

WHO WAS LAFAYETTE, AND WHY IS HE IMPORTANT TO AMERICANS?

His Early Life and Marriage

Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier de La Fayette was born into an aristocratic French family of fighting men in 1757. (He was known as Gilbert, pronounced “Zhil-Bare”). His early years were spent at Chateau Chavaniac, the family castle built in the 14th century in Auvergne, France.

When he was only two years old his father was killed fighting in the 7 Years War with Britain at which time Gilbert inherited the title “Marquis de Lafayette”. While his mother spent the majority of her time in Paris, Lafayette was raised at Chavaniac by his paternal grandmother and two aunts. They instilled in him the legacy of his fighting ancestors, and

he was influenced by their benevolent attitude toward the peasant workers on their estate. Thus, his lifelong philosophy was formed: “Honor, glory and liberty, purchased at the price of courage are the only goals in life”.



At age 11 his mother took him to Paris to study at the College du Plessis. Not long thereafter when he was 12, both his mother and maternal grandfather passed away in quick succession. He thus became an only child orphan, under the care of his maternal great grandfather. His inheritance made him one of the richest people in France. At age 13 Lafayette joined the “Black Musketeers”, soldiers of the Kings’ guard.

As was the custom in the French aristocracy of the time, he was betrothed in an arranged marriage to Adrienne Noailles, second daughter of the wealthy and influential Noailles family. Soon thereafter he joined the Noailles Dragoons as a lieutenant.

The couple were married in April of 1774, and he was promoted to Captain in the Noailles regiment. He was 16, she 14. Soon thereafter Louis XVI and his bride Marie Antionette ascended to the throne of France. A country boy, Lafayette did not fit in at court, as his father-in-law, wished and he had no desire to.



The Life Changing Dinner



In August of 1775 while at Noailles summer regimental exercises, he was invited to a life changing dinner with the out-of-favor brother of Britain's King George III. He learned about the American rebels and heard stories of the battles of Lexington and Concord, Ethan Allen capturing Fort Ticonderoga, a Continental Congress having met, a Continental Army being formed, and continuing military tensions around Boston. Before leaving the dinner table he imagined going to America to aid the Patriots. This was his chance to see real military action and to avenge

his father's death at the hands of the British.

Lafayette was soon introduced to American emissary Silas Deane who offered to have him appointed a Major General in the Continental Army. In defiance of King Louis XVI and the wishes of his father-in-law, Lafayette bought a ship, named it La Victoire, and set sail at age 19 for America.

Arrival in America at Age 19

He landed at Georgetown, South Carolina on June 13, 1777, and traveled to Charleston and thence overland to Philadelphia where he was rebuffed by a Congress tired of being bombarded by obnoxious, egotistical French mercenaries sent by Deane. Writing a letter to Congress, Lafayette asserted that he intended to serve at his own cost and to begin his service as a volunteer.

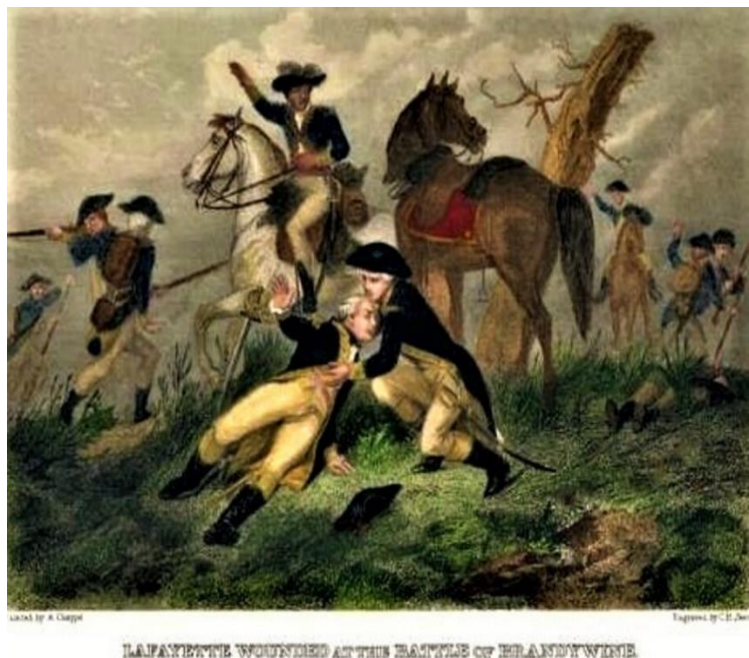
This, and an endorsement from Benjamin Franklin did the trick, and on August 3, 1777 he was introduced to General George Washington. The two men immediately connected and formed a father-son relationship that lasted until Washington's death. Lafayette would later name his only son George Washington Lafayette.



