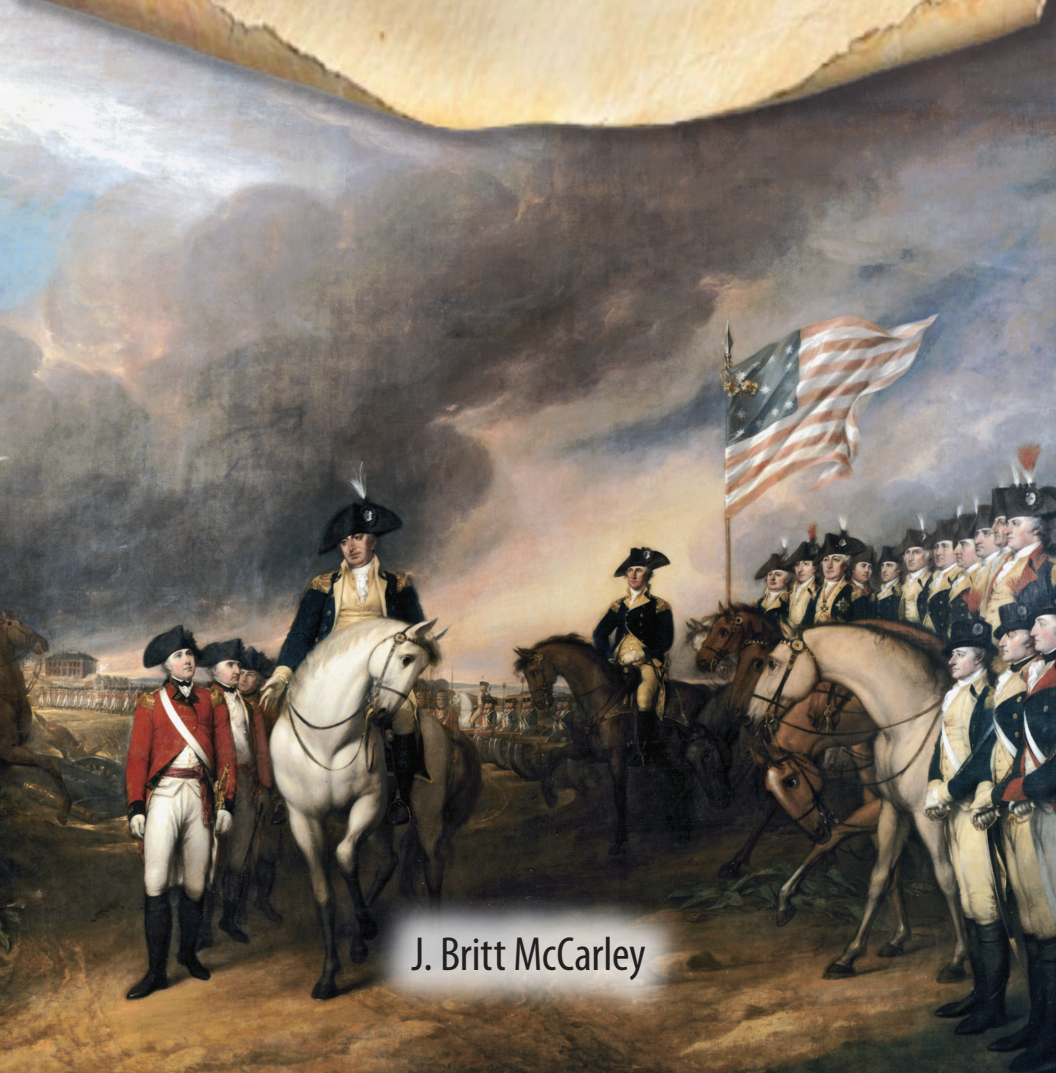




THE WAR IN VIRGINIA

1781



J. Britt McCarley

The U.S. Army Campaigns of the Revolutionary War

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The U.S. Army Campaigns of the Revolutionary War

THE WAR IN VIRGINIA, 1781

by
J. Britt McCarley



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INTRODUCTION



As America celebrates the 250th anniversary of the Revolutionary War, it is a perfect time to reflect on the revolutionary generation. In the two-and-a-half centuries since the war, the United States has grappled with the complexities and paradoxes of its revolution. How could a nation be born from the idea that all men are created equal, and yet deny much of that freedom to many of its citizens? How should a central federal government balance power with state governments? Could those thirteen fractious colonies merge into one nation? The seeds of what would become our country's future political and military conflicts lie in these complexities, as do some of our greatest national accomplishments.

This milestone anniversary is also an appropriate time to reflect on the history of the United States Army. The Army stands as our first truly national institution, having been established by the Continental Congress on 14 June 1775. General George Washington's ability to meld the soldiers of the various colonies together into one national force provided an example to the rest of the country that national unity was possible. If the Army failed to overcome the regional sectionalism prevalent at the time, it would fall to superior British resources and organization. If the Army failed, the nation would fail. Washington gave us the precedent of military subordination to the civil authority, one of the core tenets of our political tradition and way of life. At the end of the war, he resigned his commission and voluntarily gave up all his power to return to civil life. His example has inspired us as a model of military and political leadership for generations.

The Massachusetts militiamen who fired the first shots of the war on 19 April 1775 had no blueprint for creating a nation—nor did many think that the conflict would result in a drive for independence. Deep-seated colonial resentments over their rights as English citizens had been simmering since before the 1750s. As the British Parliament enacted even more restrictive laws, peaceful protests turned to military organization, and finally open violence. As New England formed its Army of Observation in the wake of the battles of Lexington and Concord, the Continental Congress saw the need for a national army.

For eight long years, the Continental Army maintained itself in the field, despite fighting superior odds, starvation, diminished resources, and divided leadership. Setbacks in the New York Campaign of 1776 nearly destroyed Washington's army as the British drove it into Pennsylvania. Yet as 1777 opened, Washington changed the operational situation by seizing the initiative in a series of tactical victories at Trenton and Princeton, New Jersey. That fall, a British invasion into northern New York met with failure and capture at the hands of the Northern Army and militia at Saratoga, ultimately bringing France into war on the side of the United States. At the same time, Washington kept a British army penned up in Philadelphia while he instituted a training regimen for his army at their encampment in Valley Forge that winter. Trained under the tutelage of German-born Frederick von Steuben, the Continentals harried the British out of Philadelphia and back to New York City, fighting like regulars at Monmouth in 1778.

General Washington faced the challenge of countering British victories at Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, when the British shifted the war south in 1778, while also containing powerful British forces in Canada and New York City. Relying on skilled subordinates such as Anthony Wayne, Nathanael Greene, and the Marquis de Lafayette—all of whom in turn worked closely with state militia—Washington was able to hold the delicate balance of power in both the northern and southern theaters. Seizing the opportunity presented by his French allies, Washington quickly shifted a large portion of his army from New York City to Yorktown,

Virginia. There, the allies laid siege to another British army, forcing it to capitulate in the fall of 1781. Although this victory sounded the death knell for British control of the American colonies, peace talks would last for two more years. During this time, Washington kept an army in the field, maintained the supremacy of civil authority over the military, and presented a credible threat to the remaining British garrisons. When the peace came, the true architects of the revolution's success were the Continental Army, state troops, and the militia.

The Revolutionary War created the model for our modern Army. It set the stage for what eventually would become a three-component force, with the Continentals and militia operating in complementary roles. Today, thirty-four National Guard units can trace their lineage to the Revolutionary War, which is a testament to their role in the formation of this country. Eight army branches also have their beginnings in the revolution. The U.S. Army's very motto, "This We'll Defend," is rooted in the "self-evident" truths enunciated in the Declaration of Independence and American interpretations of Enlightenment traditions, which came together in the seal for the Board of War and Ordnance and became the Department of the Army seal in the twentieth century. Unfortunately, it also would take until the twentieth century for the U.S. Army to be as racially integrated as its Continental Army forebears.

The traditions begun and precedents set by Washington and his soldiers continue to influence the U.S. Army and causes around the world. The seeds of hope shown at Trenton and Princeton have inspired leaders in other dark times, such as Bull Run, Shiloh, and Kasserine Pass. The revolutionary generation taught us that the true strength of our Army is our people; from the frontline soldiers to the camp followers who sustained the regiments. And it is to these individuals, who forged ahead through privation and misery to final victory and who rarely received any greater recognition in their own lifetimes than the simple epitaph "A Soldier of the Revolution," that these volumes are humbly dedicated.

CHARLES R. BOWERY JR.
Executive Director



THE WAR IN VIRGINIA, 1781

By the end of 1780, the American War of Independence had dragged on for more than five and a half years with no resolution in sight. Despite their military alliance with the French since early 1778, the patriots and their allies had achieved no war-winning victory over the British in any single campaign or battle. Both the Americans and the British were now war weary, and the French were frustrated by the lack of decision despite their several years of contributions to the patriot cause. Come the new year of 1781, all sides to the conflict looked ahead to redoubling their efforts to achieve victory before the costs associated with the war outweighed its potential benefits.

STRATEGIC SETTING

British Raids and Expeditions in Virginia, 1779–1781

Virginia—the oldest, largest, and wealthiest of Great Britain’s rebellious North American colonies—eventually joined the numerous protests of the British government’s post–Seven Years’ War taxation policies that grew into the Revolutionary War. On 7 November 1774, about half a year before the war itself erupted in New England, residents of the old tobacco port of Yorktown, Virginia, demonstrated support for the boycott of British tea.¹ They boarded a commercial vessel—ironically named *Virginia*—docked at the town’s waterfront, and in broad daylight dumped two half-chests of tea into the York River. Beyond its size and wealth, the Old Dominion’s geography and tax resistance invited British invasion, which the *Royal Navy*’s usual control of the sea enabled. Of the state’s five physiographic zones, its Piedmont and Coastal Plain were the most developed and accessible and held most of its population and resources. The Coastal Plain bordered the massive Chesapeake Bay, which had more than 11,600 miles of shoreline, over half of it in Virginia, to attract British amphibious assault. The state’s temperate climate also encouraged military activity to sustain patriot operations, especially in the Carolinas and Georgia—or to halt such efforts.

1. Virginia first responded to British taxation in May and June 1765 with the Virginia Resolves, but the colony first openly resisted those taxes with the later Yorktown Tea Party.

Once war commenced between the disobedient mainland colonies and Britain in the spring of 1775, Virginia's last royal governor, John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, struggled from the fall of that year to the summer of 1776 to maintain King George III's authority in the Old Dominion. Eventually, British forces abandoned both Williamsburg, the colony's capital at the time, and Norfolk, its largest city and port. From May through July 1776, Dunmore commanded a loyalist raiding force on Gwynn's Island, farther north in the Chesapeake Bay near the mouth of the Rappahannock River. By the end of August, Virginia state troops and militia had attacked the island and compelled Dunmore to leave Virginia for good, which temporarily ended British dominion in the state.

After nearly three years, the war returned to Virginia's Tidewater region and Yorktown on a much larger scale. In the meantime, the Old Dominion had remained relatively untouched by British or loyalist forces. During that period, the state had contributed troops, materiel, and supplies to sustain the patriots in both the north and the south. To support their southern campaign's main effort in Georgia and the Carolinas, the redcoats revisited Virginia starting in mid-1779 in a series of raids and expeditions over the next couple of years, often called the "tobacco wars." The British intended these forays to stop both the overseas shipment of tobacco—which the Americans exchanged for war-related purchases—and the flow of patriot military supplies and recruits, particularly between Virginia and the Carolinas. An imbalance in state political power favoring the General Assembly rendered Virginia Governor Thomas Jefferson unready for these new challenges, and the state mustered only intermittent and feeble resistance to the British.

From 10 to 24 May 1779, *Royal Navy* Commodore Sir George Collier and British army Maj. Gen. Edward Mathew led the Crown's first joint force with some 2,000 troops into the Chesapeake Bay. Averaging about 20 feet deep, the bay was an immense and shallow inland sea with many navigational hazards for ships of the period. Beginning on the Elizabeth River at Portsmouth, the redcoats levelled the patriots' adjacent Fort Nelson and destroyed the neighboring Gosport navy yard and more than 100 vessels in the area. They

also burned the nearby town of Suffolk on the Nansemond River; supported loyalist privateer operations in the bay; and captured some 3,000 hogsheads of tobacco and other patriot supplies, including naval stores for oceangoing vessels. Though a striking military success, the Mathew-Collier raid estranged even more Virginians from the cause of reestablishing the Crown's authority in the Old Dominion. Shortly before arriving in the Chesapeake, Commodore Collier summarized the intent of this and succeeding British operations:

. . . that the way which seemed most feasible to end the rebellion, was cutting off the resources by which the enemy carried on the war; that these resources were principally drawn from Virginia, by her trade in tobacco, &c.; that an attack on that province, and the shutting up the navigation of the Chesapeake, would probably answer very considerable purposes; and if not of itself sufficient to end the war, would drive the rebels to infinite inconveniences and difficulties, and especially as Washington's army was constantly supplied with salted provisions sent by water through the Chesapeake.

More than a year later, the British returned to the Tidewater area when their North American theater-of-operations commander in New York City, 51-year-old Lt. Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, dispatched another joint force under *Royal Navy* Capt. George Gayton and British army Maj. Gen. Alexander Leslie to the Chesapeake to continue plundering. The raiding force, which included around 2,500 troops, arrived on 20 October 1780. It had several objectives, most notably to conduct a diversionary effort in the bay area to draw American attention away from redcoat operations in the Carolinas under Clinton's second in command, 43-year-old Lt. Gen. Charles, 2nd Earl Cornwallis. The British also intended to establish a Virginia base of operations at Portsmouth and to destroy public stores, especially tobacco. Shortly after Gayton and Leslie secured Portsmouth and nearby towns, however, Cornwallis summoned

them southward to provide reinforcements, as the American victory in early October at Kings Mountain, South Carolina, had depleted British strength throughout the Carolinas. Gayton and Leslie departed on 15 November, without accomplishing much more than producing another tepid response by Virginia's ill-prepared militia and small state navy. Once more, the mission of despoiling American resources in the Tidewater region remained incomplete, leaving the area's loyalists in the lurch again.

After about six weeks' absence, another British joint force from New York, this time under the *Royal Navy's* Capt. Thomas Symonds and the American-traitor-turned-British Brig. Gen. Benedict Arnold, arrived in Hampton Roads—the confluence of the James, Elizabeth, and Nansemond Rivers—on 31 December 1780 with about 1,600 troops. With his typical energy and personal drive, Arnold ascended the James River toward Richmond. Since 1780, the state government had been located in Richmond, farther inland and supposedly safer from the British than the old colonial capital at Williamsburg. Arnold's orders directed him to wreck American resources along the James to the river's fall line at Richmond, its head of navigation, and to establish a British base of operations near the coast at Portsmouth. Arnold encountered paltry American resistance on the way to Richmond, and he spent 4–7 January 1781 destroying much public and private property there and upriver at Westham—including cannons, black powder, sailcloth, state records, and large quantities of tobacco. Once more facing nominal opposition, Arnold and Symonds descended the James to Portsmouth, where, except for foraging, American militia largely confined the British to constructing their base.

Desperate for assistance against the Crown forces, Governor Jefferson appealed for help from a fellow Virginian, 49-year-old General George Washington, commander in chief of the Continental Army. From his force operating in the New York City area, Washington dispatched to Hampton Roads the 24-year-old French noble, Maj. Gen. Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, and three light infantry regiments with upward of 1,200 troops to trap, capture, and execute Arnold on the spot at Portsmouth. At Washington's urging, the French

also sent a subordinate naval squadron under V. Adm. Armand Le Gardeur de Tilly from their joint expeditionary force operating out of Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay. This force, which included a sixty-four-gun ship of the line, departed for Virginia in mid-February. However, the Elizabeth River was too shallow for oceangoing, deep-draft vessels, especially at low tide, and so the French detachment returned later that month after capturing only a few small British ships.

In a further effort to capture Arnold, the French next dispatched their entire Rhode Island squadron, with some 1,200 infantry aboard, under V. Adm. Charles-René-Dominique Sochet, chevalier Destouches. The squadron planned to rendezvous with the Americans, who were still en route overland, though Lafayette himself already had reached Hampton Roads by water to evaluate the local situation. To counter the allied effort, the British sent a detachment from their North American fleet under its New York-based commander, V. Adm. Marriott Arbuthnot. Both naval forces included eight ships of the line and supporting vessels, and on 16 March 1781 they fought a two-hour engagement off the Virginia Capes. This First Battle of the Capes ended in a draw but caused significant damage to both forces. The French withdrew to Narragansett Bay to repair and refit their ships, which left the British in control of the sea and kept Arnold safe from summary execution.

Lacking control of the Chesapeake, the precondition for decisive operations in that region, Lafayette—whose force had at last reached the Tidewater—started north to return to New York. In the meantime, Clinton sent Maj. Gen. William Phillips and around 2,000 reinforcements to Arnold to capitalize on the Crown's continued mastery of the sea and littoral areas, which constituted the maritime domain. Those troops arrived in Hampton Roads on 26 March, bringing the redcoat force in Virginia up to about 3,600 men under arms. Phillips first secured Portsmouth as the British base of operations in Virginia. Then, on 18 April, he and Arnold started inland along the James River to continue depredations against the Tidewater area, intending to knock Virginia out of the war and thus impair American operations, particularly in the Carolinas.

On the way, Phillips sent a British light infantry detachment up the Chickahominy River, a tributary of the James, to destroy the Virginia State Navy's facilities. However, the ships already had sailed farther up the James, seeking safety inland in more restricted waters. The British light troops rejoined the main force after thoroughly wrecking docks, warehouses, and military stores on the Chickahominy. Word of this new threat to Virginia soon reached Washington. On 6 April, he directed Lafayette, who had reached Head of Elk—near today's Elkton, Maryland, on the Chesapeake Bay's headwaters—to return to the Tidewater to help counter the reinforced redcoat offensive. While Lafayette's force was enroute back south, Phillips and Arnold arrived on 24 April at the confluence of the Appomattox River with the James at City Point, where they landed and began the 6-mile march west to Petersburg and its supply depot and tobacco warehouses.

All the force the Americans could assemble to defend Petersburg was some 1,000 Southside Virginia militia under Maj. Gen. Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben. At that time, Steuben was the Continental Army commander in Virginia, with Brig. Gen. Peter Muhlenberg as his second-in-command and principal state-force leader. Steuben and Muhlenberg posted half their force in a first line of defense a mile east of Petersburg on 25 April, just beyond the nearby village of Blandford. There, Phillips employed two line infantry regiments and four field artillery pieces to force the American militia to withdraw to their second defensive line farther west. They took up positions behind the left bank of Lieutenant Run, which rises south of Petersburg, flows north, and empties into the Appomattox near the town's eastern edge. This time, Phillips attacked the American line frontally with infantry and artillery. Around midday, he also sent a force of British light infantry, German jaegers, and loyalist dragoons through a defile in high ground to the south to turn the militia's right flank.

Running low on ammunition by early evening, Steuben and Muhlenberg conducted an orderly withdrawal farther west through Petersburg and then north over the Appomattox at the Pocahontas Bridge, destroying the span. Ascending high ground on the river's

north bank, where they already had artillery to cover Petersburg, the American militia soon withdrew 10 miles farther north to Chesterfield Courthouse. The Battle of Petersburg cost both sides about sixty to seventy casualties, and the Americans performed respectably as a militia force pitted against superior numbers of British regulars and loyalist troops. Over the next several days, Phillips burned around 4,000 hogsheads of tobacco and wrecked some small vessels in Petersburg, and then marched to Chesterfield Courthouse where he destroyed military barracks, about 300 barrels of flour, and other supplies.

In the meantime, Arnold left Phillips at Petersburg and marched some 12 miles north to the village of Osborne on the right bank of the James River. Several Virginia Navy vessels had gathered in a line across the river there to try to bar British movement on the James and to protect nearby logistical resources. American militia in the area assembled across the river on its left bank at Osborne's Landing for support. On 27 April, Arnold suddenly appeared and surprised his American opponents, who scattered when the British brought artillery into the fight. The same artillery also silenced several Virginia Navy ships that attempted to fire on the redcoats from the river. Arnold's force captured more than twenty American vessels of all types, destroyed most of them, and seized more than 2,000 hogsheads of tobacco. The British also destroyed Osborne's warehouses and supplies. After the action, Arnold reportedly asked a patriot prisoner what the Americans would do if they seized him, to which the captive replied that "they would bury with military honors the leg that was wounded at Saratoga [in 1777], and hang the remainder of you on a gibbet." Arnold soon rejoined Phillips, and on 29 April they both arrived on the south bank of the James at Manchester, directly opposite Richmond, and burned a further 1,200 hogsheads of tobacco.

