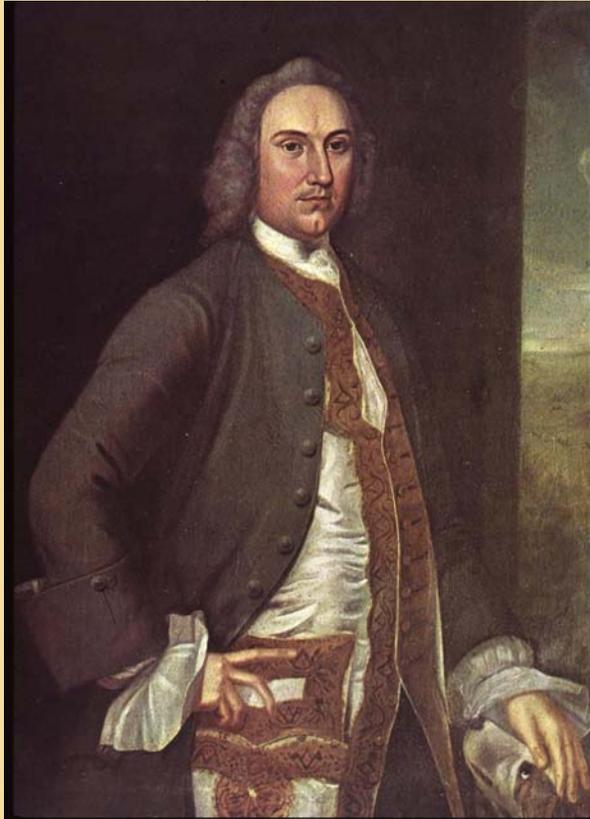




R. Carter Wellford, T. Dabney Wellford, Hill B. Wellford



Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, oil on canvas, ca. 1790, attributed to Charles Bridges

*“As a Farmer or Planter I must call it a bad Season.”*

## The Diary of Landon Carter

Virginia planter & statesman  
 January-May 1758\_\_EXCERPTS

Born in August 1710 into one of the wealthiest planter families of Virginia, Landon Carter was landed gentry. Educated in London with his brothers, Carter returned at age sixteen and learned plantation management from his father, Robert “King” Carter. At age twenty-two, events propelled Carter into his adulthood: his father died, leaving him eight plantations, and he married the first of his three wives (all of whom died before 1758). As was the norm for Virginia gentry, Carter became involved in public affairs, as a justice of the peace, member of the county court, and later, commander of the militia. In 1752 he was elected to the Virginia legislature, the House of Burgesses.

These diary selections from five months in 1758, when Carter was forty-seven years old, present a close look at his life as a wealthy planter, herbalist doctor to his family and slaves, three-time widower, father mourning his young daughter’s death — and hardworking distressed farmer in a season of drought. Three years earlier, drought had ruined the colony’s tobacco crop; the same would happen in 1758, but worse.

**January 15, 1758. Sunday.** A very rainy night. This a Constant heavy rain. 11 Calves and but one lamb. A cow died whilst I was down. They say she was put in her Stall at night seemingly quite well and found dead in the morning. She was old but not poor and raised a fine Calf last Fall. They opened her and found abundance of water in her belly. Surely there must be some poisonous herb eaten by her to die so instantaneously.

**January 17, 1758. Tuesday.** Began to plow for oats this day. The Corn field not quite finished owing to late rains in a great measure but more to Lazyness in my plowmen as I could not examine into their behaviour on account of my being abroad [away]. I find the wheel plow can’t work well in old Corn ground. The last year’s hills incommode the wheels and drive the plow out. However this is well supplied by a single fluke hoe which turns it up very properly. A Cow calved and the Calf died by reason of neglect in putting her into a Stall at such a time when she ought to have been in a house and at full liberty, but negroes will do these things and white people are more deceitful.

**January 18, 1758. Wednesday.** A most remarkable fine day after a prodigious white Frost but no ice. 13 Calves. Sowed the 4 last tobacco beds up at the house with some seed that come from Col. Spencer Ball’s, to see what it is that has made so much noise.<sup>1</sup> . . .

National HumanitiesCenter, 2009: [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds). *The Diary of Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778*, ed. Jack P. Greene (University Press of Virginia, published for the Virginia Historical Society, 1965), Vol. 1; permission pending. Footnotes added and some spelling and punctuation modernized by NHC for clarity. Ellipses marking omission of entries placed at right margin. Complete image credits at [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm).

<sup>1</sup> “so much noise”: perhaps “so much discussion” among planters.

