

AFEHRI File 19-10

**Research Materials/Source Documents
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**FILE TITLE: Sgt Peter Carnes
- First American Balloon Builder**

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courage Morgan and his associates. By June 26 advertisements announcing the opening of a subscription to underwrite the construction of "a large and elegant Air Balloon" were appearing in Philadelphia newspapers. The proposal called for a silk balloon, "properly lined, covered, varnished, and painted by the best artists." The balloon was to be a hot air model standing sixty feet tall "and of proportionate diameter; to be strengthened with net-work; to have a car or boat appended to it."

In justifying their project, the authors of the scheme drew on the now standard list of uses to which a balloon could be put. In addition, they suggested that their aerostats might even serve the needs of religion by offering "new proofs of the sublime workmanship of the great Architect of the Universe, which will have a direct tendency to excite suitable ideas of the government of the world by the all-wise and omnipotent Creator of the Universe [and] to call forth our grateful admiration of his beneficence to mankind."⁷¹

In fact, the Philadelphia savants were about to be upstaged. Just as their fund-raising effort was getting underway, word was received that Peter Carnes, a tavern owner and lawyer from Bladensburg, Maryland, would fly his "American Aerostatic Balloon" in Philadelphia on July 4, 1784.

Peter Carnes had little in common with urbane, wealthy, well-established, and well-educated city dwellers like Foulke and Morgan, save his interest in ballooning. He represented a very different side of American life.

Born, probably, in Middlesex County, New Jersey, in 1749, Carnes was rootless and ambitious. He spent his early years moving from place to place and from job to job in a restless search for economic security and social status. Many years later, while working as an attorney in South Carolina, he informed companions that he had been variously employed as a house carpenter, Methodist exhorter, planter, barkeep, and balloon builder prior to turning to the law. Carnes's early peregrinations are difficult to trace, but we do know that he was operating a tobacco plantation in Charles County, Maryland, shortly before the outbreak of the American Revolution. At this point, he began building business connections in Bladensburg, a tobacco shipping port on the Anacostia River in neighboring Prince George's County.

Carnes became a particular friend of Jacob Wirt, the owner of the Indian Queen Tavern and an associated business complex that included a large, two-story brick house, a billiard hall, counting house, blacksmith shop, and several outbuildings in Bladensburg. Carnes rented the complex from the heirs following Wirt's death in October 1774.

Vague family references indicate that Carnes had been married to one Mary Eden Briscoe, the daughter of a Charles County planter. We can assume that

she was dead by 1776, however, for in that year he married Jacob Wirt's widow, Henrietta. Over the next several years Bladensburg's new innkeeper began to make a name for himself in the community. He served as a sergeant in a county militia unit in 1777 and was apparently also reading law during this period, for he was licensed to practice before Prince George's County courts in 1780.⁷²

No portraits of Carnes have survived, but we do know that he was a large man, weighing 234 pounds in the summer of 1784. Judging from accounts of his subsequent legal career in South Carolina and Georgia, he must have been an extraordinarily ebullient and outgoing fellow. One historian of the back-country southern courts put the matter as gently as possible when he remarked that "this gentleman is better known for his humor than anything else."⁷³

In truth, Carnes was a practical joker of legendary proportions. He was once seated in court next to a frequent legal opponent. As his rival stood addressing the jury, Carnes quietly reached over and buttoned their jackets together. He then stood up and walked from the courtroom, dragging the sputtering and incoherent lawyer behind him.⁷⁴ On another occasion, after being chastised by a judge for appearing in court in his shirt-sleeves, Carnes strode angrily out of the courthouse, returning a few minutes later wearing a tattered blanket draped across his shoulders in lieu of legal robes.⁷⁵

Clearly this sort of rough-and-ready humor has its limits, and it is apparent that Carnes occasionally pushed rival lawyers beyond the limits of endurance. During the course of a trial in which the legal definition of the terms assault and battery was at issue, Carnes faced an opponent who had been the repeated butt of his jokes. When asked to explain his understanding of the terms, the rival lawyer shook his fist in Carnes's face to illustrate assault, then punched him in the stomach. Carnes's comment that he "did not think that the fellow had so much sense" drew many a chuckle for years thereafter when South Carolina lawyers met to swap tales.⁷⁶

In essence, Carnes seems to have been just the man to operate a riverfront inn or to entertain the spectators in a packed courtroom, but he can hardly have been regarded by his friends and neighbors as a very likely candidate for honors in science or technology. Nevertheless, he was to produce the first full-scale, man-carrying balloon in America within a year of the first public flight of a small aerostat in Annonay and a scant seven months after human beings had ventured aloft for the first time.

Carnes later told reporters that "the first Hint he had of the Balloon was by hearing of Monsieur Montgolfier's experiments."⁷⁷ Unfortunately, he did not tell them how he had learned of the Montgolfiers, but it seems likely that Carnes, like George Washington and so many other Americans, first heard of the balloon

FIRST BALLOON ASCENSION IN AMERICA

Peter Carnes, Hadenburg, Maryland, June 19, 1784

Carroll
Carnes

Within eight months after the first hot-air balloon demonstrations by the Montgolfier brothers in France, and nine years before the first aerial voyage in the United States by the Frenchman Blanchard in Philadelphia in 1793, Peter Carnes of Hadenburg, Maryland conducted a series of noteworthy balloon ascensions. All were tethered except for Carnes' unsuccessful free flight attempt, his first flight attempt, and his last.

This point was derived from the diorama in the Indian Queen Tavern Museum in Hadenburg, which was the residence of Peter Carnes, a lawyer by profession. It portrays the first public demonstration of Carnes' hot-air balloon inflated by the heat of burning hickory sticks. It was a multi-colored, silk-paneled, 30-ft. in diameter balloon, with lines shrouding the bag and fastened to a ring. The State of Maryland granted \$200,000 for the restoration of the Carnes' residence as a Bicentennial contribution, known locally as the "Washington House" because George Washington once slept there enroute to Mount Vernon from Annapolis.

This tethered demonstration on June 19, 1784, had followed earlier test flights. It was followed by a demonstration in Howard Park in Baltimore five days later, the site being the present location of the Washington Monument on Charles Street. During one ascent in Baltimore, a 13-year-old boy, Edward Warren, became the first American aeronaut, waving his cap to the crowd below. Warren was apparently a Baltimore resident.

On July 4, 1784, Peter Carnes himself attempted a free flight from the Walnut Street Prison yard in Philadelphia. As his balloon raised, Carnes was pitched from his "chair" and his balloon caught fire and was destroyed. When Blanchard made his successful balloon voyage in 1793, he lifted from the same prison yard as Peter Carnes, a take-off witnessed by President Washington and his entire Cabinet as it will know.

In 1784, Hadenburg was a thriving tobacco port at the head of the Annapolis River. Undoubtedly, Carnes heard of the ballooning exploits in France and proceeded to build his own. Use of silk was not inexpensive. Burning hickory embers was an efficient source of hot air, with minimum sparks. But Peter Carnes' intention to make money by his balloon demonstrations, such as happened in France, was not to be realized. Carnes' flights were duly noted in the newspapers of his day, but they have not been widely appreciated by historians until recently. After his fourth of July failure, Carnes vowed to return to Hadenburg and build another balloon. But he did not do so. He soon moved to South Carolina where he continued to practice law.

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FIRST BALLOON ASCENSION IN AMERICA

Peter Carnes — June 19, 1784

Bledensburg, Maryland