

# Yorktown

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## *CLIMAX of the* REVOLUTION



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

*Source Book Series*

NUMBER ONE

The National Park System, of which this Colonial National Historical Park is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of its people.



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# Yorktown

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## *C L I M A X* OF THE REVOLUTION

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*EDITED* by CHARLES E. HATCH, JR.

*and* THOMAS M. PITKIN

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CONRAD L. WIRTH, *Director*

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*THIS BOOKLET relates to the Yorktown portion of Colonial National Historical Park, Jamestown-Yorktown, Virginia, which commemorates significant phases of American history from the first settlement at Jamestown until the winning of American independence at Yorktown. Other areas under National Park Service administration commemorating the Revolutionary period of American history are:*

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<sup>1</sup> Operated by the Federal Hall Memorial Associates cooperating with the National Park Service.

# INTRODUCTION



THE STORY of the last great act in the drama of American independence has been told many times, but never more vividly than in the words of the actors themselves. This book is an attempt to portray the crowning campaign of the American Revolution in the language of participants. Cornwallis, commander of the British forces, and Tarleton, his dashing cavalry leader, have been called upon to describe scenes and events inside Yorktown, during the campaign which culminated in the surrender of Cornwallis's army and was followed by the abandonment of British efforts to reduce the revolting American colonies to their old allegiance. Washington, "Mad" Anthony Wayne, Surgeon Thacher of the Continental Line, the young and chivalrous Count William de Deux-Ponts, and others recount for us American and French operations around Yorktown, for the most part in words penned while the events themselves were transpiring. Lafayette writes exultantly, on the heels of the surrender, that "the play is over," and Washington congratulates the army on its success. Here is the story of the siege of Yorktown recorded by those who were a part of it.

Here also are estimates of the significance of the surrender by a contemporary American statesman who was in position to view its immediate effects on the watching European world, by an American President who saw Yorktown against the background of a century's independent national development, and by the commission which prepared the sesquicentennial celebration of the event in 1931. There has been added only sufficient new narrative to fill the obvious gaps in the accounts of contemporaries.

CHARLES E. HATCH, JR.  
THOMAS M. PITKIN.

*Colonial National Historical Park,  
Yorktown, Virginia,  
January 23, 1941.*



THE SURRENDER OF CORNWALLIS'S ARMY

*REPRODUCED from a picture made shortly after the American Revolution by the painter Van Blarenburghe, based on an action sketch by Captain Louis Alexandre Berthier, of Rochambeau's army. It depicts the British Army marching out of Yorktown between the French and American troops to surrender its arms and flags.*

## I. CORNWALLIS GOES TO YORKTOWN

In the spring of 1781, the seventh year of the struggle for American independence, Lord Cornwallis, commanding a British Army, marched from North Carolina into Virginia, in an attempt to conquer the State and restore it to allegiance to Great Britain. The Marquis de Lafayette, sent to Virginia with a small American force, was unable to meet him in open battle but did his best to hamper the movements of the British. In midsummer Cornwallis received orders from Sir Henry Clinton, his superior in New York, to fortify a base in the lower Chesapeake for the use of the British fleet.

Sir, I was honoured with your letter of the 12th of July, by the Solebay, in which you mention a desire of having a harbour secured in the Chesapeak for line of battle ships. I immediately ordered the engineers to examine Old Point Comfort, and went thither myself with the captains of the navy on this station. You will receive a copy of the engineer's report, with a sketch of the peninsula, and the opinion of the officers of the navy relative to the occupying and fortifying of that post.

The Commander-in-chief having signified to me in his letter of the 11th instant, that he thought a secure harbour for line of battle ships of so much importance in the Chesapeak, that he wished me to possess one, even if it should occupy all the force at present in Virginia; and, as it is our unanimous opinion, that Point Comfort will not answer the purpose, I shall immediately sieze and fortify the posts of York and Gloucester, and shall be happy at all times to concur in any measures which may promote the convenience and advantage of his Majesty's navy.

LORD CORNWALLIS TO ADMIRAL GRAVES, JULY 26, 1781

## 2. THE FRENCH FLEET BLOCKADES THE CHESAPEAKE

Cornwallis moved his whole army to Yorktown, on the York River, in August and began leisurely fortifying that position and Gloucester Point opposite. Meanwhile the French West Indies fleet, under Comte de Grasse, evaded its British opponent and moved north to cooperate with the French and American land forces under Washington and Rochambeau. De Grasse sailed for the mouth of Chesapeake Bay to blockade Cornwallis by sea, while the



allied armies prepared to leave the Hudson River, where they had been threatening Clinton, and close in by land. Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton, Cornwallis's cavalry leader, watched the gathering of hostile forces.

Near the end of August, the *Guadaloupe* of twenty-eight guns, left York town, to proceed to New York with dispatches from Earl Cornwallis, and from Captain Symonds of the *Charon*, who commanded his Majesty's ships in the Chesapeake. At this period, the sea officers imagined that the British fleet from the West Indies would be discovered off the capes by the frigate, and the land officers expected that a considerable body of troops would soon arrive from New York to strengthen the King's forces for solid operations in Virginia, and likewise to garrison the works which were constructing for the advantage and protection of both army and navy. These suppositions, which were well grounded, diffused among the royalists general satisfaction: but their prospects of glory were suddenly obscured. On the 30th, the French fleet, of twenty-eight sail of the line, from the West Indies, under orders of the Count de Grasse, entered the Chesapeake. The advanced guard of his squadron, consisting of the *Glorieux*, a coppered seventy-four, and the *Diligente* and *Aigrette* frigates, met the *Guadaloupe* near the capes, who, not understanding their signals, kept aloof, and afterwards by swiftness, made good her retreat to York town; whilst the *Loyalist*, a bad twenty-gun ship, who was stationed in the bay, after a gallant struggle in the mouth of the channel, fell into the possession of the French.

