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Out of the Attic

Matriarchal Mysteries: The Carlyle House

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Image: Sarah Fairfax.

As Women's History Month concludes, we wrap up with a look at two women from Alexandria's early history.

The historic Carlyle House was built in 1753 by British merchant John Carlyle for his bride, Sarah "Sally" Fairfax, a member of one of Virginia's most illustrious 18th-century families. The Carlyles moved into their new home on Aug. 1 of that year, and that very evening, Sarah gave birth to their first son, prompting John to write, "It's a fine beginning."

As one of Alexandria's grandest, and most beautiful early houses, the Carlyle home was at the center of the town's 18th-century social and political life. In 1755, General Edward Braddock made the house his headquarters, summoning five colonial governors for a meeting to plan early campaigns in the French and Indian War.

Sally Fairfax Carlyle's life was, compared to the lives of many women in the city, relatively comfortable. But the reality of her life, compared to the lives of women today in America, was difficult. Even by today's standards, Carlyle House is a large and splendid home. It was so in 1747, when nineteen-year-old Sally Fairfax married John Carlyle, a successful merchant at that time.

Despite her young age, Sally was responsible for overseeing not only Carlyle House but also the family plantation in Fairfax County. She and John had seven children in the 11 short years of their marriage – only two of whom survived childhood. Sally Fairfax died in childbirth at age 30.

Unfortunately, Sally died in the same manner as her mother, also named Sarah, had shortly after her birth. Sarah Walker Fairfax was a woman of interest in her own right. Multiple historians believe that Sarah Walker's mother was either enslaved or a free woman of color and gave birth to Sally's mother Sarah in Nassau, in the Bahamas. Sarah herself was also described by contemporaries as "dark skinned."

In fact, according to Sarah's descendant Wilson Miles Cary, a letter from Sally Cary Fairfax (Sally Fairfax Carlyle's sister-in-law) noted that William Henry Fairfax (Carlyle's brother), was denied his inheritance due to questions about his mother's race. Instead, their younger half-brother Bryan became





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Lord Fairfax after their father's passing. While questions continued in the 18th and 19th centuries about Sarah's ancestry, her descendants became prominent members of Virginia, political and civic leaders whose contributions helped make our town and state what it is today.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.