



# Carlyle House

## *DOCENT DISPATCH*

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

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### **Sarah Carlyle Herbert: 1827, The End of an Era**

by Henry Desmarais

Sarah Carlyle Herbert, sole surviving child of Col. John Carlyle, died in July 1827. She was 70 years old and, as far as we know, had lived all but 5 or 6 of those years at Carlyle House. Her obituary, published in the August 17, 1827 issue of the *Alexandria Gazette*, begins by telling us that Sarah died suddenly on Friday night, the 26<sup>th</sup> of July. However, July 26 was actually a Thursday that year, which leaves us wondering whether it is the day of the week or the date that is correct. The obituary goes on to tell us that she spent the last evening of her life “with her friends in the public worship of her Maker.” She is said to have died “in vigorous old age, and in full possession of her faculties.” Beyond this account, I have, thus far, been unable to confirm the date of Sarah’s death or find information about her funeral or burial. Sarah’s husband, William Herbert, who predeceased her in February 1819, is buried in the 1808 Christ Church cemetery on Wilkes Street, but the large tablet marking his grave does not speak about Sarah.

If we cannot say more about Sarah’s death, can we say more about the last year of her life? The *Alexandria Gazette* and other sources certainly help paint at least a partial picture. Between 1820 and 1830, Alexandria’s population remained quite stable at slightly more than 8,200 people. The 1820 census of the District of Columbia (which then included Alexandria) lists Sarah Herbert as head of family and notes that her household then included 3 white females (besides herself), 2 male slaves, 4 female slaves, and 1 free colored female. Of the 3 white females, 2 are said to have been between 16 and 26 years of age, and the other between 26 and 45. These could well be Sarah’s daughters Anne (or Ann), Eliza, and Lucinda, none of whom apparently married (4 other children of Sarah and William Herbert, two sons and two daughters, had already married by this time). The parish records of

Christ Church for 1828 to 1855 list among its communicants, a Miss Ann Herbert, a Miss L. Herbert, and a Miss E. or C. Herbert. And these same records list Lucinda Herbert among the burials for February 22, 1830. All of this tempts us to conclude that Sarah Herbert spent her last evening in prayer at Christ Church (where her father once owned a pew and where her husband once served as a vestryman), but we can’t be absolutely sure about this.

The 1820 personal property tax records for Alexandria list John C. Herbert as the owner of a house and lot, Fairfax to Water, with an appraised value of \$10,000. Alexandria taxes for 1827 were 25 cents for every \$100 of assessed value, \$1 for every horse, and \$1.50 for every male tithable. In addition, families living on streets where lamps were erected (presumably including the Herberts) were also assessed 60 cents for each story “for the purpose of defraying the expense of lighting the lamps of the town.”

For Alexandria, the year 1827 began with a bang, or more accurately, a big fire. This fire came quite close to Carlyle House. It began the morning of January 18, in the furniture workshop of Mr. James Green (who would one day own Carlyle House). His workshop was then located inside the square bound by Fairfax, King, Royal and Prince Streets. The fire ultimately damaged or destroyed 53 buildings on the south side of King Street, and on Royal, Fairfax, Water, and Union Streets (all south of King Street). It

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reportedly jumped right over Edward Stabler’s fireproofed apothecary shop (the story goes that Mr. Stabler had recently installed metal shutters after dreaming of a disastrous fire). For Carlyle House, it is undoubtedly fortunate that a strong northwest wind was blowing at the time, sending burning embers (“lighted shingles”) away from the house. In any event, according to the account published in the January 23, 1827 issue of the *Alexandria Gazette*, “the flames were rushing from house to house with increasing force - furniture and goods were scattered in every direction, women and children were flying for safety and houses that were not burnt, were often on fire, sometimes a dozen at once.” Help came from Washington and Georgetown, artificers from the War Department arrived “to blow up and pull down houses,” Congress adjourned because of the fire, and the Secretary of War and many members of Congress reportedly came to the scene of the fire to lend their assistance. It must have been quite a day for the occupants of the Carlyle House.

As is the case today, the daily newspaper in 1827 was filled with advertisements. These included one seeking a wet nurse and those for a wide variety of merchandise, including such early 19<sup>th</sup> century staples as crow, swan, goose and brandt quills; oil cloth carpets; ice, “that healthy and invaluable luxury”; candles and sperm oil; and loaf sugar. There were also frequent offers of “cash for likely Negroes.” At the same time, the Alexandria Colonization Society and the Benevolent Society of Alexandria were, each in their own way, attempting to address the needs of “the people of color.”

In the final days leading up to Sarah Herbert’s death, nearby market square served as the site for the public hanging of a convicted murderer on June 27. The Alexandria Guards paraded on Market Square on July 4<sup>th</sup>, and Alexandria’s artillerists fired a salute at sunrise, at noon and at close of day. On July 17, the *Alexandria Gazette* carried an article from the *National Journal* commemorating the 72<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Braddock’s defeat on the Monongahela (on July 9) and bemoaning the lack of monuments to those who suffered and died in this battle. On July 21, a meeting of Alexandria freeholders focused on the proposed

C&O canal, and a committee was created to help assure that Alexandria would “participate fully in the benefits expected” (by pushing for construction of a lateral canal). This committee included the mayor, the President of the Levy Court, and 11 citizens, one of whom was Sarah Herbert’s own nephew, Carlisle (Carlyle) F. Whiting.

According to the meteorological information published in the *Alexandria Gazette*, the weather in Alexandria on July 26, 1827, the presumptive day of Sarah Carlyle Herbert’s death, began cloudy and then cleared, and there was a refreshing breeze. The temperature at 8 A.M. that day was 72 degrees and reached 80 by 4 P.M. The *Alexandria Gazette* for July 26, which may well have been among the last things that Sarah Carlyle Herbert read, carried a lengthy article defending the character of Andrew Jackson (who would soon be elected President of the United

States). It also, rather ironically, carried ads for black canton crepe (a staple for mourners) and for fashionable furniture manufactured by none other than James Green.

With Sarah Carlyle Herbert’s passing, Carlyle House was soon transferred to others by its longtime owner, Sarah’s eldest child, John Carlyle Herbert. The Carlyle family’s ownership of the property thus came to a close. One important era had passed but, fortunately, the story of Carlyle House was far from over.

**Sources Consulted:**

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