**March 1, 1758. Wednesday.**<sup>2</sup> I went down the 23<sup>d</sup> January and was absent to the 20<sup>th</sup> February. In that time many spells of Severe weather at every house where I was. Ever since the 20<sup>th</sup> have been sick with a very severe kind of Cholic and now not well. February has been a bad month indeed. . . .

**March 2, 1758. Thursday.** Yesterday was a fine, warm, Sunshine day; this a cold, Snowing, Sniveling one. I had brought from on board the *Union* a Servant pretending to be a gardener named, Joseph Brown, a Yarmouth man. Says he was an apprentice to Kitchen Gardiner.<sup>3</sup>

**March 3, 1758. Friday.** Very Cold, hard Frost. No working yesterday nor today.

**March 6, 1758. Monday.** Began this day to sow Oats. The weather till now has been so bad I could not put a seed in Sooner. I saw my wheat yesterday and everywhere in the Stiff land 'tis near all Killed, being spewed up [flooded] by the very wet weather. This whole Season hitherto has been bad for wheat, for near 2 months after 'twas Sown the weather was too dry to bring it up and ever since that too wet and we could not roll it. . . .

**March 16, 1758. Thursday.** A prodigious warm day. Many of my people<sup>4</sup> have been ill this week and although the disorders have had some Symptoms similar with those a fortnight [fourteen days] past, yet they differed greatly in others. Some the belly most violently pained even to madness. Some the head, Stomach, and side. And I found worms to be the occasion of all the Coughs only such as the titillation of those animals in the stomach would occasion, and although there was a Sort of expectorated Pus yet the pains were not relieved till the removal of those animals. I bled<sup>5</sup> to relieve the Symptoms and gave *Mercurius dulcis* in Purges<sup>6</sup> by which means and a Course of worm powders after many were brought away, and some patients reduced very low recovered, nay some were imagined near their end. Note: till the operation of the purges the pains did not abate and then they began to spit and the pains died away. I had 4 in this Condition.

I observe my oats first sown begin to put forth a root. They have been in the ground now ten days and not a rain on them. Indeed I can't help observing the great drought of the weather in my river side Cornfield. We have near 10 days' work occasioned by the drought, the baking winds on the former wet Spell and the natural Stiffness of the land. Mangorike Cornfield will be near done this week. The ground is lighter than the other and their hands [workers; slaves] less afflicted with sickness. Besides there is one big bellied woman that has seemed to be near her time about 2 months. As to wheat 'tis as bad as ever I saw, drowned in the wet land and spewed out in the dry land.

We are now cowpenning for the crop in 1759 and that it may not be forgotten what division follows the other in order of farming I here set in down.

The stone house in tobacco	1758
The Barn field	1759
The Sasafrass	1760
Hay's Marsh Field	1761
Right hand great gate	1762

Each part is sown the Fall after in Wheat and each old Wheat field the Spring twelve month in Oats.

<sup>2</sup> No February 1758 entries as Carter was travelling around the colony, as he notes on March 1.

<sup>3</sup> Carter bought the contract of an indentured servant newly arrived from England.

<sup>4</sup> I.e., his slaves.

<sup>5</sup> Causing bleeding, or "blood-letting" to remove disease or "bad" blood was a medicinal treatment for centuries before the advent of modern medicine (and is still used for certain conditions).

<sup>6</sup> Carter used *Mercurius dulcis* (mercuric chloride; calomel) to induce vomiting in his patients as a worm treatment.



Sabine Hall, Richmond County, Virginia

**March 17, 1758. Friday.** Windsor, Sukey, Margaret's son Tom all pretty well.<sup>7</sup> Windsor was Seized so suddenly and so violently as to run mad and held from killing himself. His pain just below his Navel across the belly. As he never complained before I suspected wind to be the Cause and gave Agua Mirabilis 2 drachms with a large draft of Strong ginseng tea. This procured ease. . . .

Those cases have confirmed me in the change I imagined I found in the disorders of this season which were at first Pleuroben then Peripneumonick and now they are chiefly occasioned by worms — every day they grow more distinct and the pains are all in the belly below the navel and yet awhile the fever's sharp but abate on the operation of slight mercurial purges.

Finished sowing oats opposite the barn. The piece measures only 31 or 2 acres and they have put in the ground 158 bushels which at 4 bushels to the acre should have been but 124. The negroe seeds men have no gauge and therefore must have it proportioned at so many bushel to each land. There were 60 bushels sown on this side the barn and I suppose with the same profuse hand.

