



# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

*Voting for "W" (No, not that George, . . . George Washington, 250 Years Ago!)*  
by Mark Hill

John Carlyle is known as a successful merchant in colonial Virginia who helped establish the thriving northern Virginia town of Alexandria. He is also known as one who had several ties with George Washington (e.g., consignor of various goods, relationship with his brother by marriage, fellow Mason). Another tie was the support that John Carlyle (along with others) provided to a relatively young George Washington (at 26 years old) during his bid for one of the House of Burgesses seats for Frederick County in 1758.

Not only is this year (2008) a Presidential election year which has shown candidates conducting some creative campaigns but it is also a year that marks the **250<sup>th</sup> anniversary** of George Washington's first successful bid for election into Virginia's House of Burgesses. Two Hundred Fifty Years ago, the campaigning and the election processes in Virginia were a bit different than today.

### Election Process in Pre-Revolutionary War Virginia

In colonial times, electing a "gentleman" to the Virginia House of Burgesses was a fairly straightforward process. First, the colonial Governor would on occasion call for a new election (usually soon after a new Governor stepped in). In 1758, the changing of Virginia's colonial Governor impelled the call for new elections. Governor Robert Dinwiddie stepped down and sailed for England in January; his replacement, Francis Fauquier, arrived in June. The new Governor soon ordered that the General Assembly be dissolved and that "writs of election" be delivered to all counties of Virginia to effect, by vote, the selection of two members per county to the House of Burgesses. These "Writs" would be provided to the sheriff of each county where he would ensure that an election would be held and the returns (i.e., voting results) sent back to Williamsburg (the colonial capital).



*Election day in colonial Virginia may have resembled the eighteenth century scene in "The Election" by William Hogarth. 1840.*

The voting public at this time was comprised solely of "Freeholders." A Freeholder was a male who owned land within a county, and not necessarily land on which he lived. In order to vote in an election in a county within colonial Virginia, one must have been (1) male, at least 21 years old and neither of native Indian nor Negro descent and (2) the owner, within the county holding the election, of either (i) a house and a lot within one of the Virginia towns, (ii) 25 acres on which his house was established (outside of a Virginia town), or (iii) 100 acres of unoccupied land within such county.

On election day, the Freeholders would descend upon the place of "polling", usually the County

### CARLYLE HOUSE

*Mary Ruth Coleman, Director*  
*Jim Bartlinski, Curator*  
*Sarah Coster, Curator of Education*



courthouse. Once filed into the courthouse, the Freeholders would be face-to-face with the candidates, usually across a table, and one-by-one would stand up in front of the candidates and cast their votes, *viva voce*, whereupon a clerk would record the Freeholders' verbalized selections and the candidates receiving such votes would usually rise up, bow and thank the voter. The polling would typically last several hours and the votes would be counted once the sheriff closed the poll. The top two vote recipients would thus join the next meeting of the House of Burgesses usually held within a few months after the election.

### The 1758 Frederick County Election

The "writs of election" did not arrive in Frederick County until July 4, 1758. The law stated that a Virginia county must hold the election no earlier than 20 days from the time of receipt by the county sheriff of such writs. Thus, the Frederick County election was set for July 24 and would be held at the courthouse in Winchester.

Frederick County at the time of this election covered a very large tract of land and included the present day counties of Frederick, Clarke, Warren, Shenandoah, Page of Virginia and Jefferson, Berkeley and Morgan of West Virginia. To put this into a more local and present day context, Frederick County was larger in land mass than today's "Northern Virginia" (if one considers the counties of Loudoun, Fairfax, Arlington, Prince William, Stafford and Fauquier as Northern Virginia).

George Washington first involved himself in politics in May 1755 when he expressed an interest to enter the Virginia House of Burgesses to his younger brother Jack (John Augustine). Later that year, in December, some of George's friends entered his name on the poll sheet in Frederick County. He finished a distant third behind Thomas Swearingen and Hugh West (incidentally, this is the Hugh West who was the brother of John Carlyle's second wife, Sibyl West). But possibly as early as November 1757, George Washington reinvigorated his desire to run for office; after Governor Fauquier called for the dissolution of the General Assembly and new elections on June 15, 1758, George Washington appears to have put his "hat in the ring."

