

Robert Carter House Historical Report, Block 30-2 Building 13 Lot 333-336

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HISTORY OF THE SAUNDERS-DINWIDDIE HOUSE

by

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BRIEF RESUME OF NOTES ON FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS ASSOCIATED WITH THE SAUNDERS-DINWIDDIE HOUSE

(Note: this resume is confined to source data contained in the Research Department files.)

August, 1932.

FOREWORD.



This history of the Saunders-Dinwiddie house has been compiled entirely from original sources. This source material is in card form in the files of the Department of Research and Record. One copy of this data has been made on cards and accompanies the first copy of this history. It is to the data accompanying this first copy that the footnotes refer.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SAUNDERS-DINWIDDIE HOUSE.



This house, built before 1746, and remodeled many times in its varied and significant history, has sheltered a colonial governor, the treasurer of the colony, a member of the Council, a college president and an able and well known surgeon-apothecary. Its architectural character, its terraced lawns and its gardens, on the edge of the small stream which also flows through the Palace garden, have all been influenced by these owners.

As far as can be determined at this time, the first owner was Charles Carter of King George, son of Robert "King" Carter, who sold it under the title of his "messuage, house and 4 lots numbered in the plan of the city 333, 334, 335, 336" to Robert Cary, a London merchant, on March 27, 1746. ¹

Robert Cary in turn sold the property to Dr Kenneth McKenzie, surgeon and apothecary, in the next year, and he and his wife Joanna (Tyler) resided on Palace street for a number of years. ² Joanna Tyler McKenzie was the great-aunt of President John Tyler, and portraits of her and her husband are still in existence. ³

Dr. McKenzie was evidently one of the leading medical men of the town, and also a person of education and taste; an inventory of his library showing that he had all the best works on "physick and chirurgery" and a great many on history and literature. ⁴

Between 1749 and 1751 the Palace was unoccupied and fell into such bad repair that the council deemed it expedient to buy a temporary residence for the governor, Dinwiddie, when he arrived. After considering a number of available houses Dr. McKenzie's house was selected because of its size, convenience and desirable location on the Palace Green. ¹

McKenzie left his house to the governor and moved to a house and shop on Duke of Gloucester street where he soon died. His will contains several interesting bequests and provisions. ²He asked that his friends make efforts to get his son William on the foundation of William and Mary College until he was qualified "to enter some genteel business such as genius leads him to". It reveals something of the surgeon's status in Williamsburg and of his friendships that he requested that his daughter Ann be placed under the care of Mrs. Dinwiddie, Mrs. Peyton Randolph or Mrs. Chiswell, and clothed "as genteely as my estate will afford".

To his good friend, Dr. James Carter, who aided him through his long sickness he bequeathed "a skeleton and injected child". His wife Joanna was given the use of his house and estate during her life, but in the event of her remarriage or death all was to be given to his son William.

Governor Dinwiddie remained in the house only a short time, ³and then it was sold to Robert Carter Nicholas, treasurer of the colony and member of the House of Burgesses. He lived here for eight years and then on May 7, 1761, sold the house and lots to his cousin, Robert Carter of Nomini Hall, in the Northern Neck of Virginia. ¹

Robert Carter had been contemplating a town house for some years, as his business brought him frequently to the capitol. In fact as early as 1751 his intention of acquiring a Williamsburg residence was known and John Blair commented inhospitably in his diary, "July 12, 1751. Sad news of poor wrechd Bob Carter. I hope he won't come to Williamsburg to live." ²

He came on May 16, 1761 with his wife, Frances Tasker ³, daughter of Benjamin Tasker, President of Maryland, and his three children. Shortly thereafter he wrote to Governor Bladen, "I have lately exchanged my country-house for one in the city. I should rather say (to a resident in England) my desert for a well-inhabited country". ⁴

Councillor Carter, an interesting figure from the point of view of the student of Virginia social history, was remarkably the child of his time and of Virginia --enlightened, tolerant, liberal, patriotic and cultured. A man of vast possessions and varied interests who worked assiduously at the duties consequent upon them, and who was neither afraid of innovations nor of facing economic facts. He was at the same time a person who was profoundly affected by the currents of thoughts of the enlightened eighteenth century. He was an amateur musician of worth and taste; he possessed an extraordinarily fine library; and his standards of public and private life were meticulously high.