The Count de Grasse, without loss of time, blocked up York river with three large ships and some frigates, and moored the principal part of the fleet in Lynhaven bay. Upon his arrival within the capes, he dispatched information of that event to General Washington in the *Jerseys*, and to the Marquis de la Fayette, who was encamped near the Chickahomany. The disembarkation of the troops brought in the line-of-battle ships from the West Indies immediately took place, and the continental army in Virginia advanced to the Green springs on the 3d of September, to form a junction with the Count de St. Simon. The Marquis de la Fayette soon after moved the French and Americans to Williamsburgh.

In the mean time Earl Cornwallis practised various means to send intelligence to New York of the situation and force of the French fleet. Patrols of the legion cavalry were continually detached to the shores of James and York rivers, and daily reported to his lordship every occurrence worthy of attention: They informed him of the movement of the boats with troops towards the Chickahomany, and of the different manoeuvres of the Count de Grasse. On the 5th, the French ships were observed to make repeated signals, and it was soon discovered that an English squadron was approaching. Notwithstanding the absence of a number of officers and seamen employed in the disembarkation of St. Simon's brigade, and of another detachment engaged in procuring water, the French fleet got under way, and stood out of the capes.

This state of hope was interrupted by the arrival of Count de Barras's division in the Chesapeake from Rhode Island. Intelligence soon after reached York town, that Count de Grasse had repulsed the British fleet, and was returning to the bay. Before this period accounts were brought to Earl Cornwallis that General Washington, with a large body of continentals, and Count Rochambeau, with the French army, were preparing to form a junction with LaFayette, by descending in transports from the head of Elk river in Maryland, under the convoy of the French ships. In this situation, blocked up by sea, and exposed to a powerful combination on shore, Earl Cornwallis turned his attention towards the corps already arrived at Williamsburgh.

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL TARLETON,

*A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781.*

### 3. THE ALLIES ASSEMBLE AT WILLIAMSBURG

Williamsburg, at the heart of the Virginia Peninsula, commanded the landward approach to Yorktown. Here, during September, the allied armies gathered, Washington and Rochambeau hastening down from the north to join the troops of LaFayette and St. Simon. Richard Butler, then a colonel of the Pennsylvania Line, serving with LaFayette, kept daily record of the scene.

*Sept. 8th.*—Received orders to march for Williamsburgh to join the allied army; arrived at our ground at 11 o'clock, had some difficulty in getting our baggage as we had to let the allied army have our wagons to bring on their whole train and camp, therefore had to lay in bough huts, on very dusty ground, for this day and night; the French army, the Pennsylvania and light-troops made a very elegant appearance in passing through the city.

*Sept. 9th.*—Obtained our baggage, pitched our camp. Lay by without any accounts of the enemy stirring on the eighth, the British fleet passed Cape Henry and came into the bay, and were gallantly engaged by the French, who drove them to sea, and pursued them, but leaving six ships of the line for the security of the bay. The Baron de Steuben arrived in camp with his suite.

*Aug. [sic.] 11th.*—Accounts by a Frigate that the French were left in full pursuit of the British, who were flying before them, and that in about six hours sailing they must come up with eighteen sail of victuallers which the British intend for Lord Cornwallis' relief and support, which they had abandoned in their flight. Still no flour or meal, and the beef supplied is very bad, in short there is yet no exertions made to supply the troops who have been supplied with only three days' bread out of seven, and not the least likelihood of being better supplied.

*Sept. 12th.*—Several cannon heard down the river; no account from the fleet. This day Governor Nelson sent Mr. Nichols to give me an order to retain a mill, and to impress corn carriages, boats, or any thing to facilitate the collecting of provisions; sent off Lieutenant Collier with a party for this purpose.

*Sept. 13th.*—An account of the Commander-in-Chief having arrived at his own seat at last. He has not been within his own door for seven years, indeed not since he was first a member of Congress in the year 1775, all which time he has been a most faithful patriot and servant of his country, from the citizen he was a councillor, then a General, and in reality the Father of the people, he has nobly shared in all their misfortunes, shewing the utmost fortitude and regularity of conduct; indeed the able statesman has appeared in all his actions. Some malign shafts have been shot at him by a small insignificant tribe whose falsely and ill directed arrows always reverted to their own bow and wounded themselves.

*Sept. 14th.*—The Marquis Lafayette still continues ill of the ague. Yesterday the Marquis de St. Simon, and a number of his officers, paid a visit to our line, and the Baron Steuben and our good friend Gen. Wayne, whose wound and gout still continue ill. About 3 o'clock an express arrived, announcing the approach of our great and good Commander-in-Chief, Gen. Washington, and the Count de Rochambeau, the commander of the allied armies of France, now joining. At 4, P. M., the guns fired a royal salute as the General approached the camp, on which the two armies turned out on their battalion parades; — his Excellency and the Count De Rochambeau, with their suites, attended by the Marquis de Lafayette, Maj. Gen. and commander of the American, and Maj. Gen. Marquis de St. Simon, commander of the allied army (lately arrived), and all their suites, visited the allied army first, and then the American army, and were saluted according to custom; these ceremonies finished, the whole of the officers of the French army attended at the Marquis de St. Simon's quarters and were introduced to the *Illustrious Hero*. The field officers of the American army all attended to bid him and the other Generals welcome. These ceremonies over, an elegant supper was served up. . . . To add to the happiness of the event and evening, an elegant band of music played an introductory part of a French Opera, signifying the happiness of the family when blessed with the presence of their father, and their great dependance upon him. About 10 o'clock the company rose up, and after mutual congratulations and the greatest expression of joy, they separated.

