

Yorktown Battlefield

I have the Honor to inform Congress, that a Reduction of the British Army under the Command of Lord Cornwallis, is most happily effected. The unremitting Ardor which actuated the Officers and Soldiers in the combined Army on this Occasion, has principally led to this Important Event, at an earlier period than my most sanguine Hopes had induced me to expect. Gen. George Washington to the President of Congress, October 19, 1781.



October 19, 1781, dawned bright and clear, with just a touch of chill in the air forecasting the coming of winter. As the sun came out, the American and French soldiers occupying the siege lines outside Yorktown, Va., began to pack up their arms and equipment. Late in the morning they started moving to their assigned positions.

The site chosen for the British surrender was a broad, almost level field ideally suited for the purpose, behind and near the center of the allied lines along the road to Hampton. As they approached the field, the soldiers discovered that news of the victory had spread throughout the countryside and a host of men, women, and children had come, on foot and horseback, by

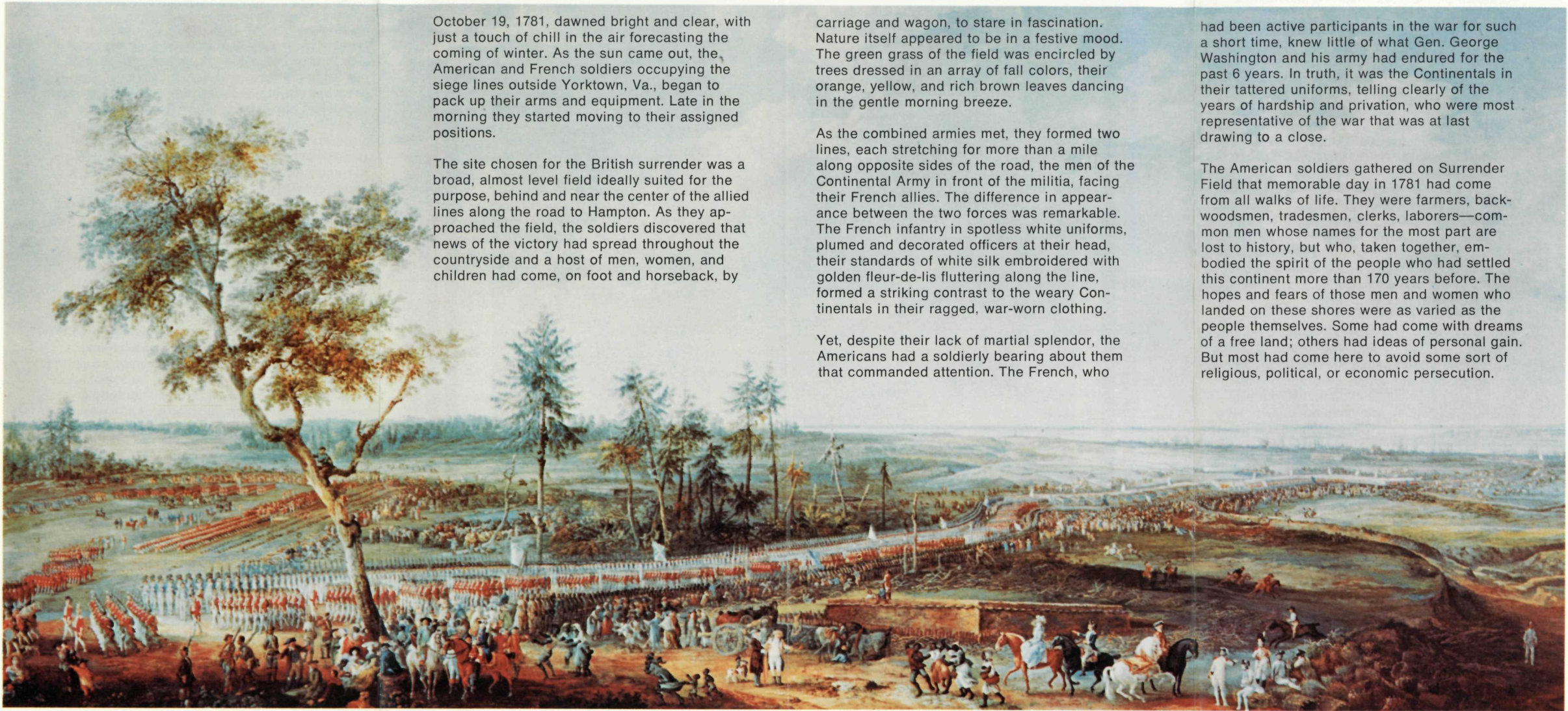
carriage and wagon, to stare in fascination. Nature itself appeared to be in a festive mood. The green grass of the field was encircled by trees dressed in an array of fall colors, their orange, yellow, and rich brown leaves dancing in the gentle morning breeze.