With respect to the election, young George had a

slight scheduling conflict issue to overcome. He was heavily engaged as a high-ranking officer (i.e., a Colonel of Virginian provincial troops) in prosecuting the war against the French & Indians from Fort Cumberland (which was about 80 miles northwest of Winchester). While at one time Col. Washington considered leaving the Fort to attend the election after obtaining the approval of his commanding officer, the renowned Colonel Henry Bouquet of the British Army, he decided by July 21 not to attend ("*. . . I [have] abandoned all thoughts of attending Personally at the Election in Winchester—determining rather to leave the management of that matter to my friends, than be absent from my Regiment when there is a probability of its being calld upon*").

At the 1758 Frederick County election, four candidates stood for election. Thomas Swearingen and Hugh West were the incumbents (elected in 1755); Col. Thomas Bryan Martin, nephew of Lord Fairfax, and George Washington were the challengers (with George Washington having close ties with the Fairfax family). The top two individual "vote getters" would serve in Williamsburg until at least the next election would be called. This election was atypical in that one of the candidates, George Washington, did not "stand a poll" (i.e., appear in person at the election).

The absence of a candidate at the place of election (in Virginia, the county courthouse usually served as such milieu) was considered to be the death knell of a candidate's bid for election to the House of Burgesses. However, the situation with George Washington was such that the combination of his present military duty and the skill and devotion of his "friends" proved to support the claim that this Frederick County election was an exception to the norm. As Col. Washington would not be able to attend in person the election, several of his friends stepped up to help, including John Carlyle. John Carlyle was entitled to vote in Frederick County due to his ownership of land in that jurisdiction. By 1751, Carlyle had amassed over 1,000 acres of landholdings in such county. John Carlyle in a letter to George Washington a few days before journeying to the election site noted to Col. Washington that he would provide assistance to ensure victory and that Washington could "*depend on Every thing In My Power*". In fact, John Carlyle and his brother-in-law, George William Fairfax, rode together the approximately 80 miles from Alexandria to



Winchester about a week before the election to help in any way they could the candidates of their choice (Col. Thomas Bryan Martin, as well as George Washington). James Wood, the founder of Winchester, agreed to stand-in for George Washington

at the courthouse on election day.

About 400 Freeholders voted during the 1758 Frederick County election. Prior to their visit to the courthouse, the Freeholders most likely were hosted by the candidates plying voters with food and drink. The practice of providing strong liquors to Freeholders before the voting session has been referred to as “swilling the planters with bumbo” (“Bumbo” was a colloquial term for “rum.”) In fact, at this election, friends of George Washington supplied over 125 gallons of assorted spirits (beer, wine, rum punch, brandy) plus a hogshead and a barrel of rum punch. A meal, most likely a barbecue the night before (probably similar in kind to the one set forth in Philippe Halbert’s Sept 2008 Docent Dispatch article on “*The History of Barbeque*”), was served by George Washington’s friends (but ultimately paid for by Col. Washington).

After the election whereupon G. Washington received 310 votes, Col. Martin, 240, Hugh West, 199, and Mr. Swearingen, only 45, Mr. Carlyle wrote Col. Washington, “*I heartily Congratulate you on Yr Election[;] here you Need Not doubt but We did Every thing in our Power to Serve you We Came here on Purpose.*”

It was probably no accident that the Freeholders casting the first votes at the polling place in Winchester included the leading citizens of the northern reaches of Virginia. The election’s first voter was Lord Fairfax (Britain’s only noble who lived in the American Colonies and for whom George Washington surveyed vast estates throughout the

western part of Virginia); next the rector of Frederick Parish (William Meldrum), then James Wood, founder of Winchester—notwithstanding that he was also “sitting in” for Col. Washington, Mr. Wood did vote. Then, “batting clean-up” was John Carlyle, followed by four other prominent merchants. Other prominent figures of Frederick County voted next, as well as Dr. James Craik, George Washington’s long-time physician. All of these gentlemen voted for George Washington. Often during the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century, there was a deferential thread running through Virginia society where the “upper” gentry (i.e., prominent land owners) provided the leadership for the rest to follow – the pattern of conduct at elections was likely an extension of this social construct. It is considered very likely that these “lead-off” voters influenced many other Freeholders further down the voting chain, especially as the votes were issued verbally in front of all; one can imagine that this mode of voting served to reinforce such leadership.

