

Remarks of Alan Hoffman at Lewis Wharf on May 2, 2015

We are gathered here today to commemorate Lafayette's arrival at this very spot on April 28, 1780 aboard a new French frigate, *L'Hermione*, and it is mete and just that we do so because there is a direct, unassailable causal connection between this event and, 18 months later, the allied victory at Yorktown.

The story starts with the Battle of Lexington, where the first shot was fired, the Battle of Concord and the Battle of Bunker Hill.

In his oration on the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill, Daniel Webster testified to the significance of this great watershed of our Revolution. He said:

“The battle of Bunker Hill was attended with the most important effects beyond its immediate result as a military engagement. It created at once a state of open, public war ... The appeal now lay to the sword, and the only question was, whether the spirit and the resources of the people would hold out, till the object should be accomplished. Nor were its consequences confined to our own country.”

Then he turned to Lafayette, the Nation's Guest who was on the 10th month of his 13-month Farewell Tour of America. Lafayette – the guest of honor – the last surviving Major General of the Continental Army – had helped to lay the cornerstone of the monument and was seated in an arm-chair in front of the survivors of the Battle of

Bunker Hill, other revolutionary veterans, a cordon of exquisitely dressed ladies and a crowd of 15,000 in an amphitheater constructed for the occasion at the foot of the Hill. Another 30,000 stood at the summit. Looking squarely at Lafayette, Webster said:

“Information of these events, circulating through Europe, at length reached the ears of one who hears me. He has not forgotten the emotion, which the fame of Bunker Hill, and the name of Warren, excited in his youthful breast.”

Webster then addressed Lafayette directly stating, in part, that “Heaven saw fit to ordain that the electric spark of liberty should be conducted through you, from the New World to the Old.”

Confirmation of Webster’s statement about the effect of the early Battles of the American Revolution on the youthful – he was still a teenager – Lafayette is found in Jared Spark’s writings. The great Washington biographer interviewed Lafayette in France in 1828. Lafayette told him that he was first inspired to join the American cause at a dinner given in honor of the Duke of Gloucester, the brother of George III, at camp in Metz, France. The Duke, who sided with the Colonists against the policy of George III and his ministers, had recently received dispatches from the Colonies, which he shared with his table companions. Documentary evidence places the Duke’s continental tour in August of 1775, in time for him to have received reports of Lexington and Concord and of the courageous determination of the insurgents and the incredible losses that the British, particularly the officer corps, had suffered on the heights of Charlestown.

Sparks quotes Lafayette as follows: “the cause seemed to me just and noble, from the representations of the duke himself; and before I left the table the thought came into my head, that I would go to America and offer my services to a people who were struggling for freedom and independence. From that hour I could think of nothing but this enterprise, and I resolved to go to Paris to make further inquiries.”

The rest, as they say, is history.

Lafayette, 19-years old, came to America in 1777, joined the Continental Army as a Major General. He served in the Battle of the Brandywine, part of the British Army’s successful campaign to take Philadelphia, where he was wounded, at Monmouth Courthouse in NJ and in the RI Campaign in August of 1778 before returning to France, on furlough. Lafayette departed our shores from Boston on the *USS Alliance* on January 11, 1779. In France, he rejoined the French Army. Because his reputation in America had preceded him and he was considered the expert on the war in America, Lafayette had complete access to Vergennes and Maurepas, the foreign and prime ministers, and he used this access to bombard the ministers with ideas to advance the American cause. Maurepas groused that Lafayette would sell all the furniture at Versailles to help the American cause. Specifically, in writing and orally, Lafayette lobbied for a French Expeditionary Force to be based in America.

The leading 19th century American biographer of Lafayette, Charlemagne Tower, Jr. wrote this about the July 18, 1779 memorial that Lafayette sent to Vergennes in which he fleshed out his ideas for a French Expeditionary Force to be based in America:

“This document is one of great importance in the history of our country, and it had a far-reaching influence upon the destinies of the United States. It was the culminating point of La Fayette’s intercession, as it was the embodiment of his sentiments of friendship and of gratitude toward us shown by his unalterable purpose to help us. It represents, beyond doubt, his greatest service to America. It was the starting-point of the series of events which led up to the surrender of the British army under Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown. The memorial was carefully studied by M. de Vergennes, upon whom it made a favorable impression immediately, and it was submitted by him to the Premier, M. de Maurepas, who also approved of the general tenor of the proposition.”

An early 20th century historian, James Breck Perkins, author of France in the American Revolution, gave this title to the Chapter in his book about Lafayette’s role in 1779 and 1780 in lobbying the ministers: “Lafayette to the Rescue.”

Thus it was that in March 1780 Lafayette was dispatched back to America to report to Washington that the French were coming.

From aboard the *Hermione* “at the entrance to the Boston Harbor,” (actually Marblehead), he wrote Washington on Thursday, April 27, 1780: “I have affairs of the

utmost importance that I should communicate to you alone.” He disembarked from the *Hermione* at Boston on April 28 at this very spot, General Hancock’s Wharf, and spent several days in Boston before travelling to Morristown, NJ by land where he imparted the news to Washington on May 10 – the French Expeditionary Force under General Rochambeau would be dispatched to America’s shores.

Rochambeau arrived with his 5,000-man Army and squadron of ships in July of 1780 at Newport, Rhode Island. In early 1781, Lafayette was sent to Virginia and engaged the British under Cornwallis in the Spring and Summer, ultimately entrapping the 7,000 man British Army at Yorktown. These operations became known as Lafayette’s Virginia Campaign. In the summer of 1781, what is now a National Historic Trail, the Washington Rochambeau Revolutionary Route, saw Rochambeau’s and Washington’s Armies join Lafayette’s troops in Virginia and the French West Indian Fleet under the Count de Grasse, which had blockaded the York River, for the successful siege of Yorktown. The Franco-American victory at Yorktown ended major combat and led directly to the Treaty of Paris in 1783, which confirmed the independence of the United States of America.

So, if you connect the dots, they go from Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill through Lafayette, the *L’Hermione*, Rochambeau, the Washington Rochambeau Revolutionary Route, DeGrasse, Yorktown and the independence of the United States of America.

Thus, you can see it is more than fitting that we are gathered on this hallowed ground to celebrate Lafayette, the *Hermione*, the French Expeditionary Force, the W3R National Historic trail and the contributions of France and its sons to the success of our War of Independence.