Still very blowing, dry weather so that I can't sow clover which I am ready for.

**March 18, 1758. Saturday.** Thunder a little and a pretty sprinkling of rain. Not cold as yet. I sowed my Corn house trash dunghill this day before the rain. Fine mellow stuff and full quantity for the little grass paddock by the Corn house.

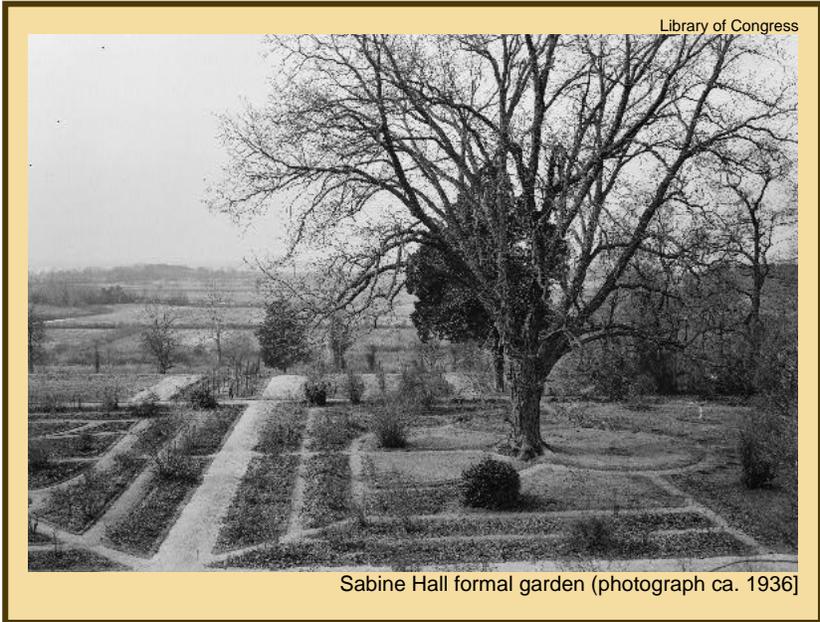
**March 19, 1758. Sunday.** It proved fine and warm last night and rained sufficiently so as to refresh everything, but March is an invidious month. It now blows hard and very Cold at Northwest. Beware of a Frost.

**March 20, 1758. Monday.** A hard Frost. Yesterday's and this day's cold wind has destroyed all the good effect of Saturday's rain. The Stiff land is as hard baked as ever. As I am now Cockling my wheat I have been over a great part of it. I find full 1/3 of it killed, that where the ground

<sup>7</sup> Children of Carter's slaves. This Sukey is not Susannah, Carter's daughter born the previous year.

lies low drowned and on the tops of the ridges and sides where the ground was drier quite spewed out and withered. I never remembered this land so spewy [liable to flood] before. I once thought the plowing in Number four bout lands had been a preservative against and I thought to have carted Sand over it to make it less apt to Spew but this winter seems to baffle all that kind of reasoning for where the land is apparently dry the wheat is most spewed out. This can only be owing to the Summer's rain and the wet and sharp weather in the winter, and indeed the land at the Fork which is quite Sandy is in the same condition which is certainly no common observation. However if we could come into the true virginian notion of sowing then we should have great expectations for they generally sow each grain at the foot asunder and I think mine is something thicker than that.

Began this morning to sow Clover seed on my oats and endeavoured to put in 12 pounds to the acre. I wish I could promise any thing from the seed but verily I don't like the looks of it. However it can't be worsted by being put in the ground. The wind quickly stopped me. Finished plowing for oats this day. My horses quite wore down but as much owing to the want [lack] of care in my people that feed them. However they shall have a week's rest and then only roll in the wheat and oats.



**March 22, 1758. Wednesday.** . . . I was waked with the rocking and trembling of my bed. Being confused from my sleep I thought the noise attending it was like the passing of many coaches by under my window but a second rocking and trembling came that instant with a roaring in the heavens, not a rumbling. I went out to know if others had not felt and heard it and the whole plantation were up and out of doors seeing for the Cause, but every part of the heavens was quite rekiin [?] and clear. They say about ten minutes before these two there was a small shaking of the earth and about the same time after the two another. . . .<sup>8</sup>

**March 24, 1758. Friday.** Clear but very cold. The snows melt fast in the Sun. This day Dr. Flood informed me of the Shock of the Earthquakes being felt at his. It agrees with mine exactly at ten but he says there was but one and it continued not longer than 6 or 8 seconds, but I am certain of at the distance of some minutes the first waked me and the 2d I felt distinctly.