No less eighteenth century and no less like the Whig noblemen of that era with whom the great landed Virginians of that time seem to have so much in common was his willingness to overturn conventions in his zeal for what he thought was the truth. Born and reared in the Anglican Church of Virginia, he dared to look for an answer to his spiritual problems first in the sect of Baptists and then in the Roman Catholic faith.

Although the owner of a vast number of slaves, Robert Carter in a deed of gift in 1791 declared, "whereas I have for some time past been convinced that to retain them in Slavery is contrary to the true principles of Religion and Justice, and that therefore it was my Duty to Manumit them if it could be accomplished without infringing the Laws of my Country, and without being of Disadvantage to My Neighbours and the Community at Large: 'An Act to authorize the manumission of slaves' ..." and proceeded to liberate these slaves according to a generous and judicious plan. ¹

Almost more is known about his household and its way of life than that of any other landed proprietor of his time through the lively picture of it presented in the published diary of Philip Fithian, who was a tutor for two years at Nomini Hall, the family place in Westmoreland County where Councillor Carter went after leaving Williamsburg. In the Williamsburg house were born six of Carter's seventeen children and here four of them died and were buried in Bruton churchyard.

The children who came to Williamsburg with their parents were Benjamin, Robert Bladen and Priscilla. Of the girl, Priscilla, the tutor Fithian wrote when she about fourteen years old, "...she is small of her age, has a mild winning Presence, a sweet obliging Temper, never swears, which is here a distinguished virtue, dances finely, plays well of the key'd instruments, and is on the whole in the first class of the female Sex." ¹

On May 25, 1764 a daughter, Frances was born, probably at Williamsburg, as the family residence was here at the time. It is amusing to note that in Carter's own records of his family he writes once that she was born in Williamsburg, and once that she was born at Nomini. ²

Fithian described the ten year old Frances, "Fanny next, is in her Person, according to my Judgment, the Flower in the Family -- She has a strong resemblance to her Mama, who is an elegant, beautiful Woman -- Miss Fanny seems to have a remarkable Sedateness, & simplicity in her countenance, which is always rather cheerful than melancholy; She has nothing with which we can find Fault in her Person, but has something in the Features of her Face which insensibly pleases us, & always when She draws our Attention, & much more because there seems for every agreeable Feature a correspondent Action which improves and adorns it." ³

When he left Nomini Fithian strictly enjoined his successor John Peck of New Jersey, to attend to his duties as tutor and to foreswear the beguiling company of ladies. One of the young ladies he had in mind was Anna Tasker Carter who was born in Williamsburg in 1762. Anna, or Nancy as she was called, had a very quick temper, was not studious, but was cheerful, talkative, played well on the guitar and was a graceful dancer. She became Mrs. John Peck and had four children. After Peck's death she married Hugh Quinlan, an Irishman. ¹

The other Carter children born in Williamsburg were Rebecca, Mary, Amelia and Rebecca Dulaney, all of whom died in infancy. ²

Of the seventeen Carter children thirteen were girls and only four were boys. Devoted to his family, and having the utmost concern for them, Councillor Carter suffered greatest anxiety for his sons.

Benjamin Carter, ³his first born child, had a brilliant and inquisitive mind, a warm impetuous disposition, a passion for horses and poor health. He left Providence College in Rhode Island, (later Brown University) because of illness, and died on his way to the medicinal springs at the age of twenty three.

The second son, Robert Bladen Carter ⁴, was the cause of one of his father's deepest sorrows. As a boy in Williamsburg, and at Nomini, he was high tempered, slovenly and clumsy. He rebelled against discipline and hated study, preferring hunting, shooting and gaming with his social inferiors to the well ordered life of his home.

He was however, likeable, and Fithian found that his temper could be moderated, even though he could not be made to study industriously.

In 1778 after the family left Williamsburg, Robert Bladen or Robin, as his father affectionately called him, was sent back to attend college there. His father wrote frankly to Bishop James Madison that his son had neither genius, nor application, nor a pious disposition, "so that if he acquires a knowledge of English words, Construction and practical Arithmetic in the course of two years I shall be forever obliged to you". He also warned the college president that strict discipline must be invoked. ¹

Robin declared frequent holidays for himself and spent much of his time, and far more than his allowance of money, at the Raleigh Tavern, and the Sign of the King's Arms. At one time he bought a handsome gray gelding from James Southall, keeper of the Raleigh, and started home in the middle of the term. He was sent back to college again with some philosophy books, and enough money to pay his many debts. ²