As the combined armies met, they formed two lines, each stretching for more than a mile along opposite sides of the road, the men of the Continental Army in front of the militia, facing their French allies. The difference in appearance between the two forces was remarkable. The French infantry in spotless white uniforms, plumed and decorated officers at their head, their standards of white silk embroidered with golden fleur-de-lis fluttering along the line, formed a striking contrast to the weary Continentals in their ragged, war-worn clothing.

Yet, despite their lack of martial splendor, the Americans had a soldierly bearing about them that commanded attention. The French, who

had been active participants in the war for such a short time, knew little of what Gen. George Washington and his army had endured for the past 6 years. In truth, it was the Continentals in their tattered uniforms, telling clearly of the years of hardship and privation, who were most representative of the war that was at last drawing to a close.

The American soldiers gathered on Surrender Field that memorable day in 1781 had come from all walks of life. They were farmers, backwoodsmen, tradesmen, clerks, laborers—common men whose names for the most part are lost to history, but who, taken together, embodied the spirit of the people who had settled this continent more than 170 years before. The hopes and fears of those men and women who landed on these shores were as varied as the people themselves. Some had come with dreams of a free land; others had ideas of personal gain. But most had come here to avoid some sort of religious, political, or economic persecution.



Colonial National Historical Park, Virginia

"The Surrender of Yorktown" by Louis Van Blarenbergh, 1785.

Gradually, in the freer atmosphere of North America, the colonists had become more self-reliant and independent than they could ever have been in the Old World. Even among people so diverse there grew a bond that somehow held them together in the search for further goals and opportunities. They began to regulate their own affairs and to mold their own civilization, and more and more they tended to resist those measures they believed were designed to constrain them. As John Adams, one of the architects of American independence, wrote: "The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the hearts and minds of the people."

Yet when war began to seem inevitable, most of the people approached the idea with great reluctance. Loyalty to the British crown was deeply ingrained. At the beginning, the majority were not seeking independence; they simply wanted the rights which they, as British subjects, thought they should have. In fact, for more than a year, the Americans fought without any Declaration of Independence. And even after separation was formally proclaimed, there were those who opposed the idea, and patriots had to contend with large numbers of their fellow countrymen who chose to remain loyal to England.

When the war started, no one on either side thought it would last very long. Neither the British nor the Americans were prepared for a war that would go on year after year, intense, severe, bitter. The Declaration of Independence, promulgated in 1776, had astounded the world. Written by exceptional men like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin who stepped forward to claim the right to determine their own destiny, it had proclaimed truths about the natural rights of human beings that, until then, no one had dared to formalize and act upon. If these truths were to endure beyond their mere announcement, the patriots must win their struggle on the battlefield. All too often in the course of the war, it had seemed that a country founded on such principles could never survive. Now, with Yorktown won, Americans knew it would survive.

The name of Yorktown holds magic. It is a magic that endures, and transcends all the years. It was more than a simple ceremony of surrender that took place here, for Yorktown symbolizes all the years of struggle that had gone before—the battles lost as well as the battles won, each had contributed its share. And to the soldiers lined up along Surrender Road, the results had been worth waiting for.

The waiting had really begun a long time before, when the militia faced the British regulars on the village green at Lexington, Mass., on April 19, 1775. Of the nearly 500 Massachusetts Continentals who took part in the siege of Yorktown, probably few (if any) had been at Lexington or Concord or even Bunker Hill. Nor could there have been many from those first companies of expert riflemen raised in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia—the first soldiers to enlist in the Continental Army. Death, disease, desertion, and the end of enlistments had taken their toll among these as among all units. And many had perished on that terrible march through sleet, hail, and ice up to Quebec in the winter of 1775, or later in the snows of Canada.

From that first winter of the war around Boston, when the army began to grow, to the fateful British campaign in Virginia that brought the armies to Yorktown, American military fortunes wavered up and down. On St. Patrick's Day in 1776 the British evacuated and sailed away from Boston, and patriot spirits soared. Then came a series of near-fatal reversals. New York City fell to the British. The American army was chased from New York across New Jersey into Pennsylvania. Everything seemed lost until George Washington led his Continentals through a blizzard across the Delaware River on Christmas night 1776 to win a great victory at Trenton. This was followed 8 days later by another victory at Princeton.

