

Who Served Here?

The Marquis de Lafayette

Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roche Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette was born in 1757. Before his second birthday, his father, a Colonel of grenadiers was killed at Minden. At the age of twelve, his mother passed away and a few weeks later he lost his grandfather to death as well. He was left a very young, wealthy orphan. On April 9, 1771, at the age of fourteen, Lafayette entered the Royal Army. When he was sixteen, Lafayette married Marie Adrienne Francoise de Noailles — allying himself with one of the wealthiest families in France. (She was related to the King.)

Lafayette's real introduction to America came at a dinner on August 8, 1775, when the young Marquis came into contact with the Duke of Gloucester who spoke with sympathy of the struggle going on in the colonies. With thoughts of the "romantic" American cause, glory and excitement, Lafayette made plans to travel to America. Realizing his plans would be disapproved of by the King and his family, Lafayette confided in his friend the Comte de Broglie, who in turn introduced him to the Baron Johan de Kalb. Both men were seeking to travel to America and after several delays, the two men set up a journey across the Atlantic with written agreements from Silas Deane that they would be commissioned major generals.

When Lafayette learned of the struggle of the Americans in their endeavor to secure their independence he resolved to come to the colonies to aid them in their efforts as a volunteer. He also persuaded several French officers to come with him. Eventually he landed near Charleston, South Carolina, June 13, 1777, and when the leaders learned of his mission they welcomed him very hospitably. Later in the summer he came to Philadelphia and the Congress welcomed him as he came to serve without pay and also as a volunteer. Since he represented the highest rank of French nobility and his motives were so patriotic in the American cause, the Congress commissioned him a Major General on the 31st of July. Later in the summer he met General Washington and a friendship developed between the two men which lasted as long as Washington lived. He was not even 20 years old! During Lafayette's life he never forgot the great American. Lafayette was a member of Washington's staff and during the Battle of the Brandywine, Lafayette participated in the closing part of the battle when he was wounded. Later in the autumn he rejoined the American forces since he had recovered from his wound.

In December, 1777, he went with Washington and the army into winter quarters at Valley Forge. In the early days of the camp several officers were interested in trying to have a sentiment developed against Washington to have Congress relieve him of the command of the Continental armies (Conway Cabal). However, they were unable to gain the support they expected. They tried to secure the cooperation of Lafayette, but failed. In order to explain the situation he wrote a long letter to Washington in which he pledged his loyalty to the General. Washington replied to Lafayette in a letter which was marked by his sincere appreciation. In due course the proposed scheme of the few officers failed as it was doomed to failure from the beginning. The soldiers and officers at Valley Forge were very loyal to Washington, and the members of Congress realized that Washington was an unusual leader, which some of the Congressmen had not taken into consideration.

General Gates who was only lukewarm in his support of Washington had succeeded in convincing

several members of Congress to appoint a Board of War in which Gates would have complete control. He suggested that plans should be developed to invade Canada. Gates knew how loyal Lafayette was to Washington and he urged that Lafayette should command the expedition and Congress agreed to the campaign and gave Gates authority to work out the details. In the meantime Washington was ignorant of this new plan. However, after Gates worked out some of the details, he wrote a letter that Congress had approved the invasion of Canada and also that he had appointed Lafayette to command the expedition. Lafayette was also notified of his appointment. He consulted at once with Washington and he stated to Washington in emphatic terms that he did not want to accept the appointment, but Washington overruled his objections and Lafayette reluctantly accepted the appointment. Washington understood the situation and told Lafayette that the expedition would not materialize. Lafayette went at once to York, Pennsylvania, the new capital of the United States and began to carry out plans for the proposed expedition. However, while Lafayette was in York, he revealed his sincere devotion and support of Washington. This turn of affairs led Gates to change his procedure and now he was anxious to have Lafayette depart from York for Albany, New York, the center of operations against Canada. Lafayette hurried to Albany and arrived on February 17, 1778, though the authorities had not expected him before the 25th. He wanted to see how much had been done in preparation and what he had to do. He saw Governor Clinton also an earnest supporter of Washington. Clinton was not enthusiastic about the invasion. After a careful study of the supplies Lafayette found that too many essential things were lacking. In the meantime Generals Schuyler, Lincoln and Arnold were decidedly opposed to the expedition as money, food and soldiers were lacking to make the expedition a success. As he continued to investigate, he found that people were disgusted that the Board of War wanted to carry on an invasion in the midst of winter. He found a small body of men about twelve hundred, who lacked sufficient clothing to carry on such a campaign. The other soldiers Gates had promised had not arrived and there was every evidence they would not arrive. Lafayette found that in this northern department Congress owed officers, men and others more than eight hundred thousand dollars. Finally half of that amount came, which did not meet the needs of the situation.

