

# Yorktown Battlefield

COLONIAL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK  
VIRGINIA

Lt. Gen. Charles, Lord Cornwallis, commander of the British forces surrendered at Yorktown. From an early engraving.



National Archives

The Storming of Redoubt No. 10, October 14, 1781. From the painting by Louis Eugene Lami, 1840, showing General Lafayette's Light Infantry overrunning the British fieldwork.



State Capitol, Richmond, Va.

Gen. George Washington, commander of the allied French and American army at Yorktown. From the painting by Charles Willson Peale.



State House, Annapolis, Md.

*The American War for Independence culminated in the battle fought in and around the town of York in 1781. From this came a new nation, the United States of America, and a deeper understanding of liberty and freedom in the western world.*

Soldiers in George Washington's army—like soldiers today—went to war for many reasons: patriotism, escape, duty, community pressure, or adventure. Once in the army their immediate concerns were their next meal, their sore feet, the weather, news from home . . . and British musket balls. But most of the soldiers believed that the Revolutionary War had something to do with freedom—with principles of self-government and individual liberties.

Such ideas were not new to the citizens and soldiers of that day. The colonists who settled Jamestown in 1607 brought with them their "rights and privileges" as Englishmen—rights which reached back to the Magna Carta. Beginning with the first representative legislative assembly at Jamestown in 1619, the English colonists became accustomed to a measure of self-government. As the years passed, Englishmen living in America began to speak of man's natural rights to life, liberty, and property. In Williamsburg, for example, the Virginia legislature in 1776 adopted a "Declaration of Rights" proclaiming that "all men are by nature equally free and independent."

When Americans believed their rights were being infringed by Britain, they went to war.

## SIX YEARS OF WAR

The historic path beginning at Breed's Hill in 1775 and leading to Yorktown in 1781 was long and painful. Those years were truly times that tried American souls. Defeat was all too common, and the elations that followed the few victories were

always short-lived. The men who filled the Continental ranks suffered a sorry day-to-day existence of too little food, too little clothing, and too much disease—an existence that was interrupted only by the exciting agony of battle.

Fighting began in Massachusetts before George Washington was given command of the ragtag Colonial forces, but his leadership eventually inspired the soldiers and welded the units into a loosely knit army. This army forced the British to evacuate Boston early in 1776. The Redcoats, however, merely moved to New York, and Washington was forced to abandon lower New York and New Jersey. The next year the Americans were driven from Philadelphia. The loss of their capital was made somewhat less painful by the surrender of British Gen. John Burgoyne's whole army at Saratoga in the autumn of 1777—an event that also encouraged France to finally sign an alliance with the hard-pressed Americans.

During the next 2 years no decisive advantage was gained by either side. Early 1780, however, brought bitter despair to the American cause when Gen. Benjamin Lincoln surrendered his entire patriot army after a lengthy siege at Charleston, S.C., and Gen. Horatio Gates, the victor at Saratoga, suffered total defeat at Camden, S.C. These blows staggered American hopes, but even in despair the tide was turning.

French troops under the Comte de Rochambeau reinforced Washington's army in the North. In the South, a band of frontiersmen killed or captured an entire British force at Kings Mountain. Nathanael Greene, who had replaced the hapless Gates, was successfully rebuilding the patriot army of the South. Gen. Charles, Lord Cornwallis,

the British commander in the South, saw Greene's defeat as being essential to a successful British occupation of the Southern Colonies. When Cornwallis moved to engage Greene, the American general withdrew. The British followed, advancing deeper and deeper into the interior. Steadily weakened by piecemeal engagements and hardships, the British pursued the Americans to the Dán River on the western Virginia border. There Greene turned, and drew Cornwallis into a battle at Guilford Courthouse. The British won the day, but at a terrible cost. Cornwallis was forced to withdraw to the North Carolina coast for rest and refitting.

The British commander then decided that Virginia was the key to successful occupation of the South and moved his army north in late spring of 1781. He raided almost at will in Virginia through the summer, checked only by the numerically inferior forces under the Marquis de Lafayette.

In this highly indecisive manner the story of the Revolution in America drew near to Yorktown and to a very decisive change of pace.

## THE SIEGE OF YORKTOWN

In August 1781—with the Revolutionary War in its seventh year—General Washington received word that a large French fleet commanded by the Comte de Grasse would arrive soon in Virginia. After conferring with General Rochambeau, Washington secretly began to move the bulk of his allied American and French troops from their camps in New York toward Virginia. He hoped that Cornwallis' army would still be there when he arrived.