**March 25, 1758. Saturday.** In spite of all our care which I can answer for the time I was at home I have lost the following cattle this Fall.

Of a dropsy:	2, 1 cow and 1 Yearling
Found dead:	1 fine cow though put well at night she had formed A wen and that was corrupted within.

<sup>8</sup> The *Maryland Gazette* [Annapolis] of 23 March 1758 reported a "very considerable Shock of an EARTHQUAKE." [U.S. Geological Survey, Maryland earthquake history]

Of a load of chaff:	1 yearling having weevil eaten wheat in it.
Of a Scouring:	1 ditto
Broke its neck:	1 a young steer just taken up.
Pushed into the Creek:	1 heifer.

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7 in all

The cockling wheat this year an immense trouble occasioned by the Rascal who was overseer last year at the Fork who never saw the work well done there and from thence came most of my seed wheat. . . .

**March 27, 1758. Monday.** I saw my daughter Sukey<sup>9</sup> yesterday. She has been exactly a fortnight under a Constant fever but said every day to intermit because when the period of the ague and the hot fit is off she becomes cheerful. Dr. Flood could not be got to her and my fears will not let me practice on her as her case is of so Chronick a kind.

**March 28, 1758. Tuesday.** This month proves the great inconstancy of the weather in this Country but more so this year than Common. We have had within this week a very deep snow, then yesterday weather almost too warm, great rain and very sharp Claps of thunder and lightning, last night a prodigious blustering Northwest and today spitting with Snow blowing hard and in squalls and with all very Cold. We should have finished sowing our Oats had it not been for this wind. Frequent scuds [low clouds] of Snow.

**March 29, 1758. Wednesday.** This day hard frost, no working and very cold and windy with many snowy Clouds. No sowing a seed. . . .

**April 5, 1758. Wednesday.** This day a Frost and so has it been this 12 or 14 days. A prospect of good weather. As a Farmer or Planter I must call it a bad Season. The cold winds attending the Frosts have had their visible bad effects on everything. Cattle which not a fortnight ago were in fine order are now much reduced. Oats lie just peeping the clod, poor and perish. Wheat again almost dead to the roots and nearly blown out of the ground. The earth merely dust and flying as at midsummer and from what I can see no prospect of any plants at all. . . .

**April 8, 1758. Saturday.** This seems to bid fair for a fine day, the first for a full fortnight. In Short I have never been so much puzzled to do the proper works in my farm since I first began. Rolling of the wheat has been so often obstructed by hard frost that it is but just done. Rolling of the oats is but now began and indeed too soon for it as it has happened, the Frosts having kept the seed so long in the ground; but if it was not to be done I could not have time to do it for the carting out the dung must be begun in a week more and 'tis as necessary a work. Thus we see what hindrances may happen. How necessary is it, therefore, to use the present time and not comfort ourselves A thing may be done next month when 'tis not impossible but nothing can be done then as it has really happened all March; how many have depended on getting their corn-fields ready this very month and yet how few in low stiff lands could ever work for the hardness of the earth occasioned by the hard frost and Violent winds upon the back of the last month's rains. 'Tis now prodigious dry. Everything wants rain. The sun sets again in a Cloud. This day has been windy but more moderate than it has been this fortnight and only in flares. . . .

**April 15, 1758. Saturday.** Excessive hot day and no rain yet. Such are the Seasons I have had to crop in ever since 1751, always on violent extremes. I can't but take notice of the death of my little Canary bird, an old housekeeper having had it here 11 year this month and constantly fed it with bread and milk, and I wish the heat of this weather did not by Souring its food occasion its death, for it sung prodigiously all the forepart of the day. At night it was taken with a barking noise and died the night following, vizt [that is], last night. I know this is a thing to be a

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<sup>9</sup> Susannah, nicknamed "Sukey," may have been a born in 1757 to Carter and his third wife, Elizabeth Beale. .

laughed at but a brute or a bird so long under my care and protection deserves a Small remembrance.

**April 16, 1758. Sunday.** . . . A fine breathing Shower this [day] for near half an hour. The wind with it hurried down a good deal of water. 'Tis just 3 weeks since we had one drop before. Everything smiles already. Oh for a day of fine dripping refreshment. . . .

Received advice from Mr. Hamilton's that my daughter Sukey was now grown very weak with her fevers. . . . Her case has in my opinion been very dangerous these 12 or 14 days. The Dr. could not be got to her till about a week ago. . . .

