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# Friend from France: The Popular Image of the Marquis de Lafayette in Early America

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# Friend from France: The Popular Image of the Marquis de Lafayette in Early America

## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the impressions the Marquis de Lafayette made upon the American people during the American Revolution and his return tour in 1824. As someone who has admired Lafayette since I was young, I was aware of the fact that many locations are named after the general and that he plays a prominent role in shows such as the Broadway musical Hamilton. I wanted to study why Lafayette had such an impact on the American people, and why he has been memorialized in a positive manner. As a promoter of liberty, Lafayette was embraced by the colonists for his stubbornness and willingness to defend the American cause. Despite being unable to carry his ideals of liberty to France, Lafayette was remembered fondly by the American people and welcomed back fifty years after the Revolution to widespread acclaim. Although he was a foreigner, he was hailed as a hero and found eternal remembrance in locations that still carry his name.

## **Keywords**

Lafayette, American Revolution, Early America

## **Subject Categories**

Arts and Humanities | History | United States History

Friend from France: The Popular Image  
of the Marquis de Lafayette in Early America

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Thank you to my parents for instilling a love of history within me at an early age. When others would go to amusement parks and beaches, we found ourselves at living history museums and old villages. Without their support I would not be doing what I love today.

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## *Introduction*

When I was younger I did not possess many aspirations or interests besides a love of dragons and playing on the internet on my computer. I was quite content in my projected career path as a zookeeper as my scores on *Zoo Tycoon* can attest. My parents were, and remain to this day, fervent history buffs, and in between visits to various zoos and aquariums we found ourselves traveling to Boston and Washington D.C. for historic field trips. I found these museums and historical sites fascinating. Or, rather, I found the artifacts and replicas on display at these sites intriguing. I was just a young child, and the overall tactile experience during these visits proved far more revolutionary than any historical document. It was on one of our many excursions that we visited Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, arguably one of the most well-known living history museums in the United States. Of course I was amazed by the food, props, crafts and the buildings, but I found my life altered by a chance encounter with a man.

Well, not just a man. A revolutionary era general.

I was far too nervous to approach him, to ask the tales of his escapades, even though I knew deep down that he was just a reenactor playing a part. He told us stories about his life, the Revolution and George Washington. I knew he was an actor impersonating a historical figure, and yet as he jumped on his brown steed and raced down the cobblestone streets proclaiming the victory at Yorktown I felt as if I was caught up in the actual event, that I was one of those starry-eyed children that must have experienced his arrival so many years ago. This man, or rather the historical figure being portrayed, was the Marquis de Lafayette.

*Figure 1: The reenactor that portrayed the Marquis de Lafayette at Historic Williamsburg, Virginia when I visited as a child.*



Ever since I was a child the Marquis de Lafayette has captivated me; he was a young man who traveled far from his home in the pursuit of something greater, for an ideal in which he believed. It's hard to not be swept up in such a dramatic tale, even if it was bolstered for theatrical effect when I was just a child.

As I've grown and come to study history, I have remained fervently interested in the life of the Marquis de Lafayette. It is through my work that I have realized how much Lafayette really meant to the American people. Just as I was in awe of him that day in Williamsburg, so were the colonists and even George Washington entranced by this young French soldier. Historians today recognize Lafayette's influence, noting how striking it was that he was so loved by the American public. In his article, "America's Lafayette and Lafayette's America", Lloyd Kramer states that "Americans took to him more warmly than they did to any other foreigner during the war" (L. S. Kramer 1981). He was adored by George Washington, who often referred to him as "the son he never had" in his personal letters.

I seek to understand why the Marquis de Lafayette was so beloved, and how his popularity and image has persisted in American thought to this day. In order to fully appreciate Lafayette's impact, I will be examining his role in the American Revolution and his return to America in 1824, as well as the reception to his appearances.

## *Origins*

The Marquis de Lafayette was born on September 6, 1757 in Chavaniac-Lafayette, France. His full name, Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roche Gilbert du Motier, reflected his noble birth and cemented him as a member of his distinguished lineage. According to legend, Lafayette's ancestors had participated in the Crusades and the Hundred Years' War, with one Gilbert de Lafayette supposedly leading the army of Joan of Arc at the Battle of Orleans (Gaines 2007). Lafayette's father died when he was a little less than two years old, killed at the Battle of Minden by the British during the Seven Years' War. His mother passed in 1770, and at the young age of twelve Lafayette found himself an orphan. The young boy inherited a fortune of over 100,000 francs, a sum that placed him among some of the wealthiest French aristocrats. In 1771, at the age of 14, he joined the King's Black Musketeers and began attending the Grande Ecurie and Manège, a riding school at Versailles reserved for princes and courtiers (Gaines 2007). Despite his struggles, or perhaps because of them, the young Lafayette was imbued with a revolutionary spirit that was only fanned by his admission to the Masonic Military Lodge. During the 1700s, Masonic Lodges were one of the organizations responsible for spreading the ideals of the Enlightenment. Such ideals included championing the liberty of the individual and the formation of democratic governments (America n.d.).