On the same day, Lafayette and more than 1,200 Continentals reached the Virginia capital following their forced march south from the Baltimore area. The Frenchman assumed overall Continental Army command in the state and prevented the redcoats from returning to Richmond and damaging it further. Now opposed by

over half their number in Continentals and Virginia militia still in the area, Phillips and Arnold started to descend the James, returning to Portsmouth. By 7 May, they had reached the vicinity of Jamestown. There, a dispatch boat from the British base of operations brought word that Cornwallis had left Wilmington, North Carolina, on 27 April and was marching north to Petersburg, intent on meeting his two lieutenants campaigning in the Old Dominion. Cornwallis had spent nearly a year commanding the British Southern Campaign, and throughout that time he had failed to defeat the Americans decisively anywhere in the Carolinas, including at Camden in August 1780 and at Guilford Courthouse in March 1781. While still at Wilmington, he had indicated his next objective in a 10 April letter to his longtime comrade Phillips:

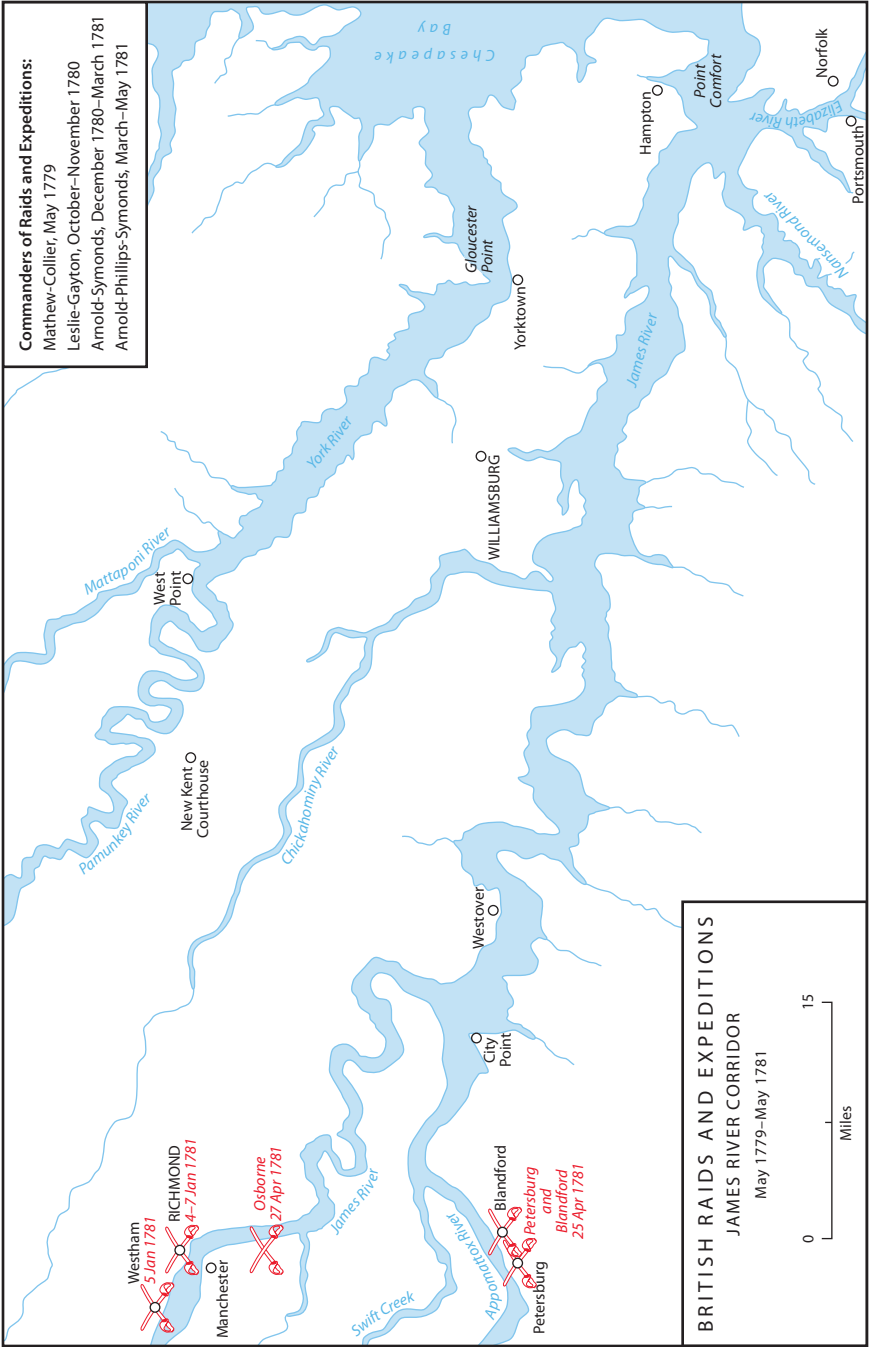
Now, my dear friend, what is our plan? Without one we cannot succeed, and I assure you that I am quite tired of marching about the country in quest of adventures. If we mean an offensive war in America, we must abandon New York, and bring our whole force into Virginia. . . . If our plan is defensive, mixed with desultory [i.e., harassing] expeditions, let us quit the Carolinas (which cannot be held defensively while Virginia can be so easily armed against us) and stick to our salt pork at New York, sending now and then a detachment to steal tobacco.

Phillips and Arnold reversed course on the James and arrived back at Petersburg on 10 May, only to find Lafayette and roughly 3,000 combined Continentals and militia troops waiting for them on the high north bank of the Appomattox. The patriots greeted the returning British forces by lobbing several artillery rounds into the town. Phillips, who had contracted typhoid fever during his service in the Tidewater region (where the illness was prevalent), died in Petersburg on 13 May and was buried at nearby Blandford Church. With the “tobacco wars” now having run their initial course, Arnold awaited his superior Cornwallis’s arrival, which would bring the British army’s numbers up to a force sufficient to overwhelm

Lafayette and reinvigorate Great Britain's Virginia Campaign. The combined offensive strategy of the Mathew-Collier, Leslie-Gayton, and Arnold-Phillips-Symonds raids and expeditions wreaked havoc and destruction on Virginia; marginally buoyed loyalist morale; and reduced some patriot supply activities, especially in the state's southeastern corner. All these British efforts, however, had failed to remove the Old Dominion from its overall pivotal logistical role in sustaining American operations, particularly to the south (*Map 1*).

Cornwallis v. Lafayette in Virginia

On 20 May, Cornwallis and his nearly 2,000 seasoned veterans from Georgia and the Carolinas marched into Petersburg. While there, the general revamped the British raiding and expeditionary strategy in Virginia into one of conquest by escalating the "tobacco wars." This approach increased the seizure and destruction of both public and private resources, but did not extend to widespread violence against Virginia's citizens, lest the king's troops incite the countryside to civil war as they had done in the Carolinas. In early June 1781, for example, Cornwallis directed the execution of two loyalist soldiers, members of the *Queen's Rangers*, for robbing and raping a local woman. Also, the resumed campaign would not attempt a long-term occupation of the state, as the British did not have enough troops and ships in the theater of operations to do so. In short, this would not be a war of posts like the one the royal army had conducted farther south, especially in South Carolina, where fortified and stationary outposts and their equally vulnerable lines of communications bedeviled Crown operations. Furthermore, Cornwallis expected Virginia's loyalists to stay out of the way of his British, German, and provincial troops, and the many Blacks in the state were likely to side with the invaders, looking for freedom and hoping for work from the redcoats. Receiving around 1,200 reinforcements in three regiments from Clinton's forces in New York on 23 May, Cornwallis now had about 7,500 men under arms, and chose to seize some of the region's abundant supply of fine horses to mount a portion of these troops for increased mobility. But one preliminary and necessary task came



Map 1

first: the American turncoat, Benedict Arnold, had to leave. Not only was he a traitor twice over—initially to King George III and then to the patriots—but he also had attracted too much American and French attention aimed at capturing and summarily executing him. To clear the air, Cornwallis soon sent Arnold back to New York.

Lafayette had assembled a mixed force of roughly 4,000 troops to oppose the strengthened British. The Frenchman's force included Continental light infantry; Virginia state militia, mostly under Brig. Gen. Thomas Nelson Jr., who would become the state's next governor; Virginia Continentals being trained by Steuben farther west in the state; a small detachment of dragoons; and other assorted units. In a 24 May letter to Washington, Lafayette revealed his dilemma: "Was I to fight a battle I'll be cut to pieces, the militia dispersed, and the arms lost. Was I to decline fighting the country would think herself given up. I am therefore determined to scarmish [skirmish], but not to engage too far. . . . I am not strong enough even to get beaten." Intent on improving on his defeat of the Americans at Camden, South Carolina, and planning to win the war in one decisive battle, Cornwallis left Petersburg the same day in search of his foes. He descended the right bank of the James southeast of Richmond and crossed the river to Westover. From there, he started north to turn the left flank of Lafayette's position at the state capital. Either Lafayette would have to fight the British forces on ground of Cornwallis's choosing, or the British would seize the opportunity to destroy the patriot manufacturing resources farther north near Fredericksburg, Virginia, and in doing so cut off supplies sustaining American operations in the Carolinas.

In response, Lafayette evacuated Richmond on 27 May and raced north, putting as many rivers as possible between his troops and Cornwallis's force. This movement would allow him to shield Fredericksburg and march toward Brig. Gen. Anthony Wayne's approximately 1,000 Pennsylvania Continentals. Wayne's force had just left York, Pennsylvania, west of Philadelphia, and was heading south to the Frenchman's aid. The arriving forces had faced their own upheavals in recent months. In early January 1781, during one of the revolution's darkest periods of war weariness, military cost-cutting,

and economic near-collapse, the Pennsylvania Continentals had been among the American regular soldiers who had mutinied against their overall service conditions in northern New Jersey. Civilian authorities resolved the Pennsylvanians' grievances with minimal violence. However, when New Jersey regiments mutinied later that month for similar reasons, Washington sought to contain the contagion by ordering the execution of several of the uprising's leaders. Now, months later, the Pennsylvania Continentals paused at York, where they nearly mutinied again, forcing Wayne to have a new group of ringleaders shot to stop a greater rebellion in the ranks. Finally returning to good order, the Pennsylvanians were en route again to reinforce Lafayette before the British reached him. Cornwallis ended his pursuit at the North Anna River on 1 June, having forced the Americans to uncover the Charlottesville, Virginia, area to the west. There, the state's General Assembly had gathered in presumed safety from British troops. Around 20 miles southeast at Point of Fork, the confluence of the James and Rivanna Rivers, Steuben was training state Continentals and guarding local supply caches.

From his main army on 3 June, Cornwallis sent Lt. Col. John Graves Simcoe, commanding the *Queen's Rangers*, a combined arms provincial unit, and mounted infantry detachments totaling some 400 soldiers toward Point of Fork, where Steuben had roughly 500 trainees, some local militia, and supplies at three neighboring locations. Simultaneously, he dispatched the notorious Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton, commanding the loyalist *British Legion*, also a combined arms force, and similar detachments to Charlottesville to capture the Virginia state legislators and Governor Jefferson at his nearby home, Monticello. When Simcoe approached Point of Fork the next day along the Rivanna's right bank, he conducted a demonstration and thus deceived Steuben into believing that the whole British army had arrived at that location. The Americans quit their training camp but managed to evacuate a portion of their supplies over the James to apparent safety. On 5 June, some of Simcoe's troops also crossed the James, compelling Steuben to abandon those stores, which the British promptly destroyed. The patriots then retreated 65 miles south until they reached the Staunton River, seemingly headed for North Carolina.

At the same time, Tarleton headed for his assigned political targets in Charlottesville. The Americans, however, had a stroke of luck: a local militia captain, John “Jack” Jouett Jr., spotted the British column at 2200 on 3 June and quickly grasped its purpose. Riding all night along back roads familiar to him—a feat that would earn him the tag of Virginia’s “Paul Revere”—Jouett arrived at Monticello the next morning just in time to warn the now former governor, whose term had expired on the second of the month, to flee before Tarleton’s troopers arrived. With only minutes to spare, Jefferson followed his family south to hide at a friend’s farm and from there all traveled west to Poplar Forest, his refuge in Bedford County. During Jefferson’s absence while concealed from the redcoats, Virginia went without a governor for a short period before General Nelson took the oath of office as the new state executive. For his decision to flee, Jefferson faced allegations of wartime cowardice. Even though the afterglow of American victory in the war mitigated the criticisms to some extent, they nonetheless dogged Jefferson for the rest of his life.

Seven of the state’s legislators were not so fortunate. Tarleton’s legionnaires took them into custody around Charlottesville, but soon paroled them; among the captives was the storied frontiersman Daniel Boone, then a member of Virginia’s lower House of Delegates. The remaining General Assembly members fled westward over the Blue Ridge Mountains into the Shenandoah Valley to Staunton, where they temporarily reassembled the state legislature. Tarleton’s legion continued to Charlottesville and burned patriot arms, black powder, uniforms, and tobacco before riding out of town.

All the while, Cornwallis and the main army had marched to the James about 5 miles downriver from Point of Fork to one of Jefferson’s farms, Elkhill. They thoroughly wrecked the place, killing livestock, seizing horses as mounts for the troops, and gathering enslaved Blacks to take with them. Jefferson himself further described the despoliation that Cornwallis and his redcoats had visited on the estate:

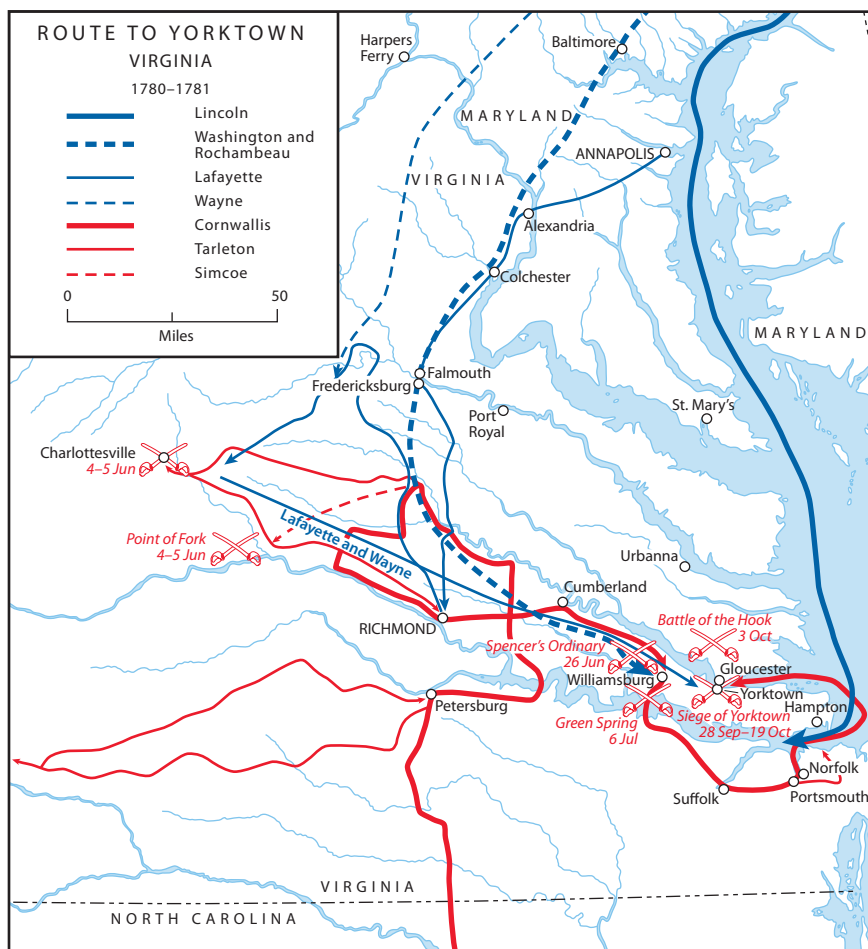
He destroyed all my growing crops of corn and tobacco,
he burned all my barns containing the same articles of
the last year, having first taken what corn he wanted, he

used, as was to be expected, all my stocks of cattle, sheep, and hogs for the sustenance of his army, and carried off all the horses capable of service: of those too young for service he cut the throats, and he burnt all the fences on the plantation, so as to leave it an absolute waste. He carried off also about 30. [*sic*] slaves

By 6 June, Simcoe and Tarleton had rejoined Cornwallis at Elkhill. During the next week, the whole character of the British campaign in Virginia changed as Franco-American forces began their months-long concentration, which would culminate at Yorktown (*Map 2*).

After the British turned west from the North Anna River and headed toward Charlottesville, Lafayette's force continued north for its anticipated rendezvous with Wayne's Continentals and their artillery contingent. Lafayette crossed the Rapidan River upstream from Fredericksburg at Ely's Ford and shortly recrossed it still farther upriver at Raccoon Ford, heading south. To the north, Wayne ferried over the Potomac River at the end of May, traversed the Rappahannock, and then also crossed the Rapidan at Raccoon Ford. On 10 June, he reached Lafayette in the field, en route to Charlottesville. From 12 to 15 June, after their troops had united south of the Rapidan, Lafayette and Wayne occupied the right bank of Mechunk Creek, about a dozen miles east of Charlottesville, to protect all the remaining supply caches to the west from further British depredation. By this time, Cornwallis had learned that Lafayette and Wayne had joined forces, and he marched the royal army east to vacate the Piedmont area of Virginia and return to the Tidewater, where the *Royal Navy* could resupply, protect, and if necessary, evacuate his army to a British coastal stronghold.

Cornwallis reached Richmond on 16 June and headed southeast four days later, sparing the town from further acts of destruction. Lafayette and Wayne pursued Cornwallis at a respectable distance on a parallel course roughly 20 miles north, gaining strength as they traveled. The pair recovered Steuben's troops on 19 June and soon added a contingent of around 600 Virginia riflemen. Together, they all brought the American force up to approximately 6,000 troops,



Map 2

which allowed Lafayette to continue shadowing his opponent. The Americans gradually drew closer to the British, coming near enough to skirmish but refraining from a general engagement for fear of losing a potentially decisive battle. Now under Cornwallis, the Crown's renewed campaign of marching, raiding, and countermarching was soon to change again.



OPERATIONS



Clinton Transforms the Virginia Campaign

Before long, the British passed through New Kent Courthouse and on 25 June occupied Williamsburg, the former colonial capital. En route, Cornwallis redirected Simcoe, a German jaeger detachment, and some North Carolina loyalists west to the Chickahominy River to destroy reported American facilities and supplies, including tobacco, and to gather forage for the redcoats' horses. Returning from his raid with stolen supplies in wagons and herding about 100 head of cattle, Simcoe paused on 26 June at Spencer's Ordinary, a tavern about 6 miles northwest of Williamsburg. Seizing the opportunity to strike his divided enemy, Lafayette sent a mixed force of Pennsylvania Continentals, Virginia militia, and dragoons to intercept Simcoe's marauders before they rejoined the main British force. The Americans encountered the redcoats at the tavern, and a seesaw skirmish ensued, often at close quarters, with the British eventually enveloping the American left flank and forcing its withdrawal. Both armies sent reinforcements that failed to reach the scene before the engagement ended in a draw. Each side sustained about thirty-five casualties and claimed victory. However, the British eventually vacated the field to the Americans, retaining the rustled cattle and purloined provisions for later consumption. Once again, as at Petersburg in April, the patriots fought well, with about an even combination of regulars and militia. While growing in size, the American army in Virginia also had matured in battlefield skill.

The ratio between Lafayette's and Cornwallis's armies now approached one to one. The British commander, in keeping with the

intentions he and Clinton had expressed in earlier correspondence, needed to reestablish contact with the *Royal Navy* at a deepwater port. On the same day as the clash at Spencer's Ordinary, Cornwallis received an 11 June letter from Clinton in New York, which in part read:

I beg leave to recommend it to you as soon as you have finished the active operations you may now be engaged in, to take a defensive station, in any healthy situation you choose, (be it a Williamsburg or Yorktown). And I would wish in that case, that after reserving to yourself such troops as you may judge necessary, for an ample defense, and desultory movements by water, for the purpose of annoying the enemy's communications, destroying magazines, etc. the following corps may be sent to me in succession as you [can] spare them.

The letter then listed the British units, including several elite formations totaling about 3,000 soldiers, that Clinton wanted Cornwallis to ship to New York City. Clinton intended to move them north for defense against Washington's Continentals and the French regulars led by 56-year-old Lt. Gen. Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau. At this time, Cornwallis had been campaigning in Virginia without explicit orders from Clinton. In a series of letters, the two British generals had discussed the possibility and potential aspects of extending their Southern Campaign from the Carolinas into the Old Dominion and likely beyond. However, they had agreed to neither a specific course of action nor a timetable for executing it.

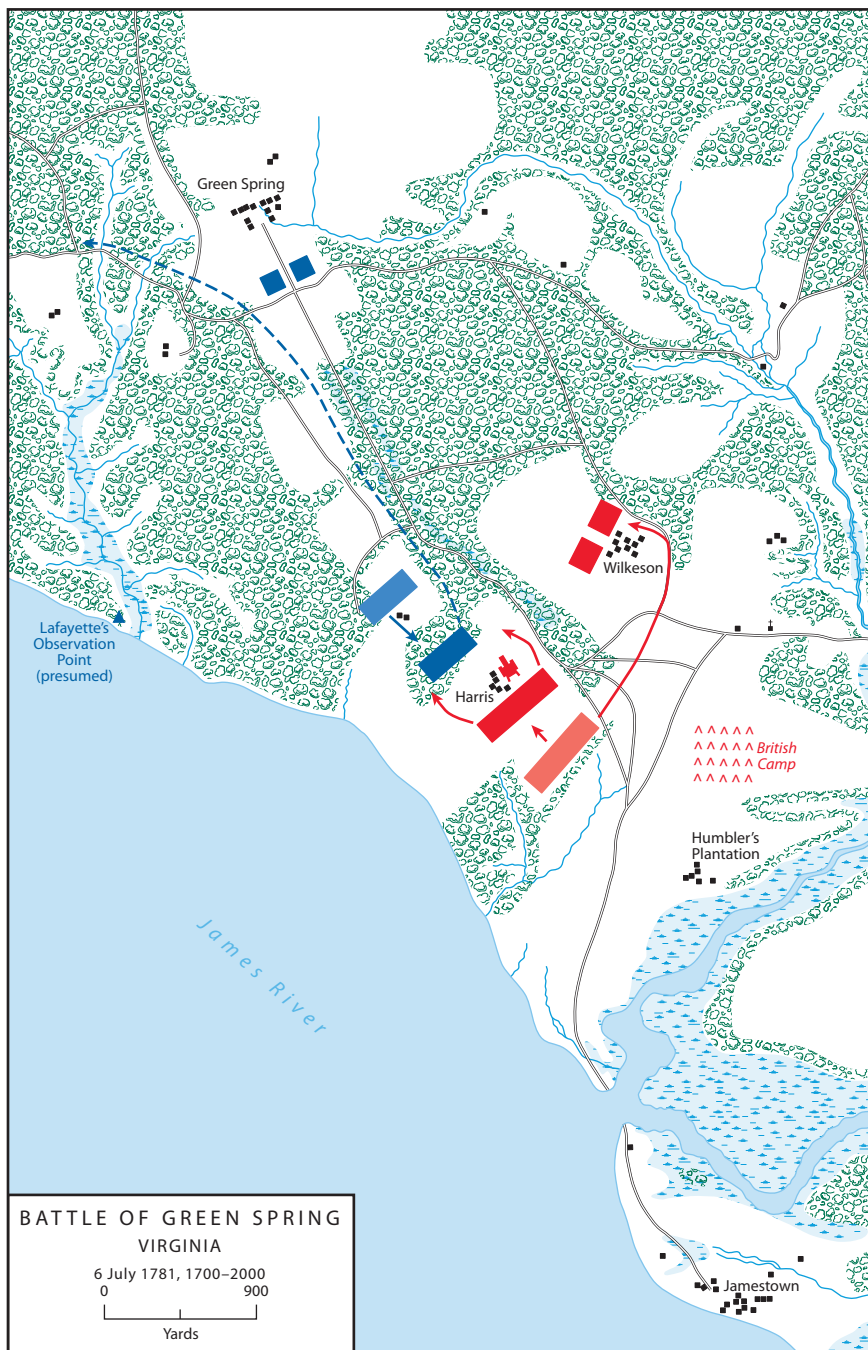
The resulting lengthy and controversial Clinton-Cornwallis correspondence revealed numerous differences between the two generals, sufficient for one historian to label their letters a "dialogue of the deaf." Neither commander appeared to fully understand the motivations or actions of the other. Moreover, Cornwallis's noble rank as an earl put him at a higher social station than Clinton's status as a knight, a circumstance that both inverted their command

relationship and further beclouded their attempts to communicate. This exchange of letters on what to do about the burgeoning allied threat to New York City continued for several more weeks. In the end, Clinton rescinded his call for reinforcements to defend the British North American base of operations. Nonetheless, the 11 June letter effectively ended the offensive phase of Great Britain's Virginia Campaign and began its defensive phase, which eventually led Cornwallis to grief at Yorktown.

