



Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

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Aquia Sandstone in Carlyle House and in Nearby Colonial Virginia

By Rosemary Maloney

John Carlyle wanted to build an imposing home, and he wanted to build it of stone, like the great stone houses of England and Scotland. But comparable stone was not available in the Atlantic coastal plain of Virginia. For Carlyle the only convenient local source of stone hard enough for building was the sandstone (or freestone as it was known in colonial times) from the area around Aquia Creek in Stafford County, Virginia, about 35 miles south of Alexandria. The name Aquia is believed to be a corruption of the original Algonquin word “Quiyough,” meaning gulls.

The source of this tan to light-gray sandstone was familiar to the early settlers of Virginia. A quarry was created there as early as 1650. Today, there are still ledges exposed on both sides of Interstate 95 near Stafford and along Aquia Creek. This stone is suitable for building purposes because of the cementation by silica of its components: quartz, sand, and pebbles. But Aquia sandstone has its flaws. It tends to weather unevenly and therefore is more suitable for interior than exterior construction.



The front façade of the Carlyle House. During the restoration, the house was refaced with Kentucky limestone, which wears better than the local sandstone. Upon close inspection, you can see the original, darker, stone in the cornice.

Construction of Carlyle House

In a letter dated November 12, 1752, to his brother George in England, John Carlyle remarks on the difficulty of building his house in Alexandria. But his frustration is blended with optimism as he writes:

“...the Violent Rains we have had this Fall, has hurt the Stone Walls that We Was obliged to Take down A part After it Was nigh its Height, which has been A Loss & great disapointment To me, however Time & patience Will over come all (I am In hopes)...”

Apart from this single mention of stone walls, nowhere in the letters to George does John mention Aquia sandstone, or how it was quarried and transported.

CARLYLE HOUSE

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The walls of Carlyle House are constructed of sandstone. The interior surfaces are uncut and unevenly coursed stone, as is evident in the Architecture Room. The west façade, which faces Fairfax Street, consisted of smoothly dressed stone set in a coursed ashlar pattern, or thin rectangles of sandstone. When reconstruction of Carlyle House was undertaken prior to the Bicentennial in 1976, it was discovered that the west elevation revealed extreme irregularity in the stone dimensions both horizontally and vertically. As a result of this irregularity no corner quoins aligned and in fact each corner had a different number of quoins. During the reconstruction the sandstone’s lack of resistance to wind and water also became apparent. As a result, the west façade was replaced with more durable Indiana limestone.

Cutting and Transporting the Stone

In the colonial period slave labor was used to cut the heavy stone, transport it to a riverbank, and load it on barges. This is a simple description of a labor-

intensive and complex process of moving tons of rock upstream on the Potomac River. Information from a later period suggests how this may have been done in colonial times. In 1791, in anticipation of constructing buildings of stone for the new Federal City, Major Pierre L’Enfant, on behalf of the Federal government, purchased an island in Aquia Creek for a quarry site. Known as Government Island today, the site is part of the Stafford County park system and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Historic markers tell the story of quarrying on Government Island; one marker labeled “Transporting the Stone” reads:

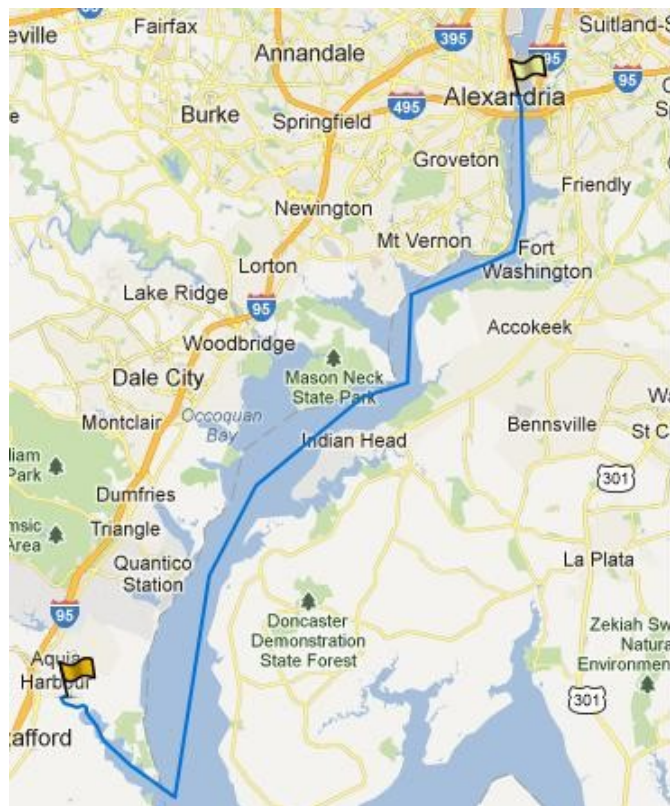
“A historic route...was created by skids of ‘stone boats’ that were loaded with stone and dragged by oxen to the wharf...At the wharf stone was loaded onto scows and was then transported downstream to deeper, more navigable waters...There stone was transferred onto larger sailing vessels called schooners or sloops, carried down Aquia Creek, and shipped up the Potomac River to Washington, D.C.”

After 1791 Aquia sandstone was used in many of the most famous buildings of our nation’s capital. It is also the sandstone used in the boundary stones that mark the original ten-mile-square area of the District of Columbia.

Aquia Sandstone in Nearby Colonial Buildings

Although John Carlyle built his entire house of Aquia sandstone, the material was used more as decorative elements in other colonial buildings. Aquia Church in Stafford County is located about four miles from the quarry. Construction was completed in 1757. This building, in the form of a Greek cross, is constructed of brick laid in the Flemish bond pattern, a decorative form of bricklaying created by alternate laying of headers and stretchers, favored in colonial architecture. Aquia sandstone is used in the quoins, the door lintels, and the keystones above the window arches. Over the years, dates and initials have been carved in the soft sandstone.

Farther north, in Fairfax County, is Pohick Church, so



A map showing the water route John Carlyle’s “freestone” would have taken to reach Alexandria. Aquia is marked by the yellow flag in the lower corner, Alexandria by the flag in the upper right.



named because of its proximity to Pohick Creek. The original Pohick Church was established some time prior to 1724. In 1767 vestrymen George Washington, George Mason, and George William Fairfax (brother-in-law of John Carlyle) supervised the rebuilding of the church in brick. Construction was completed in 1774. Aquia sandstone was used in the quoins, door frames, and steps. Here, too, the sandstone bears carvings of initials and dates. The church is located across the road from a boundary of present-day Fort Belvoir, once part of the estate and home of William Fairfax, John Carlyle's father-in-law.

Gunston Hall, the home of George Mason, is not far from Pohick Church. It was constructed about 1755 to 1760. This fine example of Georgian architecture, built in brick in the Flemish bond design, has quoins of Aquia sandstone.

Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens, home of George Washington, is also in Fairfax County. According to Dennis J. Pogue, Mount Vernon's Vice President for Preservation,



The eastern aspect of Christ Church which Carlyle undertook to build. The quoins, at the corners of the building are highlighted by glossy white paint.

the steps of the Mansion, the stones around the piazza, and the keystone of the greenhouse were of Aquia sandstone.

However, Mr. Pogue notes that "most of it probably came from

Mount Vernon itself, as a vein of the stone is known to have been exposed here in the 18th century and was quarried for local use."

Here in the City of Alexandria, Christ Church is located off North Washington Street. The church uses Aquia sandstone in the quoins, but today these are painted glossy white. In 1772 John Carlyle, as an

"undertaker," or contractor, was requested by the vestry to take over completion of Christ Church. Carlyle bought a pew in this new Anglican church, but with his Presbyterian upbringing he chose to be buried on the grounds of the nearby Presbyterian Meeting House, another building project in which he was involved.

A Lasting Effect

When John Carlyle built his house of Aquia sandstone he intended to stay in the colonies only temporarily and to return to England after he made his fortune. However, as the years passed and events shaped his life and changed his outlook, John Carlyle no longer thought of going home. Eventually he became as American as the stone he had chosen for his splendid home, Carlyle House.

Sources:

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A full list of sources is available in the web version of the article.