His long-suffering father again wrote to Bishop Madison that he felt himself bound to keep his son in college. He added, "... he must be restrained in every matter from hence, and he must not be allowed to make excursions into Gloucester County, or any other County except in vacation time but must be confined to the College and to the College Rules". ³

A clue to "the excursions to Gloucester" might be found in a letter from Robert Carter to Mann Page concerning young Robin's "great love and affection for Mrs. Baylor". With scrupulous candor the father wrote "I now advise yt such an alliance we do very much approve of - but at the same time I think it advisable to inform you that Mr Bladen's conduct has been very blamable, therefore a caution is requisite". ¹

The romance of Mrs. Baylor is a lost chapter in the history of Robert Bladen Carter, who was finally sent to England to study. While there he became involved in a quarrel over a gaming debt of his in which blows were exchanged. He was ill for some time after this fight, and then died, as a coroner's jury reported to his father, "from natural causes". ²

Young John Tasker ³, because of his brother's waywardness, was also sent to the Baptist college in Providence attended by Benjamin, and later to the academy at Newport, Rhode Island, in the hope that the stricter discipline would be more wholesome than "the custom and example" of Virginia. George ⁴, the fourth son, was born in 1777, and little record of his younger days exists.

Surrounding this family in Williamsburg in their town house was a background richly and tastefully furnished in the fashion of the day. Light from wrought brass sconces and candles in glass globes illuminated an interior with mahogany and walnut furniture, some of it upholstered in crimson damask by Joseph Kidd, one of Williamsburg's ablest cabinet makers. Here was a large library well filled with good books and music. The Councillor had a flute, violin, organ and harpsichord of the finest workmanship. The organ was later shipped to Westmoreland county and was purchased by the Lees of Stratford. The harpsichord was sold to William Washington, nephew of George Washington. ⁵

While Councillor Carter lived in the house on Palace street he was constantly improving it and adding to it. He built an addition to his study, kept the outbuildings and kitchen oven in repair, ordered a large amount of paint of white lead, yellow ochre, Spanish brown and ramp black, replaced locks and glass in the house, repaired and extended the garden pales, had his gates and gate posts painted; and in general expended much time and effort on the maintenance of a handsome town house. ¹

In developing his garden and repairing his fences he became involved in a dispute with his neighbor, Dr. William Carter, concerning the "true and just dividing line" between the lots. In order to settle the controversy he paid Dr. Carter 5 shillings for the narrow strip of ground involved and carefully recorded the deed. ²

Whether he found town life all he had imagined it to be is hard to say. He was certainly in the center of the social life of the colony, but a letter written by his father-in-law Benjamin Tasker, seems to indicate a certain regret for the departure from Nomini Hall.

"You judge very rightly when you say that little is to be got unless Gent: Reside on their Estates", he wrote, "& I say what with Entertaining ones Friends & Acquaintances not much is to be saved then." ³

But there were compensations. Many friends and relations shared the hospitality of the town house. George Washington ⁴noted in his diary in 1769 that he dined and supped at Mr. Carter's. Mrs. Carter, after her return to Nomini recounted to the tutor Fithian,

something of the life in the Carter town house. He wrote, "Mrs. Carter as always, cheerful, chatty & agreeable; she told me after Breakfast several droll, merry occurrences that happened while she was in the City of Williamsburg." ¹

When Lord Dunmore arrived to take over his office of governor, a distinguished committee which included Councillor Carter, greeted him and dined with him at the Palace. ²

In 1773 the Carter family returned to Nomini Hall and the reason for their departure from Williamsburg is given in letter from Carter to his friend Peyton Randolph written in that year.

"Mrs Carter & I, are very happy in finding our Acquaintances wish to See us return to Palace Street Once Again - We think the House there is not sufficiently roomy for our family, and must remain here 'till an addition be Built to that house- " ³

In 1774 Carter placed the town house in the hands of John Tazewell to sell. He gave the use of the house to Colonel Dudley Digges of Yorktown whose duties during the Revolutionary War brought him to Williamsburg. Carter offered him the use of any of the furniture he cared to accept, and Colonel Digges reserved a bed chamber for Carter's use. The illness of Mrs. Digges was the reason for their return to Yorktown. ⁴

The house was leased by the Reverend William Bland in 1783. He was minister of the Church on the Main, James City County, preceding Bishop James Madison. His wife, Elizabeth, was the daughter of President William Yates of William and Mary College. ¹

The outbreak of the Revolution prevented a sale of the house although several prospective purchasers considered it. In 1801 Carter sold it to Robert Saunders, who bequeathed it to his son Robert, the President of William and Mary College. ²

At some time during Saunder's tenure he decided to "veneer" three sides of the house with a brick wall and to add a columned two story pedimented porch in front.

