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CONTENTS

Bear Castle	3
by <i>Eugenia Trainam Bumpass and Claudia Anderson Chisholm</i>	
Dabney Carr	8
by <i>Edgar Wallace</i>	
Wills Not Fully Proven and Related Papers	16
contributed by <i>George H. S. King</i>	
Oakland Academy	19
by <i>Porter C. Wright</i>	
Johnson Family Register	23
contributed by <i>Thomas Johnson Henderson</i>	
Richardson Family Bible	26
contributed by <i>James Morris Bagby</i>	
United States Census, 1850 – Louisa County	28
Queries	48
Secretary's Report	51
New Members	52
Necrology	

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Cover: Louisa County Courthouse, 1818-1905

DABNEY CARR

by Edgar Wallace*
Houston, Texas

When Thomas Carr decided to make his home and raise his family in Virginia, it is unlikely that he realized he was founding an illustrious line of public servants. Little is known of his early life and education. On 24 April 1701 he was granted five hundred and forty-six acres of land in St. John's Parish of King and Queen County for having financially backed the passage of eleven other people to Virginia. From this estate, which he called Topping Castle, he launched a political career that made him a justice and sheriff of King and Queen County. In a short time, he had achieved a great deal of influence which was to be enriched by future generations of his family.¹

Major Thomas Carr, a son of Thomas Carr, was born in 1678 and settled at Bear Castle in Caroline County. During the Major's lifetime, Bear Castle became the managing headquarters for extensive landholdings in King William, Caroline, Hanover, Louisa, and Albemarle counties. Major Carr served as a justice and sheriff as well as a member of the House of Burgesses.² He and his wife Mary had among other children a son John, born 25 December 1706.³

John Carr used the name Bear Castle for his homeplace in Louisa County where he raised his family.⁴ Here John's first wife, Mary, presented him with a son, Thomas, in 1735. Mary died and on 27 December 1737, John married Barbara Overton. They were the parents of Dabney, born in 1743; James, born and died in 1740; James, born in 1741; Samuel, born in 1745/6; Elizabeth, born in

*Editor's Note: This article is adapted from a thesis done by Mr. Wallace while he was a history student under Professor Charles Turner at Washington and Lee University. Dr. Turner is a Louisa County native.

¹Elizabeth Dabney Coleman, "The Carrs of Albemarle" (Unpublished manuscript, University of Virginia, 1944), p. 2.

²*Ibid.*, p. 2.

³Carr Family Register cited in G. C. Broadhead, "The Carr Family," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, III, 209.

⁴Malcolm H. Harris, *A History of Louisa County, Virginia* (Richmond : The Dietz Press, 1936), p. 269.

Dabney Carr

1747; John, born in 1750; Garland, born in 1754; Mary, born in 1756; and Sarah, born in 1758.⁵

John Carr served as a justice for several years and as sheriff in 1753 and 1754 for Louisa County.⁶ He had attained the title, colonel, when he died on 17 June 1778—five years after the death of his illustrious son, Dabney Carr. Into this background of landed wealth and political position, Dabney Carr was born at Bear Castle on 26 October 1743.⁸

Basic education was provided for Dabney at the Reverend James Maury's school. It was here that he became the fast friend of Thomas Jefferson. Other fellow students and friends were the Reverend James Madison, future president of William and Mary College, and John Taylor of Caroline, noted United States Senator, agriculturist, and political writer. Jefferson and Carr must have been rather shrewd and full of practical pranks, for they made a great commotion in the school about a horse race they supposedly were going to run against each other on February 30th. It took some time for their classmates to realize the race would never occur!

Reverend Maury felt a planter's son should not adhere to a classical education unless destined to preach, heal or judge. According to Jefferson, Dabney must have agreed with his schoolmaster. The two friends, however, received a classical education, regardless of their schoolmaster's or their own views.