**April 17, 1758. Monday.** . . . Old George and Dinah taken ill. Their complaints are agues and in the fever pains in the right side. Both took vomits and are now discovering coughs but no fever. George was for ten years a noted runaway, always in the woods and mostly naked, and now he has left that trade he is grown a sickly fellow. . . .

**April 23, 1758. Sunday.** Poor Sukey near her last. Her disorder increases and her strength decreases. Mr. Hamilton thinks she must mend speedily or die in a very little time. Maid Winney's sickness continued which obliged me to give her Warm medicine, vizt, Powder Saffron and Rattlesnake root 23/20 grains, Powder Valerian, Salt tartar. Crabbs Eyes and Coraline each 30 grains, divided into 6 doses to be taken every two hours. Three of the doses strengthened her stomach so much that she could bear her victuals [food]. They also brought on a breathing sweat which removed her frequent fluttering in her Pulse and the intermissions. . . .

**April 25, 1758. Tuesday.** This morning Mr. Gilbert Hamilton (at whose house my dear little daughter Susannah has been ever since her last illness) sent me an account of her death Certainly approaching, and he says in his letter, although her face, feet and hands are all cold and her pulse quite gone and reduced to the bones and skin that cover them and dying very hard under the Severe agonys of her disorder, Yet does she preserve her Usual Patience to such a degree that he never saw such an Example before.

Severe stroke indeed to A Man bereft of a Wife and in the decline of life because at such periods 'tis natural to look out for such Connections that may be reasonably expected to be the support of Greyhairs and such an one I had promised myself in this child in Particular,

For although she did not live beyond the very Dawn  
Of human life  
Such were the early discoverys of her growing Excellencys  
It might be justly concluded That had the same Soul  
Animated to a Mature Age A more healthy Frame  
She would have been a Conspicuous Pattern if not inimitable  
Even amongst the most Prudent, Good, and Virtuous  
Of her Sex  
God Omnipotent.

Could it have consisted with thy divine Purposes to have Suffered this blessing to have continued to me [allowed my daughter to live] my happyness would have been uncommon, but as thou hast otherwise determined it, It is enough to lay the Obligation of a constant grateful return to thy divine Goodness that thou was't pleased to Suffer [allow] me to be the instrument of so Promising a human Creature, for in this Shall I comfort myself that I was not myself altogether Corrupt or thou wouldest not have so Signally dignified such a Stock by a Scion so universally applauded by All who knew her and this before she could have received any of the Advantages of Education. In her therefore Pure Nature must have been pure Goodness. She died between 11 and 12. . . .

**April 30, 1758. Sunday.** Very Cold last night, excessively so this day. Prodigious piercing hard wind at Northwest. This will in all probability bring on fresh inflammations, ruin those few plants remaining, prevent the sprouting of those lately sown. Note: every rain for this year at least has cleared away in this manner. I once heard an old Almanack maker say if the world lasted long enough mid-summer day would change Seasons with Christmas day. It bids fair for it this year, for 'tis very probable the 1st May will be much colder than the 1st of January was.

**May 1, 1758. Monday.** A fine winter's morning with Clouds all along the Southern and Western horizon like Snow and not a Frost last night, only because the air was so violent that the dews could not lie but cold enough for a black one. . . Thus have I seen every year since 1749 labouring under such variety of bad seasons, in some principle part of it as to make it impossible to make a Crop of anything to perfection, but once of oats and once of wheat. It differed many times with other people but now I fancy 'tis pretty universal. . . .

**May 10, 1758. Wednesday.** This is the third morning running I have to observe there was a white frost which added to the parching heat in the day and excessive dry weather must certainly destroy the Crops and fruit of every kind. . . .

**May 15, 1758. Monday.** . . . I have endeavoured all I can for plants but although I water night and day the weather is and has been such I fear all won't do. We can't long determine on any method. Sometimes the watering seems to be bad, sometimes Covering is good, sometimes it seems very pernicious. The moles have burrowed all my Corn up almost that I did not plant in hills. . . .

**May 16, 1758. Tuesday.** A Cool day and windy. . . .

**May 31, 1758. Wednesday.** A rain before day this morning, refreshing but not plenty full. This month has been remarkable for its dryness and Coolness. . . .

January was fine weather. February all winter. Windy, very wet and Cold. March the first half or near like February. The latter dry and Cold. April quite Cold. Frosty and dry. May Cold and dry. June I hope will be kind and Seasonable.

6 o'clock in the morning, well watered. At last a very fine rain and still raining, God almighty be thanked.