*Sept. 15th.*—An officer arrived from Count de Grasse's fleet, with certain account of the arrival of his and Count de Barras' fleet, from Rhode Island, with the French troops on board, and heavy artillery and large mortars, also of the capture of the *famous* Iris frigate, and the Richmond frigate, which with the Romulus of 44 guns, are sent to Baltimore, and head of Elk, to bring down all our troops and apparatus for a siege; the storm seems to thicken fast about Lord Cornwallis, whose people desert fast, which is a certain symptom of despondency in all armies. This day, his Excellency, the Commander-in-Chief, dined with the Marquis de

Lafayette, also Marquis de St. Simon, Baron de Steuben, Count de Rochambeau, Dumas, and Desandroins, a number of American and French officers of distinction, and passed the afternoon in the greatest happiness and harmony. Several officers of the Navy, among whom is the captain of the Experiment of 40 guns.

*Sept. 16th.*—His Excellency Gen. Washington, Counts de Rochambeau, de Chastelleux, and a great number of Generals and other officers dined with Baron de Steuben; we spent the afternoon in great harmony and retired.

*Sept. 17 to 27.*—Has been spent in debarking the troops and trains from the shipping the whole being arrived, the troops having taken their proper stations and every thing arranged, and the Commander-in-Chief and principal officers returned from on board the Ville de Paris where the Generals have been fixing a plan of cooperation with the Admiral, orders were issued for the whole army to move at 5 o'clock.

GENERAL RICHARD BUTLER'S JOURNAL.

#### 4. THE BRITISH POSITION

Meanwhile Cornwallis had not been idle. The unexpected appearance of the French fleet in the bay, its repulse of the British fleet, and the gathering of his enemies at Williamsburg had spurred him to renewed exertions in preparing the defenses of Yorktown. His outer line was extensive but well chosen. His inner line, close about the town, was less advantageous.

At this period, the labour which had been bestowed on the outward position at York town, had improved its natural advantages, and rendered it in every respect convenient for the King's troops. The right rested on a swamp which cover the right of the town: A large redoubt was constructed beyond it, close to the river road from Williamsburgh, and completed with fraizing and abbatis. The Charon, Guadaloupe, and other armed vessels, were moored opposite to the swamp; and the town batteries commanded at the roads and causeways which approached it. On the right, at the head of the morass, two redoubts were placed, one on each side, of the main Williamsburgh road. The center was protected by a thin wood, whose front was cut down, with the branches facing outwards. A field work, mounted with cannon, was erected on the left of the center, to command the Hampton road. A deep ravine, and a creek, which increased till it reached York river, covered the left. Trees were felled, fleches were thrown up, and batteries were constructed, at the points which were deemed most vulnerable. The distance between the heads of the swamp and creek, which embraced the flanks of the town, did not exceed half a mile. The face of the country, in front of this line, was cut near the center by a morass, and, excepting this break, the ground was plain and open for near two thousand yards. An excellent field artillery was placed to the greatest advantage by Captain Rochefort, who commanded in that department . .

The works erected for the protection of York town, consisted, on the right, of redoubts and batteries, with a line of stockade in the rear, which supported a high parapet of earth. The redoubts were furnished with fraizing and abbatis. A marshy ravine lay in front of the right, over which was placed a large redoubt, with a good ditch, fraizing, and abbatis: The morass extended along the center, which was defended by a line of stockade, and by batteries that looked upon all the avenues to the swamp: On the left of the center, was a horn work, with a ditch, a row of fraize, and an abbatis: Some embrasures for cannon were at present open in this work. The left was fortified by redoubts, communications of earth, and batteries, which were all furnished with fraizing, but without stockade or abbatis. Two redoubts were advanced before the left, which were small, and not so well finished as that in front of the right. The ground in front of the left was in some parts on a level with the works, in others cut by ravines, and altogether very convenient for the besiegers. The space within the works was exceedingly narrow, not large enough for retrenchments, and, except under the cliff, exposed to enfilade.

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL TARLETON,  
*A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781.*

## 5. THE SIEGE BEGINS

French and American troops having assembled in overwhelming force, from points as far distant as Rhode Island and the West Indies, Washington assumed command of the whole and moved on Yorktown.

I have not leisure to give a particular account of our proceedings, it must suffice only to inform you, that, after assembling all the Troops at *Williamsburg*, and making the necessary Arrangements, the Allied Army moved on the Morning of the 28th Sept. and took post in the neighbourhood of York that night. The Enemy gave us no annoyance on the March; a body of Horse that was paraded in front of their Works retired upon our firing a few shot among them. The 29th. was spent in reconnoitring, and taking a position as near the advanced Works as could be done without placing the Encampments directly in the range of the Enemy's shot; some skirmishing happened between our Rifle men and the Yagers, in which the former had the advantage. At night, the Enemy abandoned all their Out Posts (some of which were very advantageous) and retired to the Town. Yesterday Morning we occupied the same ground and last night made some lodgments at a short distance from the Lines. The Horses and Teams are beginning to arrive from the Northward, the heavy Artillery will be brought up as soon as possible and the Seige pushed with vigor; as I have no Idea that Lord Cornwallis will surrender so respectable a force, as he has under his command, unless he is compelled by dire necessity.

WASHINGTON TO MAJOR GENERAL WILLIAM HEATH, OCTOBER 1, 1781



## 6. THE FIRST PARALLEL

The siege operations of the eighteenth century were conducted according to a set pattern. When the most advantageous ground had been chosen and marked, the besiegers began digging a line of entrenchments facing the besieged position at a distance of from 800 to 1,000 yards, convenient range for the artillery of that day. This line of entrenchments, in which batteries were erected, was known as the "first parallel." In planning the siege of Yorktown, the allied engineers chose for the first parallel a line from the head of a deep ravine, which half encircled the town on the left, to the York River on the right. Its opening was delayed for several days pending the arrival of heavy artillery.

The reconnoissance completed, the artillery disembarked, and the necessary supplies arranged, the establishment of the first parallel was begun.