At eighteen the young man came into contact with another member of the Masonic Lodge, the Duke of Gloucester, who spoke of the American cause against the British. Not only was Lafayette idealistic, but, as Sarah Vowell points out in her work *Lafayette and the Somewhat United States*, he likely held a personal vendetta against the British since the passing of his father (Vowell 2015). In 1776 French officers were sent to America and the young Lafayette begged to travel among them. He was enlisted, but no officers were sent when Britain learned of France's

plan. Nonetheless, Lafayette wanted to leave. He went into hiding from his father-in-law who disagreed with him and acquired a ship with his own money to travel to the colonies (Unger 2002).

So it was that the plucky Lafayette traveled to America on his own whim, landing near Charleston, South Carolina in June 1777. He was just nineteen years old. Desperate for European aid, especially from Britain's historic enemy of France, Lafayette was welcomed with open arms and commissioned as a Major General in the Continental Army (Forge. n.d.). It is worth noting that the general arrived to the colonies a year before France officially offered their assistance.

In only a short span of time, the young Lafayette had lost his parents, was commissioned into the royal service, and traveled to America. It was here on foreign soil where he would cement himself as permanent fixture within the American conscience.

### *Participation in the American Revolution*

Not long after Lafayette arrived in Philadelphia, he received an invitation from George Washington for a military order that would be followed by an assignment of a command. The young general was immediately ecstatic about his position, an excitement Washington would note with some embarrassment in a letter to Congress:

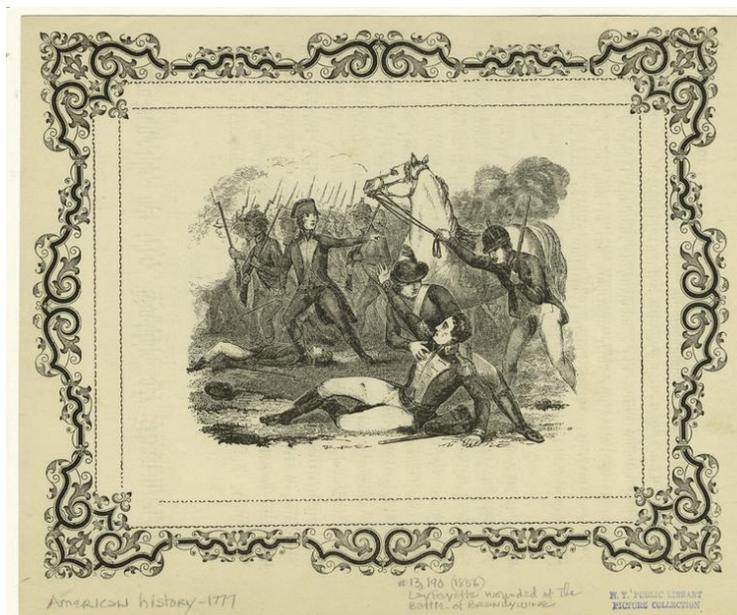
“...The Marquis de Lafayette...has misconceived the design of his appointment...he does not conceive his commission as merely honorary, but given with a view to command a division of this army. It is true...he is young and inexperienced...Soon as I shall think him fit for the command of a division, he shall be ready to enter upon the duties of it...” (Latzko 1936)

The young Frenchmen appeared overeager but soon proved himself by willingly risking his life for the revolutionary cause. During an early war council, the Marquis was the first to volunteer to be placed at the front line of combat when Washington proposed an act of resistance against Britain that stressed the need to fight even when the situation seemed hopeless. American officials were impressed with Lafayette’s bravery, and he was soon placed at the head of a march through Philadelphia by Washington’s side. The march was a staged display of might, meant to reassure the colonists while also to display the glory of the young Lafayette. His story was romantic to the American public – a French noble who abandoned the grandeur of the court to fight for American liberty (Latzko 1936). His public image granted him glowing admiration that was not typically extended to foreign visitors.

Lafayette’s welcome was in stark contrast with one of the other European aides to the Revolutionary cause Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, a Prussian nobleman who is credited with training the ragtag team of American troops. With no proper weaponry nor military experience, the American force would likely have floundered without his guidance. However, the Baron had a unique way of leadership, as he was not fluent in English. His broken English

often made it difficult for the troops to understand him, and if they ever made a mistake he was sure to swear at them in German and French and with the one English curse he did know: “Goddamn!” (Trickey n.d.) There is no mistaking Baron von Steuben’s devotion to the Revolutionary cause, as well as the effect he had on the inexperienced American troops, but as Thomas Fleming writes in *Washington’s Secret War: The Hidden History of Valley Forge*, the Baron’s reputation was that of “...an exotic character who was good for a laugh now and then” (Trickey n.d.).