He also received definite word that Canada was well prepared for the invasion as they knew the details of the campaign, which was indeed discouraging news for Lafayette.

In a letter to Washington under date of February 23, Lafayette stated he found each day conditions were very serious with no prospects of improvement. He found debt, dissatisfaction, and deceit everywhere. He wrote: "I am sent, with a great noise, at the head of the army to do great things. The whole continent, France, and what is the worst, the British army will be in expectation." Finally, Congress realized the seriousness of the situation and sent dispatches to Lafayette to delay the expedition which meant the wild adventure was ended and it came to such an untimely end as Washington had said it would. Washington knew that the Congress did not have the money to spend on such futile expeditions and there was lacking sufficient man power to invade Canada at this time. Finally, in March 1778, Congress passed the following resolution on behalf of Lafayette's service: "That Congress entertain a high sense of his prudence, activity, and zeal and that they are fully persuaded nothing has or would have been wanting on his part, or on the part of the officers who accompanied him, to give the expedition the utmost possible effect." Lafayette returned to Valley Forge early in April 1778 and was warmly welcomed by Washington. Washington found he could place the utmost responsibility upon Lafayette. Lafayette found that the conspiracy to displace Washington was virtually ended and with defeat for the conspirators. He was involved in action at Barren Hill on May 20th. Lafayette remained at Valley Forge improving his knowledge of military tactics until Washington marched out of Valley Forge to meet the enemy in New Jersey.

When Washington learned that the British had evacuated Philadelphia on June 19, 1778, he ordered his troops to pursue the British across New Jersey. As the Americans were coming nearer to the enemy, Washington called a council of war at Hopewell, New Jersey to determine if a general attack should be made upon the enemy or to follow the plan of annoying the enemy and, if a favorable time came, then to make a general attack. Lee, of the older officers, was opposed to a general attack, but Wayne, Greene and Lafayette wrote separate letters to Washington in which each stated that a large detachment of Americans should be sent forward to attack the rear of the British army and if results were favorable, then a general attack should be made. Washington accepted this

plan. He offered the command to General Lee but Lee was certain the plan would result in disaster. In the meantime Lafayette came to Washington to request the command of the advanced position, but Washington told Lafayette it was impossible to turn the command over to him unless Lee would be willing to resign it. When Lafayette spoke to Lee about giving the command to him, Lee agreed as he did not desire to command troops when the result of defeat was inevitable, and so with Washington's approval, Lafayette took command and advanced to meet the enemy. Then, upon further consideration, Lee decided he wanted to take the command, as he felt that if Lafayette succeeded in defeating the enemy, then the Congress would criticize him for permitting a younger man and of less experience to defeat the enemy. He asked Washington to return the command to him, but Washington, since Lafayette held the command, could not displace him, and Washington told Lee it was necessary to ask Lafayette and, if he were willing to relinquish the command, then Lee would be restored to the command. Lee appealed to the generous spirit of Lafayette to return the command to him. Lafayette promised if he did not find the enemy that day he would resign the command in favor of Lee. The day passed without a struggle and in the evening Lafayette wrote Lee a letter in which he resigned the command and Lee assumed charge of the division.

The next day Washington and his army caught up with the enemy. A favorable moment arrived to make an attack and Washington ordered Lee to attack, and he would advance with the rest of the army in order to defeat the enemy. When Washington arrived with his men, much to his surprise he found Lee retreating with his division. Washington stopped the retreat, reorganized the retreating division and ordered an immediate attack. The enemy were driven back, but the day was too far advanced to win a decisive victory, so the soldiers kept their positions and a general attack was planned early the next day. During the night the British retreated and eventually reached New York.

