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Lafayette's Return: The "Boy General," the American Revolution, and the Hermione

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Selected PR Images



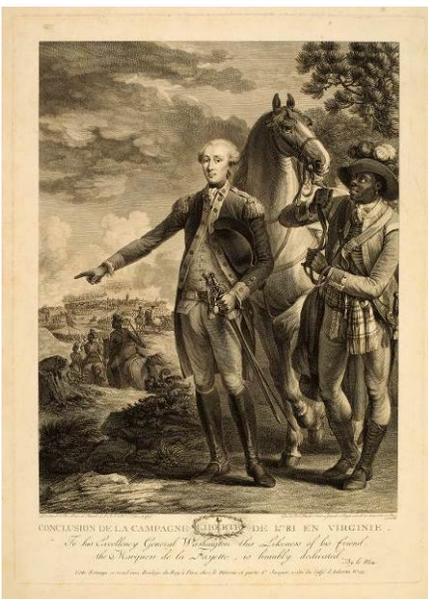
This portrait depicts Lafayette at the pinnacle of his career, wearing the uniform of the Parisian National Guard. His lapel is adorned with three medals representing his French American distinction: the Order of the Society of the Cincinnati; the Cross of St. Louis, presented to him by King Louis XVI for his role in the American Revolution; and the Medal of the Vainqueurs de la Bastille.

Unidentified artist, *Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834)*, ca. 1785–90. Oil on canvas. New-York Historical Society, 1817.2



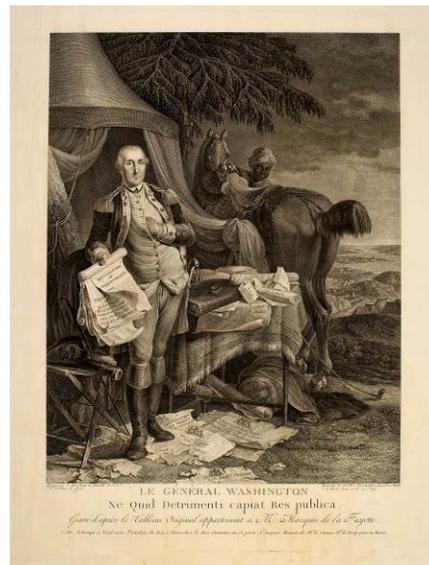
Lafayette first arrived in the colonies in 1777 at the age of 20, eager to join the nascent American Revolution. He played a major role in Washington's defeat of the British Army and enjoyed a hero's return to France in 1779. Instead of resting on his laurels, he set to work lobbying on the American revolutionaries' behalf. Lafayette's dedication paid off: he convinced King Louis XVI and his closest advisors to send an expeditionary force of 6,000 soldiers to support the American cause. In March 1780, Lafayette again returned to America, this time aboard the *Hermione* with crucial military aid in tow.

Scale model of the frigate *l'Hermione*, 2004. Wood, canvas, paper. Courtesy of Friends of Hermione-Lafayette in America



This engraving, based on a portrait by Jean-Baptiste le Paon, depicts Lafayette attended by African American spy James Armistead. In summer 1781, Armistead's intelligence reports helped Washington prevent the British from sending reinforcements to Yorktown, accelerating the October surrender. Lafayette, a supporter of slave manumission, wrote an impassioned testimonial endorsing Armistead's application for freedom in 1784.

Noël le Mire (after Jean-Baptiste le Paon), *Conclusion de la Campagne Liberté de 1781 en Virginie*, ca. 1783. Engraving New-York Historical Society



This work is based on a replica of a painting by Charles Willson Peale commissioned by Lafayette. A companion to Le Mire's portrait of Lafayette, it represents Washington outside a battle tent holding the Declaration of Independence and the 1778 Treaty of Alliance with France. He is observed by William Lee, an expert horseman and Washington's personal servant, who accompanied him throughout the revolution.

Noël le Mire (after Jean-Baptiste le Paon and Charles Wilson Peale), *Le Général Washington ne quid Detrimenti Capiat Res Publica*, 1780. Engraving. New-York Historical Society

Dear Washington, I hope
that papa will come back
soon here. I am verry sorry
for the loss of him, but
I am verry glade for you self.
I wish you a verry good health
and I am with great respect,
Dear Sir, your most obedient
servant. anastasié la fayette
Paris the 18th June 1784

Both Lafayette and Adrienne were attentive and doting parents, particularly notable for 18th-century aristocrats. While her father was abroad, six-year-old Anastasie wrote to George Washington in an elegant hand but faltering English: "I hope that papa will come back soon here. I am verry sorry for the loss of him, but I am verry glade for you self." The note delighted Washington. "I have been asked to send the fondest regards from the whole household," Lafayette conveyed to his wife, along with Martha Washington's invitation for the young family to someday visit.

Anastasie de Lafayette to George Washington, June 18, 1784
Cornell University, Kroch Library, Division of Rare Books and Manuscripts

Marquis de la Fayette
Compliments Wait upon
His Excellency to Franklin and
Begg the Honour of His
Company at Dinner on
Monday next
Paris the 26. April 1785.
The favour of an Answer is Requested

After the war, Lafayette's Rue de Bourbon home in Paris became a hub for American expatriates. Every Monday, the likes of Benjamin Franklin, John and Sarah Jay, as well as John and Abigail Adams would dine there with Lafayette's family and friends. These unpretentious "American dinners" were such a regular activity that invitations were preprinted in English, the language of choice at the gatherings.

Invitation to Benjamin Franklin for dinner with Lafayette, April 26, 1785.
New-York Historical Society