

# Carlyle House DOCENT DISPATCH

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

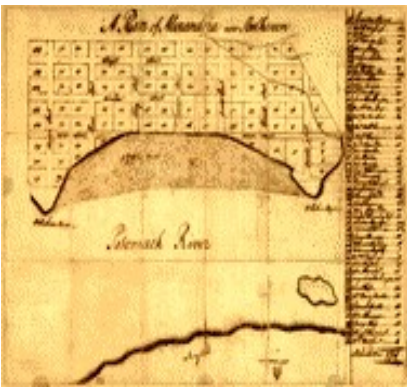
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## Filling in the Bay of Seaside Alexandria: 1750-1798

By Linda Greenberg

Adapted from an article by Dr. Steven J. Shephard

Many of us have wondered how this and other nearby lots were extended to create the city's present shore line. Dr. Steven J. Shephard, Assistant City Archaeologist, in an article published in *The Alexandria Chronicle*, Spring 2006, explains what we know about the process. The article



*Alexandria Chronicle*, Spring 2006, explains what we know about the process. The article *A Plan of Alexandria, now Belhaven, G. Washington, 1749.*

is summarized below and expanded to include the interests of John Carlyle.

### In the Beginning

On August 1, 1753, when John Carlyle moved into his new home on Fairfax Street, he could easily watch ships sailing up and down the Potomac River because his study window was about 150 feet from the river, where Lee Street is today. His property ended at a bluff that looked down on the river. The bluff overlooking the river outlined a crescent-shaped bay extending from West's Point (Oronoco Street) to Point Lumley (Duke Street).

The Carlyle House was near the mid-point of the crescent-shaped bay. The bluff behind the Carlyle House was steep; it dropped 15 to 20 feet down to a shallow beach known as the flats. Four blocks north, at the foot of Oronoco Street, was the tobacco inspection station, known as Hugh West's Hunting Creek Warehouse. The only road from the west, the tobacco Rolling Road, ended here. (These were the roads along which casks of tobacco were rolled—literally—to port to be inspected and shipped to England.)

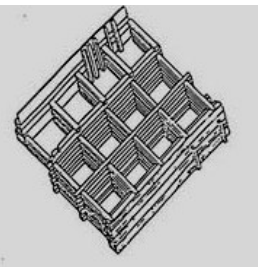
Water in the bay was about 7 feet at high water as

recorded by George Washington in 1748. A 1749 map shows the depth of the bay as "4 or 5 feet." The bay was deep enough for shallow-draft vessels but not for larger ships. Beyond the bay, the Potomac River's channel was 48 feet deep and very adequate for large ships. The channel passed close to West's Point and Point Lumley on the Virginia side of the river.

Early on, the bay began to be filled in by eroding soil, exacerbated by the practice of clearing fields for growing tobacco or grains, by ships dumping ballast in port, and by garbage and waste run-off. The active filling in of the bay began in the early 1750s, almost as soon as Alexandria's port activities began thriving. It proceeded rapidly in the 1780s and was completed about 1798 when Union Street was established. As a city trustee and a Fairfax County judge, Carlyle would have had both personal and public interests in the expansion of this land. Property owners along the bay gained more land. The prosperity and reputation of the city and Carlyle's personal wealth relied on a thriving port. His time and attention would also have been required during this expansion, in the settlement of land claims and any commercial issues to arise.

### Filling the Bay and Extending the Shore Line

The shoreline was extended out toward the deep water channel primarily by two methods of wharf construction. One method created structures that



*Crib wharf construction.*

**CARLYLE HOUSE**  
*Mary Ruth Coleman, Director*  
*Jim Bartlinski, Curator*  
*Erin Adams, Curator of Education*

projected out from the shore into the water. The second consisted of building walls parallel to the shore and filling them in from the land side. The latter are referred to as marginal or bulkhead wharves.

Both methods of wharf construction were used to fill in Alexandria's bay. Shephard's article focuses on the first method: building projecting wharves. These wharves, called cribs or cobb, were built of timber and filled with wood, stones or dirt. Building weather-worthy projecting wharves required a considerable amount of labor and materials.

A cobb wharf was filled with wood or stones rather than soil. A *cob* (sic) in the 18<sup>th</sup> century meant something of poor quality. We can infer that a cobb wharf was not as sturdily built as a crib wharf. Considerable work went into making a crib snug and land-worthy. A crib wharf was built of tightly stacked timbers with many interior cells. The crib frames were usually constructed on shore and pushed out into shallow water where the walls were built up. Once in place, the walls were completed and the crib filled.

Large, solid wooden beams known as piles were also used to strengthen a crib wharf. Pile driving machines were driven by manpower: a team, or teams, of men would haul on heavy ropes to raise a stone or iron weight and then drop it to drive the pile into the ground. In 1785 David Shaon (possibly Sharon?) placed an ad in the *Alexandria Gazette* describing his skills as a pile driver and operator. He recommended "the driving of large piles on the outside wall of every wharf...suitable here from the steepness with the channel of Potomack is formed."

Sometimes an old ship's hull was used as a substitute for a crib or cobb. Its frame would be filled with dirt and stone. Although ship hulls were sometimes incorporated into the design of a wharf, some ship owners simply sank hulls once they were no longer viable. The City Council passed three acts in 1799 to prevent this method of ship disposal, which created obstructions in the harbor. As late as 1825, citizens wishing to build wharves sought City Council's permission, as in the case of William Robert and John Miller who desired to sink the hull of the "Young Hero" to build a wharf along their lot.