Despite all this pomp, Lafayette was injured early in the Revolution, suffering from a bullet to the leg at the Battle of Brandywine in September 1777. While the young man was frustrated during his recuperation over his inability to help the army, Washington became closer to him in an attempt to restore him to health. In one letter to his wife, the Marquise Adrienne de Lafayette, the Marquis wrote that when Washington learned of his injury he urged medical attendants to “...care for me as though I were his son, for he loved me in the same way” (S. J. Idzerda, “To Adrienne de Naoilles de Lafayette, October 1, 1777.” 1977).



*Figure 2: An image of the wounded Lafayette at Brandywine. This event is noted as being the moment in which he and Washington truly became close friends (“Lafayette Wounded at the Battle of Brandywine.” 1856).*

However, Lafayette was stubborn and refused to wait for his wounds to heal before returning to the battlefield. He traveled to Valley Forge with a pronounced limp, deciding to sacrifice his health for the revolutionary cause even though the area was inhospitable and cold. The sight of a foreign nobleman returning to the field long before he was fully healed had a profound effect on the American troops. Where there may initially have been envy for his high position next to George Washington, there was now only admiration, and letters sent by militiamen found their way back home, inspiring the American public.

Lafayette continued to serve in inspiring ways, with reports stating that he led his troops against enemy Hessians with “true French fury” that captured the imagination (Latzko 1936). Additionally, Lafayette provided uniforms for all his troops using his own money. Quality military uniforms were difficult to obtain, and many soldiers in the American army were grossly unprepared with insufficient weaponry and clothing. Many would go barefoot or half clothed, even in freezing conditions. Lafayette not only provided sufficient warm clothes, but he paid for them out of his own pocket, a generous treatment that was applauded by the Americans. He paid his 1,200 troops using his own finances, as well (Latzko 1936).

Along the way, the young Frenchmen captured the heart of Washington, who possessed a “paternal affection” for the young and steadfast soldier (Latzko 1936). The depth of such affection is evident in their letters to one another, in which they repeatedly sought the other’s advice and recognition. The Marquis was determined to serve Washington to his fullest extent, writing that he hoped,

“...I should be able to be more useful in the present circumstance. My desire of deserving your satisfaction is stronger than ever, and everywhere you’ll employ me you can be certain of my trying every exertion in my power to succeed” (S. J. Idzerda, "To George Washington, Camp 30t, December 1777." 1977).

It was also clear that Lafayette's private intentions appeared to match his public devotion to the American case. In the same letter to Washington he confessed that:

"I am now fixed to your fate and I shall follow it and sustain it as well by my sword as by all means in my power" (S. J. Idzerda, "To George Washington, Camp 30t, December 1777." 1977).

In another letter to merchant and politician Henry Laurens, Lafayette felt free to express his opinions about the conduct of the war, seeing that he possessed,

"...(an) attachement for your cause, for yourself, for General Washington....I am with the most tender affection, the most warmest wishes for the liberty, happiness of your country, for the union of her sons, the succès of our cause, and your own satisfaction..." (S. J. Idzerda, "To Henry Laurens, Valley Forge, ca. January 5, 1778." 1977).

Lafayette remained a primary figure in the American army throughout the war, even though he often traveled back and forth between the colonies and France to handle various political issues. Nonetheless, he was present for the Siege of Yorktown in 1781, the encounter which effectively ended the American Revolution. French ships cornered General Cornwallis' British troops in the Chesapeake Bay, allowing for an allied victory over the British.

It was here that the Marquis faced a decision that further cemented his devotion to the American cause. François Joseph Paul de Grasse, the French admiral in command of the fleet, had ordered Lafayette to remain with him and not seek out Washington and Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, the Comte de Rochambeau. Such an action, de Grasse believed, would waste the opportune moment for the combined forces to face Cornwallis' troops. Lafayette was outranked by de Grasse, but he faced the situation with a calm that historian James R. Gaines describes as the sum of his experiences within America. For the first time Lafayette avoided battle; he was "...sobered by the demands of leadership, and devoted not only to the principles of

the Revolution but also to its leader...”, leading him to recognize that “...there was more at stake than his personal glory...” (Gaines 2007).

A rambunctious and rash young Frenchman was transformed through his experiences in America, and he would continue to demonstrate the skills he acquired in his own country’s revolution. However, the Revolution would also serve as an education to his own Republican beliefs – another reason why he was so admired by the American public.

### *Revolutionary Ideology*

Many historians agree that Lafayette was devoted to the cause of freedom before he joined the Revolutionary conflict, although his beliefs were further shaped by his experience in the colonies. In his memoirs he appeared intensely Republican, a supporter of government that is not a monarchy, portraying himself as an avid supporter of liberty. In 1779, he declared that the American Revolution was a major world event, as it was the “final struggle of liberty” (L. S. Kramer 1981). However, it is important to realize that most of his memoirs were composed in the late 1770s and early 1780s, allowing him ample time for reflection of his experiences (Gottschalk 1950).