The Battle of Green Spring

In response to the directive nature of the 11 June letter, the redcoats started right away to recross the James River to Southside and return to their Portsmouth base of operations. They left Williamsburg on 4 July and camped on the north bank of the river near Jamestown Island for the several days needed to accomplish the crossing. In this environment, Cornwallis ambitiously decided to lure Lafayette into an attack that could result in a decisive engagement and win the Virginia Campaign. For his part, the Frenchman determined to pursue the British, catch them astride the James, and possibly destroy at least Cornwallis's rearguard troops. By 6 July, some of Cornwallis's mounted units and his wagon train had crossed the river. The bulk of his army remained undercover in woods near their riverside camp. In midafternoon, patriot skirmishers pressed British outposts toward the island, which served as the north end of the crossing effort. Keenly aware of the need for caution, Lafayette had written five days before to Jefferson that "should we be beat and should the loss of Virginia follow a defeat[,] new obstacles will be raised against American independency."

By late afternoon, Wayne's Pennsylvania Continentals, reinforced with light infantry and totaling around 900 troops and three field guns, had arrived on the battleground of partially wooded lowlands (*Map 3*). They advanced toward a seemingly abandoned British field artillery piece, which Cornwallis had set as the signal to spring his surprise attack. Starting at a tree line near their camp, the British burst from concealment around 1700, with line infantry on the left,



Map 3

light infantry on the right, and Tarleton's legion toward the left rear—totaling some 5,000 soldiers. Hugely outnumbered at more than five to one, the Americans were in trouble. Lafayette had ridden to a high tongue of land on the riverbank upstream from the battlefield, from which vantage point he spotted Cornwallis's main force before it disgorged from cover. Too late to stop the battle from starting as Cornwallis planned, the Frenchman rode breakneck back to his troops, now about to feel the weight of British arms in hand-to-hand fighting with bayonets and edged weapons, a redcoat's preferred tactical method. Soon, the British infantry began to envelop both American flanks, as well as threaten to turn the patriot left flank and cut it off from retreat. Wayne realized that the available courses of action left him with no good choices.

True to his reputation for aggressive tactics, “Mad” Anthony Wayne attacked the oncoming British frontally at roughly 70 yards' range amid the unfolding engagement. He stopped the redcoats' advance for a critical fifteen minutes. Lafayette arrived on the field and began to organize the rapid withdrawal of his engaged force toward the light infantry reserve line at the nearby Green Spring plantation. This well-known landmark, the home of an earlier Virginia royal governor, would give the fight its name. Owing to the late hour at which Cornwallis sprang his trap, dusk descended around 2000 as the Americans vacated the field, leaving the British with a hollow tactical victory as they were unable to pursue the patriots with mounted troops into the night on difficult terrain. On this day, Cornwallis would not repeat his success at Camden.

The Battle of Green Spring, the largest of the American War of Independence in Virginia, cost the Americans about 140 casualties and two of their field pieces to around 75 losses for the British. Lafayette's regular troops fought well once more, if impetuously on Wayne's part, and survived to fight another day, demonstrating still more maturation as an American army and avoiding a decisive defeat that might risk the war. Having observed the strategic instincts of both Washington in the north and Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene in the south, Lafayette had learned and now practiced the fundamental principle of preserving the Continental Army under

his command. By keeping it from decisive battle, he would be able to help perpetuate the war toward an eventual American victory and national independence. The Frenchman now withdrew well north to Chickahominy Church, while Cornwallis completed his crossing operation by 9 July to Cobham on the James River's south bank.

Not wanting to abandon his offensive entirely, Cornwallis sent Tarleton west from 9 to 24 July on a mounted raid, reaching the eastern base of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Bedford County to destroy a suspected arms cache. En route, his troops ravaged the region's patriot logistical base, intending to reduce its ability to support the Continental Army in the Carolinas. During his two-week, roughly 400-mile roundtrip ride, Tarleton demolished public and private property, but the scale of his onslaught mattered less than the exhaustion he inflicted on his own troops and horses. Concurrently, Lafayette marched his army to Malvern Hill southeast of Richmond to monitor whether Cornwallis would try to return to the Carolinas, and dispatched portions of his force under Wayne to the southwest to watch for Tarleton's return. Traveling a more southerly route, Tarleton reunited with Cornwallis at Suffolk on the Nansemond River. Together, they marched approximately 20 miles to Portsmouth, which the British had garrisoned with some 1,500 troops from Cornwallis's main army throughout this period of cat-and-mouse maneuvers between the redcoats and the patriots. Now, Cornwallis faced the task that Clinton had given him in mid-June: surveying Hampton Roads for a potentially better Virginia base of operations than Portsmouth on the shallow Elizabeth River.

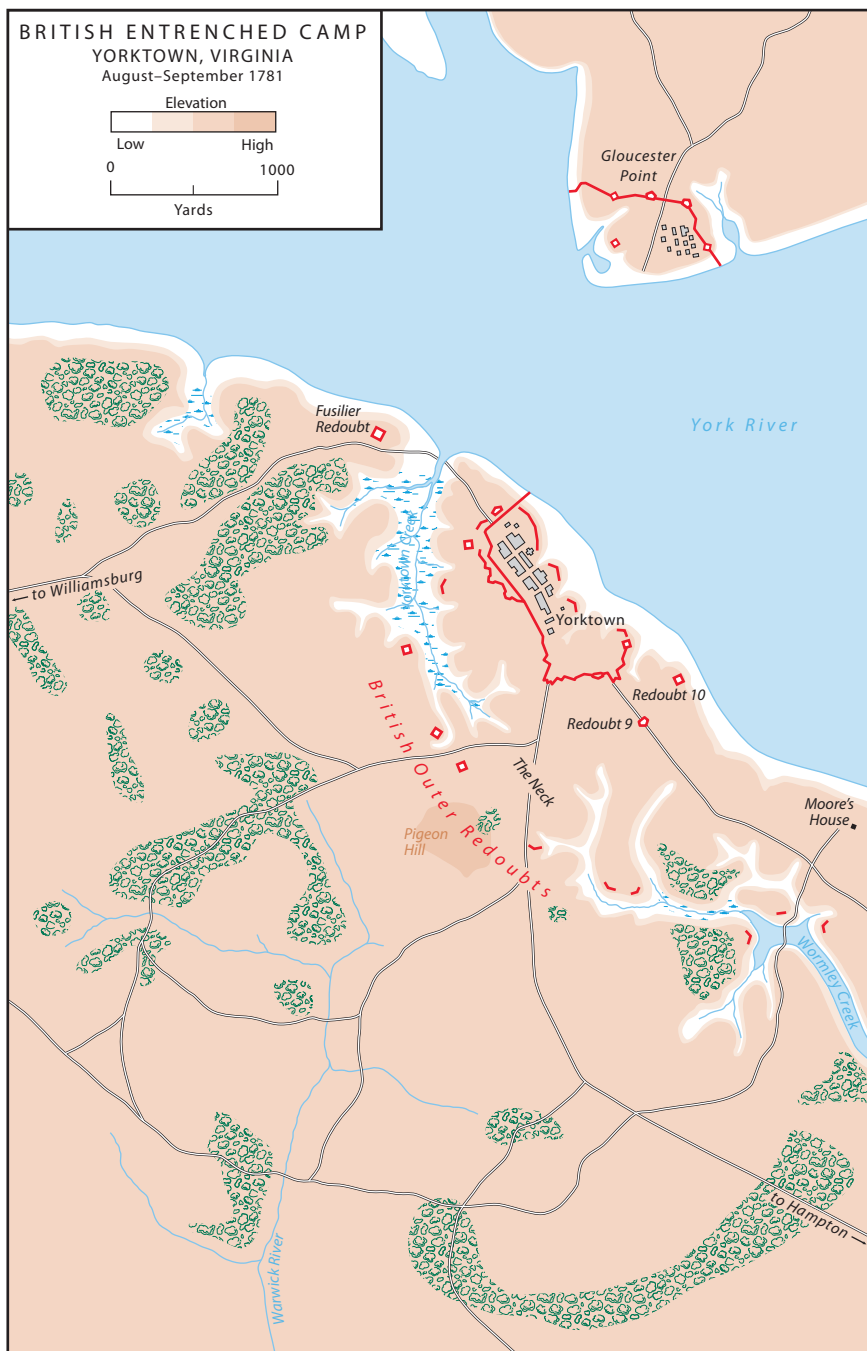
Once at Portsmouth, Cornwallis followed Clinton's most recent instructions and began destroying the port facilities while directing his engineers to look for another base. Williamsburg, which was accessible by water only through landings on the nearby streams of College Creek and Queen's Creek, was not an option. Right across Hampton Roads was the Old Point Comfort sand spit, where in 1728 the British had erected Fort George to protect against the growing French threat in North America. In 1749, the region's great hurricane had destroyed the fort, and it

still lay in ruins in 1781. But even though an earlier generation had made use of the terrain, the lack of fresh water at the point, sandy soil unsuitable for building fortifications, and close-by deep water (accessible to an attacker's navy) all eliminated Old Point Comfort from consideration.

To the northwest up the York River—as much a tidal estuary of the Chesapeake as a river—was Yorktown. There, the stream narrowed to a half mile separating the developed Yorktown waterfront on the river's south bank from the village of Gloucester Town at Gloucester Point on its north bank. A ferry connected the two locations. Descended from several forts in the general area that colonists had built to protect access to the river upstream and from a nearby settlement called Port of York, today's Yorktown dates from 1691 and functioned as one of Virginia's principal harbors for exporting tobacco. Having passed its economic prime after about 1750, as the tobacco culture moved southwest in search of fertile soil, Yorktown remained a deepwater, ice-free anchorage year-round, which made it attractive to the British. Beyond its numerous riverside piers and warehouses, the town consisted of a few hundred structures sitting atop bluffs 30 to 40 feet high overlooking the port facilities. In better days, it had had more than a thousand inhabitants, but by August 1781 almost all of them had fled inland to escape the war's increasing focus on the Hampton Roads region. Shortly after receiving Clinton's directive letter in late June, Cornwallis examined Yorktown. There, he came under fire from a patriot cannon on Gloucester Point and concluded—incorrectly—that the water was too shallow for deep-draft vessels. In fact, the main channel was around 90 feet deep, which was more than suitable for the intended purpose of a “post to protect the navy,” as he later characterized it in a letter to Clinton.

Cornwallis Arrives at Yorktown

As the British closed Portsmouth, the *Royal Navy's* Captain Symonds, who commanded Cornwallis's supporting flotilla of some sixty-eight vessels—of which half were transports or victualers—conveyed



Map 4



British Inner Defense Line, Sidney E. King, 1957 (Courtesy National Park Service, Colonial National Historic Park)

most of the Anglo-German units to Yorktown and Gloucester Point. At the same time, some mounted formations traveled overland from Hampton on the east end of the Peninsula along the York-Hampton Highway. By 22 August, Cornwallis's entire army had closed on the Yorktown area. British troops began to entrench first on Gloucester Point, intending to use artillery fire to secure Yorktown's waterfront right across the river on the south bank. During the Tidewater's intensely hot and humid midsummer, roughly 9,000 British soldiers and sailors on both sides of the river—as well as approximately 3,000 formerly enslaved individuals who had attached themselves to the British army, looking for freedom—labored slowly in the seasonal swelter on modest earthworks. Cornwallis intended to use his new base as a winter camp before restarting the Virginia Campaign in the following spring.

The initial line of defense atop the Yorktown bluffs enclosed the town on the three sides facing inland (*Map 4*). It was about two-third miles long and one-third mile deep—with ten numbered

batteries and a like number of redoubts, all connected by simple infantry curtain trenches. Upriver a few hundred yards, across the mouth of tidal Yorktown Creek on a high finger of land, stood the Star Redoubt to defend the main enclosure's right flank and interdict the river road from Williamsburg. Downriver a similar distance and crowning a couple of undulations in the ground were Redoubts 9 and 10 to defend the main line's left flank. Inland, two streams, Wormley Creek to the south and Yorktown Creek to the west, nearly enclosed the new Virginia base of operations. Through the half mile of dry ground between the heads of both creeks—which Cornwallis labeled the "gorge" and locals called The Neck—ran the main road from Williamsburg. In that same terrain interval, high ground—locally called Pigeon Hill or Pigeon Quarter—provided enough elevation to compromise the defensive integrity of the main British earthworks and threaten the nearby York-Hampton Highway that intersected the primary Williamsburg Road in the same vicinity. The redcoats eventually constructed three redoubts and one battery in this vulnerable terrain to cover the various road avenues of approach through it and deny this compromising ground to an opponent. To defend the Gloucester side of the river, the available force of some 1,000 Anglo-German troops focused on constructing three numbered batteries, four numbered redoubts, and a connecting infantry curtain trench, all to protect the point itself. In a letter to Clinton, Cornwallis characterized the fortifications at both the town and the point as amounting to no more than "an entrenched camp." Because of the terrain complications and manpower restrictions, Cornwallis never saw the whole position on either side of the river favorably. However, the need to reestablish contact with the *Royal Navy* at a deepwater port and the lingering possibility that he would have to send troops to help defend New York decided those locations for him.

To occupy the encircling Yorktown fieldworks, Cornwallis divided his remaining 8,000 troops into three British infantry brigades, four auxiliary German infantry formations (Ansbach and Hessian), two loyalist combined arms units, a *Royal Artillery* component, some North Carolina loyalists, and a pioneer contingent for engineer

work. *Royal Navy* sailors crewed numerous ships' guns, which they moved into batteries ashore and occupied several outworks to watch avenues of approach. Among the British army's storied units serving at Yorktown were the *Brigade of Guards*, the *23d Foot (Royal Welch Fusiliers)*, and the *1st Battalion, 71st Foot (Fraser's Highlanders)*. Before long, their skill and professionalism as soldiers would be tried by their counterparts in the Continental Army and its allied French regulars. Cornwallis had no units larger than a brigade and no other general officer save his second in command, Brig. Gen. Charles O'Hara. In sum, the British, Germans, and loyalists entrenching at Yorktown and Gloucester Point represented fully one-quarter of his majesty's forces in North America. As fearsome as they had seemed in the Virginia countryside, they soon found themselves isolated and attacked by Franco-American forces coming from hundreds and even thousands of miles away.

The Allies Move Against New York City

As Cornwallis arrived in Virginia from the Carolinas in May 1781, the French in Rhode Island and the Americans in New Jersey were bestirring themselves toward New York City, the primary redcoat base. The 1778 Franco-American alliance resulted from the American victory at Saratoga, New York, in the fall of 1777. The military pact between the two countries stemmed equally from the French desire for revenge against the British for the 1763 Treaty of Paris, which had ended the Seven Years' War, nearly threw France out of North America, and disturbed the European balance of power. Because the British (including colonial Americans) and the French had spent much of the eighteenth century in North America trying to destroy one another there, the alliance was even more remarkable. Bourbon King Louis XVI and Catholic France were wary of the nascent and rebellious American republic. However, associating with it might open doors of opportunity for retribution against Protestant, Hanoverian Britain. Of the two Franco-American treaties signed in the winter of 1777–1778, the military one failed to produce early positive results despite two significant attempts. In August 1778, a

combined French and American joint force foundered in its attempt to wrest Newport, Rhode Island, from British control. The following year, in September and October 1779, another such force stopped just short of seizing Savannah, Georgia, from the redcoats.

The allies' third major effort at coalition warfare began in July 1780, when the French-named *Expédition Particulière*, a joint navy and army task force, arrived at Newport, which the British had since abandoned. The naval component under R. Adm. Charles Louis d'Arsac, chevalier de Ternay, consisted of seven ships of the line and supporting frigates and transports. The army element under General Rochambeau included four infantry regiments, one artillery battalion, and one combined-arms legion, totaling around 5,500 troops. Louis XVI had made a wise choice in selecting Rochambeau to command the land component. A long-serving professional promoted to lieutenant general for this assignment, he was a field soldier most at home on campaign, possessed the subtlety and patience needed to work with allies, and accepted his role—which the king assigned him—of directing an auxiliary force serving under General Washington. For most of the first year that this third French joint task force occupied Newport, the debilitating conditions it experienced during the sea voyage to North America and the *Royal Navy's* blockade of Narragansett Bay kept the troops largely idle. Beginning in the late winter of 1781, however, the Franco-American forces started to use their military resources to strike selected blows at the British, the largest being the unsuccessful combined effort in March to seize control of the Chesapeake Bay and capture Benedict Arnold.

In mid-May 1781, French V. Adm. Jacques-Melchior Saint-Laurent, comte de Barras, arrived in Newport to replace Admiral Ternay (who had died of typhus the previous December) as commander of the naval squadron supporting the *Expédition Particulière*. In addition to a small reinforcement of troops, Barras also brought a confidential letter. The dispatch indicated that V. Adm. François Joseph Paul, comte de Grasse, who had sailed from Brest, France, with his fleet in March of that year, would be in North American waters later in the year. Grasse intended to campaign in

the Caribbean until summer, when he would sail north to cooler waters during the worst of hurricane season and then return to the tropics for the calmer fall weather. The great Caribbean hurricane of October 1780, the worst on record until then in that region, had destroyed nineteen British naval vessels and may have killed upward of 20,000 people. All European navies operating in those waters were eager to avoid repeating that experience, to the point of sailing to more temperate climates until the autumnal equinox and the onset of the fall season reduced the risks to their fleets. Yet for the time being, because of the nature of the private letter, neither Rochambeau nor Barras could share with Washington the welcome news of Grasse's planned sortie to North America.

Rochambeau, however, asked to confer with Washington so the three commanders, including Barras, could discuss how best to use their combined and joint forces against the British. Though Rochambeau spoke no English and required a translator, the two army commanders had met in September 1780 at Hartford, Connecticut. They had decided not to attack the British in New York until they could achieve a naval superiority sufficient to offset the *Royal Navy's* local control of the sea. On 9 April 1781, during the period when American fortunes in the war had sunk to new lows and their effort desperately needed more French naval, financial, and military aid to remain viable, Washington wrote to Lt. Col. John Laurens, one of his aides-de-camp negotiating in France for more support, that "it may be declared in a word, that we are at the end of our tether, & that now or never [our] deliverance must come." Unbeknown to Washington in the moment, the Franco-American alliance was about to yield significant results. When the trio of allied leaders met again on 21 and 22 May in Wethersfield, Connecticut, Washington decided, with the reluctant agreement of the French, to probe Clinton's New York City defenses with the possibility of laying siege to them. A British joint force had captured the city from Washington in a dramatic 1776 campaign, and he had wanted to retake it ever since.

Notwithstanding his decision, Washington kept an open mind about operating farther south, perhaps in Virginia or the Carolinas.

Campaigning in those hot, humid, and disease-prone areas in summer, however, posed health risks to all soldiers and sailors, and they were keenly aware of the dangers. On the same days as the Wethersfield meeting, Washington confided in his diary the need “to extend our views to the Southward as circumstances and a Naval superiority might render [it] more necessary & eligible.” Also resulting from the Wethersfield conference, the commanders sent Grasse several letters on 28 May, exhorting him to sail to North America as soon as possible and bring more ships, troops, and money. A separate French letter included the critical recommendation that Grasse operate in the Chesapeake Bay area rather than around New York City, where the British had concentrated their naval strength in North America. Also, the sandbar off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, would pose a navigational hazard to any deep-draft French ships trying to enter New York Harbor.

As the Franco-American forces prepared to march to New York, the British captured a copy of the resulting Wethersfield campaign plan. The contents of the seized document convinced Clinton that New York City itself was the allies’ main objective, and he remained persuaded of that intent during the months to come until it was too late for him to affect the ensuing course of events. Six weeks after Wethersfield, on 6 July, the American and French armies, totaling about 9,000 soldiers, united at Dobb’s Ferry on the Hudson River’s left bank around a dozen miles north of Manhattan Island. The island itself was the heart of Clinton’s base of operations. About two weeks later, the Franco-Americans reconnoitered the redcoats’ defenses in the Kingsbridge area, near Manhattan’s north end, and found the British garrison of roughly 10,500 troops well entrenched in fortifications they had been improving and expanding during the past five years. Washington’s and Rochambeau’s threat to New York City, limited as it was, nonetheless prompted Clinton to send several more letters to Cornwallis in Virginia, enjoining him to ship reinforcements straightaway by sea for New York’s defense. Ultimately, this chain of events led Cornwallis to the deepwater port of Yorktown.