The strength and reputation of the Garrison were the reason for the decision to establish it at the usual distance, and to fortify it by redoubts against sorties. The advanced works on the enemy's left made it necessary even to increase the distance of the right of the attacks from the body of the place. The lay of the ground determined its outline; the right resting on the steep bank of the river, on the left of the great ravine.

In the night of the 6th to 7th, the first parallel was opened, and the construction of the redoubts necessary for safety began. This work was only interrupted by the batteries, the fire of which was turned upon the new redoubts from the beginning of their construction.

The same night an end of a parallel with a flying sap was opened to support a battery which served the double purpose of disturbing the advanced redoubt on the right of the besieged and of driving off the ships of war which might have taken the left of the great attack in reverse.

This work, information of which was given by a deserter, was greatly troubled by the batteries of the besieged, and the attention which they paid to it diverted their attention from the opening of the great attack.

*October 7th.*—At daybreak the guard batteries entered the parallel. From the 7th to 8th the perfectionment of the first parallel and the redoubts was continued, and the construction of the batteries begun. The nature of the ground on the left decided their establishment behind the parallel, and one was placed on its left flank beyond the ravine.

*October 8th.*—At noon the parallel and the battery at the left attack were completed.

From the 8th to the 9th the perfectionment of the parallel, and of the redoubts and batteries was continued, and communications opened in their rear.

*October 9th.*—The construction of a battery of mortars was begun in part of the parallel.

In the afternoon the batteries began their fire, and subdued that of the enemy.

The fire of that on the left compelled the frigate and the other vessels of war to withdraw.

From the 9th to the 10th the perfecting of the works was continued, and palisades were set in the ditches of the redoubts.

On the left attempts were made to set fire to the abattis of the redoubt.

ENGINEERS' JOURNAL OF THE SIEGE OF YORK.

## 7. THE BOMBARDMENT

Some of the allied batteries were ready to fire by the afternoon of October 9. All movements and activities up to this time had been merely preliminary. The siege of Yorktown now settled into deadly earnest, with a heavy and continuous bombardment of the British position. Additional batteries took up the chorus on the following morning. Surgeon Thacher, of the American Army, in the intervals of caring for the wounded, watched the terrible spectacle.

From the 10th to the 15th, a tremendous and incessant firing from the American and French batteries is kept up, and the enemy return the fire, but with little effect. A red hot shell from the French battery set fire to the *Charon*, a British 44 gun ship, and two or three smaller vessels at anchor in the river, which were consumed in the night. From the bank of the river, I had a fine view of this splendid conflagration. The ships were enwrapped in a torrent of fire, which spreading with vivid brightness among the combustible rigging, and running with amazing rapidity to the tops of the several masts, while all around was thunder and lightning from our numerous cannon and mortars, and in the darkness of night, presented one of the most sublime and magnificent spectacles which can be imagined. Some of our shells, overreaching the town, are seen to fall into the river, and bursting, throw up columns of water like the spouting of the monsters of the deep. We have now made further approaches to the town, by throwing up a second parallel line, and batteries within about three hundred yards; this was effected in the night, and at daylight the enemy were roused to the greatest exertions, the engines of war have raged with redoubled fury and destruction on both sides, no cessation day or night. The French had two officers wounded, and fifteen men killed or wounded, and among the Americans, two or three were wounded. I assisted in amputating a man's thigh. The siege is daily becoming

more and more formidable and alarming, and his Lordship must view his situation as extremely critical, if not desperate.

Being in the trenches every other night and day, I have a fine opportunity of witnessing the sublime and stupendous scene which is continually exhibiting. The bomb shells from the besiegers and the besieged are incessantly crossing each others' path in the air. They are clearly visible in the form of a black ball in the day, but in the night, they appear like fiery meteors with blazing tails, most beautifully brilliant, ascending majestically from the mortar to a certain altitude, and gradually descending to the spot where they are destined to execute their work of destruction. It is astonishing with what accuracy an experienced gunner will make his calculations, that a shell shall fall within a few feet of a given point, and burst at the precise time, though at a great distance. When a shell falls, it whirls round, burrows, and excavates the earth to a considerable extent, and bursting, makes dreadful havoc around. I have more than once witnessed fragments of the mangled bodies and limbs of the British soldiers thrown into the air by the bursting of our shells, and by one from the enemy, Captain White, of the seventh Massachusetts regiment, and one soldier were killed, and another wounded near where I was standing. About twelve or fourteen men have been killed or wounded within twenty-four hours; I attended at the hospital, amputated a man's arm, and assisted in dressing a number of wounds.

JAMES THACHER,

*A Military Journal during the American Revolutionary War.*

## 8. STORMING THE REDOUBTS

Under cover of the fire of their heavy guns, the allies moved forward on the night of October 11 to a second parallel, halfway to the main British line. At the right, nearest the river, the completion of this entrenchment was delayed by the fire of two advanced redoubts held by the British. It was determined to storm them. Early on the evening of October 14 French troops prepared to attack one of the redoubts, while picked American units from Lafayette's Light Infantry assaulted the other. Count William de Deux-Ponts led the French attack, while Lt. Col. Alexander Hamilton was at the head of the American column.

### THE FRENCH ATTACK

The six shells were fired at last; and I advanced in the greatest silence; at a hundred and twenty or thirty paces, we were discovered; and the Hessian soldier who was stationed as a sentinel on the parapet, cried out "Werda?" (Who comes there?) to which we did not reply, but hastened our steps. The enemy opened





THE STORMING OF REDOUBT NUMBER TEN

*THIS IS A REPRODUCTION of the painting made about 1840 by Louis Eugene Lami, the original of which is in the old Senate Chamber of the Capitol in Richmond, Va. It shows the detachment of Lafayette's Light Infantry swarming into the British redoubt. Bitter hand-to-hand fighting is going on, the Americans using only the bayonet.*



fire the instant after the "Werda." We lost not a moment in reaching the abatis, which being strong and well preserved, at about twenty-five paces from the redoubt, cost us many men, and stopped us for some minutes, but was cleared away with brave determination; we threw ourselves into the ditch at once, and each one sought to break through the fraises, and to mount the parapet.

