

Marie Joseph de Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, French officer and statesman.
1830. By Joseph Court.

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AN ADOPTED HERO,

On the heels of *Lafayette: Lessons in Leadership from the Idealist General*, his new biography of the Marquis de Lafayette, alum and journalist Marc Leepson tells the story of the famed French general's integral role in the Revolutionary War and in the life of George Washington.

An idealistic, 19-year-old French aristocrat arrived on American shores 235 years ago, intent on fighting the British in the American Revolution. Two years later, he departed a hero whose battle-tested zeal for freedom and whose spirit and devotion engendered a lifelong friendship with George Washington.

It was a bond between the Marquis de Lafayette and Washington that carried over to the early years of Washington's namesake university in the capital, and even into the 20th century when GW renamed a residence hall in Lafayette's honor.

Born Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier de La Fayette, the young Frenchman arrived in this country in 1777. He soon bonded with the middle-aged Gen. Washington. Lafayette had never known his father, who was killed by the British in 1759 at the Battle of Minden, and Washington grew to fill that void. Washington, who never had biological children, for the rest of his life considered Lafayette his all-but-adopted son.

As a major general in the Continental Army, Lafayette was a key player in the Revolution. He fought at the battles of Brandywine (where he was wounded), Monmouth Court House, and Rhode Island, and in the Virginia campaign leading to Yorktown. The Frenchman won the hearts of the

American people for his bravery and acumen on the battlefield—as well as for his ardent devotion to the American cause and the freedoms it stood for. Lafayette—along with his wife, Adrienne—also was an ardent abolitionist.

Americans were particularly taken by the fact that Lafayette volunteered to serve without pay in the Continental Army. The Marquis (one of the richest young men in France) had paid for his own ship to bring him to these shores. Once he arrived, Lafayette used his own funds to buy uniforms, food, ammunition, and other military materiel for his men. He even returned to France in 1779 to help persuade King Louis XVI to send an expeditionary force to fight the British, which he did. It's extremely doubtful that the Americans could have defeated the British without the help of the French army and navy.

Flash forward to 1824. Lafayette, in his 67th year, was all but destitute, having lost nearly his entire fortune during the French Revolution. That summer he accepted an invitation from the U.S. Congress and his old friend President James Monroe to visit the United States. Lafayette sailed on an American merchant ship, the *Cadmus*, which left Le Havre on July 13, 1824. He made the trip with his son (George Washington Lafayette), with a valet, and with Auguste Levasseur, his secretary. Levasseur would keep

AN ADOPTED SON

BY MARC LEEPSON, BA '67, MA '71



and publish a detailed account of the visit, and send reports back home to French newspapers.

The ship sailed into New York Harbor Aug. 15. As cannon thundered from the aptly named Fort Lafayette, Levasseur wrote, “the news of Lafayette’s arrival spread quickly into the vast city of New York, and the bay was already covered with boats, which were carrying a crowd of citizens, who were rushing to Staten Island to address him these first greetings, this welcome, which was enthusiastically repeated afterwards by the entire Nation.”

The whole nation did seemingly spill over with enthusiasm for the Marquis de Lafayette throughout his 13-month, 6,000-mile visit to all 24 American states. He received raucous, highly charged hero’s welcomes in city after city and state after state as tens of thousands lined roads and city streets, shouted his name, and sang his praises at banquets, breakfasts, dinners, receptions, and balls. Governors greeted him effusively in the state capitals. Lafayette’s fellow Masons put on banquets for him virtually everywhere he went, as did the Society of the Cincinnati, of which he was a founding member.

Lafayette went to Boston and many other cities and towns in Massachusetts, where he met with John Adams and took part in 50th-anniversary commemorations of the Battle of Bunker Hill in June 1825. He made two visits to the Brandywine battlefield. He paid his respects at Mount Vernon. He took part in ceremonies at Yorktown Oct. 19, 1824, the anniversary of the British surrender. He met with Andrew Jackson in Nashville and at the Hermitage. He made a poignant visit in November 1824 to an ailing Thomas Jefferson at Monticello. Lafayette also visited Charleston, S.C., New Orleans, St. Louis, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, among other

places. Everywhere he went Lafayette proclaimed his love for the United States and for the republican ideals it stood for.

Lafayette spent most of November and December 1824 in Washington. During their time in the city, Lafayette and his small entourage were treated like visiting royalty. Wildly popular on Capitol Hill, Lafayette was the guest of honor at a reception in the U.S. Senate on Dec. 9. The following day, the Frenchman became the first foreigner to address a joint session of both houses of Congress.

As was his wont, Lafayette spoke passionately and reverently about the country he admired greatly, reflecting as he did so on his first visit to the new nation since a six-month return trip he had made in 1784.

Lafayette pointed out the “immense improvements, the admirable communications, the prodigious creations” he observed, and spoke of “the grandeur and prosperity of those happy United States, who, at the same time they nobly secure the complete assertion of American independence, reflect, on every part of the world, the light of a far superior political civilization.” He also sang the praises of our “national love of liberty,” the result, he said, “of a virtuous resistance to oppression, and institutions founded on the rights of man, and the republican principle of self-government.”