As the stalemate against the British in New York continued into August, events suddenly turned in the allies' favor. Colonel Laurens returned from his diplomatic mission to France without more soldiers for Rochambeau but with 2.5 million livres in hard cash to restock the general's severely depleted war chest sustaining the French army in America. More important than even a money infusion was a letter from Grasse, which arrived around the same time. His frigate *La Concorde* had brought it to Rhode Island, where the French navy passed it to their army, which delivered it to Washington in the field on 14 August. The letter officially revealed to the American commander in chief what Barras and Rochambeau had known since May but could not divulge. In short, Grasse was to sail from Santo Domingo on the island of Hispaniola on 5 August for North America and remain there until 15 October. His fleet would include twenty-nine ships of the line, around 3,200 French troops picked up along the way, and 1.2 million more livres in cash borrowed en route from the Spanish in Havana, Cuba. In his diary on the fourteenth, Washington expressed the immediate strategic pivot from New York to Virginia that Grasse's letter required:

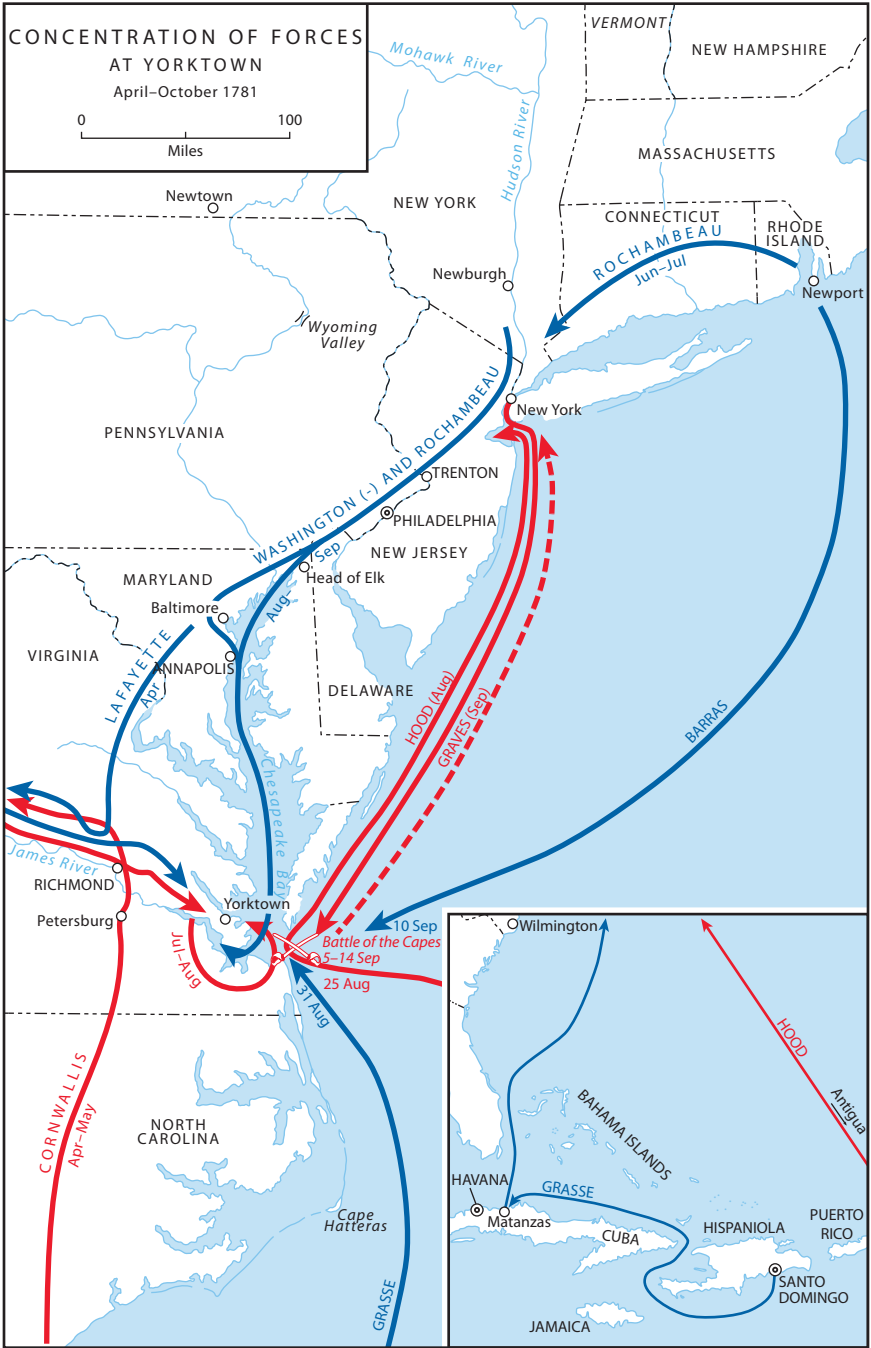
Matters having now come to a crisis and a decisive plan to be determined on—I was obliged, from the Shortness of Count de Grasses promised stay on this Coast—the apparent disinclination in their [i.e., French] Naval Officers to force the harbour of New York and the feeble compliance of the States to my requisitions for Men, hitherto, & little prospect of greater exertion in the future, to give up all idea of attacking New York; & instead thereof to remove the French Troops & a detachment from the American Army to the Head of [the] Elk [River in Maryland] to be transported to Virginia for the purpose of cooperating with the force from the West Indies against the [British] Troops in that State.

The Allies Redeploy to Virginia

At last, Washington had in prospect the very resource, perhaps even a war-winning one, that he had talked and written about for years—a decisive naval superiority. It took the form of the French Caribbean fleet, already underway to the Chesapeake Bay. By 19 August, just five days after receiving Grasse's letter, the combined American and French armies had begun their celebrated 450-mile strategic redeployment to a different theater of operations—from the New York City area to the Hampton Roads region of Virginia—the largest such allied movement of the war (*Map 5*). Washington divided his Main Army of around 6,500 troops, sending about half of them under Maj. Gen. William Heath into the Hudson Highlands to protect American fortifications at West Point. He directed the remaining half to march southward with Rochambeau's some 5,500 soldiers.

Each day, the armies arose methodically before sunup and marched an average of 15 miles until encountering the heat of the early afternoon. They encamped in predetermined locations until the next morning, only to repeat the process all over again that day, too. In addition to foot and mounted troops, both armies brought an assortment of field artillery and a supply train of hundreds of vehicles, more than 5,000 horses and oxen combined, and a herd of several thousand beef cattle to slaughter for rations along the way. Supply officers scouted ahead to determine routes of march and mark campsites and magazines for stockpiling forage and provisions beforehand. The French financed the combined overland and waterborne relocation, buying their way south with Rochambeau's replenished war chest. By contrast, the Americans largely borrowed their way along, using further specie from the French and an elaborate combination of promissory notes, private contracts, state requisitions, and supplies impressed from presumed loyalists.

The allies feinted from multiple directions toward New York City, intending to deceive the British and a newly arrived contingent of around 2,000 German reinforcements as to the march's direction and purpose. To the west, just over the Hudson River in New Jersey, the



Map 5

Franco-American forces repaired roads and bridges and constructed camps for the troops and ovens for their bread rations, all implying they would soon lay siege to the city. They also headed toward Staten Island, which could afford access to Manhattan Island. Finally, the allies marched in the direction of Sandy Hook, from which point they could contact a French fleet attempting to enter New York Harbor. Clinton believed the ruse because it reinforced his focus on defending New York first and echoed the captured copy of the Wethersfield plan. One historian has likened Washington's deception operation to "throw[ing] sand into [Clinton's] eyes." Yet the British commander harbored doubt, as revealed in a 2 September letter to Cornwallis that contained one of the war's great understatements:

By intelligence which I have this day received, it would seem that Mr. Washington is moving an army to the southward, with an appearance of haste, and gives out that he expects the cooperation of a considerable French armament. Your Lordship, however, may be assured, that if this should be the case, I shall either endeavour to reinforce the army under your command by all the means within the compass of my power, or make every possible diversion in your favor. . . . I flatter myself you will have little to apprehend from that [Caribbean fleet] of the French.

In the meantime, traveling separate routes to minimize the effect of drawing supplies from the countryside, the French and Americans reached the patriot capital at Philadelphia, almost a hundred miles to the south, early in the first week of September. They paraded before enthusiastic crowds. From there, the troops proceeded another 50 or so miles to Head of Elk, Maryland, the northernmost port on the Chesapeake Bay. Arriving on the Elk River on 6 September, they started to load soldiers and heavy equipment aboard the roughly eighty chartered or seized vessels waiting for them. Doubting the quality of American shipping at Head of Elk, the French continued south to Baltimore and Annapolis, Maryland, in search of better

vessels and alternate port facilities to finish the journey to Yorktown. As the Continental Army passed through Philadelphia, Sgt. Joseph Plumb Martin, the highly literate 20-year-old son of a New England church family and soldier in the Continental Army's Corps of Sappers and Miners—analogous to engineers of later periods—unexpectedly collected his pay. According to Martin,

we each of us received a MONTH'S PAY, in specie, borrowed, as I was informed, by our French officers from the officers in the French army. This was the first that could be called money, which we had received as wages since the year '76, or that we ever did receive till the close of the war, or indeed, ever after, as wages.

As he passed through Marcus Hook, Pennsylvania, near the Delaware state border, Washington learned on 5 September that Grasse and his French Caribbean fleet had arrived in the bay. Although uncharacteristically ecstatic at the news, Washington knew that the British sailing from New York or other points could still challenge Grasse for local control of the sea in Tidewater Virginia. Yet on the very same date, Grasse was already sailing into the open ocean to fight his counterparts in Britain's *Royal Navy*.

After campaigning in the Caribbean since he had arrived there in April 1781, Grasse made his way west to Cap François—Cap-Haitien in modern Haiti—by 26 July. Waiting for him at the port was the French frigate *La Concorde* with the earlier letters from Rochambeau and Washington, as well as civilian pilots who knew the complex waters of the southern Chesapeake Bay. On 17 August, after embarking French troops and with borrowed Spanish money in hand, Grasse sailed with his entire fleet through the little-used Bahama Straits to avoid British detection. Meantime, the ill V. Adm. George, Baron Rodney, commanding the *Royal Navy*'s Caribbean fleet, divided his force—and thus Crown naval strength in the West Indies—and accompanied a handful of ships of the line as they escorted prize vessels to Great Britain. Rodney's subordinate commanders, R. Adms. Sir Samuel Hood and Sir Francis S. Drake,

led the bulk of the fleet—fourteen ships of the line—in a race with Grasse toward North America.

Because the British ships had copper-sheathed hulls, they traveled faster than their French adversaries. Consequently, Hood, in overall command of the detachment, arrived in the Chesapeake Bay on 25 August after sailing fifteen days along the more direct route across the Atlantic Ocean from British Antigua in the Leeward Islands. Seeing no naval vessels in the bay, save those supporting Cornwallis and gathered well inland along the Yorktown waterfront, Hood sailed to New York and arrived off the Sandy Hook bar on 28 August. He then spent the next three days conferring with General Clinton and R. Adm. Sir Thomas Graves, the *Royal Navy*'s new commander in the theater of operations, about the naval situation taking shape in North American waters. Hood finally convinced his superiors of the likely threat to Cornwallis in Virginia should the French gain local control of the sea there. As a result, the combined British fleet of nineteen ships of the line with about 1,400 guns and all three admirals sortied on 31 August for the Chesapeake.

Meanwhile, Grasse arrived in the bay on the same day and dropped anchor in Lynnhaven Roads, just inside the Virginia Capes along the Chesapeake's southern shore. Thus, for what turned out to be a critical two months, control of the maritime domain changed hands from the British to the French. Grasse immediately detailed a handful of his ships to proceed up the James River to disembark Maj. Gen. Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon's three West Indian infantry regiments and an artillery contingent, totaling about 3,200 troops, at College Creek Landing for the short march into Williamsburg. These ships remained in the James to block British attempts to cross the river and flee south to the Carolinas.

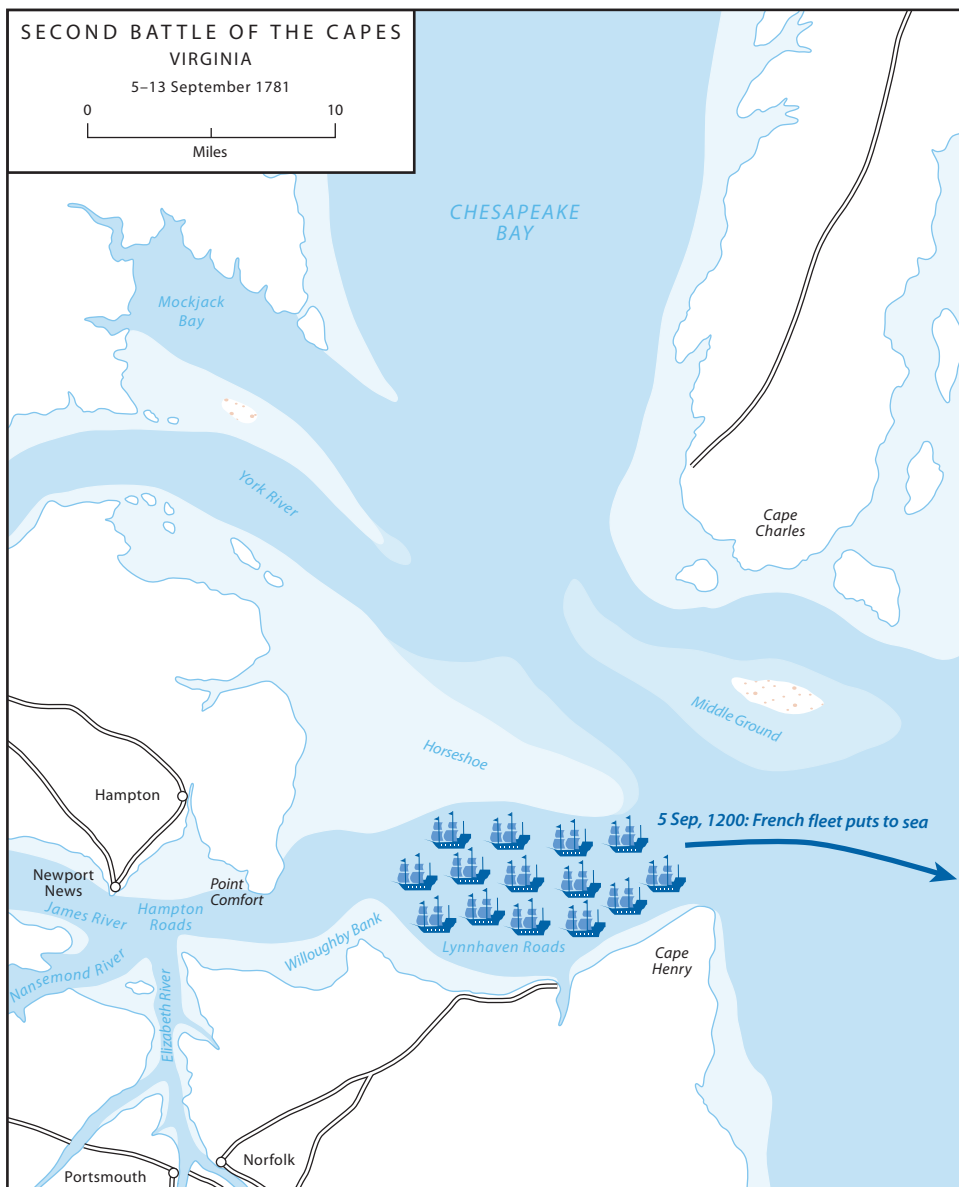
Before long, Lafayette brought his mixed force of some 5,200 Continentals and Virginia militia from the area between the Pamunkey and Mattaponi Rivers near West Point, Virginia, where they had been monitoring Crown forces in Yorktown, to nearby Williamsburg to unite with Saint-Simon's troops. At West Point, an enslaved individual named James "Armistead" (his owner's surname), serving the patriot cause as a double agent, had brought

Lafayette critical intelligence from Cornwallis's headquarters confirming that the earl and his troops were in Yorktown to stay. With the Franco-Americans on the Peninsula now totaling around 8,400 soldiers, they achieved near-parity with Cornwallis's Anglo-Germans at Yorktown. As long as Grasse's French fleet remained on station to control the area's waters, the Franco-American forces could attempt to prevent Cornwallis from escaping south to the Carolinas.

On 25 August, the same day that Admiral Hood had first arrived at the Chesapeake Bay, the *Expédition Particulière's* Admiral Barras and his seven ships of the line cleared Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island. They carried critical French siege artillery, a contingent of troops under Brig. Gen. Claude Gabriel de Choisy, and supplies of ammunition and foodstuffs. To avoid British detection, the French sailed far out to sea on a circuitous route that took them more than two weeks to reach the Chesapeake. While Barras was at sea, Lafayette visited Grasse aboard the latter's flagship and largest capital ship afloat, the 110-gun *La Ville de Paris*. The admiral importuned the young French commander to attack Cornwallis, who was still entrenching at Yorktown. Lafayette demurred, maintaining that both the responsibility for and honor of directly confronting Cornwallis belonged to the overall allied army commander, General Washington.

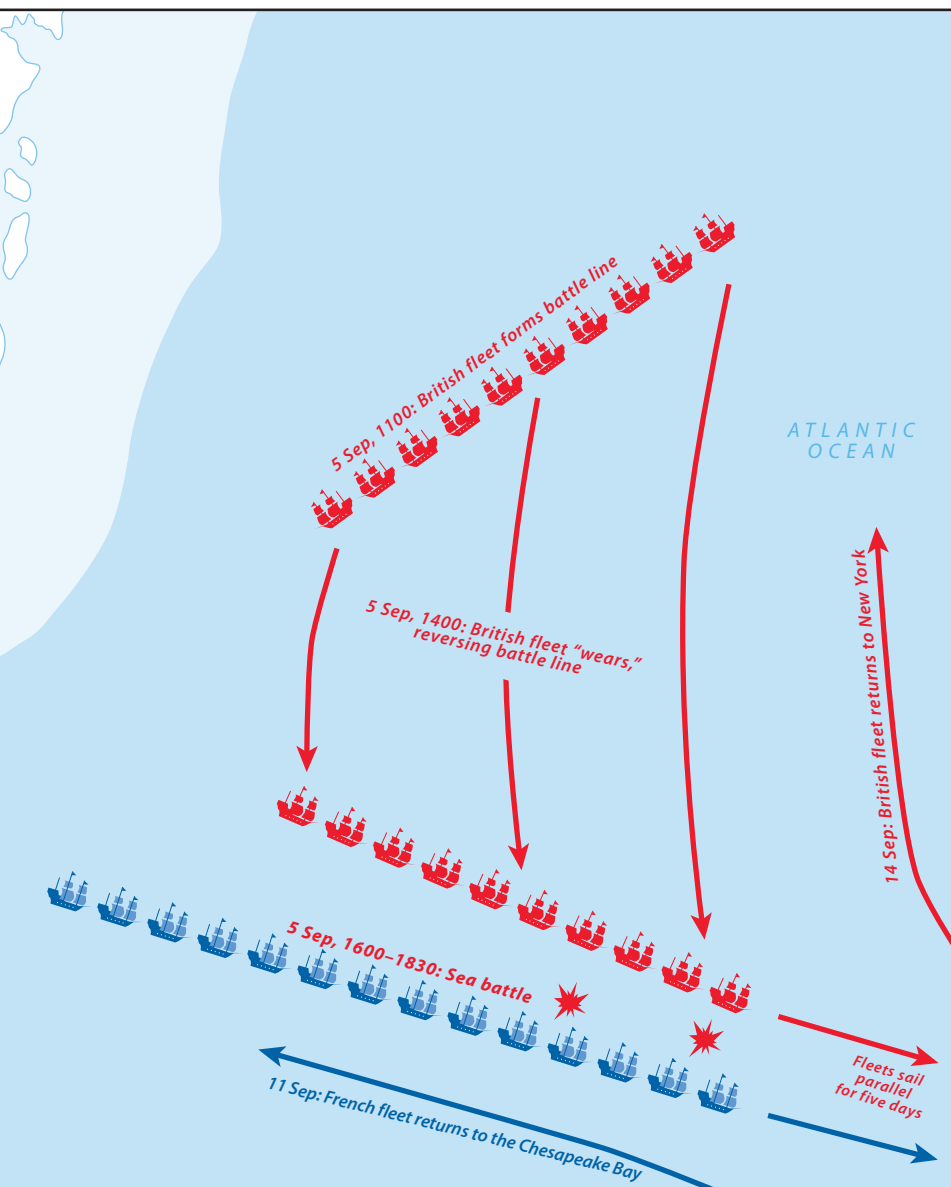
The Second Battle of the Virginia Capes and Its Aftermath

About 0800 on 5 September 1781, a French picket vessel scanning the ocean horizon north of the Chesapeake Bay's mouth toward New York spotted Graves's fleet approaching from the northeast. The British were in line formation and with the weather gage, which meant that they were upwind from the French, a favorable position for maneuvering. Graves now seemed to have the option of sailing into the bay and fighting Grasse right there for local control of the sea. However, the combined geography and hydrography near the bay's mouth precluded a fleet action in that immediate area (*Map 6*).



Map 6

The bay's mouth was only about 15 miles wide from Cape Charles on the north to Cape Henry on the south. From the mouth 20 miles west to the Peninsula's Old Point Comfort, three large areas of shoal



water—the Middle Ground, the Horseshoe, and Willoughby Bank—made running aground in the southern end of the bay, particularly at low tide, a navigational hazard for the ocean-going, deep-draft ships



Battle of the Virginia Capes, 5, September 1781, V. Zveg, 1962 (U.S. Navy Art Collection, U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command)

of the period. Because the *Royal Navy* had navigated the Chesapeake for the past year, supporting British land operations in the Tidewater region, Graves knew the attendant sailing risks. He formed line of battle around 1100 but remained outside the bay.

