

John Thomas Carré diary
1807-1809
Mss.B.C232

American Philosophical Society
2004
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Table of Contents

Summary Information	3
Background note	4
Scope & content	6
Administrative Information	7
Related Materials	7
Indexing Terms	7
Other Descriptive Information	8
Bibliography	8

Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
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Abstract	<p>Twice a refugee from the revolutionary violence in the French colony of Saint Domingue, John Thomas Carré became head of the Clermont Seminary in Philadelphia from 1804-1825, a select boarding school for boys.</p> <p>Carré's diary from 1807-1809 provides a basic chronology of his life at the Clermont Seminary, with a few comments on his students and their families. The entries are typically very brief and are confined to a relatively limited range of topics, including the weather, Carré's poor health, his visitors, and correspondents.</p>
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Background note

The educator and Saint Domingue refugee, John Thomas Carré was born in Normandy in about 1744. After apparently receiving a sound basic education, Carré was induced by a physician friend of his to emigrate to the colony of Saint Domingue. Whatever his initial intentions may have been in emigrating, Carré's talent for drawing earned him a position in the Corps des Ingenieurs in the colony, where he worked preparing maps and plans for a variety of public works projects. According to family legend, he also began to study Latin at about this time, allegedly after being embarrassed at misspelling a common Latin phrase when finishing a map.

As surveyor for the parishes of Borgne and Plaisance, near Cap Haitien on the northern coast, Carré was introduced to the widow of a local planter, Mme Chicaneau, and while surveying her plantation, rashly eloped with her daughter, Anne Beatrice. Despite her initial displeasure at the marriage, Chicaneau rewarded the young couple with a sizable estate of their own, along with twelve slaves to manage it (four of them children). Still a young man, Carré became a coffee planter overnight, eventually overseeing almost 50,000 coffee plants tended by as many as 60 slaves. The couple prospered, raising six children in Saint Domingue, Emile, Victor, Sophie, George Washington, Marcelline, and Seraphine, with a seventh arriving later.

News of the revolution in France strongly affected Carré from the outset. While apparently neither a Royalist nor a Jacobin, he was deeply concerned about the bloodshed and disorder he feared might follow. Prescient or not, the Carrés and Chicaneaus were swept up in the violence of the slave revolt, leaving the colony in 1792 with their lives intact, but little of their fortune. Carré described his remarkable escape to Charles Willson Peale:

a year is hardly Since they [Carré's children] have been Eyewitnesses of the murder of forty white peoples, men, women, and children barbarously butchered by their own Negroes, in my neighbourhood.... These assassins came to my house to the number of about two hundred, besmeared all over with human blood. a white man who had Just come to inform me of the massacre of my Neighbours, immediately fell victim of their rage. he was murdered in my arms; his blood filled up me Shoes and yielding to a cruel destiny, he fell down dead upon one of my children, whom I looked upon half dead with fear... Then more than twenty guns were aimed at my breast; but my Negroes making a wall with their own bodies all around me, threatened of an instant death whomsoever Should do me the least harm. Thus Shielding me and my family at that dreadful moment, They got time enough to move and set the heart of these assassins into its natural way again. Then being turned from wild brutes into men again, far from doing me any mischief their chief assured me of their protection...[John Thomas Carré to Charles Willson Peale, ca.1792. Peale-Sellers Papers (B P31.50). In the edited edition of the Peale Papers, this letter is given the more probable date of 1793.]

The Carrés arrived in Philadelphia in the summer of 1793 with three slaves still in tow, and with the assistance of local supporters like Peale, recovered his finances. During the revolutionary years, however,

the Carrés lost five children to disease or to the conflict itself. While in Philadelphia, Carré had some communication with the American Philosophical Society, transmitting an essay on the Natural History of St. Domingo in September 1795 and translating Palisot de Beauvois' catalogue of Peales' Museum into English.