The effect of these victories upon the people of the country was electrifying. Washington, whose reputation as a military leader had been declining, was now hailed as a genius. The patriot cause, which had seemed lost, took on new life; and the Continental Army went into winter quar-

ters at Morristown, N.J., with a renewed faith that the end might yet come out all right. Almost immediately, however, the army began to evaporate. Nearly all of the troops had served beyond their original terms of enlistment, and now many of these simply went home. Yet the continued existence of the army was the only hope the patriots had for winning their struggle for independence.

The army did survive. Slowly men began to come into camp, soldiers who would, for the first time, serve for a period of 3 years. At no time, however, did the actual strength of the army even approximate the strength authorized by Congress. More men were always needed to replace casualties caused by battle, disease, and desertion. The militia system, too, drained off a number of men who might otherwise have served in the army. Shorter periods of enlistment, usually close to home, with more frequent and larger bounties, made service in the militia always more attractive.

In 1777 the main British army under Gen. Sir William Howe moved by water to invade Pennsylvania, won a victory at the Brandywine, captured the patriot capital of Philadelphia, and then repulsed a determined American counter-attack at Germantown. But all was not gloom. A second British campaign, designed to cut New England off from the rest of the States, proved a failure. The surrender of Gen. John Burgoyne's army at Saratoga, N.Y., on October 17, 1777, marked a turning point in the Revolution because it brought France into the war against England. The French had, since the beginning of the conflict, secretly helped the Americans but had hesitated to proclaim formal recognition until they were reasonably certain of coming out on the winning side. Saratoga tipped the scales, and now France would send men, money, supplies, and a fleet to aid the patriot cause. Spain and Holland later followed France's lead.

Jean-Baptiste-Antoine de Verger, a French officer at Yorktown, called the American Continental soldiers "very war-wise and quite well disciplined. . . [and] thoroughly inured to hardship,

which they endured with little complaint so long as their officers set them an example." By the time the Continentals arrived at Yorktown, 6 years of combat had indeed turned them into a fairly efficient fighting machine. Their education in the martial arts had begun in the snows of Valley Forge, Pa., during the terrible winter of 1777-78, when the army suffered severely for want of adequate food and clothing. It was there that the Prussian drillmaster, Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, undertook to give Washington's soldiers their first taste of systematic military discipline. So successful were his efforts that the army emerged from its ordeal stronger and better trained than ever before. Indeed, at the Battle of Monmouth Court House on June 28, 1778, the Continentals proved that Americans, properly trained and led, were second to none in the art of war.

After Monmouth, faced with an American army of trained veterans, the British and their German allies retreated to the safety of New York City, there to remain until new orders sent them off on a seaborne invasion of the Southern States. Except for the American repulse of a British naval attack on Fort Moultrie at Charleston, S.C., in June 1776, the South had so far been little affected by the war. In the winter of 1778-79 the British captured Savannah and Augusta, Ga., with comparative ease.

Then in February 1780 the British landed a large force below Charleston. Gen. Benjamin Lincoln, the commander of the American Southern Department, called on Washington for help in defending the South Carolina capital. Since the greater portion of the British-German army still remained in the New York area, the only troops Washington could afford to send were Virginia and North Carolina Continentals. Of all the long, weary marches in history, the one made by these soldiers surely rates as one of the most heartbreaking. These men who had previously trudged northward to fight for their country in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York were now turned around to march, in winter, hundreds of miles south to Charleston, where, along with the rest of Lincoln's army, they were bottled up with no hope of escape.

The surrender of Lincoln's army of more than 5,400 men on May 12, 1780, was one of the great catastrophes of the war. The largest trained American army in the South was completely eliminated. The stalwart veterans of Trenton, Princeton, the Brandywine, Germantown, Valley Forge, and Monmouth were imprisoned. Almost all of the South Carolina and Georgia Continentals were also lost, except for a few who escaped into the swamps to continue the fight from there. Calling upon his last resources, Washington sent his Maryland and Delaware soldiers southward—every man he could possibly spare—to form the nucleus of a new army under the command of Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates, the "Hero of Saratoga." The ensuing Battle of Camden, S.C., on August 16, 1780, was the worst defeat ever inflicted on an American army. South Carolina, as well as Georgia, seemed firmly under British control.