When in 1931 the house was restored to its "colonial" appearance this brick wall and porch had to be removed. Beneath the brick wall was the original "weatherboarding" most of which still shows on the main part of this house, and beneath the porch roof were the old round ended roof shingles which are sometimes found in Virginia colonial architecture.

During the War Between the States the occupants of the house were absent and the place was entered by Federal soldiers. Major David E. Cronin, a Federal officer who was Provost Marshal of Williamsburg in 1864 described the desolation of the once proud house.

He wrote of finding the interior "in a state of complete wreck, empty of furniture except in broken pieces; the walls stained by streams of rain falling through leaks in the decayed roof and the floors covered with litter indescribable; the former library in the most deplorable condition of disorder and ravage. In heaps on every side, were spread half destroyed books, vellumbound volumes, some of them with ornate toolings; letters and documents of all sorts, ragged files of precious colonial newspapers; torn folios of rare old engravings. With these were mingled the remains of shattered marble busts, fragments of ornamented book cases, window glass and plaster mixed with the mud from heavy boots of cavalymen who seemed to have played football with everything of value in the place". ¹

A chest in the garret was overturned which contained letters of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Page, Count Pulaski, Bishop Madison and a great many important men of Revolutionary days. The more valuable manuscripts and bundles were taken by the officers, and the next day infantrymen with shovels and an army wagon were sent to the house to gather up the papers remaining in the garret, which were then taken to Fort Monroe. There they were divided and sorted by the officers' wives, and since that time the whole priceless collection has been so scattered and dispersed that all traces of it seems to be lost completely. ²

Who knows what records of the distinguished owners of the house and their many friends might have been stored in the confiscated chest? Where are the letters of Dr. McKenzie today, and of Robert Carter, Robert Saunders and the great men who called them friends?

Robert Saunders, whose home had been despoiled, died some years after the war and was buried under the weeping willow tree on the terrace.

Today the house has resumed its colonial appearance and its garden is once more in order. The home of the Councillor, the College president and the surgeon-apothecary exists today as a tangible record of the interesting lives led in the old colonial Capitol.

[signed]

Harold R. Shurtleff, Director
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History by: Helen Bullock

HB/hb

5 copies

Footnotes



- [^]₁ 1. See: Chain of title.
- [^]₂ 2. Ibid
- [^]₃ 3. See: Names, McKenzie.
- [^]₄ 4. See: Architecture Interior, McKenzie inventory.
- [^]₁ 1. See: Chain of title.
- [^]₂ 2. See: Names, McKenzie.
- [^]₃ 3. See: Chain of title.
- [^]₁ 1. See: Chain of title.
- [^]₂ 2. See: Names, Blair.
- [^]₃ 3. See: Names, Carter family; Frances Tasker.
- [^]₄ 4. See: Names, Bladen.
- [^]₁ 1. See: Names, Robert Carter.
- [^]₁ 1. See: Names, Priscilla Carter.
- [^]₂ 2. Ibid: Frances Carter
- [^]₃ 3. Ibid.
- [^]₁ 1. See: Names, Anna Tasker Carter.
- [^]₂ 2. Ibid, Carter family.
- [^]₃ 3. Ibid, Benjamin Carter.
- [^]₄ 4. Ibid, Robert Bladen Carter.
- [^]₁ 1. See: Names, Robert Bladen Carter.
- [^]₂ 2. Ibid.
- [^]₃ 3. Ibid.
- [^]₁ 1. See: Names, Robert Bladen Carter.
- [^]₂ 2. Ibid.
- [^]₃ 3. Ibid, John Tasker Carter
- [^]₄ 4. Ibid, George Carter, Carter family.
- [^]₅ 5. See: Architecture, Interior.
- [^]₁ 1. See: Architecture.
- [^]₂ 2. See: Chain of title.
- [^]₃ 3. See: Names, Benjamin Tasker.
- [^]₄ 4. Ibid; George Washington.
- [^]₁ 1. See: Names, Frances Tasker.
- [^]₂ 2. See: Political events.
- [^]₃ 3. See: Names, Robert Carter.
- [^]₄ 4. See: Chain of title.
- [^]₁ 1. See: Chain of title.
- [^]₂ 2. Ibid.
- [^]₁ 1. See: Political events.
- [^]₂ 2. Ibid.

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