In *Lafayette between the American and French Revolution*, Louis Gottschalk states that the published memoirs of Lafayette were often heavily edited by men who, in Gottschalk’s own words, sought to “...give the distinct impression that he was a full-fledged republican even before he first escaped from frustration in France to seek a glorious career in America” (Gottschalk 1950). Gottschalk claims that Lafayette was not a Republican, at least in the general sense of the word. The general was not a believer in popular, kingless government, and until the French revolution he had barely studied enlightened ideals (Gottschalk 1950). He believed that France should have a constitution to restrict the power of monarchy, but he was not quite as radical as some American revolutionaries who wished to separate from a king altogether. In fact, Gottschalk even argues that Lafayette did not originally travel to America to fight for liberty; to him the “American cause” was breaking up the British Empire, nothing more (Gottschalk 1950).

The ignorance of Lafayette in revolutionary terminology is also noted by Janet Polasky. The young soldier explained in a letter to his wife that he left France because he felt trapped by

the “slavery” that others imposed upon him and had to answer the beckoning of “...liberty, which called me to glory” (Polasky 2015). To him, slavery was the monotony of aristocratic duties, and “liberty his duty.” It was only in America that he learned new meanings for these terms (Polasky 2015).

Additionally, Kramer notes that as a visitor in America, Lafayette was aware of the imperfections of liberty – flaws not always discussed in literature written later in his life that seek to paint a perfect picture of America. He was not so blinded that he could not notice the fragmentation between the rebels and Loyalists. If America served as his lesson in Republican beliefs, it also served as a warning against the division of quarrels between revolutionaries. In a letter to the king’s first minister, Lafayette even confided that “the individuals who constitute the body of a republican administration have the passions, viewpoints, and prejudices of private persons”, suggesting that they allowed their beliefs to obscure the larger issue of running a nation (L. S. Kramer 1981).

Despite his relatively recent education in the lessons of liberty and his own recognition of its limitations, Lafayette appears to have fully embraced the cause of the American revolution. In a letter to his family, the Marquis exclaimed:

“I am content! America is assured of her independence. Mankind has won its cause; Liberty is no longer homeless on the earth” (Latzko 1936).

In just a few sentences, Lafayette not only affirms his devotion to American liberty, but also suggests that the Revolution will have effects far beyond its borders and that it reflects the cause of all mankind. The Marquis would carry this belief with him as he returned to France, where his own country would participate in their own revolution.

### *The Society of the Cincinnati*

Lafayette was keen to preserve the lessons of the Revolution and the memory of American independence and participated in a society established by Revolutionary troops. This patriotic organization, the Society of the Cincinnati, was formed in 1783 by French officers and members of the Continental Army to promote continued camaraderie between both groups (Cincinnati, "About the Society." n.d.). George Washington charged Lafayette with selecting French officers to be initiated into the society, a decision that took the Marquis six months to make (Latzko 1936). Constituent societies were formed in all thirteen colonies, with the final group, the French Society, established in 1784. Lafayette was one of the most influential founding members of this group, but it was abolished only ten years later during the French Revolution (Cincinnati, "SOCIÉTÉ DES CINCINNATI DE FRANCE." n.d.).

Upon his return to the United States in 1824, Lafayette gave a speech to the Society and was presented with a enameled badge of the Society of the Cincinnati that had been created for Washington. The object has been in Lafayette's family line ever since, and only recently was put up for auction in the United States by one of his ancestors. Arnaud Meunier du Houssoy, the man who is relinquishing the badge, states that it has been in his family for 180 years but that is truly belongs to George Washington and America (Collins 2007). It is interesting that his medal was preserved by Lafayette's family and kept safe for nearly two hundred years.

## *Lafayette in France*

Although this paper's focus is not upon Lafayette's role in the French Revolution, it is important to recognize how his experiences from 1789 to 1799 altered perceptions of him among the French population. Lafayette sailed back home on July 1, 1784 and carried with him the lessons he had learned in America and the ideas that he hoped to develop to a further extent in France. He established an image of himself as an advocate of natural rights, mostly due to his role in supporting the National Assembly. He also planned to introduce a "Declaration of Rights", a document that would list "...the imprescriptible rights of man and the citizen" (L. Kramer 1999).

Lafayette's views of revolutionary principles may have been held by others in France, but it was he who was vocal in adopting an explicit statement of freedom. However, the Marquis seemed to have certain difficulties implementing his ideas. Kramer notes that Lafayette seemed to show more interest in stating individual rights rather than creating specific provisions for them (L. Kramer 1999). Instead of supporting a specific governmental system, he was more focused upon the recognition of rights first. However, he did support a constitutional monarchy for France. During this revolutionary period, Lafayette also held a strong allegiance to the National Guard. He believed that the Guard would protect the citizens of France and reconcile differences to achieve the order by which citizens could express their rights freely (L. Kramer 1999).