All the while, Grasse, already having acquired some appreciation for the bay's tricky waters, anxiously anticipated the tide cycle turning in his favor. About noon, as flood tide yielded to ebb tide, the French cut and buoyed their anchor cables for later retrieval, and their fastest ships began to straggle out of the bay in a rough line to gain sea room for maneuver. Grasse had detailed several ships and around 2,000 sailors and officers to other duty elsewhere in the Hampton Roads area. His remaining twenty-four ships of the line, with nearly 1,800 guns, sailed into the open ocean against a headwind to fight the British and to clear the bay's mouth for Barras's expected arrival. Seeing the French head out to sea, Graves began to wear his fleet at 1400, thus reversing its direction and placing the van under the aggressive Hood in the rear. After about two more

hours of maneuvering, the fleets had converged enough to begin the battle. With the British ships' turnabout, resulting in two roughly parallel west-east lines of ships, the weather gage now favored the French. The prevailing wind pushed Graves's ships to starboard, which meant they exposed less hull to the enemy but also might fire low into the water. By contrast, Grasse's ships rolled in the same direction, exposing more hull but allowing them to fire high enough to strike the British masts, rigging, and sails.

By 1600, Graves had lost the fleeting opportunity to attack Grasse's straggling van. Both fleets' lead ships reached the nearest and most effective engagement range, called "pistol shot"—30 to 50 yards apart, the functional range of the period's flintlock pistols. For the next two and a half hours, and with no American sailors present in either fleet, the first fifteen French ships of the line and their eight British counterparts exchanged broadsides. Owing to the wind situation and the disparity of forces, the coordinated fire damaged the latter far more than the former. Throughout the battle, from the time he reversed his fleet's course until the fighting ended, Graves used signal flags to issue at least seven distinct orders to approach and engage the enemy. However, the sequence of hoisting those flags confused Drake and Hood concerning their commander's intent and thus impaired British action. About 1830, with darkness approaching, the two fleets ceased firing but continued to sail roughly parallel for five more days.

The close-quarters action mauled both fleets' vans, forcing Graves to make crucial decisions. The French lost some 220 sailors and marines, whereas the British lost around 330 of the same. Although the French lost no vessels, the crew of Graves's flagship, the 100-gun HMS *London*, had to replace all her riddled masts, and the 74-gun HMS *Terrible* received such critical damage that her sailors had to scuttle her. The crews of five more heavily damaged British ships managed to save them. The weather gage pushed both fleets around 60 miles south, off North Carolina's Outer Banks, in the coming days. During that time, Graves conducted four separate councils of war and resisted Hood's fervent calls to turn about and sail straight into the Chesapeake to reclaim the maritime domain, taking advantage of British coppered hulls. In the end, Graves

hesitated out of fear that he would only trap his fleet in the bay and lose it either to surrender to or another engagement with the French.

Seizing the initiative, Grasse reversed course and reentered the Chesapeake on 11 September, casting anchor once again in Lynnhaven Roads. In the process, he captured two British frigates that Graves had sent to scout the bay's mouth unsuccessfully for French ships. One day earlier, while both fleets were still at sea, Barras had sailed into the Chesapeake unopposed with his priceless cargo of siege artillery, troops, and supplies. Though Barras was the senior allied admiral by date of rank, he agreed to serve under Grasse, who was more familiar with the immediate maritime situation. The united French forces possessed thirty-six ships of the line to the British eighteen, producing a naval superiority of two to one in capital ships and precluding Graves from risking another fleet action in his present condition.

Shortly thereafter, the British sailed back to the bay's mouth and noted the numerical advantage of the consolidated French fleet in the vicinity. The British ships turned north on 14 September, heading to New York to repair, refit, and arrange to send a relief expedition to Cornwallis's rescue—provided he could resist the combined allied armies for however long that effort might take. From this moment on, the French operational-level naval blockade was firmly in place. With Cornwallis now separated from the *Royal Navy's* ships of the line, Virginia militia Brig. Gen. George Weedon graphically recalled that “we have got him [i.e., Cornwallis] handsomely in a pudding bag.” Soon aware of his rapidly deteriorating Yorktown position following the sea battle, Cornwallis immediately conveyed his concern to Clinton in a tart 16–17 September letter, which in part read:

If I had no hopes of Relief, I would rather risk an Action than defend my half-finished Works. . . . I do not think myself justifiable in putting the fate of the War on so desperate an Attempt. . . . I am of the opinion, that you can do me no effectual Service, but by coming directly to this place . . . [, which] is in no State of defence. If you

cannot relieve me very soon, you must be prepared to hear the Worst.

By “the Worst,” Cornwallis meant losing his Virginia army to the French and Americans by defeat in battle or by surrender through siege. However, Clinton failed to grasp the full gravity of the situation.

Meantime, word of Grasse’s victory over Graves and the French fleet’s ability to retain local control of the sea reached Washington right after he arrived in Williamsburg on 14 September. At once, he signaled Maj. Gen. Benjamin Lincoln, second-in-command of the Main Army, to resume the overall Franco-American movement toward Yorktown, as this force was still farther north along the Chesapeake. While the Second Battle of the Capes and its immediate aftermath unfolded, some American and French troops—as well as their field artillery, mounted units, and supply train with animals—traveled cross-country through Maryland and Virginia to Williamsburg and other Tidewater locations. Washington, Rochambeau, and their staffs followed a similar route that took them past the American commander’s home in Mount Vernon, Virginia, which he had not seen in six years and where the group remained only three days.

On 17 September, Washington, Rochambeau, American Brig. Gen. Henry Knox, and several other allied senior officers—including French Brig. Gen. François-Jean de Beauvoir, chevalier de Chastellux, the commander in chief’s liaison—visited Grasse aboard the admiral’s anchored flagship. There, the group discussed plans to concentrate the Franco-American land and naval forces to defeat Cornwallis’s now-isolated and smaller Anglo-German army and its supporting British naval squadron. During the discussions, Grasse, who spoke no English, agreed to remain on station in Tidewater Virginia until around 1 November, thereby giving Washington another precious two weeks to compel Cornwallis’s surrender. Grasse also released 800 French soldiers who were serving aboard his ships as “marines” to fight on land. However, when Washington implored Grasse to detail ships to ascend the York River, the admiral demurred. The Americans wanted the French vessels to run the

British guns at Yorktown and Gloucester Point and take station upriver to prevent Cornwallis's force from sailing upstream to West Point and fleeing overland from there northward to New York City. Washington also expected that having French vessels in the York above Yorktown would facilitate waterborne allied communication between the Lower Peninsula and the Middle Peninsula. Instead, Grasse allocated a handful of ships of the line and frigates to maintain a tactical naval blockade of the British downstream from Yorktown near the mouth of the York River. This move by the French prompted Cornwallis to direct Captain Symonds to sink as many as thirty-two of his thirty-four transports and victualers along the Yorktown waterfront, seeking protection against a possible French amphibious landing in the immediate rear of the royal army's entrenched position atop the town's adjacent bluffs.

From the short shipboard conference in Lynnhaven Roads, the allied commanders achieved a level of unity of effort that the British failed to accomplish. Washington did not command Grasse, but they were cooperating to conduct combined operations. As long as the land commanders adhered to Grasse's revised timetable, their efforts might produce a significant or even decisive victory. After the meeting, inclement weather delayed Washington, Rochambeau, and their entourage from returning to Williamsburg until 22 September.

During this time, the Franco-American troops and their heavy equipment continued traveling by water from Head of Elk, Baltimore, and Annapolis. By 21 September, they had resumed their journey in a collection of transports of various sizes provided by both countries. While the French and American cavalry traveled overland to Williamsburg and the Middle Peninsula, allied infantry disembarked from transports at College Creek Landing near the former state capital, and their siege-caliber artillery unloaded at Trebell's Landing, just down the James River's left bank from the mouth of College Creek and only 6 miles by land from Yorktown. On 26 September, the Franco-American strategic redeployment from one theater of operations to another was complete: all French naval forces were on station in the Hampton Roads area, and the bulk of the combined land forces had closed on Williamsburg for the

imminent approach march to Yorktown. Throughout these events, Cornwallis remained oddly quiescent and in place, continuing to fortify at Yorktown. However, on the night of 21–22 September, he made an unsuccessful attempt to use the *Royal Navy*’s few fire ships in his flotilla to break Grasse’s tactical naval blockade downriver from the town.

By this point, the French and Americans had assembled a multinational, combined-arms land force of some 19,000 soldiers and about 125 artillery pieces, mostly of siege caliber. By comparison, Cornwallis had roughly 9,000 Anglo-Germans and loyalists with around 250 artillery tubes, largely of field caliber, with the exception of various naval caliber guns that Symonds’s sailors had removed from their ships for land service. The American Continentals and militia amounted to some 11,000 men under arms, and the French fielded approximately 8,000 regulars from Rochambeau’s and Saint-Simon’s units, including Grasse’s ersatz marines serving ashore. The tactical ratio thus assembled for the coming fight was a healthy two to one, significant but not itself decisive. At the operational level, however, adding together the allied land and naval forces—the latter numbering about 28,000 sailors, marines, and officers—the Franco-American forces enjoyed a decisive numerical advantage above five to one. Washington achieved this strategic success through flexible planning and energetic execution, including good fortune in bringing all those disparate parts, only a portion of which he directly commanded, to southeastern Virginia. Most importantly, he at last enjoyed a decisive naval superiority, complemented by a predominance in land elements. Now, Washington had about a month to try to use that total force to momentous effect.

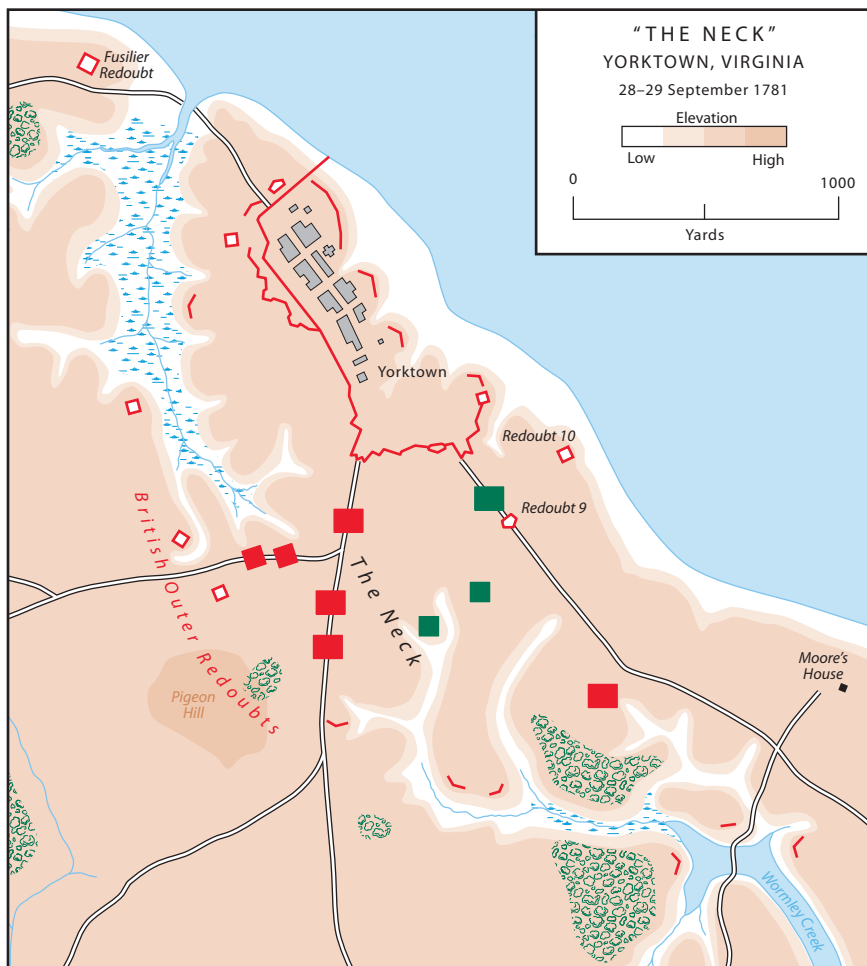
The Allies March to Yorktown

At 0500 on 28 September 1781, the French and Americans began their “grand approach” from Williamsburg to Yorktown. Nearly 4 miles southwest of the latter, the road from Williamsburg split, with the main road continuing east and intersecting the York-Hampton Highway in the “gorge” area adjacent to Pigeon Hill. From the split,

the river road headed northeast, turned east, and entered Yorktown past the Star Redoubt—also known as the Fusilier Redoubt, after the *23d Foot* which occupied it during the siege—and over the mouth of tide-fed, marshy Yorktown Creek. According to the protocol established for the campaign, the Americans, as the senior allied partner, took the main road to the right toward the strongest parts of the Anglo-German defense. The French, as the subordinate partner, traveled the secondary river road to the left in the direction of the weaker Star Redoubt area.

The disparity of forces compelled the British to withdraw before the allied advance to cover those two primary avenues of approach. They lacked sufficient numbers to be strong everywhere the French and Americans might appear. To the southeast of town, a long-established mill dam over spring-fed Wormley Creek created Wormley Pond. Downstream from the pond, the creek fluctuated with the tide. The causeway atop the dam carried a narrow but functional road from the creek's right to its left bank, thus potentially affording the Americans a route to envelop British defensive positions on Pigeon Hill's high ground. For additional defensive support, Cornwallis detailed *Royal Navy* sailors to occupy three small chevron-shaped earthworks, called *flèches*, on a trio of high points overlooking the causeway, but they were only a temporary early-warning force.

With much of the Anglo-German army now located outside Yorktown's main inner defense line, forward in the gorge area and largely behind a masking hill, Cornwallis faced a dilemma. Would the Franco-American threat come over the two roads from Williamsburg or from his extreme left via Wormley Creek? Sgt. Berthold Koch of the Hessian *Regiment von Bose* was ready to fight for key terrain in the Pigeon Hill area: "Lord Cornwallis sought to lure the enemy onto the island [i.e., the high and dry ground from the gorge to the mouths of both creeks], where he could have destroyed them with his battalions." In brief, the tactically overambitious Cornwallis initially appeared to have intended to ambush the allies, most likely the Americans, and preferably along the main road from Williamsburg where it passed through Pigeon Hill. He had room



Map 7

for maneuver just west of there, and he arrayed the bulk of his army to achieve that end, similar to his failed July attempt to execute a decisive battlefield victory over Lafayette at Green Spring (*Map 7*).

On 29 September, the allied high command began reconnoitering Yorktown's environs for a possible siege, while the French and American troops started moving into position to invest the town. At once, orders went to Trebell's Landing on the James River to start the heavy siege artillery on its overland trek to Yorktown. It would be a

slow process; the area's soft, sandy roads made it difficult to move the equipment, and the allies continued to have a shortage of wheeled transportation and draft animals.

That same night, a British exchange of letters altered the course of events in the weeks ahead and stymied any possible resistance Cornwallis might have made to block an allied advance through the gorge area. Clinton's letter of 24 September arrived aboard a dispatch galley that regularly carried the British commanders' correspondence between New York City and Yorktown under cover of darkness through the French naval blockades. Cornwallis had been expecting the missive, which read in part:

at a meeting of the General and Flag officers held this day, it is determined, that above five thousand men [i.e., nearing half the city's garrison], rank and file, shall be embarked on board the King's ships, and the joint exertions of the navy and army made in a few days to relieve you, and afterwards co-operate with you.

The fleet consists of twenty-three sail of the line [following R. Adm. Robert Digby's recent arrival in New York with three ships of the line, plus eventually two more from Jamaica], three of which are three deckers [i.e., the largest capital ships]. There is every reason to hope we start from hence [i.e., New York City] the 5th [of] October.

Elated at the long-anticipated news of reinforcement and resupply, Cornwallis wrote back to Clinton that very evening:

I have ventured these last two days [i.e., 28–29 September] to look General Washington's whole force in the face in the position on the outside of my works [i.e., at Pigeon Hill/Quarter], and I have the pleasure to assure your Excellency, that there was but one wish throughout the whole army, which was, that the enemy would advance [and engage in battle in the gorge area].

I have this evening received your letter of the 24th, which has given me the greatest satisfaction. I shall retire this night within my works, and have no doubt, if relief arrives in any reasonable time, [that] York and Gloucester will be both in possession of his Majesty's troops.

When the allies advanced on the morning of 30 September, they found the British had abandoned all their outermost defenses—redoubts, battery, and flèches—without a fight. Overnight, Cornwallis had withdrawn his forces on the Peninsula into Yorktown's innermost defense line. The Star Redoubt west of town, and Redoubts 9 and 10 east of it, would protect the flanks. The combative British Colonel Tarleton and the allied commander General Washington were incredulous at Cornwallis's course of action. Soon, Washington wrote Maryland Governor Thomas S. Lee that "Lord Cornwallis's conduct has hitherto been passive beyond conception—he either has not the means of defence, or he intends to reserve himself untill we approach very near him. A few days will determine whether he will or will not give us much trouble." Cornwallis had indeed withdrawn into Yorktown to mass his army to defend the town proper and its anchorage. It remains an open question whether fighting the French and Americans for possession of the Pigeon Hill area would have extended the British defense of Yorktown and thus given General Clinton and Admiral Graves enough time to mount a successful relief expedition to Cornwallis from New York City. However, the gorge was now in allied hands, opening the door to the undulating plateau southeast of Yorktown: ideal ground upon which the allies could conduct a siege.

Washington, Rochambeau, their staffs and engineers spent 30 September and 1 October reconnoitering Cornwallis's inner line and the redoubts protecting its flanks. All the while, their soldiers converted the British outer line earthworks into allied ones and constructed a first Franco-American redoubt as a supplemental fortification in the gorge area. In the process, the allied senior leaders, including Washington, occasionally came under fire but without



Detail from *French Artillery Park*, Sidney E. King, 1957 (Courtesy National Park Service, Colonial National Historic Park)

effect. The Franco-Americans held their fire to avoid revealing their positions to the Anglo-Germans.

To access water for both animals and soldiers and to prepare for Washington's next move, the French and American troops began to establish their camps well to the rear around the Warwick River's headwaters and along nearby Wormley Creek, both more than a mile from Yorktown itself. On the allied right, closest to the river, the American wing consisted of Lincoln's line infantry division composed of two brigades. Lafayette's elite, division-sized Light Corps comprising two light infantry brigades occupied the center. The left, westernmost Continental division was Steuben's, who also had a pair of line infantry brigades. Under Knox, Washington's chief of cannon, the American artillery park was on the upper Warwick's left bank. The sappers and miners camped nearby. Col. Stephen Moylan's 4th Legionary Corps constituted the advance guard and patrolled the area's roads. The Continental Army at Yorktown totaled some 6,000 men under arms. Three Virginia militia brigades and a state regiment under General (and now Governor) Nelson formed the reserve line, a total of around 5,000 troops combined. In all, the American force came to about 11,000 soldiers (*Map 8*).



Map 8



Detail from *The Stage Is Set*, Sandra Heiser and Doug Jaques, 1981 (Courtesy National Park Service, Colonial National Historic Park)

On the allies' left, the French wing consisted of its artillery park under Col. François-Marie, comte d'Aboville, on the upper Warwick's right bank and three infantry brigades, each composed of two regiments, to the north. The first two brigades were those of Rochambeau's *Expédition Particulière*. Maj. Gen. Antoine Charles Du Houx, baron de Vioménil, commanded the southernmost brigade, and Maj. Gen. Joseph Hyacinthe Charles Du Houx, comte de Vioménil, led the middle one. The northernmost brigade, adjacent to the York and astride the river road to Williamsburg, was that of General Saint-Simon, whose trio of West Indian regiments had arrived in Virginia aboard Grasse's Caribbean fleet. The last of those three regiments was independent of any brigade, positioned east along the river road to Yorktown, and opposed the British Fusilier Redoubt. All French mounted troops served eventually on the Middle Peninsula under Brig. Gen. Armand-Louis de Gontaut-Biron, duc de

Lauzun, whose legion was also a combined-arms unit. Rochambeau's total force amounted to around 8,000 men under arms.

The Mechanics of Siege Warfare

While the Franco-American forces finished settling into their camps, Washington's reconnaissance party sorted through its potential courses of action. They included an immediate attack on Cornwallis—a choice called “insult”—before he set his defense by finishing the earthworks protecting Yorktown and its waterfront anchorage. Because Grasse had agreed to remain on station in the Tidewater region until about 1 November, Washington decided to lay formal siege to the town instead of assaulting it outright. Still, he had to adhere to the French admiral's revised one-month timetable. After then, the *Royal Navy* would return in strength to reinforce and resupply Cornwallis, and thus Washington could not risk losing local control of the sea, and all that went with it.

Having chosen a classic, eighteenth-century, European-style field siege—one against earthworks instead of a permanent masonry fortress, and with time of the essence—Washington turned to his French allies for guidance. Rochambeau was himself a veteran of numerous sieges, and the French army had long experience in that millennia-old and most deliberate form of the Western art and science of warfare. Among European military professionals, the French had codified siege techniques by the early eighteenth century. King Louis XIV's chief siege engineer, Field-Marshal Sébastien le Prestre, marquis de Vauban (1633–1707), was the author of two manuals on the mechanics (i.e., doctrine) of siege warfare: *Treatise on Sieges and the Attack of Fortresses* (1704) and *Treatise on the Defense of Fortresses* (1706).

In his handbooks, Vauban detailed the process of a siege. It began with a numerical consideration, for which the attacker (or the besieger) preferred a three-to-one superiority in troop strength against the defender (or the besieged). Although the Franco-American forces enjoyed only a two-to-one tactical advantage at Yorktown, they had enough forces to begin the

procedure. Next, the besieger cut all the lines of communications sustaining the besieged. Then, by employing combinations of land, water, fortifications, and forces, the attacker encircled the defender twice over—first with an inner line of circumvallation to keep the defender from breaking the siege, and next with an outer line of contravallation to prevent the defender from being reinforced or resupplied by a relief force.

The siege's bombardment phase started within those two confining lines, usually at a distance of 600 to 800 yards from the besieged—a function of the much greater range of 1,000 to 1,500 yards called “cannon shot.” At the closer distance, which was just inside the effective range of the besieger's shortest-range siege-caliber artillery, the attacker would begin to dig a series of three parallels, each a simple infantry trench—called a curtain—hundreds of yards long and studded throughout its length with artillery batteries and nearby infantry redoubts to protect the cannoneers and their pieces. After opening fire from the first parallel, the attacker's sappers and miners dug zigzag saps, or communication trenches, forward roughly half the distance to the defender. At a range of 300 to 400 yards, the besieger dug another curtain trench left and right from the sap heads to open the second parallel, which also contained batteries and redoubts. Fire from both the first and second parallels focused on suppressing the defender's return fire, draining ammunition, dismounting artillery, breaching earthworks, and killing and wounding troops.

