

Near Williamsburg, 1781

By Joseph H. McCracken III

The events which occurred in downtown Philadelphia in late June and early July, 1776, would have become meaningless without the subsequent happenings around Williamsburg and at York in Virginia in mid-October, 1781. Talking and writing about Independence is one thing—defending and enforcing Independence is yet another!

The names of the patriots involved in gaining our Independence from Great Britain are well known to all Americans, particularly the outstanding roles played by General George Washington, Supreme Commander of the combined allied forces, and Benjamin Franklin, supreme money-raiser for the infant United States. What follows here was inspired by a twenty-four year old field commander affectionately known as the “French Game Cock,” a thirty-six year old Continental Army Brigadier General devotedly known as “Mad Anthony,” with an unembroidered ghost-like appearance of a forty-two year old country boy Militia Captain from Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains. When General Lord Henry Clinton, Supreme Commander British Expeditionary Forces, was first advised of the arrival of the Marquis Gilbert Mottier de Lafayette he is reported to have replied, “The Marquis de WHO?” Most certainly he soon regretted having to learn WHAT General Lafayette was capable of doing! But let’s begin.

On March 1, 1781, representatives of Maryland finally signed the Articles of Confederation, and on the 2nd day of March the Continental Congress convened for the first time—*legally*—after four years and four months of haranguing. That same day Lieutenant Colonel Henry Lee and the Virginia Militia, under the command of Wayne and Maj. General Nathaniel Greene, crossed the Dan River going into North Carolina to work against British General Tarleton and General Lord Charles, the Earl of Cornwallis, the latter then working north in hopes of joining with Clinton in the Northern Colonies. These Militia were primarily from Augusta and Rockbridge Counties, Virginia, and among them was a Captain James Buchanan, commissioned August 3, 1779, by the County Court of Rockbridge County.¹

On March 15 there occurred the famous battle at Guilford Courthouse, North Carolina, about twenty-five miles south of Danville, Virginia. There the British suffered around 600 casualties—being one-fourth of their force—with the American forces losing approximately 300 Continentals and 100 Militia. The truth of the matter is that the American forces retreated north into Virginia—not only to escape the consequences of the fight—but for the purpose of consolidating with Lafayette and Wayne. Whereupon, Cornwallis proclaimed “victory!” A British officer, however, stated in his memoirs: “Another such victory will destroy the British Army.”

Cornwallis again started north for Virginia and arrived at Williamsburg on June 25th, being closely followed and scouted



by Lafayette and his consolidated force located northwest of Williamsburg in the vicinity of Richmond. General Wayne approached Williamsburg from the southwest out of North Carolina, joined Lafayette and the Virginia Militia under Von Steuben,² and struck Simcoe’s British Rangers on the 26th day of June at Spencer’s Ordinary, which was nothing other than a Virginia country roadhouse tavern a few miles from Williamsburg. This battle—“Hotwater”—frightened Cornwallis and he turned his army to the east. Lafayette pursued from the west and Wayne from the Southwest and on July 6th, Lafayette, Wayne and Von Steuben hit Cornwallis and the British again at Green Spring Plantation, a few miles south of Williamsburg near Jamestown. The fight was a draw, but General Wayne, living up to his reputation and nickname, saw opportunity and suddenly attacked once more late in the afternoon, prompting Cornwallis into immediately preparing for a march to Portsmouth and the sea. Escape, perhaps?

At this time Lafayette, Wayne and Von Steuben remained in and around Williamsburg into early August—carousing, perhaps, at Raleigh’s and Chowning’s—awaiting the arrival of Washington.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic the greatest money-raisers of all time, Ben Franklin, moving from chaise lounge to chaise lounge in downtown Paris, raising succor and sustenance in the form of hard-earned French franc loans to the Colonial Government, and John Jay, located down at Madrid in the regal quarters of the Spanish Court, doing likewise, were cementing together final financial arrangements which would put the Colonies over. What a debt this country owed to those two geniuses!

Clinton in New York sent a written command to Cornwallis to refortify the Virginia tidewater area and be prepared to receive possible reinforcements by sea. Meanwhile, Washington sped a message to the French Count de Grasse³ to move immediately to bring the French Navy into Chesapeake Bay.

Cornwallis scouted the country looking for the proper location for fortifications to await British reinforcement. He made the decision to fortify both sides of the York River at the towns of York and Gloucester, and on September 1st moved there. Count de Grasse left the West Indies for Virginia with 28 ships of the line which arrived at the end of August. The plot thickens!

Washington, forty-nine years of age, arrived in Williamsburg September 14, accompanied by the French Commander de Rochambeau.⁴ Upon his arrival, de Grasse dispersed the French fleet throughout the Chesapeake, and after blockading the James and York River entrances, issued orders to put to sea in search of any British rescue forces. However, Washington countermanded, fearing that a strong British Navy might overrun the blockade, so de Grasse brought the fleet about and cruised the Chesapeake area. It was well he did.

On September 28th, "General George," together with Lafayette, Von Steuben and Wayne and the combined allies, left Williamsburg 12,000 strong. Several days were required for the entire American Army to arrive at York, even though it is only ten miles or so.

