

Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route



The essential and direct End of the present defensive alliance is to maintain . . . the liberty, Sovereignty, and independence . . . of said united States.

—from the “Treaty of Alliance,” 1778, National Archives and Records Administration

Map of the route to Yorktown
ROCHAMBEAU MAP COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Washington, Rochambeau, and Lafayette in the Siege of Yorktown by Louis-Charles Auguste Couder
ROGER-VOLLET / GRANGER

France Joins the Cause

France’s support in America’s struggle for independence was vital to achieving victory at Yorktown. Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail commemorates that victory and the lasting Franco-American friendship. This 680-mile-long trail follows the path taken by George Washington’s Continental Army and Jean-Baptiste de Rochambeau’s Expédition Particulière during their 1781 march from Newport, Rhode Island, to Yorktown, Virginia.

In 1776, when the 13 American colonies declared independence from Great Britain, they knew their quest would fail without military supplies, naval power, and funding. At that time, Great Britain had the world’s most powerful navy and one of the best armies, overwhelming the Continental Army. Lacking sufficient resources, the Americans turned to foreign allies for assistance.

In 1775 negotiations between the patriots and France began. France had long-established ties to North America, but King Louis XVI had additional motivations—bolstering France’s global power and avenging its loss to Great Britain in the Seven Years’ War. In 1778 France signed a “Treaty of Alliance” with the United States, providing muskets, gunpowder, mortars, and financial aid. This recognition earned the fledgling nation respect worldwide.

By 1780 the war had reached a stalemate. France responded by sending thousands of troops, including experienced General Jean-Baptiste de Rochambeau, to aid George Washington’s forces. Their combined efforts helped secure the victory at Yorktown, leading to the end of the war. The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route celebrates the critical role France played in America’s fight for independence and the enduring bond between the two nations.

The Long March to Independence

The 450 officers and 5,300 men of Rochambeau’s Expeditionary Forces landed on the coast of Rhode Island in July 1780. Generals Washington and Rochambeau agreed to wait until the spring of 1781 to launch a joint military offensive, so the French army spent the bitter winter camped in Newport, Rhode Island, and Lebanon, Connecticut. During that time, French officers prepared for the march that would unite them with Continental troops at the Hudson River. From there the allied forces planned to attack British General Clinton’s stronghold in New York City, a few days’ march to the south.

The first French forces left Newport on June 10, 1781. Moving thousands of people and animals over waterways, through unfamiliar forests, and across hilly terrain was an enormous and risky undertaking. Roads were sometimes impassable. Finally, on July 6, 1781, the two armies met in Philipsburg, New York.

There was, however, a change in plans. On learning that French Admiral de Grasse was steering his warships to the Chesapeake Bay, Washington and Rochambeau decided to abandon the offensive on Clinton and head south. Allied troops departed from Philipsburg on August 18 and arrived outside Yorktown, Virginia, on September 28.

Their efforts were worthwhile. The allied victory at Yorktown proved to be a turning point in the war. Along the 600-mile route south from Rhode Island to Virginia, colonists had greeted the French with suspicion. On the return trip north, they hailed them as heroes. The trail both armies marched is now preserved as the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail, which celebrates the allies’ joint labors to achieve American independence.



Jean Baptiste Antoine de Verger, *Soldiers in Uniform*, 1781. Soldiers of the Continental Army sketched by a French soldier at Yorktown.
COURTESY ARNIE S.K. BROWN MILITARY COLLECTION, BROWN UNIVERSITY

the [American] men were with out uniforms and covered with rags; most of them were barefoot.

—comte de Clermont-Crèvecoeur, 1781

Officers and Men

The allied forces comprised a diverse group with a common goal. French troops impressed colonists with their professional military training and elegantly decorated uniforms. The Continental Army, however, included able bodies, from boys who were barely teens to men who were grandfathers. Some had been trained; others had never fired a shot. Social or political status often determined rank. Although most American soldiers were of British ancestry, some descended from Germans, Africans, and Native Americans. Only one Black soldier served under Rochambeau, but Baron von Closen, a member of Rochambeau’s French army at Yorktown, noted in July 1781 that a quarter of the Continental Army was Black. Many of those African Americans who fought under Washington were freedmen and formerly enslaved who hoped American independence would improve the status of their race.



George Washington
by James Peale
INDEPENDENCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK



comte de Rochambeau
by Charles Willson Peale
INDEPENDENCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK



Many officers played important roles in the Washington-Rochambeau story, including (left to right) British generals Sir Henry Clinton and Lord Charles Cornwallis and French Admiral François-Joseph Paul, comte de Grasse.

CLINTON—PRODUCED COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN MUSEUM IN BRITAIN (BATH, UK); CORNWALLIS—THE GRANGER COLLECTION; PAUL—WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Every Continental Army soldier received a musket and tools to keep the weapon in working order.
COURTESY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE MUSEUM MANAGEMENT PROGRAM AND MORRISTOWN NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Siege d’York, 1781
ROCHAMBEAU MAP COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



This iron kettle was used by the Americans to melt and pour lead into molds to make musket balls or shot.