Fortunately for the Americans, Cornwallis had just taken his army into Yorktown, thus ending his extended campaign through the southern Colonies and Virginia. Cornwallis expected to use Yorktown as a naval station and winter quarters. He

thought the York River would provide suitable opportunity for either reinforcement or withdrawal, with aid from the British Navy.

Cornwallis was dismayed when De Grasse's fleet blockaded the Chesapeake Bay and on September 5 defeated a British fleet attempting to break the blockade.

By the end of September Washington had moved his army of 16,000 close to Yorktown where the British were encamped in homes, in public buildings, and on open fields behind earthen defenses. Washington's army worked diligently for 3 weeks, digging siege lines around the British position and bombarding the Redcoats with shot and shell from heavy cannon. The superior manpower and artillery of the allied army, a futile British counter-attack, and the loss of strategic Redoubts 9 and 10 in the night fighting of October 14 convinced Cornwallis that he could hold out no longer. British, French, and American officers drew up surrender terms at the home of Augustine Moore on October 18. The next day the British surrendered formally just beyond the siege lines in a large open field, since known as Surrender Field.

With the surrender of Cornwallis and his whole army, British hopes of victory over the Americans collapsed. Two more years passed before the final peace treaty with Britain was ratified. But Washington and his men, if they looked back at all, could see that the victory at Yorktown in reality ended the war. And the citizens and soldiers who sacrificed so much could work out their own answers to questions of reconciling individual liberties with governmental authority, of balancing freedom with discipline. Even today, the search for workable answers continues.

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## ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Stop first at the Yorktown Visitor Center where you will find information service, an introductory theater program, and exhibits.

Yorktown and the surrounding area offer motel and restaurant facilities. The park does not have campgrounds, but there are several in the area. Picnic grounds, open in season, may be found along Colonial Parkway and at Yorktown.

The speed limit on Colonial Parkway is 72 kilometers per hour (45 m.p.h.). There are no service stations, and the roadway is closed to commercial traffic, except for buses, for which permits are required.

## ADMINISTRATION

Colonial National Historical Park, which includes Jamestown, Yorktown Battlefield, Colonial Parkway, and Cape Henry Memorial, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Yorktown, VA 23690, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities to protect and conserve our land and water, energy and minerals, fish and wildlife, park and recreation areas, and for the wise use of all those resources. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

**SEEING YORKTOWN**

To see the battlefield, encampment areas, and Yorktown itself, drive your own car and follow the red arrows. Markers along the drive identify points of interest. For a richer historical experience, stop to explore on foot those areas which look especially interesting to you.

Your first stop is the **British Line** just outside the visitor center. You may wish to walk along the line, look out over the battlefield, and think about the American and French soldiers whose determination gave new meaning to the ideas of freedom and liberty. Remember also the British soldiers caught in the swirl of history, of war, and of death. The paragraphs below—keyed by bold face type to areas on the map—are intended to provoke your thinking about the men and women who made history at Yorktown.

*"The noise and thundering of the cannon, the distressing cries of the wounded . . ."*

**Soldiers at the British Line**  
Load! Aim! Fire!  
again and . . . again  
trying not to think of what might happen,  
what is happening.