“*Treating*” the Freeholders

Several of the campaigning and election themes of colonial Virginia were woven into and amplified (in a humorous vein) by Robert Munford in a 1770 play entitled *The Candidates*. In addition to being a playwright, Robert Munford was once a House of Burgesses member (1765-1776) and officer in the Virginia militia during the American Revolution. Also, he had ties to the Carlyle family--in a July 1781 letter to General Nathanael Greene, commander of the Continental Army’s Southern troops, Col. Munford notes that the carrier of such letter is the son of a good friend and should be looked after by the General; he was referring to George William and his father, John Carlyle! George William picked up this letter at the manor of Robert Munford in Mecklenburg County, Virginia (just north of the North Carolina border) during his expedition to join the fighting in South Carolina.

*The Candidates* is one of the few contemporary written reflections (albeit in an amusing manner) of the House of Burgesses election process. In this play, the primary characters are four “candidates” and several Freeholders. Plying (or “treating”) potential voters with strong drink and food is a recurring theme throughout the play. In one verbal exchange within the play, a candidate named *Wou’dbe* notes to a



Freeholder that *“It would be ungrateful in you, Mr. Guzzle, not to speak in favour of Sir John [another candidate]; for you have stored away many gallons of his liquor in that belly of yours.”*

The Virginia General Assembly passed a law in 1699 that essentially banned a candidate for the House of Burgesses from providing money, drink, meat, etc. in order to procure votes *“for his election to be a Burgess. . . .”* As House of Burgesses candidates plying Freeholders with drink in exchange for their votes was illegal in Virginia, candidates needed to be careful in how they “treated” voters. To not run afoul of this law, several clever candidates would claim they opened their doors to all Freeholders to imbibe in food and strong drink regardless of their political persuasion. In George Washington’s letter to James Wood after Washington’s election in 1758, he thanked all of his friends for *“entertaining the Freeholders in my name,”* but Washington appeared very sensitive to maintaining the appropriate level of propriety when he also stated that *“I hope no exception were taken to any that voted against me but that all were alike treated . . . .”*

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**STUMP THE STAFF**

***The Fall 2005 Carlyle Connection says that 6 of John Carlyle’s 11 children died in the house. As Ann, Sarah and George W. died elsewhere, what about the others?***



The other two children who did not die at Carlyle House were John’s first two children, Rachel and Ann



(not to be confused with the later Ann-Fairfax). Rachel, born on June 5th 1750 (while John was traveling in England) died nine weeks later. Sarah gave birth to Ann the next year and nursed her on one breast *“until it pleased god to take it.”*

Whether or not Sarah Carlyle Herbert died in the house is questionable. Her husband, William, had preceded her in death and we have no record of whether she was living here or with her son in Baltimore.

***Where are Sarah Carlyle Herbert and Ann Carlyle Whiting buried?***

We do not know where Sarah and Ann are buried.

***Was there a cemetery at the Presbyterian Meeting House before it was built?***



No, it is unlikely a cemetery existed before the meeting house was built. The land where the Presbyterian Meeting

House sits was donated to Rev. William Thom by Richard and Eleanor Arell in 1773 for the purpose of building a church. Up until that point, the Presbyterians had been worshipping in Town Hall. In 1775, two of their Elders– William Ramsay and John Carlyle– advertised bids to construct a new, brick Meeting House.

It is likely, then, that Sarah Fairfax Carlyle and her children were reinterred in the Presbyterian Meeting House cemetery after it was built. So where were they buried before then? A period reference points to the possibility that they were buried on the Carlyle House property. Mrs. Charlotte Browne, an English traveler who came to Alexandria in 1755 with her brother, an officer with Braddock’s forces, noted that the odd fact that Alexandrians buried their dead in their backyards.