To succeed the hapless Gates, Washington named Nathanael Greene. While Greene was still reorganizing his pitifully small force, his opponent, Charles, Earl Cornwallis, moved aggressively forward to add North Carolina to the list of Southern States now in British hands. Cornwallis' first setback came on October 7, 1780, at Kings Mountain, S.C., where his small western column of Loyalist troops was destroyed by an American army of frontier militia composed of hunters, farmers, and settlers. Then on January 17, 1781, Daniel Morgan administered a stunning defeat to the British at the Battle of The Cowpens in South Carolina in one of the most superbly fought battles in American history. Despite these defeats, Cornwallis continued his advance.

The turning point of the war in the South came at Guilford Court House, N.C., on March 15, 1781. The battle fought there was claimed by the British as a victory, but their losses were so severe that Cornwallis decided to leave the Carolinas and march northward into Virginia. By doing so he not only set the stage for the siege of Yorktown but left the way open for Nathanael Greene to recover the deep South in a campaign that would forever stamp him as the greatest general of the war next to Washington.

In May 1781 Cornwallis joined other British troops to begin his operations in Virginia. For more than a month his army, opposed by militia and only a comparatively few Continental soldiers, roamed almost at will through the State. Eventually the British retired toward the sea-coast where Cornwallis established a base at Yorktown on the York River. He moved his army there early in August and immediately began to fortify both the town and Gloucester Point opposite.

At the beginning of the war, George Washington's military experience had been very limited. His principal contribution throughout the years had been the force of his personality and character. His indomitable will to win would never admit of the word "defeat," although defeat was not unknown to him. As a leader of men, he was superb. There have been few generals in history who can stand comparison with him. Men had followed him for months and years, through the most dark and trying times, when there seemed little hope of victory at the end of the road. It is doubtful that anyone in the colonies could have provided the same qualities of leadership that held the army together.

Now after years in command, wherein he had learned the art of generalship to a remarkable degree, the great chance for which he had waited so long was finally before him. Two weeks after Cornwallis occupied Yorktown, Washington, whose army still lay outside New York City, received a message from the Count de Grasse, the French admiral whose fleet was assigned for duty in American waters. He was, the Admiral wrote, bringing his squadron, with troops and artillery aboard, to the Chesapeake. Because of prior and unbreakable commitments, however, the ships and men would be available only until October 15, so "I shall be greatly obliged to you if you will employ me promptly and effectually within that time. . . ."

After conferring with the Count de Rochambeau, commander of the French troops operating in America, Washington made an immediate and fateful decision: He would go to Virginia. Leaving a reduced force to defend the Hudson Highlands, he marched southward, taking with him

not only the greater portion of his American army but also Rochambeau's French army that had been at Newport, R.I., for almost a year. The move was made with the greatest secrecy. By the time the British in New York discovered the destination of the allied armies, they were passing through Philadelphia.

On September 5, 1781, a British fleet commanded by Adm. Thomas Graves appeared off the Virginia Capes at the entrance to Chesapeake Bay with 19 ships of the line in an attempt to aid the British army at Yorktown. They were met there by a French fleet of 24 ships under Admiral de Grasse. The battle that followed resulted in a strategic French victory that ended all hope Cornwallis might have had of succour by sea. When Washington's American and French armies arrived on the scene, the British commander was also effectively cut off by land.

When he occupied Yorktown, Cornwallis' purpose had been to obtain a good seaport and harbor. He had never envisioned the necessity of having to defend it against a siege from the landward side; it possessed no commanding features overlooking the surrounding terrain. The British constructed around the town an

inner defense line of earthworks, redoubts, and batteries, with two redoubts, named simply 9 and 10, in advance of the eastern end of the line. A series of earthworks was also constructed northwest of Yorktown near the river. The most formidable of these was a star-shaped fort known as the Fusiliers' Redoubt because it was manned by a portion of the Royal Welch Fusilier Regiment.

The actual siege began on September 28, when Washington's allied army of some 16,000 men occupied a line encircling the town within a mile of the British outworks. The entire allied army then spread out into permanent camps that extended in a great curve 6 miles long from the York River, northwest of the town, around to the south through woods and fields, then east to Wormley Creek. The American wing on the right and the French wing on the left were divided about the middle of the line by the swamps and marshes of Beaverdam Creek.

On the morning of September 30 the allies awoke to a pleasant surprise. During the night, Cornwallis, thinking he could better defend the town by concentrating his troops closer to it, evacuated all of his outworks except the Fusiliers' Redoubt and Redoubts 9 and 10.

This was a grievous error because it allowed Washington to move his forces to within 1,000 yards of the British lines, upon which the allied artillery could now easily be brought to bear.

