

Remarks of Alan Hoffman at Bunker Hill on December 4, 2011

I will say a few words about why I think it is so appropriate that we are celebrating the Washington Rochambeau Revolutionary Route, a national historic trail, on the heights of Charlestown. The reason is there is a causal connection between the Battle of Bunker Hill and the W3R and the victory at Yorktown.

In his oration on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill, Daniel Webster testified to the significance of this great watershed of our Revolution and, therefore, of the history of mankind. He said:

“The battle of Bunker Hill was attended with the most important effects beyond its immediate result as a military engagement. It created at once a state of open, public war ... The appeal now lay to the sword, and the only question was, whether the spirit and the resources of the people would hold out, till the object should be accomplished. Nor were its consequences confined to our own country.”

Then he turned to Lafayette, the Nation’s Guest who was on the 10<sup>th</sup> month of his 13-month Farewell Tour of America. (Those of you who know me knew I would bring Lafayette into this. But, in this case, it’s a no-brainer). Lafayette – the guest of honor – the last surviving Major General of the Continental Army – had helped to lay the cornerstone of yonder monument and was seated in an arm-chair in front of the survivors of the Battle of Bunker Hill, other revolutionary veterans, a cordon of exquisitely dressed

ladies, a crowd of 15,000 in an amphitheater constructed for the occasion at the foot of the Hill opposite where we are now. Another 30,000 stood at the summit. Looking squarely at Lafayette, Webster said:

“Information of these events, circulating through Europe, at length reached the ears of one who hears me. He has not forgotten the emotion, which the fame of Bunker Hill, and the name of Warren, excited in his youthful breast.”

Webster then addressed Lafayette directly stating, in part, that “Heaven saw fit to ordain that the electric spark of liberty should be conducted through you, from the New World to the Old.”

Confirmation of Webster’s statement about the effect of the Battle of Bunker Hill on the youthful Lafayette is found in Jared Spark’s writings. The great Washington biographer interviewed Lafayette in France in 1828. Lafayette told him that he was first inspired to join the American cause at a dinner given in honor of the Duke of Gloucester, the brother of George III, at camp in Metz, France. The Duke, who sided with the Colonists against the policy of George and his ministers, had recently received dispatches from the Colonies, which he shared with his table companions. Documentary evidence places the Duke’s continental tour in August of 1775, just in time for him to have received reports of the courageous determination of the insurgents and the incredible losses that the British, particularly the officer corps, had suffered on the heights of Charlestown.

Sparks quotes Lafayette as follows: “the cause seemed to me just and noble, from the representations of the duke himself; and before I left the table the thought came into my head, that I would go to America and offer my services to a people who were struggling for freedom and independence. From that hour I could think of nothing but this enterprise, and I resolved to go to Paris to make further inquiries.”

The rest, as they say, is history.

Lafayette, 19 years old, came to America in 1777, joined the Continental Army as a Major General. He served in the Battle of the Brandywine, part of the British Army’s successful campaign to take Philadelphia, where he was wounded, at Monmouth Courthouse in NJ and in the Battle of RI in August of 1778 before returning to France, on furlough, Lafayette departed our shores from Boston on the USS Alliance on January 11, 1779. In France, he rejoined the French Army. Because his reputation in America had preceded him and he was considered the expert on the war in America, Lafayette had complete access to Vergennes and Maurepas, the foreign and prime ministers, and he used this access to bombard the ministers with ideas to advance the American cause. Specifically, in writing and orally, he lobbied for a French Expeditionary Force to be based in America.

A leading 19<sup>th</sup> century biographer of Lafayette, Charlemagne Tower, Jr. wrote this about the July 18, 1779 memorial that Lafayette sent to Vergennes in which he fleshed out his ideas for a French Expeditionary Force to be based in America.

“This document is one of great importance in the history of our country, and it had a far-reaching influence upon the destinies of the United States. It was the culminating point of La Fayette’s intercession, as it was the embodiment of his sentiments of friendship and of gratitude toward us shown by his unalterable purpose to help us. It represents, beyond doubt, his greatest service to America. It was the starting-point of the series of events which led up to the surrender of the British army under Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown. The memoir was carefully studied by M. de Vergennes, upon whom it made a favorable impression immediately, and it was submitted by him to the Premier, M. de Maurepas, who also approved of the general tenor of the proposition.”

An early 20<sup>th</sup> century historian, James Breck Perkins, author of France in the American Revolution, gave this title to the Chapter about Lafayette’s role in 1779 and 1780 in lobbying the ministers: “Lafayette to the Rescue.”

Thus it was that in March 1780 Lafayette was dispatched back to America to report to Washington that the French were coming.

He disembarked from the ship Hermione at Boston on April 26 and hurried to Morristown, NJ by land where he imparted the news to Washington on May 10.

Rochambeau arrived with his 5,000-man Army and squadron of ships in July of 1780 at Newport, Rhode Island. In the summer of 1781, what is now a historic trail, the W3R, saw Rochambeau's and Washington's Armies join Lafayette's troops in Virginia and the French West Indian Fleet under the Count de Grasse for the successful siege of Yorktown. The Franco-American victory at Yorktown ended major combat and led directly to the Treaty of Paris in 1783, which confirmed the independence of the United States.

So, if you connect the dots, they go from Bunker Hill through Lafayette, Rochambeau, the Washington Rochambeau Revolutionary Route, Yorktown and victory to the United States of America.

Thus, you can see it is here and just that we are gathered on this hallowed ground to celebrate the W3R National Historic trail, the French Expeditionary Force and the contributions of France and its sons to the success of our War of Independence.