Lafayette soon joined the ragtag army as part of Washington's "family", his aides. About the same age as Hamilton, Burr and Monroe, he endeared himself by stating "I have come to learn, and not to teach".

First Taste of War and an Injury

Washington was now tasked with defending the colonial capital of Philadelphia from the advancing British. Lafayette attended his first council of war before the battle of Brandywine. While he did not have a command, he was front and center trying to organize the eventual retreat. He took a bullet in the left calf - a flesh wound. While recuperating in Bethlehem, PA, he became the "spin doctor" of his day. writing letters to his friends in the French aristocracy and the King's ministers promoting the Patriot cause and magnifying his exploits.



Returning to the Army, encamped at Valley Forge, he was gratified to hear the news of a formal alliance with France. Lafayette is credited for the alliance due to his audacious departure from France, and his letters home with exaggerated tales of adventure and success.



First Commands

In May of 1778 at age 20 Lafayette was given his first real test of military leadership. Placed in charge of a reconnaissance mission to determine if the British were going to evacuate Philadelphia due to the impending arrival of French warships, he deftly managed an escape of his troops from being surrounded by the British at Barren Hill. He later was in charge of part of the forces at the battle of Monmouth as the Continental Army followed the British across New Jersey, and he testified at the court martial of Major General Charles Lee.

When the French fleet under Admiral Comte d'Estaing found New York harbor too shallow to enter, negating an attack on New York City, d'Estaing sailed his ships to Rhode Island. Lafayette was sent there with a troop detachment to join Generals Sullivan & Greene. After a series of mishaps including stormy weather, a major battle for Newport never really happened.



Lafayette's fame having spread, he was now widely referred to throughout the colonies as "Our Marquis", Ironically, at this time, filled with the idea of liberty for all, he dropped his title on his correspondence and signed just "Lafayette". About this time, he wrote the following letter:

Lafayette to Henry Laurens, President of Congress,

Camp near Warren, R.I, September 23, 1778

“The moment I heard of America I loved her; the moment I knew she was fighting for freedom I burnt with a desire of bleeding for her; and the moment I shall be able to serve her, at any time, or in any part of the world, will be the happiest of my life”

Return to France to Lobby the French Government for More Support

With Winter approaching and a lull in the fighting, Lafayette asked for leave to return to France. This trip was to result in his most significant contribution to the American Revolution. On arrival he was treated as a hero. The King could not compete with his popularity and only put him on a short house arrest for disobeying when he left France to join the Patriot effort. While in France, Lafayette was able to convince Louis XVI and his ministers to send an expeditionary force to America to aid the Patriots.



Returning to Boston on the new French frigate l’Hermione on April 27, 1780 he traveled to camp at Morristown, N.J. to bring the news to Washington of the imminent arrival of French forces under Comte de Rochambeau, and an armada lead by Admiral de Grasse. The French forces arrived in Rhode Island on July 10, 1780.

Lafayette arrives bringing the news of French expeditionary forces on their way

Southern Campaign

In February of 1781 Washington sent Lafayette south to Virginia where he first met Thomas Jefferson and they became lifelong friends. Lafayette was able to scare off the British from a battle for Richmond by making it appear that he had more forces than he did. Richmond, a key city full of supplies and armaments was saved, but later, after supplies had been hidden in the

hills, Richmond was evacuated. Lafayette continued a holding action with his small force until reinforcements arrived.

Decisive Patriot and French Win at Yorktown Effectively Ends the War.

Washington and Rochambeau finally agreed that an assault on rested British troops in New York City made no sense but striking British General Cornwallis in Virginia did. French troops from Rhode Island joined American northern forces on the trek down to Virginia.



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Washington, Lafayette & Tilghman at Yorktown.



So why is Lafayette important to Americans?

He had a pivotal role in assuring that we are an independent nation today and not British subjects.

His letters home following Brandywine helped move the French government to send d'Estaing and his naval forces.

His lobbying on his return to France resulted in major additional French forces committed to the effort under Rochambeau and de Grasse.

His efforts were the first in establishing a long-term friendship between the countries of France and the United States that exists to this day.

And finally, he was the first international proponent of human rights, including the abolition of slavery.

It is no wonder, then, that his 13-month farewell tour of the then 24 states in 1824-1825 has been called the “Triumphal Tour”. Wherever he went during his journey along the Lafayette Trail, he was treated as the biggest celebrity this country had ever seen.



*Lafayette as a young man.
Daniel Chester French statue
of the Marquis on the campus
of Lafayette College.*

John C. Becica