In 1760 the boys' education continued in Williamsburg. Governor John Page recorded that he attended mathematics classes with them under Professor William Small. George Wythe was conducting legal training in Williamsburg at the time. The two professors at Williamsburg evidently had as much influence on Dabney Carr as his earlier teacher, Reverend Maury.⁹

After learning law and finishing his studies at Williamsburg, Dabney applied his knowledge in the courts of Goochland, Louisa, Chesterfield, Albemarle, and Augusta counties. This was also the territory of the great Patrick Henry and Dabney Carr was counted as Henry's most formidable rival during these first years of his career.¹⁰

⁵Carr Family Register, *loc. cit.*

⁶Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

⁷Carr Family Register, *loc. cit.*

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Coleman, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-5.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 5.

Dabney Carr

As today's boys must do their stint in military service, Dabney had to serve for a short time. After the French and Indian War, standing volunteer companies were maintained for Virginia's protection. In 1763 Dabney served under Captain Phillips in a company of Volunteer Rangers. Carr and other Louisa soldiers accepted land bounties as payment for their military service.¹¹

When Dabney was twenty-two years old, he fell in love with Thomas Jefferson's nineteen year old sister, Martha. The couple was married on 20 July 1765, went to Goochland, and probably lived at a home called Spring Forest. The two young people were extremely happy. In a letter to John Page, Thomas Jefferson wrote of Dabney after a visit to Spring Forest: "He speaks, thinks, and dreams of nothing but his young son. This friend of ours, Page, . . . is the happiest man in the universe. Every incident in life he . . . takes as . . . a source of pleasure. With as much benevolence as the heart of man will hold, but with an utter neglect of the costly apparatus of life, he exhibits . . . a new . . . philosophy."¹² Dabney and Martha Carr had six children: Mary Lucy, Peter, Samuel, Dabney, Jane Barbara, and Polly.¹³

Dabney Carr joined his many friends in the House of Burgesses, as was the wish of most young Virginia lawyers, as a member from Louisa. He served in the sessions from February 10, 1772 until his death in 1773 with Richard Anderson, who was representing Louisa County for the third time.¹⁴

In the House of Burgesses, Carr was unswervingly honest. When that honesty was doubted by his friend, Benjamin Lewis, he replied indignantly, as seen from the following excerpts of his letter of August 16, 1772 to Mr. Lewis:

. . . Of that vulgar, indiscriminating applause, that is often acquitted without merit, and lost without a fault, I was never ambitious. I well know how truly it is a bubble . . . Judge then what must have been my feelings, when I was well informed, that upon a variety of occasions, not only to our common friends, but in mixed companies, you had misrepresented my conduct, and admitting it to have been, as you said, had spoken of it with a virulence and asperity of censure that could only belong to my worst enemy My

¹¹Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹²Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹³Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

¹⁴William Wirt Henry, "House of Burgesses, 1766 to 1775." *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, IV, 385.

conduct, supposing it wrong, may have proceeded from an error in judgement; yours can only have proceeded from some degree of malevolence Whenever you shall think proper to tell me that you did not mean to impeach my integrity, in what you said of my conduct in the House of Burgesses, I shall cease to think that you have been activated by malevolence, and whenever you say you desire it, I am ready to return to those sentiments of friendship for you, which I have always entertained. In the meantime, as I think myself discharged of any other connections with you than those of common humanity and civility. I am D. Carr¹⁵

On February 17, 1772, Dabney was appointed to the committee on Religion and the committee on Privileges and Elections. His work on the former included the writing of a bill in answer to a petition from the inhabitants of Louisa who wished to be able to choose new vestrymen. As a member of the committee on elections, he helped Jefferson examine the writs for the election of Burgesses for the Assembly of 1773.¹⁶

Of course, Carr's greatest contribution politically was his work in regard to the Committees of Correspondence. The old Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg was being used for political as well as social gatherings. There were a few Burgesses (Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, Richard Henry Lee, Francis Lightfoot Lee, and Dabney Carr) who were in the habit of meeting to discuss the affairs of state. An old Committee of Correspondence had been responsible for handling affairs between the mother country and Virginia. Jefferson gives the following account of the formation of the new committee, which was chiefly for inter-colonial relations:

Not thinking our old and leading members up to the point of forwardness and zeal which the times required, Mr. Henry, Richard Henry Lee, Francis L. Lee, Mr. Carr and myself agreed to meet in the evening in a private room of the Raleigh Tavern to consult on the state of things. We were all most sensible that the most urgent of all measures was that of coming to an understanding with all the other colonies, to consider the British claims as a common cause to all, and to produce a unity of action; and for this purpose, that a committee of correspondence in each colony would be the best instrument of intercommunication; and that their first measure would probably be, to propose a meeting of deputies from every colony, at some central place, who

¹⁵W. G. Stanard, "Library of Dabney Carr with a Notice of the Carr Family," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, IV. 226-228.

¹⁶Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

Dabney Carr

would be charged with the direction of the measures which should be taken up by all. We therefore drew up the resolution.¹⁷

The idea of establishing the committees had been suggested by Richard Henry Lee as early as 1768. At the Raleigh Tavern meeting, Jefferson, who probably wrote the resolutions, was asked to present them to the Assembly, but he insisted that his brother-in-law, Dabney Carr, be permitted to introduce the plan. This is only one example of the estimation in which Dabney Carr was held by his friend and brother-in-law, Jefferson. This was to be Carr's debut speech in the Assembly.¹⁸

Oddly enough, the legislature was convened by a very unwilling Governor Dunmore on March 12, 1773, in order to discuss a recent discovery of currency counterfeiting in Virginia. The Assembly seized the opportunity to discuss some matters of great importance to themselves, and Dabney Carr arose to introduce the resolutions which were the result of the conference at Raleigh Tavern.¹⁹ This speech, Carr's first and greatest to the Virginia Burgesses, was brilliantly organized and delivered with tremendous power. Although no copy of the speech is available, Jefferson makes note of "the pleasure expressed . . . [by] . . . the members, generally, on this debut of Mr. Carr, and the hopes they conceived, as well as . . . the patriotism it manifested."²⁰

At the presentation, Patrick Henry and Richard Henry Lee also made impressive talks supporting the resolutions. Within a short time the members of the House had unanimously passed the plan on the day of its introduction.²¹

A standing Committee of Correspondence and Inquiry was established, consisting of eleven of the most prominent men in the colony. Dabney Carr was among them.²² The committee consisted

¹⁷E. I. Miller, "The Virginia Committee of Correspondence of 1773-1775." *William and Mary Quarterly, First Series*, XII, 99ff.

¹⁸Lyon G. Tyler, "Leadership of Virginia in the War of the Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly, First Series*, XIX, 235-236.

¹⁹James Mercer Garnett, "The Last Fifteen Years of the House of Burgesses in Virginia, 1761-1776," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XVIII, 220.

²⁰Coleman, *op cit.*, p. 8.

²¹Tyler, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

²²Garnett, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

of six other William and Mary graduates: Peyton Randolph, Robert Carter Nicholas, Richard Bland, Benjamin Harrison, Thomas Jefferson, and Archibald Cary, and four others: Richard Henry Lee, Edmund Pendleton, Patrick Henry, and Dudley Digges.²³ The purpose of the committee was to keep informed on all acts and resolutions of Parliament relating to the colonies, to correspond with sister colonies, and to inquire into the case of the British armed sloop, *Gaspee*.²⁴

On March 15, the Assembly was dissolved by the governor. Dunmore was actually indifferent to the newly organized committee. But when the Assembly criticized him, and when England, who was outraged at the idea behind the Committee of Correspondence, very nearly recalled Dunmore, he roused from his indolence. In effect, the governor only followed the Cabinet of St. James in order to retain his position. Thus Dr. Philip Mazzei's derogatory references to Dunmore when he spoke of "the weakness of his mind and the meanness of his heart" are understandable.²⁵

After the passage of the resolution, Jefferson and Carr agreed that there must be a congress of the deputies of all colonies to unite for the preservation of colonial rights.²⁶ Virginia was the first colony to propose this, and the first step was taken in that direction on March 16, the day after Dunmore dissolved the Virginia Assembly. It was then that the Speaker of the House, Peyton Randolph, at the direction of the new committee, sent a circular to the other colonies.

