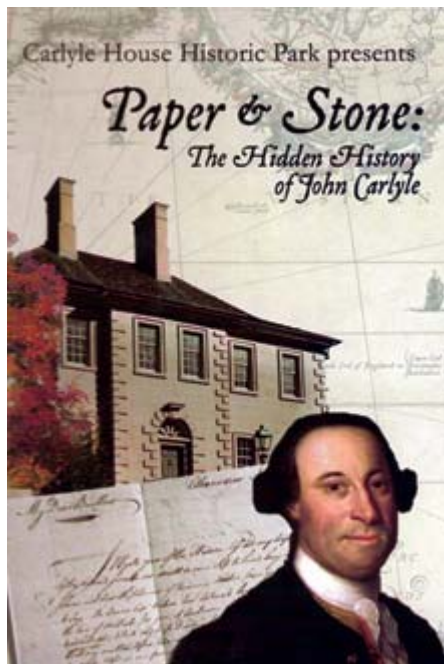


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The historically significant life of Colonel John Carlyle – that almost vanished

The story of Col. John Carlyle and the magnificent stone house he built at 121 N. Fairfax Street in 1752 is intimately bound up with the early history of Alexandria and America. But his is a story that almost didn't get told. At the time of Carlyle's death 225 years ago in 1780, the American colonies were in a desperate war for independence from England that would not be won until after American and French forces defeated the main British army at Yorktown in 1781.

By Mary Claire Kendall
Alexandria Times Features Writer



Carlyle's sole surviving son, George William, volunteered at age 14 to join Gen. Harry Lee's Virginia Regiment, and was subsequently killed in the Battle of Utah Springs. His death threatened the Carlyle legacy, and the house gradually fell into disrepair and neglect.

The story of how this legacy was recovered is wonderfully told by guides at Carlyle House Historic Park, under the direction of Curator Jim Bartlinski, as well as in the 2005 documentary film "Paper & Stone: The Hidden History of John Carlyle."

Young John Carlyle

Carlyle himself had left his Scottish home at a young age to seek his fortune, settling in the port town of White Haven as apprentice to a merchant active in trade with the Virginia colony. Soon, he was sent to Virginia as an agent of the merchant.

It was not long before Carlyle met and married Sara Fairfax, daughter of William Fairfax of Belvoir, who in turn was land agent for his cousin Thomas, the sixth Lord Fairfax and owner of more Virginia land than anyone else.

Sara was also related to George Washington, the young surveyor who in 1749 had traced out the new town of Alexandria, of which Carlyle was a co-founder.

Carlyle built his great stone house on lot 42. While stone was an unusual building material for the colonies, it was a mark of prestige in Scotland, where Carlyle's ancestors traced their lineage to Robert the Bruce.

Carlyle meant for his home to signal his own stately position in the young town of dirt roads and log houses. Over time, he became the longest-serving member of the Alexandria board of trustees, overseeing such building projects as roads, warehouses and Christ Church.

Great events

He had intended to move back to England, and viewed America as a place to make money. But a series of great events — some occurring at Carlyle House — prompted a change of heart.

England sent Gen. Edward Braddock in 1755 to quell French and Indian activity along the Ohio River frontier. The general made Alexandria his initial headquarters, and Carlyle House his residence. Treating colonists with disdain,

Braddock convened the crown's colonial governors in Carlyle's dining room as he explained a "grand campaign" that would launch multiple invasion forces to conquer French forts.

Braddock himself planned to lead a critical expedition to the forks of the Ohio, and assembled a powerful military force. However, near present-day Pittsburgh Braddock's column collided with the enemy, and after an hours-long battle Braddock was dying and the British column had collapsed. The key prong of the grand campaign was destroyed, a full war would erupt between England, France and their allies and would eventually span the entire world. When it ended, England would control North America.

