

# *Yorktown Battlefield*



COLONIAL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

*Virginia*

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## YORKTOWN BATTLEFIELD

*Scene of the allied French and American victory over Cornwallis in 1781, climax of the American Revolution, and a decisive victory in world history.*



*Redoubt No. 9.*

The surrender of the British Army at Yorktown on October 19, 1781, marked the virtual close of the American Revolution. It ended 7 long years of war. While the treaty of peace was not signed until 2 years later, the victory at Yorktown was the decisive event in the struggle to make the United States an independent nation.

The victory came 174 years after the founding, just 23 miles away at Jamestown, of the first permanent English settlement, in 1607. Midway between Yorktown and Jamestown is Williamsburg, where colonial life on the Virginia tidewater reached a peak. There, also, developed strong leadership in the quest for independence. Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Yorktown are connected by the scenic Colonial Parkway. Together they help reveal much of the story of our colonial period in Virginia.

Williamsburg is an historic community restored by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., through

Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., while the Yorktown Battlefield, Colonial Parkway, and part of Jamestown Island are included in Colonial National Historical Park. The park, too, includes the Cape Henry Memorial at the entrance to Chesapeake Bay where the settlers, in 1607, first landed in Virginia.

### *The Colonial Town of York*

Yorktown was established by the Act of Ports of 1691, which looked to the founding of trade centers in Virginia. During the early 1700's the town grew and prospered because of the rich tobacco trade which passed through its harbor and warehouses. Its prosperity reached its peak about 1750, when there was a population of about 2,500, including a number of wealthy merchant families with fine homes. With the gradual decline of the tidewater Virginia tobacco trade, the importance of the town and port of York dwindled.

## *The Siege of 1781*

In 1781, the American War of Independence reached its seventh year. The British had practically abandoned efforts to reconquer the northern states, but still had hopes of regaining the southern part of the country. Cornwallis, in the spring of the year, marched into Virginia from North Carolina at the head of a British Army. He believed that if Virginia could be subdued the states to the south of it would readily return to British allegiance.

The Marquis de Lafayette, with a small American force, was operating in Virginia, but was unable to meet Cornwallis in open battle. The British Army marched up and down the State almost at will, but failed to break the resistance of the people. In July, in response to orders from his superior officer in New York, Cornwallis moved down the James River to Portsmouth, in preparation for sending part of his army to New York, which Washington was threatening.

Countermanding orders soon reached him, however, directing him to fortify a naval base in the lower Chesapeake.

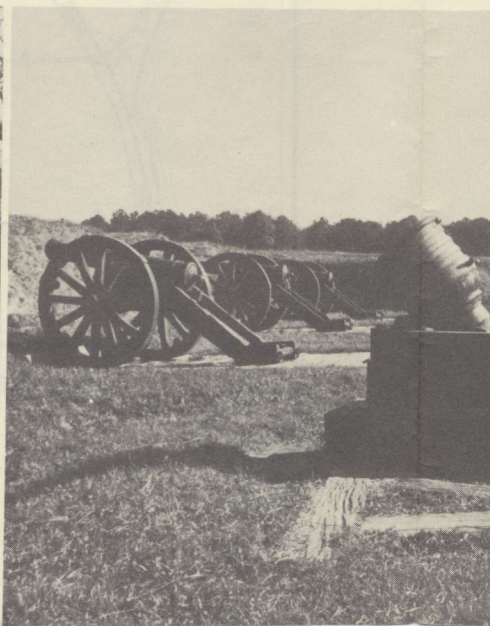
Cornwallis, on advice of his engineers, chose Yorktown for the base and transferred his whole army there early in August. He began fortifying the town and Gloucester Point opposite. Meanwhile, a large French fleet, under the Comte de Grasse, was moving up from the West Indies for combined operations with the allied French and American Armies. De Grasse proceeded to blockade the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, to cut off Cornwallis from help by sea. Washington moved his forces toward Virginia to attack by land. These forces included part of the main American Army operating on the Hudson, and the French Army under Comte de Rochambeau.

