



Anniversary of the Landing of LaFayette

Schoolchildren learn of the crucial and timely role played by France in the American victory over King George III's redcoats. The personification of the invaluable Gallic assistance to the American cause of liberty is none other than the Marquis de Lafayette.

Although known to history by his aristocratic title, Lafayette was born Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert de Motier. For obvious reasons, we will continue the tradition of referring to this hero of the Revolution by the much more manageable monicker: LaFayette.



Born in Chavaniac, France, LaFayette was born in 1757 to a French aristocratic family. One of his noble ancestors had the distinction of serving as the head of Joan of Arc's forces in Orleans. Extraordinary military service is a common trait found among many of LaFayette's ancestors.

The young nobleman's association with the American War for Independence began in 1775. In that year, LaFayette was participating in his own unit's training in Metz. During this bivouac LaFayette met the Marquis de Ruffec, the commander of the French army's eastern force. As LaFayette recalled the event, it was at this meeting that he "first learned of that quarrel, my heart was enlisted and I thought only of joining the colors."

Upon returning to Paris, LaFayette followed-up on those promptings to join his fortunes to those of the American revolutionaries. In the City of Lights, the young aristocrat joined in many of the groups that were meeting to consider the proper scope of French involvement in the American struggle with the English — France's long-time enemy. At these societies, LaFayette listened as passionate speakers advocated the cause of freedom and the rejection of autocracy being fought for by the Americans.

After the long train of abuses chronicled in the Declaration of Independence was "submitted to a candid world," LaFayette sought for an opportunity to join the fray. On December 7, 1776, LaFayette contacted one of the American delegation in Paris (Silas Deane) and arranged for a commission in George Washington's Continental Army. The marquis entered the service of the American forces with the rank of major general.

That same American delegation, under the direction of Benjamin Franklin, secured the loan of one million livres from the French government. Several French dignitaries were anxious to assist the Americans and humble the British. While a monarchy itself, France recognized the value to its own position of an American victory.

As LaFayette prepared for his departure to America, he learned that the Continental Congress didn't have the money to pay for his trip. Undeterred, the wealthy young general chartered the sailing ship La Victoire using his own money. Despite this commitment to the cause, the trip to the New World would hardly be smooth sailing.

After LaFayette's plan to join the American cause under the steam of his own ship was discovered by



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on June 13, 2011

the British, the King of France was pressured to forbid his nobleman from leaving his homeland. In fact, the King ordered LaFayette to join his father in Marseille and was informed that failure to comply with the royal command would result in his imprisonment. Again, LaFayette was not to be dissuaded.

LaFayette set out for Spain. Disguised as a woman, he set sail on April 20, 1777 for America. Although the captain of the ship intended to stop over in the West Indies to sell some goods, LaFayette feared any layovers would open a window of opportunity for the British that would result in his arrest. To avoid this delay in his mission to America, LaFayette again opened his own purse and bought the cargo from the captain in exchange for the skipper's promise to sail directly to America.

On June 13, 1777, the Marquis de LaFayette landed on North Island near Georgetown, South Carolina. This was almost as momentous a landing as any other in American history.

After a stopover at the home of Major Benjamin Huger, LaFayette headed for Philadelphia. Another obstacle lay in the young Frenchman's path to his commission, however. Some in the Congress were weary of the Gallic influence on American policy and there was widespread official disdain for "French glory seekers." As was already so evident, LaFayette would not be denied the fulfillment of his destiny to aid the cause of liberty. The rich and reticent LaFayette informed the Continental Congress that would serve for free and on July 31, 1777, he was awarded his commission.

Although the value of LaFayette's contribution to the American War for Independence is indisputable, there was one man known as "The Indispensable Man" — George Washington. Washington, the commander of the Continental Army, received a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin, recommending that the general add the Frenchman to his personal company. Washington heeded Franklin's suggestion and on August 10, 1777, LaFayette joined General Washington in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

Washington, a man of personal pride and immeasurable patriotism, was a bit embarrassed that a man of LaFayette's grace should be forced to witness the ragtag state of the American forces. The Marquis nobly and humbly informed the General that, "I am here to learn, not to teach."

As LaFayette was a foreigner, Congress refused to appoint him as a commander of his own unit. He was sent to join General John Sullivan at the Battle of Brandywine. In the course of combat, LaFayette was wounded. Courageously, LaFayette led the coordinated retreat of the American forces, despite the wound. For his bravery, Washington recommended to the Continental Congress that it award LaFayette with command of his own unit.

After recuperating from his injury, LaFayette took command of a division and he led his troops to a rout of a larger force of Hessian mercenaries in Gloucester, New Jersey, on November 24, 1777.

From there, LaFayette was to prove and prove again his dedication to the cause of liberty and to his "friend and father" George Washington. While at Valley Forge, the Marquis became aware of a conspiracy being hatched by General Thomas Conway to replace Washington at the head of the American army with General Horatio "Granny" Gates. LaFayette dutifully warned his mentor of the plot and headed off for Albany, New York to coordinate the invasion of Canada.

Upon arriving at his post in New York, LaFayette recognized that there was insufficient forces to accomplish the goal of invading Canada. He reported his findings to Washington and set off for his return trip to Valley Forge. Before setting out from Albany, however, LaFayette secured the cooperation of the Oneida indian tribe. Leaders of the tribe nicknamed the young French nobleman "Kayewla" or "fearsome horseman."



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Soon after the events at Albany and Valley Forge, the French crown officially recognized America as an independent nation in March of 1778. No one, not even the master diplomat Benjamin Franklin, contributed more to this critical event than the Marquis de LaFayette, who returned home to France in February of 1779 so that he might secure additional funding for the American government.

In France, LaFayette's wife presented him with a son whom the Marquis named Georges Washington LaFayette, demonstrating the love and loyalty felt by the ardent aristocrat for his commanding officer.

After serving ably in additional battles, including the decisive Siege of Yorktown, LaFayette returned again to his homeland in 1781. Hailed as a hero, LaFayette continued to advocate the American cause by working side by side with Thomas Jefferson to work out trade treaties between France and the United States.

Succumbing to the effects of pneumonia, LaFayette passed away on May 20, 1834. His son, Georges Washington, sprinkled soil from Bunker Hill on his father's coffin. American president Andrew Jackson ordered that LaFayette be granted the same funeral honors as other American heroes, John Adams and George Washington.



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