We reached there at first in small numbers, and I gave the order to fire; the enemy kept up a sharp fire, and charged us at the point of the bayonet; but no one was driven back. The carpenters, who had worked hard on their part, had made some breaches in the palisades, which helped the main body of the troops in mounting. The parapet was becoming manned visibly. Our fire was increasing, and making terrible havoc among the enemy, who had placed themselves behind a kind of intrenchment of barrels, where they were well massed, and where all our shots told. We succeeded at the moment when I wished to give the order to leap into the redoubt and charge upon the enemy with the bayonet; then they laid down their arms, and we leaped in with more tranquillity and less risk. I shouted immediately the cry of *Vive le Roi*, which was repeated by all the grenadiers and chasseurs who were in good condition, by all the troops in the trenches, and to which the enemy replied by a general discharge of artillery and musketry. I never saw a sight more beautiful or more majestic. I did not stop to look at it: I had to give attention to the wounded, and directions to be observed towards the prisoners.

At the same time, the Baron de Viomesnil came to give me orders to be prepared for a vigorous defence, as it would be important for the enemy to attempt to retake this work. An active enemy would not have failed, and the Baron de Viomesnil judged the English general by himself. I made my dispositions to the best of my ability; the enemy showered bullets upon us. I did not doubt that the idea of the Baron de Viomesnil would be fulfilled. Finally, when all was over, a sentinel charged with observing the movements without, called me, and said that some of the enemy were appearing. I raised my head above the parapet, and at the same time a ball, which ricocheted in the parapet, and passed very near my head, covered my face with sand and gravel. I suffered much, and was obliged to leave the place, and to be conducted to the ambulance.

COUNT WILLIAM DE DEUX-PONTS,  
*My Campaigns in America.*

### THE AMERICAN ATTACK

SIR,

I have the honour to render you an account of the corps under my command, in your attack of last night upon the redoubt of the enemy's lines.

Agreeable to your orders, we advanced in two columns with unloaded arms, the right composed of Lieutenant-colonel Gimat's battalion and my own, commanded by Major Fish. The left of a detachment commanded by Lieutenant-colonel Laurens, destined to take the enemy of reverse, and intercept their retreat.

The column on the right hand was preceded by a van guard of twenty men, led by Lieutenant Mansfield; and a detachment of sappers and miners, commanded by Captain Gilliland, for the purpose of removing obstructions.

The redoubt was commanded by Major Campbell, with a detachment of British and German troops, and was completely in a state of defence.

The rapidity and immediate success of the assault, are the best comment on the behaviour of the troops. Lieutenant-colonel Laurens distinguished himself by an exact and vigorous execution of his part of the plan, by entering the enemy's work with his corps among the foremost, and making prisoner of the commanding officer of the redoubt. Lieutenant-colonel Gimat's battalion, which formed the van of the right attack, and which fell under my immediate observation, encouraged by the decisive and animated example of their leader, advanced with an order and resolution superior to every obstacle. They were well seconded by Major Fish, with the battalion under his command, who, when the front of the column reached the abbatis, unlocking his corps to the left, as he had been directed, advanced with such celerity, as to arrive in time to participate in the assault.

Lieutenant Mansfield deserves particular commendation, for the coolness, firmness, and punctuality, with which he conducted the van guard, Captain Olney who commanded the first platoon of Gimat's battalion, is entitled to peculiar applause. He led his platoon into the work with exemplary intrepidity, and received two bayonet wounds. Captain Gilliland, with the detachment of sappers and miners, acquitted themselves in a manner that did them great honour.

I do but justice to the several corps when I have the pleasure to assure you, there was not an officer nor soldier whose behaviour if it could be particularized, would not have a claim to the warmest approbation. As it would have been attended with delay and loss to wait for the removal of the abbatis and pallisades, the ardour of the troops was indulged in passing over them.

There was a happy coincidence of movements. The redoubt was in the same moment enveloped and carried on every part. The enemy are entitled to the acknowledgment of an honourable defence.

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL HAMILTON'S REPORT TO LAFAYETTE.

## 9. THE BRITISH COUNTERATTACK

The completion of the second parallel, including the captured redoubts, would bring the allied artillery at some points to within 300 yards of the main British line, a close and deadly range. To delay the work, Cornwallis launched a counterattack.

The batteries were opened and fired with great success, which silenced the chief of the enemy's batteries; many of their men were killed, and the whole of the garrison thrown into confusion. About 12 o'clock at night, Maj. Abercrombie, of

the British, with a party of the Light Infantry and Guards, made a sally, and passing between two small redoubts that were unfinished, and where (by the parties being moved in another post to work,) the line was weak, got possession of the trench; thence they pushed rapidly to a French battery, and spiked the guns and drove out the people, having killed four or five: Thence to the covert way or communication leading from the first to the second parallel, where they halted. They then discovered a battery commanded by Capt. Savage, of the Americans and challenged, What troops? The answer was French—on which the order of the British Commandant was “Push on, my brave boys, and skin the b-----rs.” This was heard by Count de Noailles, who had the command of a covering party, which he ordered to advance, and was guided by the Huzza of the British. He ordered grenadiers to “charge bayonet and rush on,” which they did with great spirit crying “*Vive Le Roy*”, and to use the British phrase skivered eight of the Guards and Infantry, and took twelve prisoners, and drove them quite off. The British spiked Savage’s three guns with the points of bayonets, but our smiths and artillery men soon cleared all the guns, and in six hours chastised the enemy for their temerity with the same pieces. Our loss was very trifling, though the British really executed the sortie with secrecy and spirit.