The real work of the siege began during the first days of October. Although the Continental Army had been engaged in the business of war for several years, large-scale siege warfare was something new to it. The French proved invaluable in remedying this deficiency. There were no better instructors than the French engineers and artillerymen, famous throughout Europe for their efficiency and skill. Under their supervision, construction of the first siege line close to the British inner defenses was begun southeast of Yorktown on the night of October 6. For the next 2 days the work continued at a rapid pace despite the fire of the British artillery. By October 9 the allied artillery was ready to respond.

The French were the first to fire; 2 hours later an American battery joined in, with General Washington himself firing the first round. On October 10 the Grand French Battery opened up together with other American siege guns; within 24 hours the superior allied firepower had nearly silenced the British. The bombardment was so effective that the allies immediately began work on their second parallel siege line, about midway between the first parallel and the British position. Construction continued for the next 3 days.

The last major infantry assault of the war occurred on the night of October 14, when the French stormed Redoubt 9 while New England and New York Continentals overran Redoubt 10. Each attacking force was composed of 400 men. The French target was the stronger of the two forts. It was defended by 120 British and German soldiers, while the American target was held by 70. Both columns started their assault at 8 p.m. The Americans, led by Col. Alexander Hamilton, overcame all resistance in the short space of 10 minutes; the French encountered some difficulties but completed their task in less than half an hour. The two redoubts were then incorporated into the allies' second parallel.

Just before daybreak on October 16, the British launched an attack against the allied center. It was a gallant effort, a few cannon were spiked, but the assault was repulsed. Cornwallis then made a desperate attempt to get some of his troops across the York River to Gloucester Point and escape to New York, but a violent storm scattered the boats and doomed the undertaking. Cornwallis' situation was now hopeless.

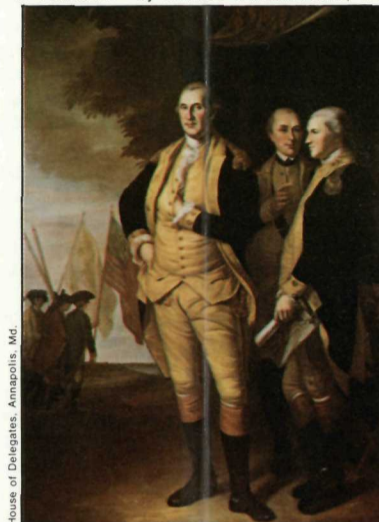
At 10 'clock on the morning of October 17, the fourth anniversary of Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga, a red-coated drummer appeared on the British rampart and beat a "parley." The guns ceased fire. A British officer appeared and was taken into the American lines where he asked for an armistice. The next day commissioners met at the Moore House and, after a heated and prolonged conference, settled the surrender terms.

At 2 p.m., October 19, 1781, the defeated British army marched out from Yorktown, clad in a new issue of uniforms, with their colors cased and their bands playing (so tradition has it) a British march entitled "The World Turned Upside Down." Cornwallis, pleading illness, did not surrender in person; that task was assigned to Gen. Charles O'Hara of the British Guards. In all, 7,247 British officers and soldiers and 840 seamen were surrendered at Yorktown and Gloucester Point. The casualties incurred during the siege were fewer than might be expected. The American losses were 20 killed and 56 wounded, the French 52 killed and 134 wounded, and the British and Germans 156 killed and 326 wounded.

Among the soldiers and civilians who silently watched the surrender ceremony, none could know that nearly 2 more years would pass before the official documents terminating the war would be signed. The fighting would continue for well over a year in Georgia, South Carolina, and on the Ohio frontier. But, for all intents and purposes, the surrender at Yorktown was a signal to the world that the war had been won; and some must surely have sensed that in many ways this day, October 19, 1781, was an ending of sorts, and perhaps even a beginning.

Joseph B. Mitchell

"Washington, Lafayette, and Tench Tilghman at Yorktown" by Charles Willson Peale, 1784.



House of Delegates, Annapolis, Md.



"Charles Earl Cornwallis" by Gainsborough, 1783.



Stokes Collection, New York Public Library



"Comte de Rochambeau" by C. W. Peale, 1782.



This "Plan of the Investment of York and Gloucester" by Maj. Sebastian Bauman of the New York Regiment of Artillery shows the strategy by which Washington and Rochambeau won the last major military action of the Revolutionary War. The American encampment and lines of approach are shown in blue, the French in yellow, and the British in red. The Allies' first and second siege lines lie south of the town at the western branch of Wormley Creek.

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 Battlefields, 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.