In the spring of 1778 Washington sent General Sullivan to command the Continental troops in Rhode Island. The British were strongly entrenched at Newport and the British fleet was also on guard. Later in the summer Washington sent Greene and Lafayette with additional troops to aid Sullivan. The Americans hoped that the French fleet and French forces would give them much needed aid to conquer the British. The French fleet had suffered considerable damage from a storm and Admiral Estaing felt his ships were unprepared to meet the British fleet. Consequently Sullivan had some unkind words for the situation which resulted in much misunderstanding. The French fleet went to Boston harbor for repairs. Sullivan urged Lafayette to make the long trip to Boston to urge the authorities to hurry the repairs so the fleet could attack the British. Lafayette agreed reluctantly and after a seven hour ride reached Boston and the authorities promised to have the repairs made at once. Lafayette returned to Rhode Island and upon arrival found the British had attacked Sullivan's forces but were driven back with heavy losses. Then Sullivan withdrew his forces to higher ground as the result of a letter he received from Washington that Howe had left New York with troops to help the British at Newport. When Lafayette arrived upon the scene he found the Americans were retreating to higher ground, then Lafayette though fatigued from his long trip to Boston, asked Sullivan to command the rear-guard and thus he brought out safely more than a thousand men and supplies and united the forces with Sullivan's main army. Since the American army was safe, Sullivan sent his report to Congress in which he mentioned the earnest service of Lafayette. Congress was much pleased with Lafayette's efforts and on September 9, 1778, passed the following resolve: "That the President be requested to inform the Marquis de Lafayette, that Congress have a due sense of the sacrifice he made of his personal feelings in taking a journey to Boston with a view of promoting the interest of these states, at a time when an occasion was daily expected of his acquiring glory in the field, and that his gallantry in going on Rhode Island, when the greatest part of the army had retreated, and his good conduct in bringing off the pickets and out-sentries, deserve their particular approbation." Lafayette appreciated this action of Congress and he wrote to President Laurens of the Congress in part under date 23 September 1778, as follows: "I have just received your favor of the 13th instant, acquainting me with the honor Congress have been pleased to confer on me by their most gracious resolve. Whatever pride such an approbation may justly give me, I am not less affected by the feelings of gratefulness, and the satisfaction of thinking my endeavours were looked on as useful to a cause, in which my heart is so deeply interested." Since the active campaigning was over for 1778, Lafayette expressed a desire to return to France for a time.

Consequently he applied to Congress in Philadelphia for a furlough to return home. On October 21, Congress granted him permission to return to his native land and stated: "that he shall return at such time as shall be most convenient to him." When Lafayette arrived in France he went at once to the palace at Versailles to see his wife and family. Since Lafayette had left France against the king's will, he knew he was under a cloud and could not come to the court until he was forgiven by the king. His father-in-law went to see Maurepas, the minister, who informed him that Lafayette must undergo a period of exile before he could return to court. Later Lafayette was exiled to the Hotel de Noailles for a period of eight days, and he was not permitted to go about, and no one was permitted to see him except his family. He was always honored by the queen and she made it a point to see him in the palace grounds before he went into exile. She congratulated him on his fine record in the American war. Once it became known that Lafayette was exiled, the king soon discovered that the sentence was considered unjust and Lafayettes' praises were heard on all sides. Nevertheless, many important people did come to see him during his period of exile. When his term of exile was completed he was summoned by the King who received him very graciously, congratulated him very warmly on his service for the United States. The early situation was soon forgotten and Lafayette stood very high in court affairs. Shortly after his return home the Congress of the United States presented him with a sword which was an honor appreciated by the King and his government.

From the very beginning on his return home, Lafayette made every effort to secure additional aid from his government. In the long run his work bore fruit. On June 12, 1779, Lafayette wrote a long letter to Washington in which he expressed his hope that he would soon be with Washington to tender such aid as he could give. He knew how much the colonies needed money so he wrote: "It gave me much trouble, and I so much insisted upon it, that the director of finances looks upon me as his evil genius. France has incurred great expenses lately. The Spaniards will not easily give their dollars. However, Dr. Franklin has got some money to pay the bills of Congress, and I hope I shall determine the government to greater sacrifices. Serving American is to my heart an inexpressible happiness."

Early in the year 1780 Lafayette's hard work with the French government resulted in the success of sending French troops to aid Washington and additional needed supplies. So insistent was Lafayette for aid to the Americans that one day Count de Maurepas said in the royal council: "It is fortunate for the King, that Lafayette does not take it into his head to strip Versailles of its furniture, to send to his dear Americans; as his Majesty would be unable to refuse it." In addition to governmental supplies Lafayette purchased out of his private account a large amount of supplies for the troops he would command on his return to America.

After numerous conferences the French government decided to give the French troops to the command of Count de Rochambeau and Lafayette would be expected to command the American division according to the plans of Washington. Special instructions were given Rochambeau under date March 1, 1780, from Versailles: "His Majesty, having determined to send a considerable body of troops to American, to the assistance of his allies, the United States, has appointed Count de Rochambeau, one of his lieutenant-generals, to the chief command of the twelve battalions of infantry, which are to be commanded under his orders by four major-generals. This corps, which his Majesty has furnished with its proper complement of artillery for sieges and service in the field, is to be in readiness to start from Brest in the first days of April, under the escort of a squadron of six ships of the line, commanded by the Chevalier de Ternay." Lafayette had stressed the vital need of harmony in order to assure military success in the campaign. In the instructions given to Rochambeau there was this significant statement: "That the general, to whom his Majesty intrusts the command of his troops, should always and in all cases be under the command of General Washington."