Rhode Island and five other colonies accepted the Virginia Committee's ideas and responded warmly, praising Virginia for her leadership in taking such a practical step. William Lee wrote from London: "The inter-colonial committees struck a greater panic in the ministers than anything that had taken place since the passage of the Stamp Act." Indeed, the British recognized the strength of the Committees as the almost certain precursor of a Continental Congress.²⁷

²³"Education in Colonial Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly, First Series*, VII, 2.

²⁴Garnett, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

²⁵E. C. Branchi, "Memoirs of the Life and Voyages of Doctor Philip Mazzei," *William and Mary Quarterly, 2nd Series*, IX, 131-174.

²⁶Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²⁷Tyler, *op. cit.*, 237.

Dabney Carr

As could be expected, there is some controversy about who was actually responsible for the origin and fruition of the idea of correspondence committees. Bancroft attributes the entire credit to that "young statesman of brilliant genius," Dabney Carr. Dr. H.J. Eckenrode is equally sure that the "first inter-colonial intelligence bureau" owed its inception to Richard Henry Lee.²⁸

Although Dabney very likely had a great deal to do with the maturity of the plan, it is known that Lee had suggested it as early as 1768. Evidently, it had a common origin or occurred to several people at the same time, and then was worked out in detail at the Raleigh Tavern conference. It can be said that Richard Henry Lee might have had the original idea; Thomas Jefferson probably wrote the resolutions; Dabney Carr presented them to the House; Jefferson, Lee, and Henry then supported them; and the Assembly unanimously passed them, thus taking the first step toward the future union of the colonies.

Thirty-five days after his introduction of the resolutions, Dabney Carr died suddenly of bilious fever on May 16, 1773.²⁹ He left a fairly large inheritance, including an extensive, well-rounded library, for a man only thirty years old who had seven mouths to feed. He had built up a thriving law practice also.³⁰ An inventory of his property shows his house was comfortable, even elegantly furnished. The total of his personal estate was £ 1,067/4sh/2d.³¹

Dabney's extremely early death was a terrible shock to his wife. Her grief caused a slight mental disturbance, but under the care of her brother, she soon recovered. After her husband's death, Martha and the children lived at Monticello. Jefferson was appointed guardian to the Carr children.³² Dabney became a judge on the Virginia Supreme Court; Peter and Samuel both served in the state legislature; Peter also helped to establish the University of Virginia and Samuel turned his interests to the Albemarle Agricultural Society.³³ Martha Jefferson Carr died in 1811 at the home of her son

²⁸H. J. Eckenrode, *The Revolution in Virginia* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), p. 33.

²⁹Carr Family Register, *loc. cit.*

³⁰Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³¹Stanard, *op. cit.*, pp. 222-226.

³²Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 1.

Samuel and was buried at Monticello.³⁴

Carr was a man who enjoyed the simple things of life, yet retained his dignity, inward composure, and consequently, a stalwart character. He was never ambitious for recognition because he realized the fickleness of human admiration. His proper up-bringing, good education, and interest in religion gave him a steadfast moral foundation and an eye that quickly discerned right and wrong. A happy family life and an excellent choice of friends undoubtedly were other factors that combined to make him the man he was.

Appropriately, in death Dabney and his friend Thomas Jefferson remained as close as their friendship was during Carr's life. Long before, the two boys, while sitting on the future site of Monticello, had made a pact to be buried side by side.³⁵ Jefferson did not forget the promise of his youth and had Dabney's remains brought to the Monticello graveyard. There he was interred under a tombstone dedicated by Jefferson to "virtue, good sense, learning, and friendship . . ." ³⁶Now all three rest on that hillside at Monticello-- Thomas Jefferson, Martha Jefferson Carr, and Dabney Carr.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 11.