GENERAL RICHARD BUTLER’S JOURNAL.

## 10. CORNWALLIS TRIES TO ESCAPE

Finding his enemies closing in for the kill, Cornwallis determined on a desperate measure. This was to transport his army across the river to Gloucester, break through the allied troops guarding that point, and march overland to New York.

A few hours cannonade from the new batteries upon York town, where the fraizings were already destroyed, the guns dismounted, many breaches effected, and the shells nearly expended, would be productive either of a capitulation, or an assault. A retreat by Gloucester was the only expedient that now presented itself to avert the mortification of a surrender, or the destruction of a storm. Though this plan appeared less practicable than when first proposed, and was adopted at this crisis, as the last resource, it yet afforded some hopes of success. In the evening, Earl Cornwallis sent Lord Chewton to Gloucester, with explicit directions for Lieutenant-colonel Tarleton to prepare some artillery and other requisites from his garrison to accompany the British troops with which his lordship designed to attack Brigadier de Choisy before daybreak, and afterwards retreat through the country. The guards of cavalry and infantry at Tarleton’s post were immediately augmented, and many officers were advanced as sentries, to prevent any intelligence being conveyed to the enemy. All the commanding officers of regiments were afterwards acquainted with the intended project, that their corps



THE LAST DAY OF THE SIEGE

*REPRODUCED from a picture by Van Blarenberghe, based on an action sketch. The foreground shows allied staff officers in consultation over a map. Nearby, French troops are moving up to the front. In the background the batteries of the second parallel are in full play against Yorktown.*

might be completely assembled and equipped. The spare horses of the garrison were ordered to parade for the benefit of the infantry, and the necessary artillery and waggons were prepared.

A number of sailors and soldiers were dispatched with boats from Gloucester, to assist the troops in passing the river. Earl Cornwallis sent off the first embarkation before eleven o'clock that night, consisting of the light infantry, great part of the brigade of guards, and the 23d regiment, and purposed himself to pass with the second, when he had finished a letter to General Washington, calculated to excite the humanity of that officer towards the sick, the wounded, and the detachment that would be left to capitulate. Much of the small craft had been damaged during the siege; yet it was computed, that three trips would be sufficient to convey over all the troops that were necessary for the expedition. The whole of the first division arrived before midnight, and part of the second had embarked, when a squall, attended with rain, scattered the boats, and impeded their return to Gloucester. About two o'clock in the morning the weather began to moderate, when orders were brought to the commanding officers of the corps that had passed, to re-cross the water. As the boats were all on the York side the river, in order to bring over the troops, it required some time to row them to Gloucester, to carry back the infantry of the first embarkation; but soon after daybreak they returned under the fire of the enemy's batteries to Earl Cornwallis, at Yorktown. Thus expired the last hope of the British army.

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL TARLETON,

*A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781.*

## II. CORNWALLIS DECIDES TO SURRENDER

With the failure of the attempt to escape, and the opening of the batteries in the advanced allied line, the position of the British Army, as Cornwallis realized, became hopeless.

Our works in the mean time were going to ruin, and not having been able to strengthen them by abbatiss, nor in any other manner but by a slight fraizing which the enemy's artillery were demolishing wherever they fired, my opinion entirely coincided with that of the engineer and principal officers of the army, that they were in many places assailable in the forenoon, and that by the continuance of the same fire for a few hours longer, they would be in such a state as to render it desperate with our numbers to attempt to maintain them. We at that time could not fire a single gun, only one eight-inch and little more than an hundred cohorn shells remained; a diversion by the French ships of war that lay at the mouth of York-river, was to be expected. Our numbers had been diminished by the enemy's fire, but particularly by sickness, and the strength and spirits of those in the works were much exhausted by the fatigue of constant watching and un-

remitting duty. Under all these circumstances, I thought it would have been wanton and inhuman to the last degree to sacrifice the lives of this small body of gallant soldiers, who had ever behaved with so much fidelity and courage, by exposing them to an assault, which from the numbers and precautions of the enemy could not fail to succeed. I therefore proposed to capitulate . . .

EARL CORNWALLIS TO SIR HENRY CLINTON, OCTOBER 20, 1781.

## 12. THE PARLEY

“Mad” Anthony Wayne, brigadier-general of the Pennsylvania Line, has recorded for us the preliminaries of the surrender.

17th.—The enemy beat the chamade at 10 o'clock, A. M.

Cornwallis now “sent out a flag, proposing a cessation of hostilities for twenty-four hours, . . . and that commissioners might be appointed to meet at Mr. Moore’s house, to settle the terms upon which the garrisons of York and Gloucester should surrender. General Washington would only grant a cessation for *two hours*; previously to the expiration of which, his lordship, by another flag, sent the following terms, viz: The troops to be prisoners of war; the British to be sent to Great Britain, and not to act against America, France, or their allies, until exchanged; the Hessians to Germany, on the same conditions; and that all operations cease until the commissioners should determine the details. To this his excellency returned for answer: That hostilities should cease, and no alterations in the works, or any new movement of the troops, take place, until he sent terms in writing; which he did on the 18th, at nine o'clock, A. M., allowing the enemy two hours to determine. They again requested more time; and the general granted them until one o'clock, when they acceded to the heads of the imposed terms, and nominated Colonel Dundas and Major Ross, on their part, to meet with Colonel Laurens and Viscount de Noailles on ours, to reduce them to form, which was completed by nine o'clock at night; and, on the 19th, at one o'clock, P. M., the capitulation was ratified and signed by the commander of each army, when the enemy received a guard of Pennsylvania and Maryland troops in one of their principal works, and one of French troops in another.