Three types of large-caliber artillery predominated in siege warfare. Low-trajectory guns dismantled the defender's fortifications with solid-iron round shot and dismounted artillery tubes from their carriages. High-trajectory mortars exploded bombs inside the defender's earthworks to kill or wound soldiers. Mid-trajectory howitzers fired exploding shells that combined the effects of guns and mortars.

After sapping forward again to around 30 to 50 yards from the besieged—the aforementioned “pistol shot” range—the besieger opened the third parallel. From all three parallels, the attacker's siege artillery blasted a “practicable breach” in the defender's fortifications.

From the third parallel, the besieger launched a general assault through the rupture, aiming to put the entire defending garrison to death at bayonet- or sword-point in hand-to-hand melee fighting. Usually, between opening the third parallel and conducting the general assault, the besieged would beat the *chamade*: a drum signal to the besieger that the besieged wished to discuss and determine proposed articles of capitulation. If the besieged forces had conducted a stout and lengthy resistance up to that point, then their surrender included granting the “honors of war,” which allowed their troops to march out from their battered fortifications with colors uncased and flying in the breeze, while their bands played the martial music of the attacker to acknowledge the victorious force’s skill in conducting the siege. All the European professional soldiers at Yorktown, as well as many of the veteran Americans, knew the long recognized and accepted process of siege warfare.

The Battle of the Hook

Before the siege could proceed, the Franco-Americans had to finish closing on the Anglo-Germans on the York River’s north bank in the Gloucester Point area, which Cornwallis had begun to fortify when he arrived at Yorktown in early August. By the start of October, well north of the point itself, the allies had assembled a motley force of some 3,000 troops, containing Lauzun’s Legion; Grasse’s substitute marines; and General Weedon’s Virginia militia brigade, which included Lt. Col. John Mercer’s “select” battalion of Continental Army veterans. The commander of this group was France’s General Choisy, who had arrived from Rhode Island in September with Barras’s *Expédition Particulière* squadron.

On the British side, under the command originally of Lt. Col. Thomas Dundas and later Colonel Tarleton, the roughly 1,000 soldiers occupying the Gloucester Point batteries, redoubts, and infantry curtain trench included Tarleton’s *Legion*, Simcoe’s *Rangers*, the detachment of the *17th Light Dragoons*, Capt. Johann Ewald’s company of German jaegers, and detachments from the *23d* and *80th Foot*. All of Cornwallis’s mounted units also were at the

Gloucester garrison, where they could forage on the rich Middle Peninsula countryside to sustain their horses without encountering significant allied forces—that is, until 3 October.

On the morning of that day, sometime before 1000, a large British foraging expedition under Tarleton was returning to Gloucester Point when it encountered most of Choisy's force moving deliberately southward to close on Dundas's troops and possibly lay siege to their fortifications. Nearly 5 miles north of the point in open fields west of the main road to Gloucester Courthouse, well beyond a British advanced redoubt obstructing the thoroughfare itself, the allied vanguard of lancers from Lauzun's Legion confronted Tarleton's rearguard. The British troopers were escorting livestock and wagons full of recently gathered fodder, and they deployed to shield the wagons, which kept going toward the redcoats' garrison at the point. Meanwhile, Tarleton and about fifty to sixty of his mounted force approached the allied advance party, which included Lauzun and a similar number of his troopers. The French lancers attacked, and the two leaders sought one another for individual combat. In the resulting melee, a French lance pierced a British horse, which reared and plunged into Tarleton's mount. The Briton's horse then threw him to the ground. Lauzun angled to capture his downed opponent, but more British troopers, including mounted infantry, joined the fight and protected Tarleton while he remounted. Amid all the saber charges and short-range, black-powder weapons fire during the fight, neither side broke the other's lines.

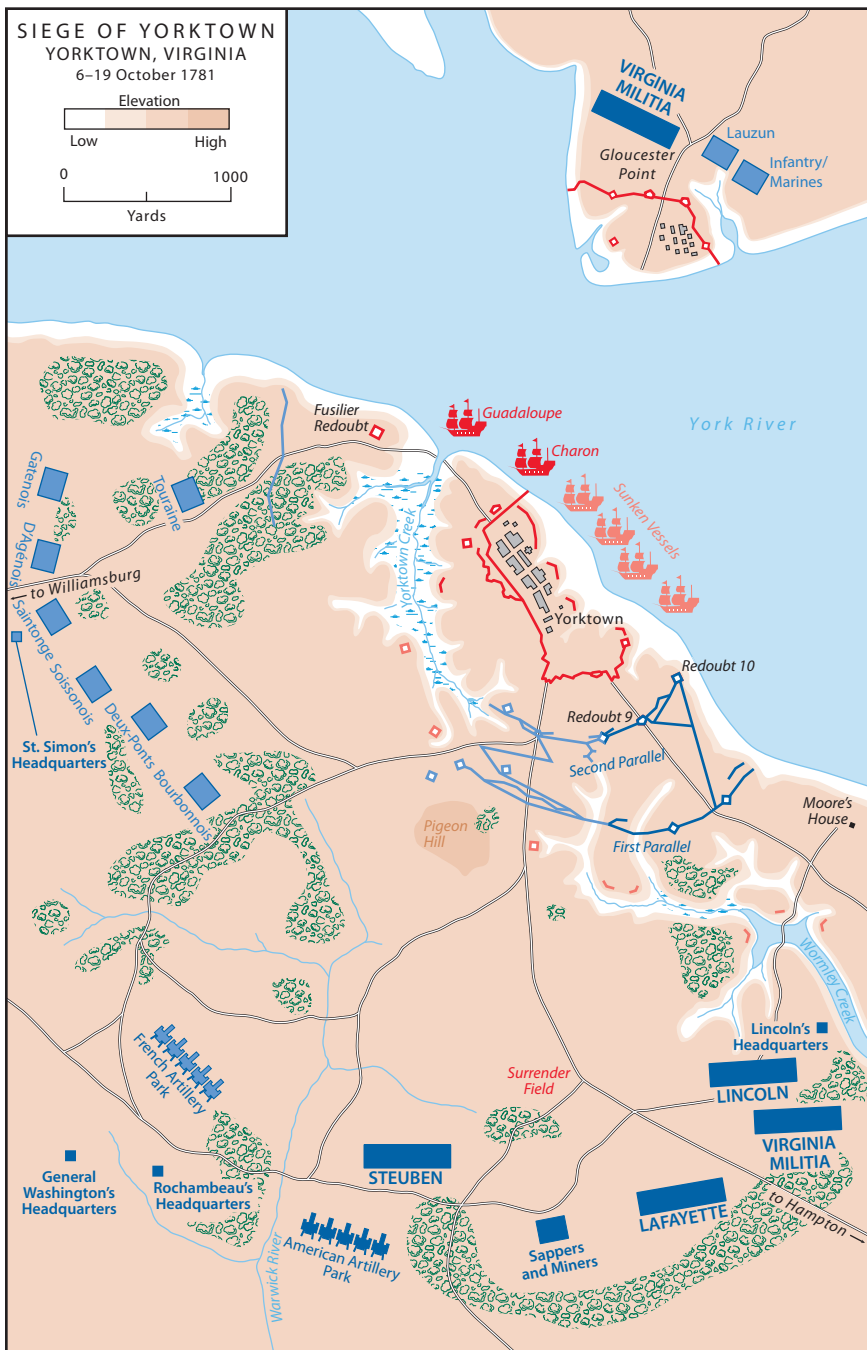
Mercer's veteran Continentals, now serving as Virginia militia, soon appeared and held against further British attack. Tarleton opted to conclude the expedition and withdraw within the relative safety of the Gloucester Point entrenchments. Though Tarleton did not know it at that point, his fighting days in the war were over. In all, the engagement comprised around four hours of back-and-forth battle between nearly 900 mostly mounted soldiers on both sides—the largest cavalry engagement of the Revolutionary War. The Battle of the Hook, which took its name from a nearby angled road intersection, resulted in about a dozen French, around the

same British, and an unknown number of American casualties. The defining outcome of the battle, however, was not a question of losses in the field. Shortly afterward, Choisy's troops arrayed themselves before Dundas's earthworks and prepared to encamp to form a land blockade. In doing so, the allies completed their lines of circumvallation and contravallation as a precondition for the overall siege to start on both sides of the river. At last, Washington and Rochambeau could focus on opening the parallels and beginning the bombardment. The siege of Yorktown now truly began.

The Siege of Yorktown

By 3 October, Cornwallis had lost any good opportunity he might have had to escape. After the Second Battle of the Capes in early September, the allies had obstructed all practicable water avenues away from Yorktown. Once the French and Americans closed on Yorktown from 29 to 30 September, they were able to block any feasible land route that the British could use to decamp from the Peninsula toward central Virginia or the Carolinas. Cornwallis might have fled over the York inland along the Middle Peninsula, but he would have had to traverse some 450 miles through American territory while foraging for food and crossing numerous major rivers. It was a long way to travel to reach the presumed safety of the British North American base of operations at New York City. Even the hope for a *Royal Navy* seaborne relief expedition was dim, as the British ships would have to fight their way into the Chesapeake Bay, past Grasse's entire Caribbean fleet and Barras's whole Rhode Island squadron. With their exits closed off, the Anglo-Germans and American loyalists could only await the deliberate and predictable process of a formal siege and its endpoint in a bloody general assault.

From 3 to 6 October, the allies finished gathering the logistical resources needed to start the siege proper (*Map 9*). The combination of shallow-draft transports from Barras's squadron; private boats that Governor Nelson impressed into temporary military service; and the overland arrival of the French supply train with its wagons, entrenching tools, and around 2,300 draft animals—especially



Map 9

oxen—all allowed the allies to disembark the siege artillery and begin to convey it from Trebell's Landing to Yorktown. On 4 October, Washington continued his leader's reconnaissance with his staff around Pigeon Hill to pinpoint the line for the first parallel. Intermittent British field-caliber artillery fire came alarmingly close at times to the allied commander in chief. One round landed so close to staff chaplain Israel Evans that the displaced sand covered the clergyman's hat. As he prepared to brush the hat clean, Washington humorously interjected: "Mr. Evans, you had better carry that [hat] home and show it to your wife and children [as a souvenir]."

The next night, amid rain and under the cover of darkness, the engineers began to mark with white-painted pinewood laths the line along which to dig the allied first parallel facing the British inner defense line. The arc stretched more than a mile from the head-draws of Yorktown Creek to the bluffs overlooking the York River and the mouth of Wormley Creek. Washington was omnipresent during this critical stage of the siege. According to Sergeant Martin, the general appeared alone among the sappers and miners, chatted with them, and then disappeared into the drenched night looking for engineer officers. He soon returned with the engineers, but the storminess prevented further work that night.

During the evening of 6 October, in improved but still rainy conditions, about 1,500 troops from the Franco-American force on the Yorktown side of the river returned to open their first parallel. This group included most of the sappers and miners. On the undulating plateau southeast of Yorktown, Washington himself used a pickaxe to break ground officially for all the forthcoming French and American trenches, batteries, and redoubts. Roughly 2,800 allied soldiers on the Peninsula guarded the diggers throughout the night. Allied trench duty rotated daily by division for the Americans and by brigade for the French. One of the Continental Army's camp followers, Sarah Osborn—a soldier's wife performing the typical duties of laundering, sewing, and cooking for the troops—brought cooked rations of beef, bread, and a gallon pot of coffee one evening to those working in the trenches. There, she encountered Washington. When he asked if she "was not afraid of the cannonballs," Osborn replied that "it would

not do for the men to fight and starve[,] too.” Beyond the British right flank that same 6 October evening, on the long and high finger of land where the Fusilier Redoubt overlooked the river road from Williamsburg to Yorktown, Saint-Simon’s West Indian Régiment Touraine conducted a demonstration—a burst of activity intended to distract and deceive the enemy—in the form of a “flying sap.” Hurriedly and under fire, the French dug this earthwork toward the redoubt to attract Anglo-German attention in that direction and away from the main excavation starting across town to the southeast. The ruse worked.

By daylight on 7 October, the allies had finished the first parallel’s infantry curtain trench and had begun the first few of its eventual thirteen batteries and redoubts. Annoyed at having been deceived, the British deployed several field guns outside their earthworks and fired at the allies but to no avail. Using two draws leading down to Wormley Pond as natural saps, the French and Americans brought to the first parallel some of the protective wooden implements—gabions, fascines, fraises, palisades, and abatis, among others—that they had constructed locally and concealed there until needed to reinforce the batteries and redoubts.

The Bombardment Begins

With the first parallel finally complete, on 9 October the French and Americans prepared, with palpable optimism and enthusiasm, to commence the allied bombardment. In a nod to French military professionalism and skill in siege warfare, Rochambeau’s artillerists received the honor of firing the ceremonial first round. At 1500, on the far-left continuation of the allied first parallel, the French fired a fusillade of ten siege artillery pieces from Saint-Simon’s trenches opposite the Star Redoubt. Then, at 1700, Washington himself fired the first American round from an 18-pounder siege gun from the first American Grand Battery atop the bluffs overlooking the York River. Dr. James Thacher, a Continental Army surgeon, recalled that:

Two or three of our batteries being now prepared to open on the town, his Excellency George Washington put the match to the first [American] gun, and a furious discharge of cannon and mortars immediately followed, and Earl Cornwallis has received his first salutation [i.e., greeting]. . . . It is astonishing with what accuracy an experienced gunner will make his calculations, that a shell shall fall within feet of a given point, and burst at the precise time, though at a great distance [of 600 to 800 yards over open ground]. When a shell falls, it whirls round, burrows, and excavates the earth to a considerable extent, and bursting, makes a dreadful havoc around. I have more than once witnessed fragments of the mangled bodies and limbs of the British soldiers thrown into the air by the bursting of our [American] shells.

Within the British main earthworks, Washington's first round crashed into Cornwallis's headquarters in the house of Thomas Nelson, the uncle of General Nelson. The elder Nelson had been secretary to the Council, the prewar royal governing body in Virginia.² At that time of day, a group of British officers had sat down to dinner. Witnessing the carnage that followed, Captain Ewald recalled that:

by the first cannon shot of the [American] besiegers [that is, Washington's], Commissary [General] Perkins was killed at table[,] and Lieutenant [Charles] Robertson of the 76th Regiment [of Foot] lost his left leg. The lady of the good commissary general sat between the two at table during this misadventure [and was unharmed].

For nearly the next week and a half—day and night—the Franco-Americans fired artillery projectiles at an average rate of more than

2. This member of Yorktown's storied Nelson family went by the moniker of "Secretary" Nelson after his colonial governmental duties.

one per minute into the Anglo-German defenses at both Yorktown and Gloucester Point. By the end of the siege, this amounted to nearly 15,500 large-caliber rounds.

The following day, 10 October, the massive French Grand Battery unleashed its firepower. The French propitiously had positioned their artillery on the high ground of the first parallel at Pigeon Hill, astride the York-Hampton Highway and reaching the head-draws of nearby Yorktown Creek. This position was crucial in the bombardment. The mounting effect of the combined Franco-American artillery fire soon closed nearly all of Cornwallis's earthwork embrasures, severely limiting his return fire to about half a dozen rounds per hour. British Capt. Samuel Graham of the *76th Foot (MacDonald's Highlanders)* remembered the upshot of the rain of iron:

An incessant cannonade now commenced on both sides, but our batteries and newly constructed works soon began to feel the effects of the powerful artillery opposed to them, and on the 10th scarcely a gun could be fired from our works, fascines, stockade platforms, and earth, with guns and gun-carriages, being all pounded together in a mass.

Cornwallis responded only with harassing fire, choosing to conserve his ammunition and manpower for later in the siege, when he might need them to repel an allied general assault.

Also that day, under a flag of truce, the elderly Secretary Nelson left Yorktown and revealed to the allies the cumulative effect of their artillery fire, which already had heavily damaged numerous buildings in town. The fire had compelled Cornwallis to move his headquarters from the secretary's wrecked residence into a safer adjacent ravine called Tobacco Road. Along that thoroughfare, Virginians had long rolled hogsheads of the compressed leafy product from the bluffs down to the waterfront for overseas shipment. Later in the day, Lafayette, who was directing the activities of the siege in his duties as Officer of the Day, invited General Nelson to observe the opening fire from the battery of



Detail from American Trench Depot at Yorktown in 1781, Sidney E. King, 1957 (Courtesy National Park Service, Colonial National Historic Park)

the 2d Continental Artillery Regiment's Capt. Thomas Machin. Lafayette asked Nelson to indicate a target for the initial shot. Knowing Yorktown's layout well, Nelson chose his own residence, saying to the captain:

There, to that house; it is mine, and is, now that the Secretary's [dwelling] is nearly knocked to pieces, the best one in town; and there you will be almost certain to find Lord Cornwallis and the British head quarters [which already had relocated into the adjoining Tobacco Road defile]. Fire upon it, my dear Marquis.

Even the reduced volume of British artillery fire posed risks to the soldiers in the allied trenches. Light infantry Capt. James Duncan of the Canadian Regiment (Congress's Own), in American service, noticed a braver-than-prudent militiaman who "stood constantly on the [trench's surmounting] parapet and d—d [damned] his soul if he would dodge [cannonballs] for the [British] buggers." Duncan

continued that the man “had escaped longer than could have been expected, and, growing fool-hardy, brandished his spade at every ball that was fired, till, unfortunately, a ball came and put an end to his capers.” On another occasion, Duncan’s regiment, while relieving the troops detailed to dig the trenches and under American light infantry Lt. Col. Alexander Hamilton’s direction, topped the parapet with unit colors flying and drums beating, performing the soldier’s full manual of arms with the musket. Hamilton’s troops were in clear view several hundred yards away of the defending British, who watched without firing a shot, perhaps admiring the allies’ esprit de corps. However, once Washington and Rochambeau learned of these antics, they quickly prohibited the practice throughout the Franco-American forces. The pointless exposure of any allied soldier to such mortal danger was a waste of manpower for the more productive purpose of fighting, not entertaining, their foes.

During the night of 10–11 October, from atop the bluffs overlooking the York River upstream from the town, Saint-Simon’s artillerists fired “hot shot”—solid round shot heated to a high temperature in a purpose-built furnace—and set ablaze the HMS *Charon*, a forty-four-gun frigate and the flagship of Captain Symonds’s *Royal Navy* squadron. Fully engulfed in flames, the ship broke loose from its moorings, set fire to nearby transports, drifted across the York to the Gloucester Point side, burned to the waterline, and sank. The same skilled French gunners, with like fire, also chased the HMS *Guadaloupe*, a twenty-six-gun sloop of war, across the river in search of safer harbor on the Gloucester bank. Her crew later scuttled the vessel to prevent its capture. The French also set aflame several additional British transports with still more hot-shot rounds. All this incendiary fire effectively interdicted the line of communications between the British Yorktown and Gloucester garrisons. The allies no longer had to fear the possibility that Cornwallis could decamp from Yorktown, embark aboard his residual transports escorted by his remaining warships, and ascend the York River to West Point as an escape route.

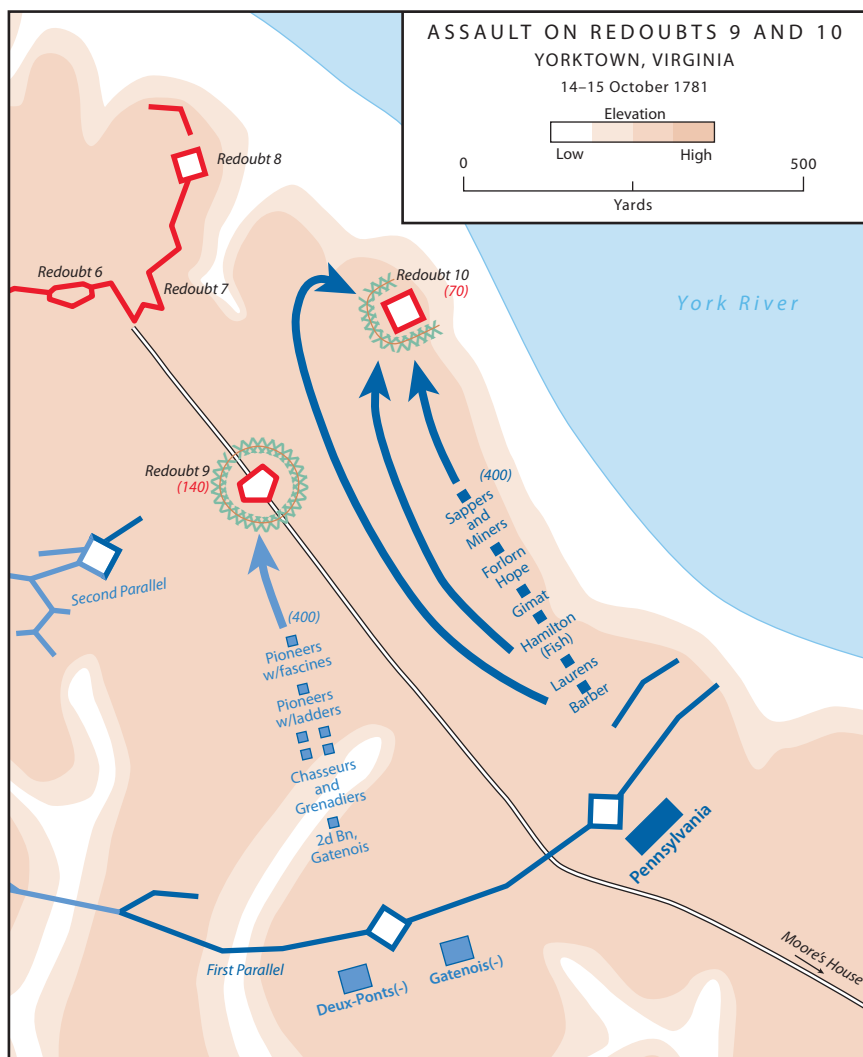
The next night, 11–12 October, after sapping halfway to the British inner defense line and branching left and right from their

sapheads, the French and Americans opened the allied second parallel, 300 to 400 yards from the Anglo-Germans. By 12 October, however, the new line of Franco-American earthworks ran only as far as the junction separating that parallel's larger French sector, which ended in a battery and an American and French redoubt, from the nub of the American sector, which at that time consisted only of an additional battery. Still, covering fire from both parallels on these two days was among the heaviest of the siege. British Redoubts 9 and 10 prevented the allies from completing the second parallel to the York River's bluffs. This pair of redoubts, approximately 300 yards apart, occupied two high points on the undulating plateau where the siege was unfolding. The fortifications there protected the redcoats' extreme left flank, about 400 yards from Cornwallis's innermost defense of the Yorktown anchorage.

