, we see from the family correspondence the enormous impact death had on the Carlyle household and especially on John. We also find that despite his enormous heartbreak, Carlyle found the strength of character to persevere and distracted himself with his work and in the welfare of his remaining children until the early fall of 1780, when he too fell victim to the Reaper of Souls.