At some point between December 1798 and June 1799, Carré decided to return to Saint Domingue, perhaps hoping to recover his estates. Traveling as secretary to the U.S. Consul Edward Stevens, however, his timing was not propitious: instability and renewed violence forced Carré to abandon Saint Domingue a second time, possibly as early as June 1799. After returning to Philadelphia in 1804, following a stay in Burlington, N.J., Carré established a select school with his brother, Charles. Situated half way between Germantown and Frankford, the Clermont Seminary gained a reputation as one of the city's finest boarding schools for boys, drawing students not only from the local elite, but from as far away as Natchez and New Orleans. The Carrés were later assisted by John Sanderson (1783-1844), a noted writer who married Carré's only surviving daughter Sophie. John Carré died in about 1825, the year in which his Seminary closed.

Scope & content

John Thomas Carré's diary from 1807-1809 provides a basic chronology of his life at the Clermont Seminary, with a few comments on his students and their families. The entries are typically very brief and are confined to a relatively limited range of topics, including the weather, Carré's poor health, his visitors, and correspondents.

Among the students Carré mentions are a few from important Philadelphia families (Waln, Smith, Lewis), and others who hint at Carré's prestige as an educator: Spanish boy, Francisco Garay. Lemesurier, and the sons of the Spanish Consul at New Orleans, Vidal. Among the most frequently mentioned are two of the sons of the writer and scientist Mary Griffith, of whom Carré seems to have been particularly fond. Even the comments on the Griffiths, however, are relatively slight. Carré is at his most reflective when considering the physical trials to which his ill health has subject him, at one time remarking morosely:

Spent my leizure with my dead friends, whom no living can be compared to; for they store my mind with true information and my heart with fortitude to bear with resignation the unsincerity of men's protestation; and moreover teach me to place no dependence on them. (October 29, 1809)

The diary is accompanied by a copy of a biographical reminiscence of Carré written by his granddaughter, Ann Virginia Sanderson Farquhar, and other supporting documents collected by the family. The front cover of the diary is marked "Book 1. Diarium commendarium, 1807," with an illegible inscription on the rear.

Administrative Information

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Acquisition Information

Gift of Mrs. Linnea Layton of Acton, Mass., April 2000 (accn. no. 2000-330ms).

Processing Information

Catalogued by rsc, 2004.

Related Materials

Related Material

Carré's superb letter to Charles Willson Peale describing his escape from the slave uprising in Saint Domingue is located in the Peale-Sellers Papers, (B P31.50). His essay on the natural history of Saint Domingue of September 1795 has apparently not survived in the Society's archives, however the library has copies of two books he donated:

Gesner, Johann Matthias, *Scriptores rei Rusticae Veteres Latini*, 2nd ed. 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1773-1774). Donated May 1820. **Call no.:** 630 G33. Varro, Marcus Terentius, *Opera Omnia Quae Extant* (Durdurchti, 1619). **Call no.:** 6878.9 V43. See also:

Palisot de Beauvois, Ambrose Marie François Joseph, *A Scientific and Descriptive Catalogue of Peale's Museum*, trans. by John Thomas Carré (Philadelphia, 1796). **Call no.:** PMP v.6, no.3. Sanderson, John, *Biography of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence* (Philadelphia, 1849). **Call no.:** 920.3 Sa5.a. Sanderson, John, *Remarks on the Plan of a College: (About to be Established in This City,) in Which English Literature, the Sciences, and Liberal Arts are Proposed to be Taught, in Exclusion of the Latin and Greek Languages* (Philadelphia, 1826). **Call no.:** Pam. v.970, no.8.

Indexing Terms

Corporate Name(s)

- Clermont Seminary (Philadelphia, Pa.)

Genre(s)

- Diaries
- Diaries.
- Educational Material

Personal Name(s)

- Griffith, Mary, 1772-1846

Subject(s)

- Beyond Early America
- Education
- Philadelphia History
- Refugees--Saint Domingue
- Teachers--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia

Other Descriptive Information

This recently acquired diary contains information on the founding and operation of Clermont Seminary, a private school Carre founded in Philadelphia after being exiled from Haiti.

Bibliography

The Clermont Seminary was depicted in the November 1810 issue of the *Port Folio*.