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.

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

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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 horsemanship, who accompanied him throughout the revolution.
While traveling to America to join "the insurgents," the 19-year-old Lafayette wrote to his pregnant wife. Tenderly conveying his love for her and their one-year-old daughter, his pain at their separation, and the details of his "dreary" voyage, he also expressed his inspiration in joining the American cause. "The welfare of America is intimately connected with the happiness of all mankind; she will become the respectable and safe asylum of virtue, integrity, tolerance, equality, and a peaceful liberty," he wrote.

Lafayette to his wife, Adrienne de Noailles de Lafayette [written on board La Victoire], May 30, June 7, and June 15, 1777. Cornell University, Kroch Library, Division of Rare Books and Manuscripts

In October 1778, Congress granted Lafayette’s request to return home on leave. This letter from Congress to King Louis XVI commends Lafayette on his service in the United States.

Congress to the King of France, October 21, 1778. New-York Historical Society

Granted a furlough, Lafayette journeyed home and on February 12, 1779, arrived in Paris, where he enjoyed a hero’s welcome. Nevertheless, as a formality for traveling to America against the French king’s orders, he briefly was placed under house arrest. The night before he was to emerge officially from his confinement, Lafayette met with John Adams and discussed French aid for the American cause. "It is certain," Adams began in a letter acknowledging the visit, "that a Loan of Money, is very much wanted…"

John Adams to Lafayette, Passy, France, February 21, 1779. New-York Historical Society

Passed over to command the French detachment to America, Lafayette nevertheless sailed ahead of the expeditionary forces to inform Washington confidentially of the happy news of French aid. Bearing a generous supply of provisions on the Hermione, Lafayette arrived in Boston, according to Abigail Adams, to "the ringing of Bells, firing [sic] of cannon, bon fires, etc." Anchored in the harbor, Lafayette wrote to Washington: "Here I am, My dear General, and in the Mist [sic] of the joy I feel in finding Myself again one of Your loving soldiers."

Lafayette to George Washington [written on board the frigate Hermione in Boston Harbor], April 27, 1780. Hubbard Collection, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College
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 very sorry for the loss of him, but I am very glad for you self. I wish you a very good health, and I am with great respect, your most devoted servant, Anastasie la Fayette.

June the 12th, 1784

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

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.
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