(Above) Valley Forge—Washington & Lafayette, engraved by Henry Bryan Hall, after Alonzo Chappel. New York: Johnson, Fry & Company, 1856. Collection of the Society of the Cincinnati. Lafayette and Washington stand with the American soldiers at Valley Forge during the Revolutionary War in 1777-78. The British had forced American troops out of major cities and into the countryside, where they had to endure harsh winter conditions. (above right) General Lafayette at the Anniversary of the Battle of York Town, Oct. 19, 1824, by William Russell Birch (1755-1834) after Ary Scheffer (1795-1858). Enamel on copper, ca. 1824-1834.

Lafayette and his entourage were the guests of honor on the evening of Dec. 14 at the Washington Theatre for a “gala performance,” as one newspaper put it, of a play based on his life. After the show, Secretary of State (and future President) John Quincy Adams hosted a party for the Marquis and company at his house.

Earlier in his Washington stay Lafayette had taken a tour of the city’s newest institution of higher learning, Columbian College, which had been founded in 1821—and in 1904 would be renamed in honor of Lafayette’s surrogate father. The college, Levasseur wrote in his journal, “founded a short time ago, contains as yet only a very small number of students. The choice of director and of professors presages a brilliant future for it...”

Lafayette also was taken by the college—so much so that he accepted an invitation to attend its first commencement, which was held on the sunny, mild late fall morning of Wednesday, Dec. 15, 1824. The event took place at the Rev. Dr. James Laurie’s Presbyterian Meeting House on F Street between 14th and 15th streets. On hand were family and friends of the first three graduates, along with a who’s who of the city’s luminaries. That list included President Monroe (who had signed the college’s original charter), John Quincy Adams, Speaker of the House Henry Clay, and Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, along with the Supreme Court justices and a slew of senators and congressmen.

That first commencement day began at 9:30 a.m., when the students, adorned in black silk robes, and the college faculty marched into the church to the music of the U.S. Marine Band. The ceremonies included more music by the band, and then the three graduating seniors received their diplomas. A benediction from the first president of Columbian College, the Rev. Dr. William Staughton, followed.

Lafayette enjoyed the occasion, thanking the college’s officials for inviting him and saying he hoped the college would prosper. He then was introduced to each student and shook hands with them. After the ceremony Dr. Staughton hosted a reception for the Frenchman with the school’s trustees, faculty, students, and other distinguished guests.

That evening Lafayette was the guest of honor at a big party at the Washington mansion of William Winston Seaton, co-publisher of the *National Intelligencer* newspaper. “We had the high gratification of entertaining and welcoming Lafayette in our own house, being the only private individuals so honored, as yet,” Seaton wrote in a letter the next day. Seaton said that 360 people showed up at the party, including nearly every foreign ambassador. All the guests, he said, greeted the Marquis.

In the next two weeks Congress made a concrete statement of thanks to Lafayette for his selfless, invaluable service during the Revolution. “Congress debated, passed and President Monroe signed a bill giving Lafayette a ‘National Reward’

consisting of \$200,000—around \$3.5 million in today’s dollars—along with 24,000 acres of land in North Florida,” Lafayette expert Alan Hoffman, the translator of Levasseur’s *Lafayette in America in 1824 and 1825: Journal of a Voyage to the United States*, said in an interview.

Although the bill passed Congress easily, 26 House members voted against it, Hoffman noted. “After New Year’s Day, a delegation of these dissenters, who were fiscal conservatives and did not believe that the gift was a proper use of federal funds, visited Lafayette in Washington to explain their votes,” Hoffman said.

“Lafayette interrupted their spokesman in mid-sentence, saying: ‘I can assure you that if I had the honor to be your colleague, we would have been 27, not only because I share the opinion that determined your vote, but also because I think that the American

nation has done far too much for me.’”

Lafayette’s farewell tour came to an end Sept. 7, 1825, the day after his 68th birthday. That day he and his expanded entourage—which now included 24 U.S. Navy midshipmen, one from each state—boarded the aptly named steamboat *Mount Vernon* on the Potomac in Washington. The ship sailed down the river to St. Mary’s in Southern Maryland, where Lafayette and company transferred to a larger vessel for the Atlantic crossing. It was a U.S. warship, the newly commissioned 44-gun *Susquehanna*, which the Navy renamed *Brandywine* in Lafayette’s honor.

Lafayette took a special memento with him on the *Brandywine*: a large trunk filled with American soil, which he said he wanted to be put on his grave. His son George did exactly that when Lafayette died in Paris in May 1834.

When word of Lafayette’s death crossed the Atlantic, America went into mourning. Flags flew at half-mast; memorial services took place in hundreds of cities and towns. President Andrew Jackson ordered that the French Marquis receive the same funeral honors President John Adams had ordered for George Washington in 1799. **GW**



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Journalist and historian Marc Leepson, BA '67, MA '71, is the author of seven books. His latest, *Lafayette: Lessons in Leadership from the Idealist General*, was published in March 2011 by Palgrave Macmillan in its Great Generals series. The book, a concise biography of the Marquis de Lafayette, was chosen as a History Book Club selection.

Mr. Leepson also is the arts editor, columnist, and senior writer for *The VVA Veteran*, the magazine published by Vietnam Veterans of America. He teaches U.S. history at Lord Fairfax Community College in Warrenton, Va., and lives in Middleburg, Va.