Reviving the Memory of Our Marquis
America Celebrates the 250th Birthday of the Marquis de Lafayette
BYlena Basha

On April 20, 1777, 19-year-old Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roche Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, set sail from a Spanish port near the French border, leaving behind his doting wife, pregnant with their second child, and abandoning the privileged aristocratic life he led in France. On a ship he purchased himself, he was on his way to America to help defend the Patriot cause.

His decision went against his family’s and his country’s wishes, but it turned out to be a fortuitous one for the Patriots. Lafayette played a key role in securing America’s independence from England and won the hearts of Americans, who would lovingly refer to the Frenchman as “our marquis” long after he returned home. But while some worry that the marquis has faded from modern America’s consciousness, his admirers hope to revive Lafayette’s memory with events surrounding his 250th birthday on September 6. The international celebration planned for the occasion is already focusing the spotlight on one of the most revered heroes of the American Revolution.

LIFELONG FRIENDS

Within two months of arriving in America, Lafayette, newly commissioned as a major general, came face-to-face with his new commander in chief, General George Washington, at a dinner. As a member of the Masonic order, Washington “believed that Freemasonry provided him with true brothers in all parts of the world,” writes Harlow Giles Unger in Lafayette (John Wiley and Sons, 2002). So when he found out that Lafayette was also a Freemason, he “drew brother Lafayette aside to express his good will toward the boy ...

Washington complimented him for his zeal and sacrifice in coming to America.”

Despite their different backgrounds, the two became fast friends. And on September 11, 1777, when word reached Washington that British General Cornwallis was trampling Patriot troops at nearby Brandywine Creek, Lafayette was by his side. In what would be the young major general’s first battle, Washington sent Lafayette to help take control of the situation. But when Lafayette arrived, the “blistering fire and inexorable British advance sent the American soldiers fleeing in panic. Lafayette tried to halt their retreat,” Unger describes. “He reared his horse into the air, wheeled to the right, to the left, galloping back and forth to block the fleeing troops. Finally, he jumped off and grabbed at men’s shoulders and arms, ordering them to turn about, stand and fight—a major general in full uniform; a madman refusing to face defeat.”

Lafayette left the Battle of Brandywine Creek, a decisive British victory, wounded in the leg but not deterred. “Brandywine also gave Washington a new appreciation for his young charge, who, he realized, was like himself in so many ways,” Unger writes, noting that Washington probably saw in Lafayette the same fervor and determination with which he had fought 22 years earlier during the French and Indian War.
Washington made sure that the major general received the best care for his wounded leg. While on the mend, Lafayette described his new friendship in a letter to his wife, Adrienne. "This estimable man, whom I at first admired for his talents and qualities and whom I have come to venerate as I know him better, has become my intimate friend," he wrote on October 1, 1777.

Despite his inexperience, Lafayette proved his military savvy the following year, using Indian war tactics that he learned from his soldiers to ward off the British at Barren Hill, Pa., and fighting courageously at the Battle of Monmouth, which led to the British evacuation of Philadelphia and New Jersey.

Meanwhile, his feats were the talk of the town in Paris, and by then, the French government had come to terms with Lafayette's decision to help fight for the Patriots. After almost two years in America, Lafayette returned to France to spend time with his family. (During this period his wife, Adrienne, gave birth to a son, whom the couple called George Washington Lafayette.) He also spent time petitioning the French government to increase its involvement in America's quest for independence. In addition to helping mount a European campaign against the English, which proved unsuccessful, Lafayette petitioned Versailles for more ships, arms, troops and supplies to be sent to his overseas friends. His pleas paid off for the Americans, and preparations began to send 6,000 men, clothing and 15,000 muskets overseas, led by Jean-Baptiste-Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau.

Eager to give Washington the good news, Lafayette sailed for America in advance of their deployment. But when Lafayette arrived in 1780, Patriot spirits were low. After a hard winter, the Continental army was perishing, and defeat seemed imminent. According to Unger, "Lafayette's arrival brought the first ray of
hope to the gloom that had enveloped America for months ... He was a unifying presence whose aura enveloped and bound them in common cause.”

A year after pledging Rochambeau’s help, the French commissioned François Joseph Paul, marquis de Grasse Tilly, comte de Grasse, whose fleet of 26 ships was stationed in the West Indies, to sail toward America to help fortify the coast.

All of Lafayette’s efforts came full circle in the fall of 1781 at the Siege of Yorktown, where Cornwallis faced defeat on all sides: by Lafayette from the west, Washington and Rochambeau from the north and de Grasse’s fleet on the Chesapeake Bay.

**BECOMING ‘OUR MARQUIS’**

With America’s independence effectively clinched, Lafayette returned to France in 1782, where he was awarded the Cross of Saint-Louis, one of France’s greatest honors. His daughter, whom he named Virginie after the American state, was also born that year. While he had just finished fighting for America’s independence, France’s battle for freedom had only just begun. But though Lafayette turned his attention to the French Revolution, even spending five years in prison, he did not forget America—nor did America forget him. In 1784, during Lafayette’s first of two post-Revolutionary War tours of America, the Philadelphia Legislature named Fayette County in southwest Pennsylvania after the marquis, and the city of New York declared him a citizen. In 1803, President Jefferson wrote to Lafayette, offering him the governorship of the Louisiana Territory, but he declined, not wanting to abandon his own country, which needed him more than ever. He returned to America again in 1824 as “the nation’s guest,” to celebrate the 50th anniversary of America declaring her independence from England.