But England would also begin to lose American colonies. The historic meeting at Carlyle House came to symbolize British arrogance of power, thus marking an important crossroads in the march toward independence. Colonists, now understanding they would need to defend themselves with the initial failure of British power, became Americans first. Carlyle, now seeing America as his home, supported the revolution until his death.

Paper trail

The reason we know Carlyle's thinking in these historic years is that letters Carlyle sent across the ocean to his brother, William, were in safekeeping with Scottish relatives in Strachur, where Carlyle's portrait hangs.

But it was only in the 1970s, about the same time that the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority was rescuing and beginning to restore Carlyle House to its colonial splendor, that this source material first surfaced, as related by Sir Charles MacLean, a writer and Carlyle descendent.

When Sir Charles' father and his wife were on a trip to Washington, they stopped by Old Town for the Scottish Walk celebration. They dropped by the Visitor's Center to see if anyone had ever heard of John Carlyle, and asked if they would be interested in looking at his old box of letters.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Dead drunk: 18th-century Alexandrians put the "fun" in funeral

By MARY CLAIRE KENDALL
Alexandria Times Features Writer

Editor's note: The exhibit titled "Death Comes to Carlyle House" continues through Nov. 19, dealing with the funeral of this Alexandria founder.

Earlier, the museum held a reenactment of the event on Oct. 29 (see Times, 11/3, p. A9). The following story explains how funerals and wakes of that era were major social occasions.

Although mourning rituals varied from region to region and among the diverse social, ethnic and religious groups in America of the 1700s, funerals of that period offered a chance (as they do today) for family and friends to publicly mourn the death of someone near and dear. Funerals were also one of the social rites that presented opportunities for kith and kin to strengthen old ties — an important function for families and friends in eighteenth-century America who may have been separated by distance.

And with such gatherings, it was only natural that social gatherings such as weddings, baptisms and funerals also became occasions of conspicuous consumption.

The cost of a funeral in Col. John Carlyle's time of course included preparation of the body for burial and interment. However, sources from that period say the fee might also have included gifts of mourning jewelry, black gloves, scarves, handkerchiefs and engraved invitations to the funerals invited guests.



Source:

<http://www.carlylehouse.org/history/house.html>
Drawing of the Carlyle House. Harper's Monthly, February 1880.

And the price tag may have included copious amounts of refreshments, as well as other diversions for the mourners. As a result, it was not uncommon for funerals of this period to turn into very, say, spirited celebrations with bouts of drinking and other entertainments.

Records show that bereaved families frequently went into debt to provide their departed loved ones with an appropriate farewell.

Unruly

The Irish and Scottish funeral, in particular, became notorious on both sides of the Atlantic for unruly behavior of those who came to mourn.

Olney Winsor, a visitor to Alexandria in the 1780s, wrote of a funeral in which guests were "highly treated with the best of liquors," and said that "this improper, not to say indecent, custom prevails among the higher ranks."

Winsor said that with such refreshments "many of the guests are frequently almost as insensible, before they quit the house, as their deposited friend," and that the effect of seeing such behavior at a funeral was to "strike a damp on the humane that have been accustomed to see it treated with sacred respect."

The quality and quantity of victuals, intoxicating beverages and amusements provided to mourners by the bereaved family was a direct reflection of the social status of the loved one in the community. It is quite possible that the funeral and wake for Col. Carlyle was just such an event.

With his Scottish ancestry, Carlyle's sendoff may have been accompanied by a mock marriage or duel, common occurrences at Scottish funerals of the time.

But those mock duels sometimes became very unruly, say reports from that era. It is not surprising that such boisterous horseplay was sustained, if not instigated, by the liberal provision of various intoxicants that the house of mourning was expected to provide.

In this way, the bereaved family was sure to give a departed loved one a proper sendoff.

It would have been not only a breach of etiquette but also a source of embarrassment to the grief-stricken family to do anything less.