H. N. MOORE,  
*Life of Gen. Anthony Wayne.*

## 13. THE SURRENDER

The terms settled, the victorious allies prepared to receive the surrender of the British Army, while Cornwallis’s men made ready for the humiliating ordeal with which they were faced.

19th.—This is to us a most glorious day, but to the English, one of bitter chagrin and disappointment. Preparations are now making to receive as captives, that



THE SURRENDER HOUSE, COMMONLY CALLED THE MOORE HOUSE

*THE SKETCH of which this is a reproduction was made about 1843 by Henry Howe, for his Historical Collections of Virginia. It is a rear view of the house. The room in which the allied and British commissioners met to discuss the terms of surrender is at the lower left. In the sketch the window of this "Surrender Room" is half hidden by the chimney.*

vindictive, haughty commander, and that victorious army, who by their robberies and murders have so long been a scourge to our brethren of the southern states. *Being on horseback, I anticipate a full share of satisfaction in viewing the various movements in the interesting scene.*

The stipulated terms of capitulation are similar to those granted to General Lincoln at Charleston the last year. The captive troops are to march out with shouldered arms, colors cased, and drums beating a British or German march, and to ground their arms at a place assigned for the purpose. The officers are allowed their side arms and private property, and the generals and such officers as desire it, are to go on parole to England or New York. The marines and seamen of the king's ships are prisoners of war to the navy of France, and the land forces to the United States. All military and artillery stores to be delivered up unimpaired. The royal prisoners to be sent into the interior of Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania, in regiments, to have rations allowed them equal to the American soldiers, and to have their officers near them. Lord Cornwallis to man and despatch the Bonetta sloop of war with despatches to Sir Henry Clinton at New York without being searched, the vessel to be returned and the hands accounted for.

At about twelve o'clock, the combined army was arranged and drawn up in two lines extending more than a mile in length. The Americans were drawn up in a line on the right side of the road, and the French occupied the left. At the head of the former the great American commander, mounted on his noble courser, took his station, attended by his aids. At the head of the latter was posted the excellent Count Rochambeau and his suite. The French troops, in complete uniform, displayed a martial and noble appearance, their band of music, of which the timbrel formed a part, is a delightful novelty, and produced while marching to the ground, a most enchanting effect. The Americans though not all in uniform nor their dress so neat, yet exhibited an erect soldierly air, and every countenance beamed with satisfaction and joy. The concourse of spectators from the country was prodigious, in point of numbers probably equal to the military, but universal silence and order prevailed.

It was about two o'clock when the captive army advanced through the line formed for their reception. Every eye was prepared to gaze on Lord Cornwallis, the object of peculiar interest and solicitude; but he disappointed our anxious expectations; pretending indisposition, he made General O'Harra his substitute as the leader of his army. This officer was followed by the conquered troops in a slow and solemn step, with shouldered arms, colors cased and drums beating a British march. Having arrived at the head of the line, General O'Harra, elegantly mounted, advanced to his Excellency the Commander in Chief, taking off his hat, and apologized for the non-appearance of Earl Cornwallis. With his usual dignity and politeness his Excellency pointed to Major General Lincoln for directions, by whom the British army was conducted into a spacious field, where it was intended they should ground their arms.



Charles Cornwallis Lieutenant General  
in Chief. Majesty's Forces.

I do acknowledge myself a Prisoner of War to the  
States of America, & having permission from His  
General Washington, agreeable to Capitulations, to  
reside at New York & Charleston, or either, & to Europe.

I do pledge my Faith & Word of Honor, that I  
will not do or say any thing injurious to the said United States  
or Colonies thereof or their Allies, untill duly exchanged, I do  
further promise that whenever required, by the Commander in  
Chief of the American Army, or the Comissary of Prisoners  
for the same, I will repair to such place or places as they or  
either of them may require.

Given under my Hand at York Town 28<sup>th</sup> day  
of October 1781 —

Cornwallis

#### CORNWALLIS'S PAROLE

FOLLOWING THE SURRENDER, Cornwallis, as a prisoner of war, gave his parole not to engage in further hostilities against the United States, or its allies, until exchanged and was permitted to go to New York. The original document is in the Virginia State Library.

The royal troops, while marching through the line formed by the allied army, exhibited a decent and neat appearance, as respects arms and clothing, for their commander opened his store and directed every soldier to be furnished with a new suit complete, prior to the capitulation. But in their line of march we remarked a disorderly and unsoldierly conduct, their step was irregular, and their ranks frequently broken. But it was in the field when they came to the last act of the drama, that the spirit and pride of the British soldier was put to the severest test, here their mortification could not be concealed. Some of the platoon officers appeared to be exceedingly chagrined when giving the word "*ground arms*," and I am a witness that they performed this duty in a very unofficerlike manner, and that many of the soldiers manifested a *sullen temper*, throwing their arms on the pile with violence, as if determined to render them useless. This irregularity, however, was checked by the authority of General Lincoln. After having grounded their arms and divested themselves of their accoutrements, the captive troops were conducted back to Yorktown and guarded by our troops till they could be removed to the place of their destination. The British troops that were stationed at Gloucester surrendered at the same time, and in the same manner to the command of the French general de Choise.

JAMES THACHER,

*A Military Journal during the American Revolutionary War.*

#### 14. "THE PLAY IS OVER"

Lafayette, exulting in the victory which he had helped to create, wrote in the first flush of enthusiasm to high officials in France.

The play is over, Monsieur le Comte, the fifth act has just come to an end. I was somewhat disturbed during the former acts, but my heart rejoices exceedingly at this last, and I have no less pleasure in congratulating you upon the happy ending of our campaign . . . I am happy that our Virginia campaign has ended so well, and my respect for the talents of Lord Cornwallis gives his capture an additional value to my mind. After this attempt, what English general will undertake the conquest of America? Their manoeuvres in the southern country have not been more successful than those at the North, and now the experience of General Burgoyne has been repeated.