Around 400 yards southwest of Redoubt 9, the American battery that temporarily formed the end of the second parallel occupied lower ground and refused its right flank with a short *épaulement* earthwork as protection against British enfilading fire. Before the allies could complete the second parallel and conclude the siege with a third parallel and a general assault, they first had to capture those two redoubts. The likely approach would be a nighttime infantry attack. For the next two days, in preparation for the assault, French and American artillery concentrated their fire on Redoubts 9 and 10 but failed to damage critically either fortification. With Grasse's departure date drawing ever nearer, Washington decided to attack the redoubts on the evening of 14 October.

The Allies Assault British Redoubts 9 and 10

At 1400 that day, the commander in chief informed both allied armies of his decision to conduct the assault that evening. The pentagonal Redoubt 9, the larger of the two positions, contained a garrison of about 140 German and British defenders plus two light, field-caliber artillery pieces. The smaller, diamond-shaped Redoubt 10 held some 70 British and German defenders and no artillery. Always observing the Franco-American protocol that



Map 10

characterized the siege, Washington assigned the capture of Redoubt 10 to a picked force from the light division of 400 American infantry, who were to attack on the allied right under Lafayette's command. The Americans thereby enjoyed overwhelming numbers of nearly six to one. Similarly, Washington allocated the seizure of Redoubt 9 to 400 select French infantry. The formation consisted of

light infantry chasseurs and heavy infantry grenadiers—throwing an early version of the hand grenade—from one of Rochambeau's Expédition Particulière regiments and one of Saint-Simon's West Indian regiments. Together, these French units would assault Redoubt 9 on the allied left under Baron de Vioménil's command, at a numerical strength of around three to one. The odds of victory in the forthcoming fight for possession of these two critical redoubts were heavily in the allies' favor from the start (*Map 10*).

Lafayette initially bestowed the honor of leading the attack on Redoubt 10 on one of his battalion commanders and fellow Frenchman, Lt. Col. Jean-Joseph Sourbader de Gimat. Colonel Hamilton, formerly one of Washington's aides-de-camp and only recently returned to line duty as a light infantry battalion commander, was overseeing the activities in the American sector as Officer of the Trenches on the day of the attack. He claimed seniority over Gimat and took his case directly to Washington, who decided in the American colonel's favor. As a result, Hamilton himself would lead the American assault column, which consisted of a variety of units. To take the redoubt, Hamilton would begin by sending in a handful of sappers and miners to remove such wooden obstacles as abatis, palisades, and fraises with their axes. With the way cleared, the first soldiers to confront Redoubt 10's defenders would be a similar number of volunteers called the Forlorn Hope: as their detachment's name implied, they would be unlikely to survive the fight. Following the first two groups was a detail of eight companies from Gimat's battalion; a further detail of four companies from Hamilton's battalion, now temporarily under the command of Maj. Nicolas Fish; and a final detail of two companies from Colonel Laurens's battalion. The American plan called for Gimat's and Fish's soldiers to pin and then overpower the Anglo-Germans in their redoubt while Laurens's troops flanked the fortification through an adjacent swale to prevent its garrison from escaping.

For the French assault on Redoubt 9, tactical control of Vioménil's formation fell to Col. Christian de Forbach, comte de Deux-Ponts. In the lead were pioneers, French counterparts to the American sappers and miners, who carried fascines and ladders

to assist their entry into the redoubt. Next came the chasseurs and grenadiers of the Royal Deux-Ponts and Gatenois regiments. The French plan called for a frontal attack, without a maneuver like the Americans had employed. Nearby American and French infantry, as well as several allied light field guns, were available as reinforcements.

Before the action began, the Franco-American columns gathered in separate assembly areas outside the first parallel on low ground concealed from the Anglo-German redoubts. In the American area, Washington himself addressed Hamilton's troops and exhorted them to their duty of capturing Redoubt 10. One eyewitness to the commander in chief's summons was Capt. Stephen Olney, commander of the Rhode Island Regiment's light infantry company assigned to lead Gimat's battalion into the fight. Olney recalled that he "thought then, that his Excellency's [i.e., Washington's] knees rather shook, but I have since doubted whether it was not mine." To divert British attention from the two redoubts, Saint-Simon's troops before the Fusilier Redoubt and Choisy's force outside Gloucester Point conducted demonstrations, starting about 1830. Around 1900, as scheduled, the French fired six artillery rounds to signal the assaults to begin.

Partly obscured by a misty fog, both columns of attackers started forward in unison, intending primarily to use their bayonets in the impending hand-to-hand fight. Washington did not have the American troops load any weapons beforehand, to both ensure fire discipline and to encourage the utmost speed in covering the roughly 450 yards between the assembly area and the objective. He also aimed to show the British that the Americans were now a well-trained, veteran force capable of fighting them at close quarters, relying on bayonets and edged weapons. The redcoats had proved to be experts in this kind of melee, and thus fancied themselves as having no peers on the battlefield. As ordered, the French loaded their weapons but would not fire until they reached Redoubt 9's parapet.

Within a few minutes of the assaults beginning, both allied columns simultaneously reached the line of wooden abatis



Detail from *Yorktown, 14 October 1781*, H. Charles McBarron, 1972 (Army Art Collection)

obstructions protecting Redoubts 9 and 10, about 25 yards outside both fortifications. The French at Redoubt 9 stopped while their pioneers chopped at the still mostly intact abatis. The resulting commotion surrendered the advantage of surprise. A German sentry inside repeatedly shouted, “*Wer da?*” (Who goes there?), and Redoubt 9’s garrison fired mostly high over the attackers’ heads. Several shots, however, found their mark. The French finally made their way through the remaining obstructions and onto the parapet, where the defenders exacted a heavy toll in casualties during the ensuing exchange of musket fire. In the darkness, despite illumination by intermittent black-powder flashes from musket discharges, it was difficult to determine friend from foe. Some soldiers on both sides spoke German and wore blue uniforms, adding to the confusion amid the combat.

The French finally organized for a mass bayonet charge against the Anglo-Germans defending behind a line of barrels across Redoubt 9’s rear sally port. Facing certain defeat and the prospect of further casualties, the defenders broke and ran for the British

inner defense line. In the roughly thirty minutes it took the French to capture Redoubt 9, they sustained nearly one hundred casualties or around one quarter of their strength. Baron de Vioménil soon arrived at the redoubt and directed his forces to prepare for a British counterattack—which never came.

Several hundred yards away at Redoubt 10, the American sappers and miners found the line of abatis there partly damaged from earlier artillery fire. The Forlorn Hope and assault battalions therefore reached the earthwork in a matter of minutes, ready to execute their part of the plan. Captain Olney was commanding the lead company in Gimat's battalion, and his Rhode Island light infantry were among the first Continental soldiers to arrive before the redoubt, where a volley of British and German muskets greeted them. These defenders also fired high. Olney broke the directed silence and, amid the fray, cried out to his troops: "See how frightened they are, they fire right into the air."

While the sappers and miners hacked at the abatis, Olney led his company through gaps in the obstructions from artillery fire and onto the earthwork's parapet, where he again shouted to his soldiers: "Captain Olney's company, form here!" This conspicuous example of personal courage in battle by a small-unit leader drew the defenders' deadly attention. In short order, Olney, armed primarily with an espartoon (half-pike), received one musket and three bayonet wounds—the last of which punctured his abdomen, causing his intestines to protrude. Evacuated to Williamsburg for treatment, he made a remarkable recovery and returned to command his company only three weeks later. Meanwhile, the attackers swarmed Redoubt 10, and Sergeant Martin, one of the engineers in the assault, spotted the remaining defenders scrambling for safety:

I saw a British soldier jump over the walls of the fort next [to] the river and go down the bank, which was almost perpendicular, and twenty or thirty feet high; when he came to the beach he made off for the town, and if he did not make good use of his legs[,] I never saw a man that did.

It took the Americans no more than ten minutes to seize Redoubt 10 at a cost of around forty casualties or some 10 percent of their strength.

In all the havoc during hand-to-hand fighting, more than half of the two redoubts' Anglo-German defenders escaped. The tactical skill of the Americans' "fix and flank" maneuver featured a strong and dense fixing element, which, under Hamilton's direct command, quickly overran and overwhelmed their objective of Redoubt 10. A complementary light and swift flanking element under Laurens's leadership prevented some of the defenders from fleeing. Still, the British had lost key terrain, and the Franco-American forces immediately started to turn this development to their advantage.

During the struggle for the redoubts, Washington and several senior American officers and staff gathered on foot close enough to track the progress of the assaults by observing the black-powder flashes. Lt. Col. David Cobb, an aide-de-camp to the commander in chief, grew concerned for Washington's safety and remarked, "Sir, you are too much exposed here, had you not better step back a little?" Mindful of the danger, the general retorted, "Colonel Cobb, if you are afraid, you have liberty to step back." Cobb worried still more when Cornwallis massed artillery along his inner defense line's far left flank to blunt a possible allied follow-on attack. British guns fired randomly into the night toward the captured redoubts, but without effect. Although no redcoat counterassault materialized, the French and Americans probed to test further British reaction, which proved nonexistent.

That night, Franco-American work parties dug a long infantry curtain trench connecting the second parallel's temporary end at the *épaulement* with the captured Redoubts 9 and 10. When the sun rose on 15 October, the Anglo-Germans faced a mostly complete allied second parallel 300 to 400 yards closer to their main defense line. In a growing mood of despair, Lord Cornwallis wrote to General Clinton in New York City, describing the siege in bleak terms:

My situation now becomes critical; we dare not shew a gun to their old batteries, and I expect that their new

ones will open to-morrow morning [i.e., 16 October]; experience has shewn that our fresh earthen works do not resist their powerful artillery, so that we shall soon be exposed to an assault in ruined works, in a bad position, and with weakened numbers. The safety of this place is, therefore, so precarious, that I cannot recommend that the fleet and army should run great risque in endeavouring to save us.

Also on 15 October, the allies began to move siege-caliber artillery into the captured redoubts and to construct the second American Grand Battery position between those two fortifications. At the same time—according to Private Asa Redington, a New Hampshire light infantryman—allied guns started to concentrate their fire on the British batteries “to beat down their [earth]works [to] effect a breach that the works may be carried by storm [in a general assault].”

General Knox, Washington’s artillery chief, directed the ingenious conversion of two mortars into faux howitzers to emplace in Redoubt 10. While overseeing the work, Knox and Colonel Hamilton came under fire. According to procedure, a nearby soldier would yell “A shell, A shell!” when he saw exploding artillery rounds headed toward his location. Hamilton, an artillery officer by trade who now was assigned to command a light infantry battalion, thought this practice undignified because it led officers to scramble for cover in the presence of common soldiers. On this day, such an incident occurred while both officers were inside Redoubt 10. At the alarm, they dived for cover behind blinds, and the lean Hamilton further sheltered himself behind the girth of the more substantial Knox. The latter took exception to this move and tossed the former out into the open. The two shells exploded but injured no one. Turning to Hamilton, Knox rejoined, “Now, now what do you think, Mr. Hamilton, about crying “shell”? But let me tell you not to make a breastwork of me again!”

One of the casualties in the American seizure of British Redoubt 10 would become part of a memorable moment in U.S. military history. A member of the Forlorn Hope detachment was Sgt. William

Brown, a light infantryman of the 5th Connecticut Regiment, who sustained a hand wound during his participation in the assault. In 1782, Sergeant Brown would receive the Honorary Badge of Military Merit, bestowed personally by George Washington. This military decoration, the first one awarded to Americans for valor irrespective of rank, was the precursor to the present-day Purple Heart. Brown was one of the award's first three recipients, all of whom were noncommissioned officers.

With the Franco-American second parallel now nearly complete, Cornwallis had to act soon to avoid a practicable breach and a general assault fight to the finish. Standard siege practice obliged the British commander to break out of the allied encirclement and flee. His first effort, more a raid than an escape attempt, came at 0400 on 16 October, when nearly 400 select British light infantrymen and heavy grenadiers under Lt. Col. Robert Abercromby sortied from their inner defense line near the Hornwork, the largest Anglo-German fortification. Abercromby's group struck the junction where the second parallel's French and American sectors met, the very area where earlier they had temporarily ended. No allied fatigue parties were laboring on the earthworks that night, so Abercromby achieved surprise. When they intersected the parallel near the *épaulement*, the British turned west toward the French zone and started spiking about a dozen siege artillery pieces they encountered while advancing. Because the storming party had failed to bring the proper long nails for the job, they resorted to the field expedient of driving bayonets into the guns' vents, which allowed access to the breech's black-powder chamber, and then breaking the blade near the point to prevent further firing. A nearby French covering party counterattacked the British raiders and drove them away. Both sides suffered around fifteen casualties. In about six hours, the allies cleared the vents and returned all the spiked artillery to firing order. This first attempt to break out landward was a pro forma observance of siege warfare's routines and had no real chance of success, as Abercromby was at a numerical disadvantage of about one to forty against the whole Franco-American force on the Yorktown side of the river.

Cornwallis's next attempt to break the siege, during the night of 16–17 October, was genuine. Though he left a token force to stoke campfires in Yorktown as a deception, he intended to transfer all the rest of his army to Gloucester Point in sixteen large boats. Once over the river, they would shatter the relatively weak allied position on the Middle Peninsula with a numerical dominance of more than four to one and then initiate a grueling 450-mile overland march to New York City. While the redcoat units were crossing the river, a severe rain squall blew from the west through the area. The weather sank some of the boats, drowned several soldiers, and drove yet more boats downriver into the French navy's hands. The British plan was impracticable at best and a desperate last resort at worst. The breakout through the Middle Peninsula thus ended, and with it, so did Cornwallis's will to resist.

Starting on the morning of 17 October, the British transferred their units back to Yorktown in broad daylight, remarkably without loss. Cornwallis now faced the near certainty of an allied third parallel, a practicable breach, and the bloodbath of a general assault. He had to make a fateful decision. If he continued to resist, death and destruction lay before him, and he could lose his entire army at the point of the bayonet. Sgt. Roger Lamb of the *23d Foot* put the matter succinctly:

In this state of things, reduced in force and disabled to withstand his adversaries, Lord Cornwallis thought it would be wanton sacrifice of his brave little army to continue the conflict, and therefore, with the advice of his officers, he resolved to capitulate. Previous to the taking of the redoubts our army by sickness and actual losses of men in the enemy's attacks, and in sorties, suffered so much that Lord Cornwallis's prospect of attaining any object by fighting, particularly when the redoubts were taken, was hopeless in the extreme.

Having observed the rules concerning lifting the siege, Cornwallis decided to ask for parley to discuss terms of surrender.

Cornwallis Surrenders to the Allies

Beginning early on 17 October, allied artillery fire increased in volume and severity, with as many as a hundred siege-caliber weapons targeting the Anglo-German earthworks and their defenders. Lance Cpl. Johann Doehla of the *Bayreuth Regiment* recalled the scene:

At daybreak the enemy bombardment resumed, more terribly than ever before. They fired from all positions without letup. Our command, which was in the Hornwork, could hardly tolerate the enemy [mortar] bombs, howitzer [shells], and [gun] cannonballs raining down on our entire line.

Around 1000, as British artillery ammunition ran low, a redcoat drummer ascended the Hornwork's parapet and beat the chamade to signal a desire to make a proposal to the allies. A British officer soon joined him, waving a white handkerchief to draw attention to himself. Amid the siege's din and smoke, the French and Americans somehow noticed that Cornwallis was asking for parley to discuss the conditions of his army's surrender. Allied officers called a halt to the firing and took the redcoated officer into custody, blindfolding him and escorting him to Washington. The Briton handed the allied commander in chief a brief note from Cornwallis that read: "Sir, I propose a cessation of hostilities for twenty-four hours, and that two officers may be appointed by each side, to meet at Mr. [Augustine] Moore's house, to settle for the surrender of the posts of York & Gloucester." Moore owned a nearby grist mill, and his two-story frame house conveniently sat atop bluffs overlooking the York a mile and a half outside Yorktown, near the American encampments.

Not knowing whether a British relief expedition already had departed New York to sail to Virginia, but certainly knowing that Grasse now had less than two weeks to remain on station in the Tidewater, Washington responded that he would give Cornwallis two hours from receipt of the commander in chief's answer to

propose terms, or the siege's bombardment would resume. He added that "an ardent desire to save the [further] effusion of human blood will readily incline me to listen to such terms for surrender of your posts and garrisons at York and Gloucester as are admissible." Thus began about two days of activity conveyed in the exchange of five documents that set the stage for the end of the Revolutionary War.

Within the limited time remaining that day, Cornwallis sent to allied headquarters around 1630 proposed terms that outlined a traditional surrender scenario, in which the British, Germans, and loyalists would become prisoners of war "with the customary honors." There the matter rested for the night. On 18 October, Washington responded to Cornwallis in a long letter summarizing the terms and conditions that the Americans judged admissible and inadmissible. None of these elements was more important than the so-called honors of war, eventually expressed as Article 3 of the completed Articles of Capitulation. These honors, if implemented as Cornwallis proposed them, would allow the Anglo-German forces to march out of their battered fortifications with flags flying and bands playing the attackers' martial music to recognize their skill at siege warfare. Here, the Americans enjoyed a moment of revenge. In May 1780, at the end of the roughly six-week siege of Charleston, South Carolina, the British besiegers—under General Clinton's command—had denied those same honors to the besieged American garrison surrounded in the city. The American commander, General Lincoln, had been taken prisoner and later exchanged for a captured British general, and now was Washington's second in command of the allied forces' American army at Yorktown. The Charleston siege had progressed to a third parallel within "pistol shot" of the defenders but not to a practicable breach or a general assault. Still, the Americans had resisted stoutly and long, thus meriting the honors of war.

Now, the tables had turned, and Washington categorically denied the customary honors to Cornwallis and his army as retribution for British behavior at Charleston. He announced his decision in the return letter: "The same honors will be granted to the surrendering army [at Yorktown] as were granted to the garrison of Charleston [the year before]." Moreover, Cornwallis's forces had not displayed

as much resistance as the Americans had shown at Charleston. He had beat the chamade and asked for parley to propose surrender shortly after the Franco-American forces had completed only their second parallel and were still fully 300 yards outside the Anglo-German inner defense line. The distance between the two forces was a killing zone if either side were to attack across it, especially in the daylight. Reflecting allied sentiment broadly, Col. William Fontaine, a Virginia militia officer, wrote a week after the surrender that “his Lordship’s defense I think was rather feeble. His surrender was eight or ten days sooner than the most sanguine expected, though his force and resources were much greater than we conceived.” To the allies, in sum, Cornwallis had capitulated too soon—another reason for why he was not due the customary honors of war. Finishing his long 18 October missive to Cornwallis, Washington again gave the British commander only two hours upon receipt of the letter to reject or accept all the adjudicated proposals or face a resumed bombardment. With no remaining option worthy of the name, Cornwallis reluctantly accepted these terms.

Later that day, the four designated commissioners assembled at Moore’s farmhouse well behind the allied first parallel. The British commissioners—Colonel Dundas, first commander of the Gloucester Point garrison, and Maj. Alexander Ross, one of Cornwallis’s aides-de-camp—arrived at the house in an already sour mood, knowing that their forces would be denied the honors of war. The allied commissioners—Colonel-en-Second Louis-Marie, vicomte de Noailles from the Régiment Soissonois, representing the French, and Colonel Laurens, who commanded one of the four battalions in the 2d Brigade of Lafayette’s light division, representing the Americans—awaited their counterparts’ arrival in a small room on the first floor.

When the discussion began, the exchange between Ross and Laurens soon became heated. As Laurens placed the final Articles of Capitulation before Ross, the Briton responded sharply, “This is a harsh article.” Laurens, fully aware of the reference to the refusal of the customary privileges given to the defeated, tauntingly asked, “Which article?” Ross continued in the same aggrieved tone, “The

troops shall march out with colors cased, and drums beating a British or German march.” Laurens simply replied, “Yes, Sir, it is a harsh article.” Ross, frustrated, asked, “Then, Colonel Laurens, if that is your opinion, why is it here?” Rising to the challenge and now irritated, Laurens answered at length, almost as a lecture on siege protocol:

Your question, Major Ross, compels an observation, which I would have suppressed. You seem to forget, Sir, that I was a capitulant at Charleston, where General Lincoln, after a brave defense of six weeks’ open trenches, by a very inconsiderable garrison, against the British army and fleet, under Sir Henry Clinton and Admiral [Marriott] Arbuthnot, and when your lines of approach were within pistol-shot of our field works, was refused any other terms for his gallant garrison, than marching out with colors cased, and drums *not* [original italicized] beating a German or a British march.

Ross responded resentfully, “But, my Lord Cornwallis did not command at Charleston.” At last losing his patience, Laurens finished the exchange summarily: “There, Sir, you extort another declaration. It is not the individual that is here considered; it is the Nation. This remains an article or I cease to be a commissioner.” In brief, these fourteen articles—ten of which Washington accepted and four he rejected or modified—were the only conditions for surrender that Cornwallis was going to receive. Laurens’s message stuck: Article 3’s denial of the full war honors was nonnegotiable, or the siege would resume toward its blood-soaked end.