Bullet molds, used to cast musket and pistol caliber balls, were among the essential supplies issued by the Continental Army.



Each Continental soldier carried a powder horn and musket.

KETTLE, BULLET MOLDS, POWDER HORN—COURTESY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE MUSEUM MANAGEMENT PROGRAM AND MORRISTOWN NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK



Playing cards, like these French ones, provided entertainment in camp.

COURTESY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE MUSEUM MANAGEMENT PROGRAM AND VALLEY FORGE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK



Soldiers Return by Pamela Patrick White
© PAMELA PATRICK WHITE



A woman’s etui, or case, contained tools for daily use, including scissors, pencil, fork, knife, corkscrew, bodkin, tweezers, ear pick, and an ivory writing board.

COURTESY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE MUSEUM MANAGEMENT PROGRAM AND GUILFORD COURTHOUSE NATIONAL MILITARY PARK

Moving an Army

From June through September 1781, soldiers on the march to Yorktown carried their own weapons, utensils, and other personal items. They often hauled 60 pounds or more for up to eight hours a day. Troops of both armies required food, water, and a safe place to rest each night.

A soldier’s lodging depended on his military rank. On the way to and from Yorktown, French and American officers stayed in nearby homes or taverns, while their troops slept outside in tents. A camp of thousands required hours to assemble. French Chaplain Abbé Robin complained of having to wait “until the hottest part of the day for the baggage wagons before we can take any repose. The sun has sometimes finished her course,

before our weak stomachs have begun to receive and digest the necessary food.”

The troops received meal rations and dug pits where they could set their cooking kettles. Collecting pure water was essential. Robin described being “stretched out full length upon the ground, panting with thirst.” The heat plagued the French. American troops did not have elaborate uniforms, but their linen overalls were better suited to summer in the eastern United States than the wool garments worn by most of the French troops. To avoid marching at the hottest time of day, soldiers were on the road by 4 am and walked 12 to 15 miles to their next campsite by late morning.

Wives and children of the Continental Army and French troops sometimes followed their husbands, brothers, and fathers to camp. These civilians, uprooted by war, sewed, cooked, and washed clothes for the soldiers, often earning a bit of money for their services. They also nursed the wounded. American soldiers benefited by the presence of women in the camps, but Washington noted that these “camp followers” presented a physical and financial burden for the army. Like the enlisted troops, they needed to be fed and sheltered but did not fight.



let history huzzah for you

—George Washington, silencing his cheering troops at the British surrender of Yorktown, 1781

John Trumbull, *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*
ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

Allied Victory at Yorktown

The 300-mile trek from New York to Virginia took five weeks, during which allied troops endured heat-stroke, thirst, and fatigue. The French and Americans separated for part of the route, making road travel easier and effectively deceiving British General Clinton, who was still expecting an allied attack on New York.

The allies received encouraging news that on September 5 French Admiral de Grasse’s fleet won the Battle of the Capes against British warships. De Grasse established a blockade of the Chesapeake Bay, cutting off naval support to the British and allowing Cornwallis and his troops no escape route from Yorktown. By September 28, 1781, when French and American forces arrived, Cornwallis was cornered, and allied troops immediately opened siege on British fortifications.

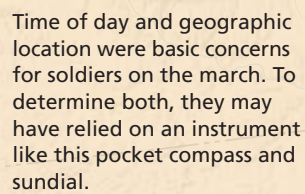
French and American artillery first fired on the British on October 9.

By October 14 an exhausted French soldier wrote in his diary, “The whole redoubt was so full of dead and wounded that one had to walk on top of them.” Days later, with their defenses shattered, the British called for a ceasefire. On October 19, 1781, British troops solemnly walked through two lines of soldiers—Americans on one side, French on the other—and laid down their arms.

The allied victory at Yorktown was the final major battle of the American Revolutionary War, securing the 13 colonies’ path to becoming one nation. The successful collaboration between Rochambeau’s forces and Washington’s leadership, the strategic coordination of land and naval resources, and the soldiers’ perseverance during their long journey all contributed to the triumph. When French troops returned north to New England in 1782, they were warmly welcomed and thanked by grateful Americans.

Discover a Revolutionary War Trail

Although population growth and urban development have erased almost all traces of the rural campsites and small taverns that once sheltered Revolutionary War soldiers, the legacy of the Washington-Rochambeau journey endures. You can explore historic sites that bring this story to life: Stroll the green in Lebanon, Connecticut; sail the scenic Chesapeake Bay; observe a captivating Revolutionary War reenactment at Colonial Williamsburg; or stand on the hallowed battlefield of Yorktown.



COURTESY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE MUSEUM MANAGEMENT PROGRAM AND MORRISTOWN NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

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ROSETTS

Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary
Route National Historic Trail
www.nps.gov/waro

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