When Lafayette arrived, Unger describes a true military hero’s welcome: “A group of veterans in patched up, ill-fitting old uniforms stood as straight as their crooked old limbs allowed. As he passed before them, each snapped out his name and company, and the battle where he had served with the marquis. It was all too much for the old man, and he burst into tears.”

While the tour was only supposed to take Lafayette through the 13 original states, it expanded quickly, taking him to every state in the union. During the 13-month tour, Lafayette made a pilgrimage to Mount Vernon to visit the tomb of Washington, whom he had last seen in 1784. He was honored in every city he visited, from Boston to New Orleans to St. Louis. “Americans were enjoying, as never before, the fruits of freedom that Lafayette and the other Founding Fathers had won for them,” Unger says.

Though he returned to France eventually—to the disappointment of his American friends—his affection for his adopted country never waned. When Lafayette died in 1834, he was buried at Phipus cemetery in Paris next to his wife, under dirt that traveled across the Atlantic Ocean from Bunker Hill.

**REBUILDING AWARENESS**

American reverence of Lafayette did not end at his funeral. Americans continued to commemorate the anniversary of his death and celebrated his birthday as Lafayette Day. He was also revered on other holidays, as Anne Loveland explains in *Emblem of Liberty* (LSU Press, 1971), including Washington’s Birthday, the anniversaries of the battles of Brandywine and Yorktown and the Fourth of July. In 1957, for the marquis’ 200th birthday, the U.S. Post Office issued a commemorative stamp. In addition, hundreds of U.S. cities, counties and schools have been named for Lafayette.

But awareness of the hero has diminished in recent years, says Philippe Gustin, international manager for the city of Lafayette, La., which is hosting the majority of events celebrating Lafayette’s birth. “We did a local survey and were shocked to see that not too many young people knew much about Lafayette. Even though he is one of the most respected personalities in the country, not enough people know about the special relationship he had with Washington that eventually led to the victory at Yorktown.”

Gustin says he hopes this year’s celebration will help educate Americans, especially young people, about Lafayette.
Our goal is for every child here to know about the marquis before the end of the year,” he says. Educational events including poster and costume contests and quiz bowls have already helped achieve that goal.

Recognizing the importance of educating today’s youth about such an important Revolutionary leader, DAR members of the local Galvez Chapter, Lafayette, La., donated money to be awarded at a social studies fair at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. The chapter also co-sponsored a dinner that featured a lecture by Count Gonzague de Saint Bris, who is considered the authoritative Lafayette biographer. For its 48th annual George Washington Ball, the chapter had the marquis, portrayed by an actor, address the audience. Lafayette was also honored at the Louisiana State Society conference in April.

“Lafayette and his democratic ideals fit so beautifully with the DAR, so we have tried to incorporate the Marquis de Lafayette into as many DAR projects this year as possible,” says Virginia Stuller, member of the Galvez Chapter and co-chair of the city’s Marquis de Lafayette Commemoration Committee.

Organizers of the celebration also hope many of this year’s events will help bridge the recent widening gap between America and France caused by differing politics. “For hundreds of years the United States and France have enjoyed a wonderful relationship, and we need to remember how important those ties are,” Mrs. Stuller says. “We hope this celebration will encourage Americans to re-evaluate the wonderful friendship and kinship we’ve had and continue to cherish it.”

Contributing Editor Lena Basha’s story on Ellis Island was featured in the November/December 2006 issue.

Honoring the Marquis in 2007

JULY 1: Vermilionville, La., Heritage and Folklife Park presents an American Independence Day celebration with historical characters and a “Freedom Fête.” 11 a.m.–2 p.m.; (337) 233–4077.

JULY 28–29: La Belle Journée Festival in Langac, France: featuring historical re-enactments, music, costumes and town life in Langac, near Chavaniac, France, the marquis’ birthplace; (337) 291–5474.

AUGUST 31: “Lafayette in Two Worlds” lecture by renowned historian and Lafayette scholar Lloyd Kramer, professor and chair, History Department, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; (337) 482–5414.

SEPTEMBER 6: Marquis de Lafayette Birthday Party: Gala event at the Lafayette (La.) Natural History Museum honoring the opening of the exhibition; (337) 291–5544.


SEPTEMBER 7: Commemorative concert presented by the Acadiaana Symphony Orchestra in honor of the Marquis de Lafayette, conducted by Maestro Mariusz Smolij, Heymann Center, 8 p.m. Admission fee; (337) 232–4277.

SEPTEMBER 10–20: “In the Footsteps of the Marquis de Lafayette,” a commemorative trip from the United States to France. The itinerary will follow important historical sites in the life of the Marquis; (337) 291–5474.

OCTOBER 5–NOVEMBER 24: Opening of the “Lafayette: Hero of Two Worlds Quilt Exhibit” at the Acadiaana Center for the Arts, highlighting quilts from the United States, France, Belgium, Canada, Hungary, the United Kingdom and Senegal; (337) 658–3414.

NOVEMBER 3–4: La Belle Journée Festival in downtown Lafayette with historic re-enactments, including the marquis’ arrival in Louisiana, music and an Old World market; 11 a.m.–6 p.m. (337) 291–5474.


For a complete listing of events, visit www.marquisdelafayette2007.com and click on “Calendar.”

Wear Your Affection for the Marquis de Lafayette

A commemorative lapel pin has been designed to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of the Marquis de Lafayette. The design is based on the official celebration insignia which was created by students at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

The ornate lapel pin, which can also be worn as a pendant, is available in 14K gold, sterling silver and gold plated. Proceeds from the sale of the pin are being used to support the exhibits, concerts, lectures, performances and educational programs to be held throughout the 2007 celebration.

For more information, visit www.marquisdelafayette2007.com.