However, in his efforts to emulate American revolutionary beliefs Lafayette ultimately lost the support of the French people. In America, the young general had learned to mediate between various political and cultural electorates. However, in France Lafayette was unable to mediate successfully. The Marquis' refusal to support sides incurred the wrath of multiple

groups as a result. Royalists disliked his support of revolutionary rights, which they saw as humiliating the king, while Republicans argued that his membership in the National Guard and cooperation with the king showed his preference for old regime power (L. Kramer 1999).

Lafayette became increasingly vulnerable due to the position he found himself in – surrounded by those who did not accept his mediation. His downfall came as he watched what he had fought for crumbling around him. On April 18, 1791 he was disgusted to see Parisians preventing the royal family from exercising their rights to practice their religion. Frustrated, he resigned from his position in the Guard. By the following year Lafayette had been defeated; power had passed to radicals in the Legislative Assembly and he fled the country, finding himself exiled soon thereafter.

Seven months later Lafayette wrote of his struggles, which had troubled him deeply.

“I wanted to go die in Paris. But I feared that such an example of popular ingratitude would only discourage future promoters of liberty. So I left.”

## *Return to America*

The return of Lafayette to the now United States was not unexpected, but it did occur at a time in which a different political party controlled the government. During the Revolution the Federalists comprised the first official American party, with many of the founding fathers, including George Washington, counting themselves within its ranks. Federalists favored industry and strong centralized government and were regarded as an elitist entity. They also opposed the French Revolution and supported acts meant to prevent French political activities in America. However, Federalists did establish legal and judicial systems and encouraged the industrial evolution of the colonies. By 1814, the Federalists had largely lost power to the Democratic-Republicans, which had begun as the Jeffersonian Republican Party. This group tended to favor state rights and a strict interpretation of the Constitution (University 2017). Democratic-Republican James Monroe ascended to the presidency in 1817 and sought to remove the political divides that had arisen from the War of 1812, a conflict often labeled the “second war of independence.” The “Era of Good Feelings” which followed focused upon unifying the American people.

President Monroe invited Lafayette to come and visit the United States in 1824, when the Marquis was in a much different position than he was when he first came to America. His vast inheritance had been depleted in the cause of American independence, with the remaining amount confiscated by the French government due to his participation in revolutionary activities (Klamkin 1975). He had been disgraced and hated by his own countrymen. Despite all this, the prospect of Lafayette returning to the United States was welcomed enthusiastically by most. The issue of his finances, however, remained a looming problem for any travel. Americans were

keen to aide in Lafayette's travel, and an article in the Washington D.C. *National Journal* from August 5, 1824 issued a cry for help to relieve the dear Marquis of his burden:

“It is understood that he will be at no expense. He ought to be at no expense anywhere. It is hoped that he will not be permitted to expend one cent in the United States, - the people have proclaimed him to be their guest; Let him be treated therefore, as such” (Klamkin 1975).

This sentiment was echoed by the entire nation, as Lafayette was granted free tolls and boat rides, and was even accompanied by many “gentlemen” at each location he visited. That is not to say the trip was not lucrative – many stores took advantage of Lafayette's visit to sell themed objects meant to both celebrate his return and profit from the patriotic fervor.

It may have been a deliberate choice by President Monroe to extend the invitation to Lafayette to foster the “Era of Good Feelings.” Lafayette's visit could help Monroe's efforts to inspire unity, because he had been beloved by Americans despite his French citizenship. Of course, Lafayette was not revered by all; he was an aristocrat who believed in a constitutional monarchy, which may have inspired the ire of Democratic-Republicans, and was vocally anti-slavery, which surely was met with annoyance in the South. However, these concerns were not primarily raised in documents or newspapers I have studied, which may suggest that, for a time, people seemed truly united and joyful over the general's return. It also may have been ungrateful to express displeasure with Lafayette. As the Hancock Gazette in Maine wrote in their July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1824 issue, it was only proper that Americans partake in an “enlightened homage” and act as a “grateful people”. Lafayette was remembered as a man to be honored, so much so that even “veterans, just sinking into their grave...will join in the cry of thanksgiving and praise” (Hancock Gazette and Penobscot Patriot 1824). In such an environment it's likely that those

who disliked Lafayette were discouraged from publicly condemning him, and perhaps even pushed aside their beliefs to participate in the celebrations.

Lafayette arrived in New York in July 1824 to much pomp, with his ship's escorts proudly displaying pennants and flags celebrating the event. About two hundred thousand people waited eagerly on the shore for his arrival, and threw flowers and wreaths as his carriage traveled to City Hall. Upon arriving at City Hall the Marquis was treated to a grand banquet and a balloon was released to honor his visit. New York, for all intents and purposes, set the precedent for the rest of the stops on Lafayette's tour (Klamkin 1975).