LAFAYETTE TO M. DE MAUREPAS AND M. DE VERGENNES, OCTOBER 20, 1781.

#### 15. WASHINGTON CONGRATULATES THE ARMY

Washington, more reserved than his young friend and subordinate, nevertheless felt deeply the triumph which had come after long years of defeat and bitterness and hope deferred. With his

pride in the victory was mingled gratitude to the brave allies and the officers and men of his own army who had made it possible.

The General congratulates the Army upon the glorious event of yesterday.

The generous proofs which his most Christian Majesty has given of his attachment to the Cause of America must force conviction on the minds of the most deceived among the Enemy: relatively to the decisive good consequences of the Alliance and inspire every citizen of these States with sentiments of the most unalterable Gratitude.

His Fleet the most numerous and powerful that ever appeared in these seas commanded by an Admiral whose Fortune and Talents ensure great Events.

An Army of the most admirable composition both in officers and men are the Pledges of his friendship to the United States and their cooperation has secured us the present signal success.

The General upon this occasion entreats his Excellency Count de Rochambeau to accept his most grateful acknowledgments for his Counsels and assistance at all times. He presents his warmest thanks to the Generals Baron Viomenil, Chevalier Chastellux, Marquis de St. Simond and Count Viomenil and to Brigadier General de Choissy (who had a separate command) for the illustrious manner in which they have advanced the interest of the common cause.

He requests that Count de Rochambeau will be pleased to communicate to the Army under his immediate command the high sense he entertains of the distinguished merits of the officers and soldiers of every corps and that he will present in his name to the regiments of Gattinois and Deuxponts the Two Pieces of Brass Ordnance captured by them; as a testimony of their Gallantry in storming the Enemy's Redoubt on the Night of the 14th. instant, when officers and men so universally vied with each other in the exercise of every soldierly virtue.

The General's Thanks to each individual of Merit would comprehend the whole Army. But He thinks himself bound however by Affection Duty and Gratitude to express his obligations to Major Generals Lincoln, de La Fayette and Steuben for the dispositions in the Trenches.

To General Du Portail and Colonel Carney for the Vigor and Knowledge which were conspicuous in their Conduct of the Attacks, and to General Knox and Colonel D'Aberville for their great care and attention and fatigue in bringing forward the Artillery and Stores and for their judicious and spirited management of them in the Parallels.

He requests the Gentlemen above mentioned to communicate his thanks to the officers and soldiers of their respective commands.

Ingratitude which the General hopes never to be guilty of would be conspicuous in him was he to omit thanking in the warmest terms His Excellency Governor Nelson for the Aid he has derived from him and from the Militia under his Command to whose Activity Emulation and Courage much Applause is due; the

Greatness of the Acquisition will be an ample Compensation for the Hardships and Hazards which they encountered with so much patriotism and firmness.

In order to diffuse the general Joy through every Breast the General orders that those men belonging to the Army who may now be in confinement shall be pardoned released and join their respective corps.

Divine Service is to be performed tomorrow in the several Brigades or Divisions.

The Commander in Chief earnestly recommends that the troops not on duty should universally attend with that seriousness of Deportment and gratitude of Heart which the recognition of such reiterated and astonishing interpositions of Providence demand of us.

WASHINGTON'S GENERAL ORDER, OCTOBER 20, 1781.

## 16. THE MEANING OF YORKTOWN

The surrender of Cornwallis was immediately recognized as bringing within sight the end of the Revolution and the independence of the United States.

Your predictions regarding the fate of Lord Cornwallis have, thank God, been verified. It is a glorious, joyful, and important event. Britain feels the force of that stroke and other nations begin to doubt less of the continuance of our independence. Further successes must prepare the way for peace, and I hope that victory will stimulate instead of relaxing our exertions.

JOHN JAY TO ELBRIDGE GERRY, MADRID, JANUARY 9, 1782.

The news of Yorktown brought the defeat of Lord North's war ministry in England. Negotiations ending in a treaty of peace, with recognition of the independence of the United States, soon followed. The succeeding century brought out in stronger relief the significance of this decisive victory in the struggle for American self-government.

Upon this soil one hundred years ago our forefathers brought to a successful issue their heroic struggle for independence. Here and then was established, and as we trust made secure upon this continent for ages yet to come, that principle of government which is the very fiber of our system—the sovereignty of the people.

PRESIDENT CHESTER A. ARTHUR, YORKTOWN, OCTOBER 19, 1881.

With the approach of the 150th anniversary of the Yorktown victory, there was renewed realization of the meaning of the event and of the debt which the people of the United States owed to the men who, by that victory, made the Declaration of Independence a living thing. The National Government and local organizations

in 1931 cooperated in impressive commemorative services, and the battlefield of Yorktown was dedicated as a national shrine to be maintained for the people by the National Park Service.

While the events commemorated in other national parks are well worth the expense to the Government in commemorating them, and they all recall to the minds of the citizens important events in our history, as well as the heroism and devotion of our soldiers, they are at best only events, although important ones, in our history, while Yorktown marks the consummation of our national independence. Other battles of the Revolutionary War led up to this one battle, while battles of other wars since then were only struggles for our rights, or for the preservation of the Government, whose existence was decided on the field at Yorktown. It was at the bridge at Concord, Massachusetts, on April 19, 1775, where the embattled farmers stood and fired the shot heard around the world. It was on the field at Yorktown, Virginia, on October 19, 1781, that it was finally decided after six and one-half years of heroic struggle that shot had not been fired in vain. From that date the freedom of our country was secure and has never again been in danger. The treaty of peace acknowledging our independence two years later was but a natural and inevitable sequence to the surrender of our opponent's finest army and ablest general.

#### REPORT OF THE SECRETARY OF WAR'S YORKTOWN COMMISSION

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