### The Bluffs and Flats

Hundreds of tons of dirt were moved to extend the shore line east, closer to the deep water channel. The bluffs were cut down, and the sandy flats under the bank were filled over to insure that the foundations of the buildings erected there would be stable and not undercut by seasonal tides. The flats were filled over with soil and stones. The accumulation of so much

flotsam and jetsam required the use of wooden bulkheads to secure the waterside.

The Trustees tried to anticipate possible structural problems to buildings located close to the river. In their Proceedings in 1755 they stipulated that the warehouse built at Point Lumley by John Carlyle was to be "One hundred feet long twenty four feet Wide thirteen feet Pitch'd. To be three Divisions double studded, the sills to be raised four feet from the ground & so compleatly finished." Then the Trustees instructed "that the Warehouse at Point Lumley be filled with Sand & Rubbish from the Point but such a manner as not to prejudice the foundation of the said house." The warehouse may have been raised off the flats perhaps for water to flow underneath, and a bulkhead facing the river built which was then filled in with "sand & rubbish" to form a protective wharf. The structures under the bank may have been built on driven timber piles, as is the Torpedo Factory building. Such structures are called "earth-fast" buildings. Stone may also have been used in the foundation.

We do not know whether the warehouse was storm-worthy.

Later Carlyle property owner, James Green placed a notice in the *Alexandria Gazette* in 1849 to have removed "about two thousand

cubic yards of clay and Plan of the town of Alexandria sand from the bank east of in the District of Columbia, the Mansion House." This 1798. engraved by T. Clarke.

was probably in anticipation of his building the extension to the bank building. By then the bank building had been transformed into a fashionable hotel. Removal of this large quantity of soil would have further leveled remnants of the bluff.

The evidence of the original bluff on the Carlyle property may be seen today by comparing the elevation of the House's foundation with the elevation of Lee Street. Remnants of the bluff also can be found along the shore in front of the PEPCO plant and in sections of





the 500 block of South Union Street in Windmill Hill Park. Note also that Lee Street had been named Water Street.

### Archaeological Finds

Archaeological evidence for the filling of the bay has been found at four sites. One site is where John Carlyle and John Dalton built a long crib wharf, in 1759, beginning at the base of Cameron Street and extending out toward the channel. In 1982, during construction of the Torpedo Factory condominiums, remains of this wharf were discovered. It was here that Carlyle & Dalton loaded and unloaded ships. The wharf was about 200 feet long and 66 feet wide. The Alexandria Trustees approved its construction with the condition that the other half of the wharf be dedicated to public use. The wharf's width of 66 feet matched the width of the standard street in Old Town Alexandria. The wharf was uncovered in excellent condition. The crib that formed the wharf consisted of stacked timbers of yellow pine with the bark intact. Artifacts from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were found.

### What is Surprising

The filling of the bay—a massive earth-moving project—took only 35 to 40 years to accomplish and was not a municipal project but rather many small projects carried out by citizens. The filling in of the bay, of great economic importance to the city's growth and prosperity, was the result of the initiative and self-interest of men such as John Carlyle.

### Sources

Shephard, Steven J. "Reaching for the Channel: Some Documentary and Archaeological Evidence of Extending Alexandria's Waterfront." *Alexandria Chronicle*, Spring 2006.

\* A copy of Dr. Shephard's article is in the Docent Lounge.

### Shipping Tobacco in Virginia, 1755.

## The Revolutionary War Contributions of George William Carlyle

By Mark Hill

What do the prominent Revolutionary War figures of Marquis de Lafayette, General Nathanael Greene, 'Light Horse' Harry Lee (Robert E. Lee's father), William Washington (cousin to George) and James McHenry (of Fort McHenry fame) have in common? They all came in personal contact with 15 year-old George William Carlyle, son of John Carlyle, during the fight against the British. In July 1781, George William carried critical letters from Lafayette and James McHenry to General Nathanael Greene (Southern Department commander) detailing the Patriots' military struggles against Lord Cornwallis in Virginia. George William later joined Nathanael Greene's

cavalry in South Carolina headed by William Washington and 'Light Horse' Harry Lee.

On September 8, 1781, George William Carlyle charged the British lines with other cavalymen of the 3rd Continental Light Dragoons, led by Lt. Col. William Washington and was killed during one of the bloodiest military engagements during the Revolutionary War—the Battle of Eutaw Springs (South Carolina). The "gallant young Carlisle" (as George William was described by 'Light Horse' Harry Lee) was killed at the Battle of Eutaw Springs fighting alongside William Washington. This battle was the last major engagement of the American Revolution before Yorktown, which occurred a month later. September 8, 2006 marks the 225th anniversary of George William's death.

### Question of the Month

How does a spinet compare to other keyboard instruments?



The spinet is considered to be a member of the harpsichord family, along with the clavichord and others. Although the names were sometimes used interchangeably, the main difference between these sister instruments is the arrangement of the strings. On a harpsichord, the strings are all arranged perpendicular to the keyboard—like the arrangement of a modern grand piano. Meanwhile, the strings on a clavichord are arranged parallel to the keyboard. The spinet's strings are strung diagonally, creating the triangular shape. This shape takes up less space than the harpsichord, hence making the spinet a very popular instrument for use in the home during the eighteenth century.

The major difference between the harpsichord family and keyboard instruments of today, is that the strings on a spinet are plucked instead of hammered. In modern pianos, depressing a key causes a hammer to hit that string. By putting more or less pressure on the key, the hammer will hit the string harder or softer, creating variations in volume. This does not hold true for harpsichords and spinets. Depressing a key on a spinet raises a quill or *plectum* which plucks the string. It does not matter how hard the key is pressed, since plucking does not allow for the variation in volume. Therefore, harpsichordists in the eighteenth century would alter the tempo, speeding up or slowing down slightly, in order to create the dynamics and expression in their playing.