Other upcoming Carlyle House events include:

Saturday, Dec. 3:

A Soldier's Christmas (Noon to 4 p.m.). Experience "A Soldier's Christmas" with the First Virginia Regiment of the Continental Line.

Saturday, December 10:

Holiday Candlelight Tour (6 - 9 p.m.). During the holiday season of 1775, Col. John Carlyle entertained friends and family at his grand stone mansion to celebrate the engagement of his daughter Sarah to William Herbert. Museum visitors will be shown into the elegant candlelit dining room, where the table is set for a sumptuous late supper. The Carlyles' table is decorated with an abundance of greens and flowers, and an orange tree. The highlight of the meal is the popular syllabub (a colonial libation) which guests may sample as they listen to music of the period. Admission charged.



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Re-enactment of Col. Carlyle's funeral brings 1780 era to life

Editor's Note: The Alexandria Times visited Carlyle House on Sat., Oct. 29, for a re-enactment of the wake and funeral of Col. John Carlyle. The following narrative describes events as though the writer were reporting in 1780 the actual passing of one of the city's early leaders.

By MARY CLAIRE KENDALL
Alexandria Times Features Writer

The City of Alexandria Pipes and Drums stood in front of the ornate Carlyle House gates playing the recent hymn "Amazing Grace" on the bagpipes, as well as other traditional music, to observe with dignity and honor of this mournful event.

Inside was attending physician Dr. John Desequeyra, who hails from London and now lives in Virginia's capital city of Williamsburg.

The doctor said he just happened to be in town, and was summoned by Carlyle's son, George William, as the colonel's condition worsened.

Desequeyra said he already knew both the Carlyle and Fairfax families, including Col. Carlyle's first wife, the deceased Sara Fairfax.

The doctor said that in his attempts to help revive the colonel he tried the remedies of "not only bleeding but purging, hoping he would get better." However, it was not to be, Desequeyra said, and Carlyle "passed away a number of hours ago."

The physician said that "it is in God's hands who shall live and die," but that it was still "depressing" to lose this pillar of the community and one of Alexandria's founding fathers.

In the parlor of the stately house, mourners included Col. Carlyle's two surviving children — Sara Herbert, by his first wife, Sara; and George William, by his second wife, Sybil West, also deceased. In addition there was Sara Fairfax's youngest sister, and Rev. Isaac Stockton Keith of the Presbyterian Meeting House.

Kind, caring father

Keith recalled that "death was not a stranger to" Carlyle, who had suffered the losses of all but two of his 11 children, as well as his two wives.

He also spoke of Carlyle's contributions to his city and county as judge, church controller and founder and trustee of Alexandria. Early in the city's history, Keith added, Carlyle had aided the colonies and England in the war on the frontier against the French and Indians.

And he took on the role again years later, the ministers said, as Americans began to take up arms against British rule.

When asked about Col. Carlyle changing his allegiances at that time, Keith replied that "we like to think that the British switched their allegiance." He asserted that the present war for independence developed after American colonists first insisted on their rights as British citizens, but were denied.

Sara Herbert spoke about how "greatly" her father will be missed, noting what a "good, kind, caring father" he was.

She also recalled and how profoundly he was affected by the deaths of his children and wives.

"My younger sister, Ann," she said, "was the most recent to die," just three years ago at age 17, in the delivery of her first child."

James Lawrason, purveyor of hard liquors and beverages, stood in the elegant dining room where the coffin was laid out.

He cautioned "death can come to anyone at any time, and this is a reminder to us of the fragility of our human existence."

Lawrason looked around the dining room and emphasized that it was "in this very room" in April 1755, just 25 years ago, that Col. Carlyle hosted a meeting of five colonial governors with British Major Gen. Edward Braddock as the general laid out plans for a multi-pronged invasion against French-held forts and territory.

"The forces unleashed at that meeting," he said, "led to where we are today as these independent United States. This must be borne in mind when we look at this man's mortal remains."