While De Grasse maintained a strict blockade by sea, the combined armies, numbering over 16,000 men, gathered at Williamsburg during the middle of September. On the 28th they marched down the peninsula and laid siege to Yorktown, with its British garrison of 7,500. Cornwallis almost imme-

*The Moore House.*



*The Grand French*



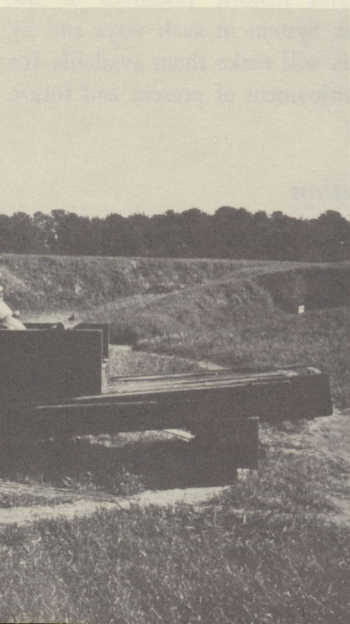
diately abandoned his outer line and retired within the town. On the night of October 6, the allied armies opened entrenchments and a few days later, with their batteries in position, began a heavy bombardment of the British position. Their fire soon subdued that of Cornwallis' guns, and they were able to close in at shorter range. Two outlying British redoubts were stormed on the evening of October 14, and the position of the British Army became desperate. Cornwallis made an attempt to escape by way of Gloucester, but his boats were scattered by a storm. On the morning of October 17 he sent out a flag of truce and asked Washington for a discussion of terms of surrender.

On the following day commissioners met at the Moore House, just behind the American lines, and drafted articles of capitulation. In accordance with these articles, the British Army marched out of Yorktown at 2 p. m. of the 19th, between the French and American Armies drawn up to receive them, and laid down their arms. The long war was practically over and American independence had become a reality.

## *Yorktown Today*

Yorktown, though smaller than in colonial days, continues as an active community. Several of the houses and other structures of colonial times are still standing and give the town much of the character of a long-vanished period. Along Main Street are the Customhouse, York Hall (the Thomas Nelson House), and the Digges, Somerwell, Sessions, and West houses, all dating from the 18th century or earlier. Within a block of Main Street are the Grace Episcopal Church, originally built in 1697, and two other colonial buildings, the Smith House and Pearl Hall. The Swan Tavern group of buildings has been reconstructed by the National Park Service on original foundations, and effort is being made to have new construction in the town harmonize with the existing colonial types. Near the upper end of Main Street is the Yorktown Victory Monument, erected by the United States to commemorate the French alliance and the victory over Cornwallis. The cornerstone of this monument was laid in 1881 at the celebration of the centennial of the surrender.

*Battery.*



*Colonial Parkway and York River.*



Close around Yorktown lie the remains of the British earthworks of 1781, as modified and strengthened by the Confederate forces during the Civil War. A few hundred yards beyond them are reconstructed portions of the French and American lines. The original allied works were leveled by Washington's order immediately after the siege, but reconstruction of more significant portions has been possible through careful archeological investigation and documentary research. In several of the reconstructed batteries and redoubts have been mounted guns of the American Revolution period, including some that saw service at the siege of Yorktown. Highways and park roads through the battlefield and beyond lead to the encampment and headquarters areas of the French and American Armies.

### *The Park*

The area was established as a national monument in 1930, but was changed to Colonial National Historical Park in 1936. Headquarters are in the Yorktown Visitor Center on the southeastern edge of town.

### *How To Reach Yorktown*

Yorktown, on U. S. 17, is 106 miles from Fredericksburg and 32 miles from Norfolk. However, the 13-mile drive over the Colonial Parkway from Williamsburg is the most interesting approach.

### *About Your Visit*

In the Yorktown Visitor Center (located within the earthworks on the southeast side of Yorktown and at the end of Colonial Parkway), there is information service, an introductory program of slides and movies,

and exhibits relating to Yorktown and the siege. This is the starting point, too, for the self-guiding tour of the battlefield. This route connects the principal points of interest. Markers, field displays, and other aids help you to visualize the events of the siege.

Those who plan to visit in a group may obtain special service if advance arrangements are made with the superintendent.

The Moore House, where the Articles of Capitulation were drafted, has been restored and is 1 mile outside the town. It is usually open every day from April to November. There is a small admission fee, which is waived for children and educational groups.

There are two sales publications, which are obtainable at the park and from the Superintendent of Documents, Washington 25, D. C.: *Yorktown and the Siege of 1781* (Historical Handbook Series No. 14) for 25 cents, and *Yorktown, Climax of the Revolution* (Source Book Series No. 1) for 20 cents.