For thirteen months, Lafayette ventured to all twenty-four states, beginning in New York before traveling to Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore. Lafayette visited the tomb of his dear friend George Washington at his beloved Mount Vernon and was even honored at the site of the Battle of Brandywine. He also visited Thomas Jefferson at Monticello and James Madison at Montpelier, solidifying his continued bond with the United States through its founding fathers (S. J. Idzerda 1989). He was met with ceremonies at each location, where he was honored with speeches. In Lexington he was praised by the American people:

“Permit us, Sir, in common with grateful millions, to express our earnest solicitations that a life...may be preserved for many years to come, a blessing and an honor to mankind; and when you, Sir...shall have ceased from your earthly labors...may (your) children rise up to bless your memory and emulate your virtues” (“Salem: Tuesday Morning, Sept. 7. Gen. Lafayette” 1824).

During the second half of the trip, Lafayette ventured south to South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and New Orleans. He then traveled west along the Mississippi River to Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Albany. New England was his next destination, and on June 15, 1825 he witnessed a cornerstone-laying ceremony at Bunker Hill. The Marquis then remained in the capital until September 9, when he departed once more for France (S. J. Idzerda 1989).

The journey across America was arduous, with the elderly Marquis constantly traveling from one place to another. However, he seemed to keep up his energy despite of his age. Not only was his perseverance admirable, but his speeches were extremely popular because he could read, write, and speak in English. This skill endeared him to the American people even further, as they realized they could have conversations with him in their own tongue. And, as Monroe may have intended, Lafayette's visit had an outstanding effect of unifying the country. The question of Presidential elections and politics alike were overshadowed in newspapers by the rejoicing over Lafayette's visit. The Marquis himself noticed the effect his visit had on the American people, commenting in a letter to his family that:

“I have the satisfaction of thinking my presence has effected many reconciliations between political parties; men, who had not spoken to each other for more than twenty years, have made arrangements together and have invited one another to entertainments in our honor, and revive together their common memories of the Revolution” (S. J. Idzerda 1989).

As suggested in his letter, Lafayette's visitation generated a surge of patriotism alongside the harmony he inspired. Politicians such as Edward Livingston, a jurist and statesman, praised Lafayette for his presence, which “...develop(ed) throughout this happy land the latent fire of republican sentiment” (S. J. Idzerda 1989). For a few months the United States were transported back to the Revolution, a moment of unparalleled patriotic and Republican fervor. Although the war placed a heavy burden upon the fledgling nation, it was a still the moment of birth, a beginning that could only be achieved through the efforts of a people pursuing a similar goal of liberty, even if it manifested itself in different ways. Such a monumental effort united the colonies in a unique and special way that was not to be repeated.

Lafayette's return reminded the Americans of this unity, harking back to a time in which the Marquis was powerful and perceived as an emboldened young man who traveled across the

sea to fight for American beliefs. His return touched Americans in a way they had not been touched in years, especially considering that many of the revolutionary figures had died by this time. Lafayette's glory may have faded away in France, but in America his light could not wane – not when he carried the memory of the Revolution with him.

## *Lafayette and Slavery*

One of the greatest questions of American history is how so many, including the Founding Fathers, were able to reconcile the ownership of slaves with the values of the American Revolution. As Polasky mentioned in her own work, Lafayette “escaped” from what he viewed as slavery in France – that is, the monotony of aristocratic duties. However, in America he experienced a different kind of slavery, a bondage of human beings that he could not align with his own revolutionary beliefs. He was not the only foreigner who had difficulty accepting this; Polasky writes that many traveling revolutionaries were exposed to other ways of thinking, and therefore challenged the “perpetuation of slavery in an era of freedom” (Polasky 2015). Lafayette was no exception and was anti-slavery.

In the late 1780s, before the Revolutionary War had formally concluded, the Marquis had even suggested an experiment to Washington himself. Lafayette wished to purchase land with Washington where the former’s slaves could work as free tenants. In 1785, the Marquis purchased a plantation in French Guiana under the stipulation that none of the slaves could be sold or exchanged. Washington rejoiced in this experiment, calling it “...a striking evidence of the benevolence of your Heart”, and Lafayette himself expressed his devotion to the cause of anti-slavery with the words: ““If it be a wild scheme, I had rather be mad in this way, than to be thought wise in the other task”” (Vernon n.d.).

Additionally, Lafayette was outspoken in his beliefs, a trait that may have made him unpopular among some Americans but was embraced by many others. A newspaper article published in Baltimore in 1834 openly mentions the Marquis’ efforts to abolish slavery in France after his participation in the American Revolution (“Life of General Lafayette.” 1834).

In his return to the United States, Lafayette faced a country that was still debating the issue of slavery – a debate that would turn to war forty years after his visit. Displays of slavery were regulated in some states during this grand tour, perhaps to cater to Lafayette’s values or even to prevent slaves from being inspired to revolt by the Marquis’ own beliefs. Newspapers in Fredericksburg, Virginia proclaimed that “Owners of slaves are respectfully solicited to keep their slaves within their lots. All colored people are warned that they are not to appear on any of the streets through which the procession will pass” (Klamkin 1975).

Lafayette’s traveling companions seemed to share an aversion to slavery, as well. During his stay in Virginia, Lafayette’s secretary Auguste Levasseur noted that the town of Norfolk shamed him, as most of its slave owners were French emigrants from St. Domingo. The treatment of slaves was so cruel that it rightfully upset Levasseur and most likely Lafayette by extension (Klamkin 1975).