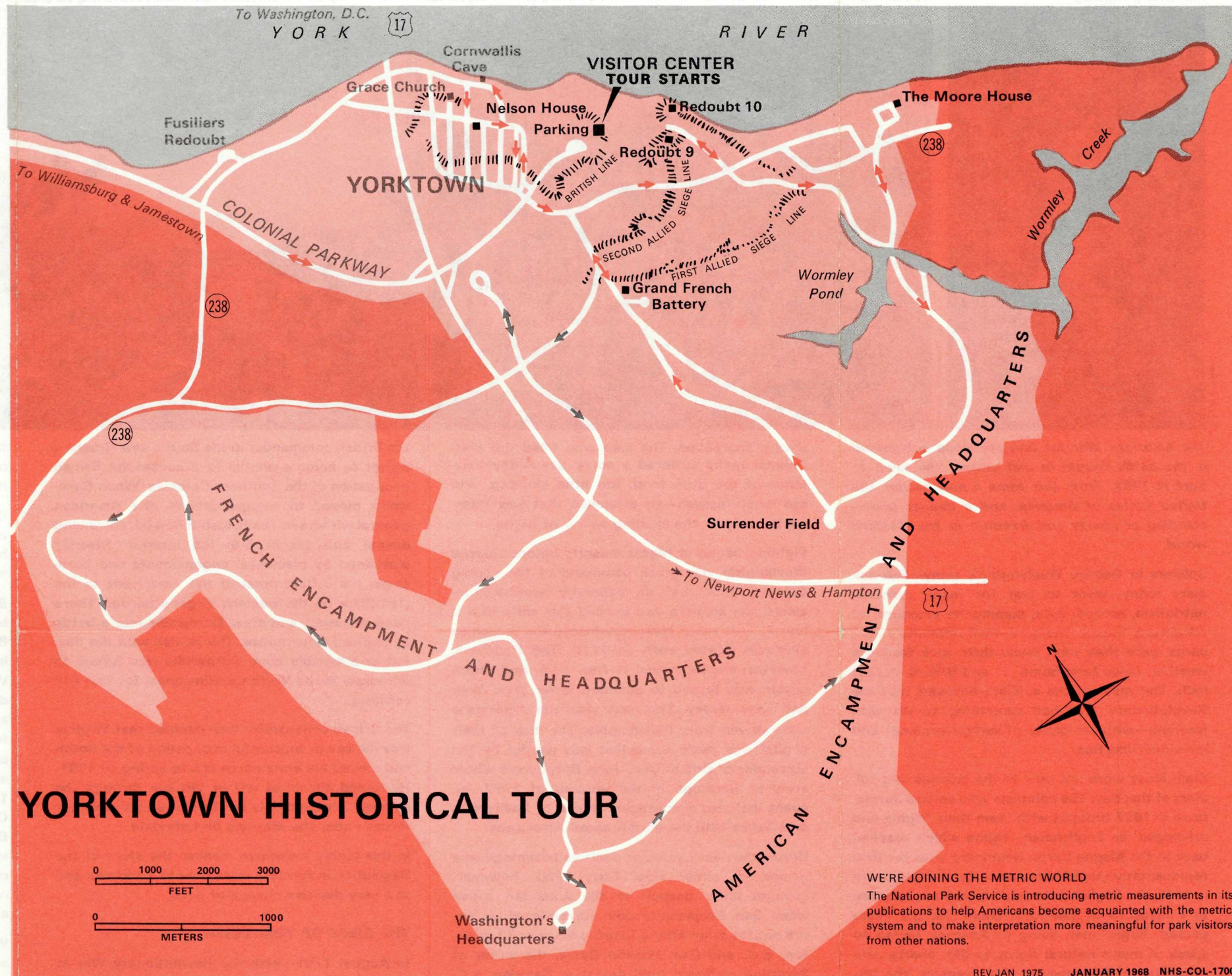
*"We worked hard on the batteries . . ."*  
Always the digging  
with pick, with shovel,  
with the special tools of warfare.  
**The First Siege Line,**  
the **Second Siege Line,**  
the blistered hands,  
the aching muscles.

*"A gauche-alignement."*  
**Commands at the Grand French Battery**  
sound strange to American ears.  
But American eyes can see the results  
and American hearts  
are thankful for the help.

*"We threw ourselves  
into the ditch at once,  
and each one sought to mount the parapet."*

**Attacking Redoubts 9 & 10**  
American and French soldiers  
move forward in darkness,  
muskets in hand, bayonets fixed,  
trying not to think of what might happen,  
what is happening.

**Inside Augustine Moore's House**  
weary officers argue surrender terms.  
Tempers flare, and flare again!  
They stay longer than expected.  
Outside  
on the battlefield stillness prevails,  
rumors fly,  
soldiers wait.



*The Encampments provided rest and food. Time to fix a boot or write a letter home. Time to think about the war and wonder, why?*

*Soldiers and citizens line the road. They watch the British march to Surrender Field.*

*"Present arms! Lay down arms! put off swords and cartridge-boxes!" Is the long war over? No one knows. But many hope that Yorktown will mean independence, a chance for the new nation to pursue its own destiny, and a chance for each citizen to build a new life.*

Those who want to see Washington's Headquarters and the French Encampment, follow the yellow arrows (gray on map) from the Grand French Battery. If you wish to return directly to Yorktown, continue to follow the red arrows.

*After the siege, Thomas Nelson, Jr., rides into Yorktown. Five years earlier he signed the Declaration of Independence pledging "our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor." Now Nelson had lost his fortune and his health.*

*Now he sees his town in ruins: "great holes made by bombs . . . most of the houses riddled by cannon fire and almost no window panes." Nelson remembers Yorktown before the war: the busy waterfront with wharves, warehouses, and taverns, with ships arriving and departing; the handsome homes along Maine Street "built in the modern taste," the churches, the courthouse, and most of all the people—planters, slaves, innkeepers, craftsmen, merchants, his father and grandfather whose businesses grew with Yorktown. But those days would never return. The town did not recover from the war. And neither did Nelson. His gravestone reads "He gave all for liberty."*