Lafayette sailed in the French frigate Hermione on March 19 and after a passage of thirty-eight days arrived in Boston. He reported to Washington and then went to Philadelphia to give the French representatives of his government certain official papers. Rochambeau and his expedition arrived in Newport on July 10. The coming of this help brought new hope to the American cause. In the weeks

which followed Washington and Rochambeau made careful plans so that their campaign would bring definite success and Washington hoped it would be the final victory for independence.

In the meantime the British invaded the south in their endeavor to crush the war in that section Washington sent such troops that he could spare and the first real movement began in the spring of 1781 when Lafayette was sent to Virginia to unite his forces with Steuben, who was also operating there in a limited way. In the early fall of 1781 Cornwallis and his troops were driven into Yorktown, Virginia, and now the forces of the Americans and French moved to force him to surrender since he was also held in from the sea by the French fleet. As a result of brilliant efforts on the part of the Americans and the French forces, Cornwallis was compelled to surrender on October 19, 1781. Rejoicing was manifested throughout the entire country as at last the victory was won. Gratitude was likewise given the French for their timely help and particularly to Lafayette for his unselfish devotion to the American cause. Every one seemed to realize that the main fighting was ended. Consequently, Lafayette went to Washington to secure a leave of absence to return home. He went to Philadelphia to secure the permission of Congress which granted his request and gave him a fine letter of appreciation for his patriotic services. Before he sailed for home Washington wrote him a personal letter in which he said: "I owe it to your friendship and to my affectionate regard for you, my dear Marquis, not to let you leave this country without carrying with you fresh marks of my attachment to you, and new expressions of the high sense I entertain of your military conduct and other important services in the course of the last campaign, although the latter are too well known to need the testimony of my approbation." Lafayette sailed home from Boston on the United States ship "Alliance" on December 23, and before sailing he wrote a letter to Washington in which he said: "Adieu, my dear General; I know your heart so well that I am sure that no distance can alter your attachment to me. With the same candour I assure that my love, respect, my gratitude for you, are above expression; that, at the moment of leaving you, I felt more than ever the strength of those friendly ties that forever bind me to you."

When Lafayette returned home he was honored for his unusual service in America. He had done much to strengthen the ties of friendship between France and the United States. Eventually changes came to the French government and Napoleon came to be head. Lafayette stood firmly for representative government and never yielded to the full support of Napoleon. When the sad news reached France early in the year 1800 of the death of Washington, Napoleon decided to hold a memorial service for Washington at Invalides, but Lafayette was not invited and Napoleon ordered the orator not to refer to Lafayette in his oration. It was rather a glorification of Napoleon than a memorial service to Washington. However, Lafayette had his glorious memories of Washington and the friendship of the great man.

In 1784 he visited America on Washington's invitation. During the ensuing years, he aided Thomas Jefferson, U.S. Minister to France on numerous political and economic matters. He was a member of the Assembly of Notables in 1787. In 1789 he was a representative for the nobility of Auvergne in the States General. On July 26, 1789 he was named the commander of the National Guard — saving the royal family from a Paris mob in October. A year later he was promoted to Lieutenant General, but resigned on October 8th. In 1792, when war was declared with Austria, he took command of the army, but was later replaced during the rise of the Jacobin influence and he fled to Belgium. He was taken by the Austrians, who turned him over to the Prussians who held him prisoner until 1797. He was eventually freed by Napoleon, returning to France in 1800, only to find his fortune destroyed. He declined a number of social and political offers over the convening years, focusing his attention on the lands of La Grange, his home outside of Paris. In 1825, he accepted an invitation to visit the United States and thus began a tour of the country rivaling the frenzy of audiences at music concerts today. He returned to France after his popular tour of the States, working in the political arena. He spent some \$200,000 or more of his fortune in support of the colonies in the Revolution. He eventually was paid by Congress for "services rendered" during the war. He was given two checks. One for \$120,000 and one for \$80,000. (The larger check of the two is in the collection of the Valley Forge Historical Society). He was also given lands in 1803 (in Louisiana) which did not see an income until almost twelve years later.

To the end of his life Lafayette held firm for representative government in his country. The great general died in 1834. His fine work for American independence will never be forgotten and his name will always shine out on the pages of our history.

Courtesy National Center for the American Revolution/Valley Forge Historical Society

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