Lafayette, however, was unable to make direct attacks on slavery while touring the states. As historian Lloyd Kramer argues, it would be difficult for the Marquis to participate in public outcries because he felt he had to return the praise he received from the American people. Instead Lafayette settled for “limited symbolic gestures” such as visiting the African Free School in New York. While en route to the Carolinas he even stopped at the cabins of Virginian slaves and visited local free blacks (L. Kramer 1999). In New Orleans he also met with a delegation of blacks and addressed them thusly:

“I have often during the War of Independence...seen African blood shed with honor in our ranks for the cause of the United States” (L. Kramer 1999).

Although he did not outwardly condemn slavery, Lafayette’s actions expressed a clear message of racial tolerance and reminded Americans that Africans had served alongside them in

the Revolution. If he could not critique the post revolutionary endurance of slavery he would instead remind Americans of the role blacks played in securing the country's freedom. His interest in the black population, specifically that of the South, may have influenced the political culture at the time by recalling the shared revolutionary heritage all races shared.

### *The Material Culture of Lafayette's Return*

It is here that I wish to pause to stress the importance of examining material history. It is my belief that physical items provide a deeper understanding of the past that could be otherwise overlooked. The fact that these materials were created, distributed, and bought presents an important understanding of the time period in question. In this case, it demonstrates just how significant Lafayette was to the American people. Memorabilia commemorating his return were distributed widely in the 1820s, and many items have been preserved to this day. Such care is a testament to the enduring memory of the Marquis.

These items' production perhaps can be better understood by comparing them with objects sold today at large events such as concerts, parades, and sporting events. Items that can be used or displayed are made in response to popular demand. Lafayette's visit was an overwhelmingly popular event, and souvenirs such as fans, buttons, bowls, and plates were sold with the general's image to create a profit (S. J. Idzerda 1989). Such small objects were capable of being transported and consumed effectively. The fact that such memorabilia has been preserved, however, adds another dimension to the importance to them.

One blog managed by art conservationists, "Inside the Conservator's Studio", points out that consumers often have an emotional connection to their memorabilia. These objects are obtained during an emotional moment in peoples' lives, moments they know they may never experience again. As a result, people feel the need to preserve them for the future, so that others can learn about this moment in time. This conservator's blog notes that these items are more likely to be cared for than other objects because of the emotional connection their owners have with them (Spicer n.d.). That may be a reason why memorabilia concerning Lafayette's return

are conserved to this day, some even in such abundance that they appear in auction catalogs and websites (such as the card deck pictured below) (1824-24 pack of "Lafayette" playing cards by Jazaniah Ford n.d.).



*Figure 3: This pack of playing cards featuring the Marquis de Lafayette was issued by Jazaniah Ford, the first playing-card manufacturer in Boston.*

Memorabilia today is often seen as decorative goods, objects that hold meaning through their displays. However, much of the products produced during Lafayette's return tour also served a practical purpose. For example, the cameo ring pictured in Figure 4 was not only a fashion statement with its golden body, but it also displayed the Marquis' image carved into its surface. Therefore, this was not only a stylish accessory but carried with it the image, and likewise the lessons, of the Marquis de Lafayette. What is more telling, however, is the fact that this ring was originally made for a man and was resized to fit a woman's finger instead. This is a testament to the lasting remembrance of memorabilia and demonstrates how the emotional connection contained within an object was passed on from one person to another. In a similar

fashion, the memory of Lafayette was passed on, as well ("The Marquis de Lafayette Collections" n.d.).



*Figure 4: An oval cameo ring displaying a bust portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette. Likely produced during his return tour in 1824.*

Personal accessories were not the only items mass produced for consumption during Lafayette's return. Ceramic wares were also created and would have served both an aesthetic and functional purpose. The pearlware mug pictured in Figure 5 is a representation of both intentions – to be attractive while also serving some functional purpose. Multiple types of kitchen ware and utensils were produced by artisans. Those pictured were produced by Washington D.C. based china merchant Robert H. Miller. This mug is specifically pearlware, a type of ceramics that was popular until the 1820s (Evolution of English Household Tableware n.d.). It was not truly china, as pearlware was developed to substitute for the lack of this particular porcelain. However, the transfer print design makes it quite a believable substitute.