From October 1st through the 6th the allies busied themselves bringing up artillery, with the shooting to begin October 9th. It must have been something to witness! The various diaries of those in attendance are unbelievable in the descriptions given as to the amount of destruction heaped upon the British forces. From October 11th through the 14th the allies prepared various connecting trench and redoubt installations around York—at the same time cannonading and burning two British ships which were moving about in the York River, these unfortunates being unable to escape east through the French fleet blockade.

Virginia Governor Nelson, having succeeded Jefferson in that capacity, was Ex Officio Boss of the Virginia Militia. It is to this man's eminent honor that he gave the command for his artillery to bear upon his own home in York, inflicting considerable damage. Cornwallis knew the "bear-hug" was coming and tried desperately to transport the army across the river in small boats to Gloucester, but the Almighty intervened with a hellacious storm and that, combined with the cannonading from the shore batteries and the French ships, put an end to the endeavor.

On the 17th of October the American and French artillery pounded Cornwallis to the extent that he sent a flag to General Washington urging, in so many words, "STOP!" The American scribes immediately grabbed parchment, paper, pen and ink and prepared documents for signature putting an end to the battles. The allied commissioners met on the morning of the 18th and submitted to Cornwallis a draft of the "Articles" for his signature. He desired to palaver and discuss the matter more at length, to which General Washington replied, "No, sign or we'll start pounding you again!" So, on the morning of October 19, 1781, Cornwallis signed the "Articles of Capitulation," being joined therein by Thomas Symonds, the highest ranking British naval officer.⁵

And so ends our story, the epilogue being that in truth and in fact some attempt was made to land British rescue forces October 24th, but being advised of the capitulation by Cornwallis, they returned north to New York to the safety of Clinton's area. This victory—the Cornwallis surrender at York-Town—broke the British in North America, at least for thirty years. The entire expeditionary force soon retired from our shores, with the British Parliament passing legislation in March of 1782 authorizing the King "and company" to negotiate with the American Colonies, which negotiations of course ended with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in September, 1783.

Truly, is not this year, 1981, the appropriate "Bicentennial" of our Independence?

NOTES

- ¹ Rockbridge County, Virginia Records:
"At Court held for Rockbridge County August 3rd, 1779
(8th Entry)
"James Buchanan received a commission in Court appointing him a Captain of the militia of this County and took the Oath answering to Service."

(Signed)

Sam. McDowell"

Virginia State Library—*Rockbridge County Order Book, 1778-84*, Reel 33, pages 104-109.

- ² Frederic William Augustus, "Baron" von Steuben, Major General, Continental Army of the United States, 51 years of age at that time.
³ Francois Joseph Paul, Count de Grasse, fifty-eight years of age at the time, with a Continental rank of Lieutenant General.
⁴ Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, the Count de Rochambeau, Lieutenant General, Continental Army of the United States, 56 years of age at that time.
⁵ Facsimile tracing made by the authors of *THE PICTORIAL FIELD-BOOK OF THE REVOLUTION* from the original document then in the possession of Peter Force, Esquire, Washington City, circa 1830, as follows:

ARTICLE 14th

No article of the capitulation to be infringed on pretext of Reprisal, and if there be any doubtful exceptions to it, they are to be interpreted according to the common meaning & acceptance of the Words.

Done at York in Virginia this 19th day of October 1781

Cornwallis

Thos: Symonds

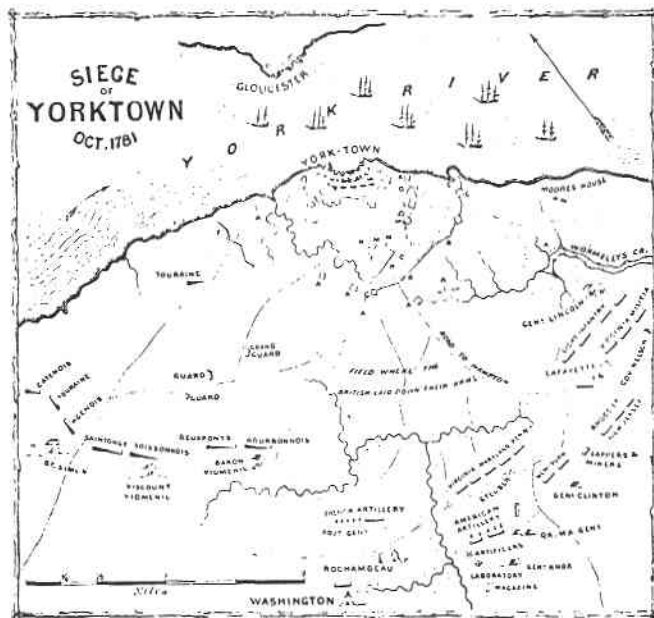
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McAllister, J.T., *VIRGINIA MILITIA IN THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR—McALLISTER'S DATA*, published privately, 1913, at Hot Springs, Virginia.

Article 14th
 No Article of the Capitulation
 nor to be infringed on the
 text of the Surrender, if there be
 any doubtful Expressions
 in it, they are to be inter-
 preted according to the com-
 mon Meaning & Reception
 of the Words.

Done at York in Virginia
 this 19th Day October 1781

Cornwallis
 J^r: Lymonds.



Note — Explanation of the Map — A, British outworks taken possession of by the Americans on their arrival. B, first parallel. C, D, American batteries. E, a bomb battery. G, French battery. H, French bomb battery. I, second parallel. K, redoubt stormed by the Americans. L, redoubt stormed by the French. M, M, M, French batteries. N, French bomb battery. O, American batteries.