Virginia C.A.R. Patriots of the Round Table
James Lafayette

Enslaved Patriot and Key American Spy

The victory at Yorktown would not have been possible without critical intelligence provided by Patriots from widely varying backgrounds, from the drawing rooms and balls of occupied Philadelphia to the plantations of Virginia. James (later known as James Lafayette) was a classic double agent who provided important intelligence during the months leading up to the Victory at Yorktown. And he was an African American slave.

James was born into slavery and at a young age was assigned to be the personal servant for his master's son, William Armistead. William Armistead was a Patriot and served as paymaster and commissary for Virginia's troops in the Revolutionary War.
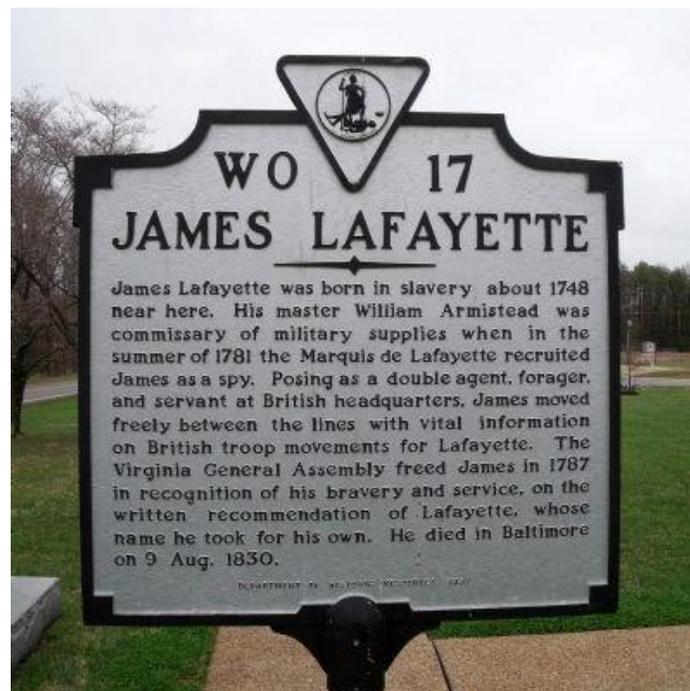
In 1781, with his master's permission, James volunteered to join the Continental Army to fight in the American Revolution. James served under Lafayette, who employed James as a spy, with the hopes of gathering intelligence regarding enemy movements. James infiltrated the headquarters of Lord Cornwallis by posing as a runaway slave hired by the British to spy on the Americans.

Able to travel freely between both British and American camps, James relayed information to Lafayette about British plans and provided false information about American forces to the British. Using the details of James's reports, Lafayette and General George Washington were able to prevent 10,000 British reinforcements from getting to Yorktown. The American and French blockade in the Chesapeake Bay surprised British forces and left them with no alternative but to prepare for a siege. Following the Battle of Yorktown, the British surrendered on October 19, 1781. It would be the last major battle of the Revolution.

After the war, James returned to William Armistead and life as a slave. He was not eligible for emancipation under the Act of 1783 because he had been a spy, not a soldier. He eventually petitioned the Virginia legislature for his emancipation. William Armistead, then a member of the General Assembly, supported the petition, and Lafayette assisted him by writing a recommendation, which led to his freedom being granted in 1787. In gratitude, James adopted Lafayette's surname.

James Lafayette acquired two parcels totaling about forty acres in New Kent County and became a successful farmer there. He eventually received from the Virginia General Assembly $60 for present relief and a $40 annual pension, which he traveled to Richmond to collect twice a year. In 1824, the Marquis de Lafayette returned to the United States at the invitation of President James Monroe. He made a tour of all 24 states, during which huge crowds gathered to see him and he was feted as a hero. Lafayette visited Yorktown, as well as Washington's grave at Mount Vernon, and gave a speech to the Virginia General Assembly in Richmond. While in Richmond, he abruptly ordered his carriage to stop when he saw James in the crowd and rushed to embrace him.

James Lafayette is just one of the many African American Patriots who helped to secure American independence and a reminder that the legacy of the Revolution belongs to all Americans of every race.

Historic Marker at the New Kent County Courthouse.

The Lafayette Monument in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, New York,
features a depiction of James, who is unnamed.

Discussion Questions for Local Societies

Why were spies important in the American Revolution?

What would have happened if 10,000 reinforcements had arrived to support Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown?

What would motivate an enslaved African American to risk his life as a spy for the Patriot cause?

Resources

Primary Source: Lafayette's Testimonial to James Armistead Lafayette
https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/american-spies-of-the-revolution/lafayettes-testimonial-to-james-armistead-lafayette/

Primary Source: Virginia; Hening, William Waller (1823). "Chapter LXXXIX, An act to emancipate James, a negro slave, the property of William Armistead, gentleman."
https://books.google.com/books?id=wOrTLRd0328C&pg=PA380#v=onepage&q&f=false

Rockwell, Anne, *A Spy Called James: The True Story of James Lafayette, Revolutionary War Double Agent* (2016).

Biographical entry in the Encyclopedia Virginia:
https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/lafayette-james-ca-1748-1830/