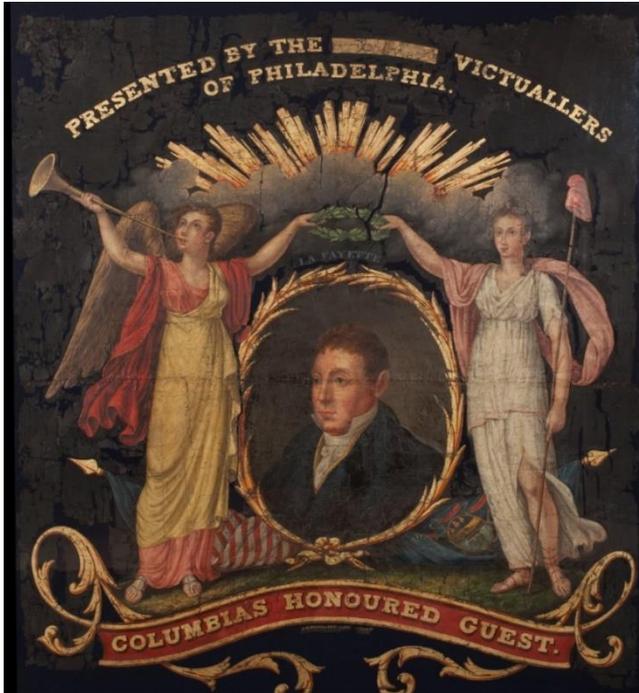


*Figure 5: A pearlware mug showcasing two engravings. One side is titled “Lafayette crowned at Yorktown” and displays him crowned with laurels given to him in 1824. The other side portrays “Cornwallis Resigning his Sword at York Town, Oct. 18, 1781”; a reminder of Lafayette’s contribution to the Revolutionary cause (Lafayette and Cornwallis Mug 1835).*

One side of the mug features Lafayette crowned at Yorktown, displaying him in an ethereal fashion as he is flanked by beautiful women and rays of light. He seems to be elevated to a holy level of admiration, a kind of savior to the American people. The victories of the Marquis are represented on the other side of the mug, which portrays General Cornwallis surrendering at Yorktown (City of Alexandria n.d.). This harks back to the message of the revolution that Lafayette carried with him. With this mug the owner kept that memory alive while also contributing to the consumption of memorabilia produced during this historic time.

Items were also produced for purely celebratory purposes. Examples of such objects are preserved in museums to this day (Lafayette Parade Banner

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/collection/lafayette-parade-banner>).



*Figure 6: A banner created by Philadelphia artist John Archibald Woodside in 1824 to commemorate Lafayette's return to Yorktown. The "Victuallers of Philadelphia" refers to the butchers who carried the banner during the procession.*

When I was searching for thesis topics, my professors suggested that I visit the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia. Upon visiting their website I discovered the banner pictured above (Figure 6), which influenced me to write on the topic of Lafayette. Not only is this banner a lovely example of American art, but it also echoes previously established themes regarding the importance of Lafayette in images. This banner, created by Philadelphia-based artist John Archibald Woodside, recalls the holy imagery pictured on the pearlware mug. Lafayette is labeled as an "honored guest" and is wreathed by a crown and rays of light. Two women stand by his side triumphantly announcing his arrival. The sight of this banner no doubt inspired awe from all those who witnessed it in the procession and reminded them of the influence the man they were celebrating possessed.

### *Lafayette Today*

The memory of Lafayette remains alive today in the names of towns, highways, colleges, and even natural sites. There are over thirty towns in the United States that take their name from the Marquis, such as Lafayette, Louisiana, and Fayetteville, North Carolina, the latter holding the distinction of being one of the locations he visited during his return tour (Richard 2014).

Lafayette College in Pennsylvania was established in 1826, and nearly a century later, in 1917, a monument honoring the Marquis was built in New York City. Other locations, such as Mount Lafayette in New Hampshire, were named to honor the general. In Washington D.C. there is a Lafayette Square, a public park located north of the White House. It is not an exaggeration to say that these places would not be named after an historical figure if he had not been incredibly influential upon the American people.

Lafayette was even honored in death. In 1834, President Andrew Jackson ordered that the Marquis be afforded the same funeral honors as George Washington. Gun salutes were fired from military posts and ships, and flags hung at half-mast for over a month to honor the deceased general. Even Congress mourned, hanging black in their chambers (Clary 2007).

It is certain that many people in the present day do not realize the impact Lafayette had, nor why these locations are named in his honor. However, that does not change the fact that those who endowed these sites with their names held the Marquis in high regard and likely hoped he would be remembered fondly by the country he helped defend.

## *Conclusion*

Lafayette could not have known the impact he would have had upon the American imagination when he first set foot in Charleston, South Carolina. He was an idealistic young man yearning for adventure and eager to be a part of something greater than himself. He pursued the cause of liberty in a foreign land, befriended the founding fathers and assisted in the birth of a new nation. His stubbornness, bravery, and sheer devotion to liberty blurred the divide of the Atlantic Ocean, so much so that he was adopted as an American hero despite his French citizenship. This much is shown by the memorabilia produced during his return tour, as well as his lasting memorialization in American sites and schools to this day.

As a figure of great renown his return tour stirred the hearts of the American people, reminding them of the liberty and republicanism they had fought for. Much like me when I was a child, wide-eyed and amazed at this stranger, Americans fell in love with this Frenchman who endeared himself to their cause. This love was portrayed in their writings and creations, and persist to this day in what is preserved.

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