With the articles’ final transcription in hand at 1100 on 19 October, Cornwallis and the *Royal Navy*’s Captain Symonds signed the surrender instrument for the Anglo-Germans. In the next hour, right outside captured Redoubt 10, Washington, Rochambeau, and Barras—the last of these substituting for the ill Grasse, who remained aboard his flagship—signed for the Franco-Americans. From then, every hour until 1500, a major step in the surrender process

occurred. At noon, Cornwallis's Yorktown garrison surrendered two key redoubts to the French and the Americans to compromise the defensive integrity of the British inner line. An hour later at 1300, Tarleton's garrison at Gloucester Point surrendered two critical earthworks there for the same purpose.

After 1400, in picturesque Tidewater fall weather, one of the grandest spectacles in all American military history unfolded on the plateau before Yorktown. Bad water and food had caused widespread illness in the ranks, and therefore only about 3,500 of the town's remaining defenders marched out, many of the British in new uniforms and some soldiers apparently tipsy, to surrender their weapons before going into captivity. According to the articles, their bands played indeterminate and melancholy British or German martial music, with drums likely predominating. Sarah Osborn, who witnessed the ceremony, recalled that British "'drums [were] covered with black handkerchiefs and their fifes with black ribbons tied around them'" in recognition of the somber moment.

Despite the pomp, Lord Cornwallis was nowhere to be seen and lamely claimed indisposition. Because he believed that the Americans had dishonored him and his army without cause concerning the honors of war, he feigned illness on this inauspicious day. He remained in his Yorktown quarters and delegated the onerous duty of capitulation to his second-in-command, the Irish General O'Hara, who carried Cornwallis's sword for symbolic surrender to the allies.

The Americans and French arrayed themselves in grandeur on both sides of the road where the York-Hampton Highway crossed the Franco-American second parallel, which the allies had breached for the occasion and was just down the way from the British Hornwork. The Americans stood to the east or right and the French to the west or left, in keeping with their long-established protocol. The allied command group of Washington and Rochambeau, their senior commanders and staffs, as well as numerous others, all gathered near the broken parallel.

On horseback—escorted by one of Rochambeau's aides-de-camp, the mounted Capt. Guillaume-Mathieu, comte de Dumas—General O'Hara asked the Frenchman to indicate Rochambeau's

location. Once identified, the Irishman approached the French army commander and attempted to surrender, one European professional soldier to another. Rochambeau, however, refused the offer and motioned O'Hara across the road toward Washington. After hearing O'Hara's apology for Cornwallis's absence, Washington likewise rejected the gesture, saying: "Never from such a good hand." He then referred O'Hara, Cornwallis's second, to his own second, General Lincoln—not as a nod to the conditions of surrender at Charleston, but as a response to the perceived slight of Cornwallis's sending a subordinate to conduct a commander's business.

Lincoln accepted Cornwallis's sword, immediately returned it to O'Hara, and then escorted the reduced contingent of Anglo-Germans the remaining mile-plus along the road to the Warwick Courthouse Road intersection, a prominent area landmark. French and American troops, as well as thousands of local civilians who came to witness the spectacle, watched them along the way from both sides of the road. To the west of the road junction, in a field lined with French cavalry, the British, Germans, and loyalists laid down their arms—some trying angrily to break them—unit by unit. Finally, they marched back along the same route to Yorktown to await removal as prisoners of war, Cornwallis's soldiers to the Americans and his sailors to the French. The pageantry of the moment deeply impressed all its participants and onlookers, including Dr. Thacher, who acerbically recalled:

We are not surprised that the pride of the British officers is humbled on this occasion, as they have always entertained an exalted opinion of their own military prowess, and affected to view the Americans as a contemptible, undisciplined rabble. But there is no display of magnanimity when a great commander shrinks from the inevitable misfortunes of war, and when it is considered that Lord Cornwallis has frequently appeared in splendid triumph at the head of his army by which he is almost adored, we conceive it incumbent on him cheerfully to participate in their misfortunes and

degradations, however humiliating; but it is said he gives himself up entirely to vexation and despair.

Across the York River at 1500 the same day, the Anglo-German garrison at Gloucester Point surrendered under partially different conditions. Because the allies there contained the defenders during the siege without constructing parallels or conducting assaults on their earthworks, the Articles of Capitulation allowed at least the British cavalry to march out with swords drawn and trumpets blaring. Even if the Anglo-Germans did not actually play, as later asserted, the tune “The World Turned Upside Down” on either side of the York River during any part of the surrender ceremonies, the colonial world the British had known in North America—since the 1607 establishment of the Jamestown settlement across the Peninsula from Yorktown—was now tossed on its head with no prospect of a return to the status quo antebellum.

The Effects of British Surrender

Cornwallis’s surrender set in motion numerous consequential events. In a bitter twist of irony, even as freedom from the Crown’s rule was in the offing, the Americans began to round up the several thousand surviving Black people who had attached themselves to the British army. Cornwallis had expelled most of them from Yorktown in September because of a smallpox outbreak and a growing food shortage, and now the Americans prepared to deliver them back into bondage. In further ironic timing, Clinton and his relief expedition finally had managed to overcome repeated delays from shortages in shipyard facilities and naval materials for repairing and refitting Graves’s fleet, and cleared the Sandy Hook bar on 19 October. When Clinton arrived off the Virginia coast on the twenty-fourth with some 7,000 men under arms, he learned of Cornwallis’s surrender from a ship carrying Yorktown refugees. Shortly, the British reversed course and headed northward, having discovered from coastal patrols that both Grasse’s and Barras’s fleets remained on station and still held local control of the sea.

On 21 October, Washington and Lafayette visited Grasse aboard *La Ville de Paris*, thanked the admiral for his pivotal role in the campaign and siege, and implored him to capitalize on allied success in Virginia by immediately embarking the total force for Charleston, South Carolina, to retake that critical Southern port from the British. Grasse declined: he already had agreed to return to the Caribbean to release the Spanish fleet from its assistance in protecting French colonial interests in the admiral's absence. Accordingly, the French Caribbean fleet weighed anchor from the Chesapeake Bay on 5 November, with Saint-Simon's troops aboard, and sailed over the horizon. The British once again had control of the maritime domain—too late to do them any good. According to the Articles of Capitulation and under parole, Cornwallis soon sailed from Yorktown to New York City aboard the fourteen-gun sloop of war *HMS Bonetta*. The articles asked no questions about the ship's cargo or passengers, a provision that allowed Cornwallis to carry anything or anyone aboard the *Bonetta*, including numerous American deserters whom Washington wanted to see gone before he had to deal with them otherwise.

The remaining Franco-American armies, as well as Barras's naval squadron, soon began to disperse. Beforehand, the troops leveled their earthworks to prevent the British from returning to the Tidewater and laying siege to any allied force lingering in Yorktown. Around 2,000 Continentals from Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia, plus all the available mounted troops, shortly marched under Maj. Gen. Arthur St. Clair's command toward the Carolinas to reinforce General Greene in his ongoing campaign there. Washington and the rest of the Main Army began the long overland trek back to the Hudson Highlands to reunite with General Heath's Continental division to continue holding the British in New York City. At the same time, the militia serving in Virginia and the Canadian regiment escorted Anglo-German prisoners of war to their detainment camps.

Rochambeau's *Expédition Particulière* troops wintered in the Yorktown area to be available to reinforce American operations north or south of Virginia. In the summer of 1782, the French

started their cross-country return march to New England. From there, later that year, they reembarked for possible service in the Caribbean on the way to France. Rochambeau began his return journey home from Annapolis, Maryland, in January 1783. In the wake of the siege, the infrastructure of Yorktown lay in ruins, from which it never physically recovered. What little was left of the war occurred elsewhere.

Lt. Col. Tench Tilghman, one of Washington's aides-de-camp, left Virginia right after Cornwallis surrendered. Traveling by water and land, he arrived in Philadelphia on 22 October and announced the Franco-American victory at Yorktown to a delighted Continental Congress. Celebrations soon followed throughout the states. When word of the allied triumph reached London on 25 November, it fell to Lord George Germain, colonial secretary for the American Department, to bear the awful news to Frederick, Lord North, home secretary and chancellor of the Exchequer. Germain recalled that North received the report "as he would have taken a [musket] ball in the breast" and strode back and forth excitedly repeating, "Oh, God, it is all over."

By comparison, King George III took the news with equanimity, maintaining that the war against the Americans should continue and was still winnable. Numerous British politicians, however, demurred. Before long, the Tory government supporting the war fell from power, and a Whig ministry favoring peace with the Americans rose in its place. By the spring of 1782, as a result, delegates representing the British, French, and Americans had begun to meet to settle the war. The meetings eventually resulted in the Treaty of Paris of 1783, which formally recognized the national sovereignty of the United States. For all practical purposes, the Americans declared their independence in Philadelphia in 1776 and won it at Yorktown in 1781.



ANALYSIS



The 1780–1781 Virginia Campaign and its culminating siege of Yorktown stand as a signal moment in U.S. history. They also provide enduring insights into the military art and science and the profession of arms, including a particularly instructive example of operational-level failure by the British and a like instance of success by the Americans and French. By European standards, the tactical siege at Yorktown and Gloucester Point was small in scale and short in duration. Yet throughout, the Franco-Americans maintained a robust numerical dominance of two to one. From their roughly 19,000 troops—leaving aside Grasse’s sailors and shipboard marines—the allies sustained only about 400 casualties, three quarters of them French, for a total loss rate of 2.2 percent. Of their some 9,000 soldiers and sailors, all operating at the tactical level, the Anglo-Germans suffered around 500 casualties for a total loss rate of 5.5 percent. The siege warfare routines of this period tended to produce fewer casualties—so long as a general assault did not occur—than its open-field battles, which relied on close quarters, often hand-to-hand fighting with black-powder firearms, bayonets, and edged weapons. Nevertheless, the magnitude of Cornwallis’s defeat went beyond mere percentages of loss, as his army’s complete surrender removed fully one quarter of British land forces from the North American theater of operations, with no prospect of replacement.

Throughout the conflict, the British had assumed that they dominated the maritime domain. This assumption held true until the critical two months in Virginia from early September to early November 1781. During that time, the allies capitalized on the kind of decisive naval superiority that Washington often had written and

spoken about and long knew only the French could provide. Losing local control of the sea to the allies demonstrated the vulnerability of Cornwallis's army and his supporting naval squadron in Virginia—something of which he was only marginally cognizant. The British already had failed to learn this lesson when they barely retained control of Savannah, from a Franco-American combined force in September and October 1779. They likewise had ignored its warnings after a Spanish joint force captured Pensacola, Florida, in similar circumstances in May 1781. Moreover, the Spanish victory at Pensacola largely cleared the *Royal Navy* from the Gulf of Mexico. That turn of events allowed the Spanish to concentrate their naval power in the Caribbean, which enabled them to protect France's West Indian possessions while Grasse gave the Franco-Americans their margin of victory with his local control of the sea in Virginia.

British disunity of command and effort, particularly the collision of diametrical personalities between Cornwallis in Virginia and Clinton in New York, contributed to the Crown's defeat in the Tidewater. Clinton also had to negotiate with the notoriously independent *Royal Navy* to achieve any form of joint-force action at the operational or strategic levels in the North American theater of operations to maintain, as Clinton himself put it, Great Britain's "permanent Superiority at Sea." In short, British forces had no semblance of a joint-service commander. After the Crown's main effort in the war shifted from the north to the south, starting in 1778 in Georgia, Clinton and Cornwallis eventually clashed over whether their Southern Campaign should focus on destroying American armed forces in the Carolinas or eliminating the patriots' sustainment base in Virginia. The British did not have the military strength in theater to pursue both objectives simultaneously. Throughout, Cornwallis operated behind Clinton's back. He frequently corresponded with Germain, who occasionally overturned Clinton's command decisions in Cornwallis's favor. When Cornwallis himself decided the matter by campaigning in the Old Dominion starting in May 1781 without Clinton's direct authorization, he unhinged what little unity of command or effort British arms had achieved in the south by then. Clinton's own actions

compounded the problem; through directive orders, especially his 11 June 1781 letter to Cornwallis, he badgered his subordinate commander into occupying Yorktown—with disastrous results.

As the distinguished British army historian Sir John W. Fortescue harshly concluded, Cornwallis's tactical "behavior at Yorktown seems to have been singularly weak. He knew that he was in a most perilous situation." Isolating himself in Yorktown's earthworks for an extended period posed an unacceptable risk that materialized in the late summer and early fall of 1781. Moreover, Cornwallis was blind to the criticality of sea power and its effects on land operations, which became painfully evident when the British temporarily lost local control of the sea to the French. Overall, the Yorktown catastrophe was decisive because it shattered the British will to continue the war, having made calamitous errors in the theater of operations and accumulated enemies around the globe—from the Americans (1775) and the French (1778) to the Spanish (1779) and the Dutch (1780).

For the French and Americans, by contrast, the Virginia Campaign and siege of Yorktown demonstrated the efficacy of unity of effort in joint operations and coalition warfare. It was a shining example of how well a combined operation could succeed. As the British and French had spent much of the eighteenth century in North America in a mortal struggle for control of the continent, Franco-American harmony in Virginia in 1781 was by no means a given; it owed much to Washington's and Rochambeau's mature and stable personalities. Furthermore, having a mutual foe in Great Britain brought the French and Americans together in common purpose for long enough to achieve decisive results.

According to one historian, the six-week, 450-mile expeditionary relocation of the Franco-American combined force from the New York City area to Tidewater Virginia, was the "largest and farthest strategic redeployment of allied forces in the Revolutionary War." It was a feat of flexible planning and nimble logistics in large-scale combat operations that would be hard to duplicate at any time. Once on the scene in the Hampton Roads area by late September 1781, the allies dominated both the land and maritime domains until they achieved Cornwallis's surrender on 19 October. The siege of Yorktown

featured the largest and most decisive artillery bombardment of the war. The scale of French presence on land and at sea and the extent of their technical expertise in artillery and engineering gave the allies their full margin of victory.

That said, the siege of Yorktown would not have been possible if Grasse had not seized and held local control of the sea for those pivotal eight weeks. Barras's and Grasse's cooperation, regardless of seniority, was a critical element of this feat. Without local control of the offshore waters, the war would have continued indefinitely, lacking that ensuing and decisive Franco-American victory. The fortuitous Franco-American alliance of 1778 began with and culminated in the conventional victories at Saratoga in 1777 and Yorktown in 1781. During that period, General Washington's Continental Army, the predecessor to today's U.S. Army, emerged as a fully trained and veteran force capable of competing in camp, on the march, and on the battlefield with two of the most capable European armies of the period—French and British—and thus it served as one of the indispensable institutions in achieving American independence.



APPENDIX



“Order, Regularity, & Discipline”: Waging War in the Eighteenth Century

by Joseph A. Seymour

By 1775, armies in Europe and North America had developed into complex forces organized around the infantry regiment. Artillery provided fire support. Mounted units performed reconnaissance, screened attacks and retreats, and added shock. Engineers and pioneers built and demolished fortifications and other works. Artificers repaired and maintained weapons and ordnance. Surgeons treated the sick and wounded. Civilian commissaries made, procured, and transported supplies and rations. All of them supported the foot soldiers, who usually dominated the battlefield.

Composition

The Continental Army and state militia generally organized their infantry regiments using the British model, with a colonel in command, aided by a lieutenant colonel, major, and regimental staff. A regiment had ten companies, including one light and one grenadier company. The light company consisted of the best shots, the cleverest, and the most agile in the regiment. These soldiers specialized in screening, skirmishing, patrolling, and scouting. Congress dispensed early on with the grenadier company, with its brawny shock troops who often formed the vanguard of assaults, and usually authorized

nine companies. Each company carried equipment and additional ammunition in one or two wagons. When the situation called for the infantry to operate away from its baggage train, soldiers placed extra ammunition and essential items in their knapsacks. Most companies had a few women on their rolls. Although not officially in the army, they could draw rations, and sometimes pay, by performing various essential duties, including nursing the sick and wounded and laundering the soldiers' clothing. Captains and lieutenants directed the maneuver and fire of the platoons in their companies. Sergeants and corporals maintained unit cohesion in battle, assisted officers, and enforced discipline in the sections under their charge. Drummers, who ranked between corporals and sergeants, communicated orders in camp and battle.

Equipment

A soldier's basic fighting equipment was known as a stand of arms, which commonly consisted of a musket; a bayonet; a cartridge box of wood, leather, or tin containing between twenty-three and twenty-nine paper cartridges; and cleaning tools. A standard firearm of the period was the British Land Pattern musket. It fired a powerful load consisting of a 1-ounce lead ball propelled by nearly a half ounce of gunpowder. Its oversized barrel of about 0.76- to 0.80-inch diameter made it easier to load. A ball fired from a musket of this type could reach massed troops out to 300 yards. At 100 yards, it was accurate enough to hit an individual and powerful enough to penetrate a two-inch elm plank. Continental, state, and militia forces augmented existing musket stores with locally made copies of the Land Pattern and imported French, German, Dutch, and Spanish arms of similar bore sizes and ballistics. Soldiers also shouldered sporting (nonmilitary issue) arms of different calibers, sometimes retrofitted to mount bayonets. The lack of serviceable arms slowed augmentation and the integration of reinforcements. Furthermore, companies equipped with a mix of arms could not easily sustain fire, let alone mount effective bayonet assaults.

Both armies also issued rifles to light troops or recruited experienced riflemen who brought their own. The rifles usually followed two patterns: the short-barreled, large-bore Germanic or *Jäger* (hunter) rifle, and the long-barreled, small-bore Pennsylvania rifle. Less powerful than muskets, both were accurate to about 300 yards and took about one minute to load. Neither could mount a bayonet. In 1777, British Maj. Patrick Ferguson fielded an innovative breech-loading rifle that mounted a bayonet, but it saw limited service.

Tactics

The musket's capabilities shaped tactics. A trained soldier could fire three rounds per minute. After twenty-five shots, the piece became too hot to handle, and the accumulation of residual gunpowder (known as powder-fouling) required cleaning and slowed reloading. Regiments formed in line at close order, presenting a continuous front of muskets and bayonets to concentrate their fire and mass to maximum effect. Close ranks also enabled company commanders to keep their troops together and thus better control them. The soldiers easily could hear orders communicated by drumbeat and could support each other using linear tactics described in tactical publications such as the *Manual Exercise, As Ordered by His Majesty in 1764*. In 1778, the Continental Army introduced a system spelled out in the *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*, nicknamed the Blue Book. Well-drilled companies could execute a variety of maneuvers to bring their firepower or bayonets to bear, unleashing simultaneous volleys with devastating effect, or firing alternately by platoon to sustain a running fire. Infantry usually closed to the optimal range of 40 yards for a killing volley before a bayonet assault. While battalions also could extend their intervals to optimize individual fire, volume rather than accuracy usually decided a battle's outcome.

Artillery on both sides organized as separate regiments and battalions but fought as detachments as needed. With a range of several hundred yards, 3-, 4-, and 6-pounder guns supported

battalions in battle. With their slightly longer range, 8- and 12-pounders supported brigades, while larger guns with greater range operated from fortifications. Mortars fired exploding shells in a high arc to get over walls or other obstacles. Howitzers fired shells either directly at troops or in an arc. Artillerists and wagon teams were valuable assets. Commanders therefore often ordered crews that were about to be overrun by the enemy to disable their guns with spikes and mallets and abandon the weapons to save themselves and their teams.

Both forces also employed light dragoons, a type of mounted infantry. The scarcity of large horse breeds in America, the cost of transporting such mounts, and the uneven topography challenged the use of cavalry. Organized as regiments or separate troops, dragoons fought both mounted and dismounted and were armed with sabers, carbines, and, occasionally, pistols. Depending on time and terrain, both armies frequently detached light infantry, riflemen, artillery, and dragoons into separate battalions or combined them into corps or legions.

Fortifications

European and colonial governments constructed dozens of forts before and during the war to defend important cities, towns, and key points. Field fortifications included fort-like redoubts, arrow-shaped *flèches*, and crescent-shaped *lunettes*. These structures were built of large wicker cylinders, called *gabions*, which were filled with soil or rubble, and then reinforced by bundles of sticks called *fascines*, covered with soil and sod, and surrounded by moats. As time permitted, soldiers erected *palisades* (walls of vertical wooden stakes), placed *fraises* (sharpened stakes) at a slant on the inner surface of the moat, and laid an *abatis* (a network of felled trees with sharpened branches) to slow infantry assaults. For a portable obstacle, artificers would use a *cheval-de-frise*, which typically consisted of sharpened stakes projecting from a log or beam. To fortify harbor defenses and block rivers, engineers employed log booms connected with heavy chains and created the naval version

of a cheval-de-frise by constructing rock-filled timber boxes bearing sharpened logs.



Technology dictated tactics, which in turn influenced formations. The contending forces frequently deviated from the standards prescribed by regulations or government allocations as they dealt with issues of personnel, materiel, and authority. Necessity and mission spurred the evolution of regulations, tactics, and equipment during the war. That was particularly the case for the new army of the United States. As the war progressed, American soldiers attained a high level of proficiency that earned the confidence of those they served and the respect of both allies and enemies.

A piece of aged, yellowed paper with torn edges, containing a quote. The paper is slightly wrinkled and has a warm, golden-brown tone. The text is written in a classic serif font, centered on the page.

“The Course of human Affairs forbids an Expectation, that Troops formed under such Circumstances, should at once possess the Order, Regularity & Discipline of Veterans—Whatever Deficiencies there may be, will I doubt not, soon be made up by the Activity & Zeal of the Officers, and the Docility & Obedience of the Men. These Qualities,] united with their native Bravery, & Spirit will afford a happy Presage of Success, & put a final Period to those Distresses which now overwhelm this once happy Country.”

—George Washington, in an address to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 4 July 1775



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MAP SYMBOLS



Route of march/attack



Retreat



Fortifications/Redoubts



Boat Bridge



Battle/Engagement



Abatis

MILITARY UNITS

American	French	British	German	
				Main Body
				Mounted Wing
				Division
				Division Cavalry
				Brigade
				Brigade Cavalry
				Regiment
				Regimental Cavalry
				Battalion
				Battalion Cavalry
				Company
				Company Cavalry
				Sharpshooter
				Artillery
				Warships



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