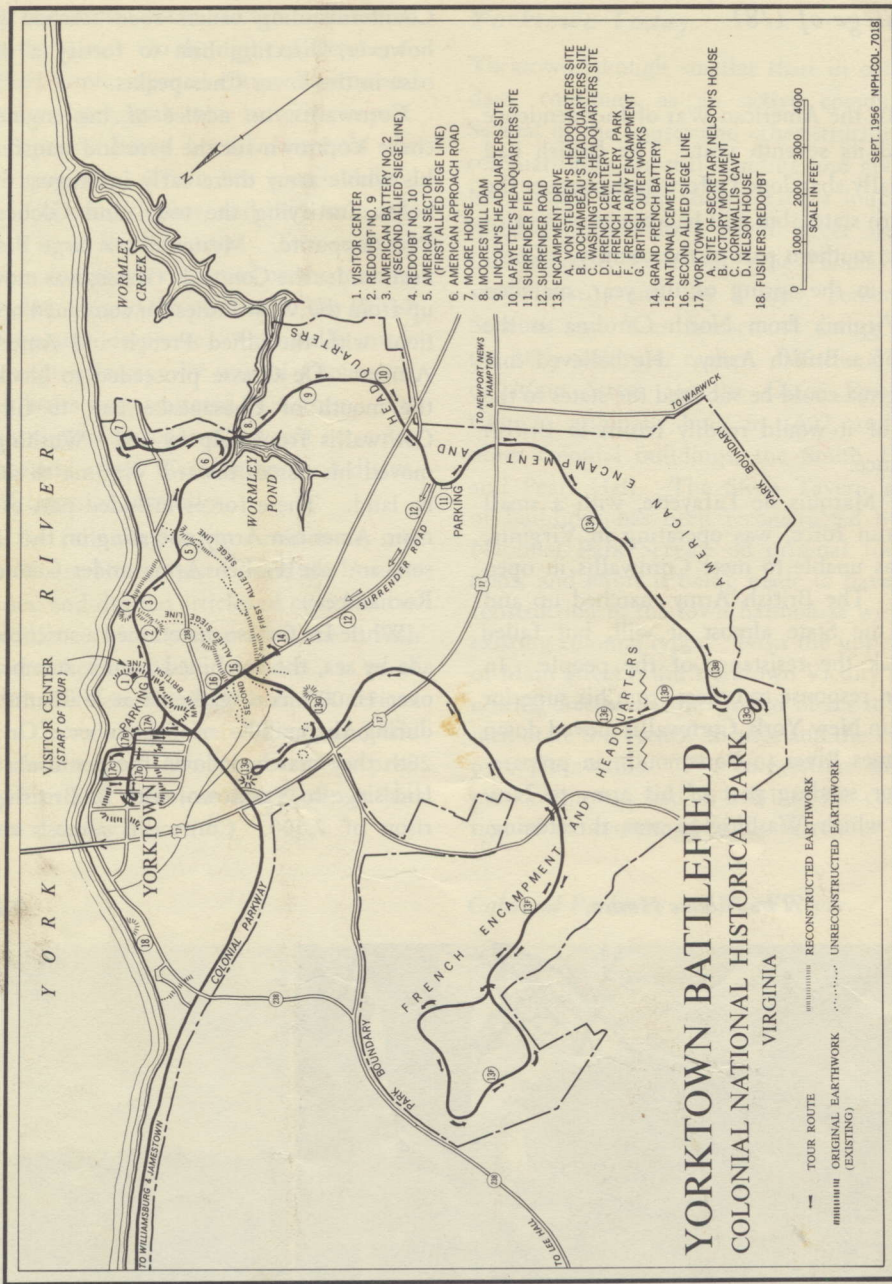
### *Mission 66*

Mission 66 is a program designed to be completed by 1966 which will assure the maximum protection of the scenic, scientific, wilderness, and historic resources of the National Park System in such ways and by such means as will make them available for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

### *Administration*

Colonial National Historical Park is administered by National Park Service of the United States Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Yorktown, Va., is in immediate charge.

*The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of its people.*



SEPT. 1956 NPHCOL-7018



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 Fred A. Seaton, Secretary  
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