

Lafayette in Alexandria

The Farewell Tour

In 1824, the marquis de Lafayette returned to the United States at the invitation of President James Monroe. It was his first visit since returning to France after the American Revolution. By this time, Lafayette was the only living Revolutionary War general. Disillusioned by the excesses of the French Revolution, Lafayette enjoyed his visit in the United States so much, he stayed well into 1825 with his son and personal secretary. The tour went as far north as Montpelier, VT, and as far south as New Orleans, LA. In 13 months, Lafayette traveled 6,000 miles and visited all 24 states at the time. Against the backdrop of the contentious 1824 Presidential election, Lafayette got a personal, if not curated, glimpse of the country whose independence he fought so hard for. In return, America got a physical reminder of its origin story.

Visiting Alexandria

Lafayette visited Alexandria on Saturday, October 16, 1824, on his way from Washington City to Yorktown for a commemoration of this famous battle. That morning, he rode a carriage into town with a military escort of local cavalry and 2,000 troops on foot. The procession traveled through three ceremonial arches across Washington Street. Hundreds of spectators greeted him. Women waved handkerchiefs from open windows along neighboring buildings. Two hundred young girls and boys dressed in white with blue and pink sashes and badges bearing the General's image spread flower petals along the path. The General greeted the Mayor and City Council at Claggett's Hotel (now known as Gadsby's Tavern) who gave speeches extolling the virtues of Lafayette while the militias performed exercises for his review. After this official welcome, Lafayette proceeded to 301 S. St. Asaph Street, the home of Mrs. Thomas (Elizabeth) Lawson, where he would be lodged for the evening.

Tradition says that when Lafayette arrived at Lawson's house, he was surrounded by a great crowd of citizens. He found the front steps too low for speechmaking, so he walked across the street to 601 Duke Street where he could be more easily seen. Here, he made his expressions of goodwill and appreciation in broken English to a "the assembled multitude."

This silk sash, stamped with black ink, was worn by Lafayette at a Table Lodge and Lodge Meeting of Alexandria - Washington Lodge, No. 22. Lafayette became a member of the lodge in the meeting that took place at City Hall in 1825. From the collection of Alexandria - Washington, No. 22, AF&AM (No. 012).

Photo courtesy of P. Adam Smart.



This portrait of Lafayette was painted by American Rembrandt Peale from life in 1825 at the height of Lafayette's fame. From the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

At 5 p.m., Lafayette returned to Claggett's for a large public dinner. Among the guests was John Quincy Adams, Secretary of State and future President. The dinner concluded with 33 toasts. Lafayette toasted to "The City of Alexandria; May her prosperity and happiness more and more realize the fondest wishes of our venerated Washington." The next day, he boarded the steamship *The Petersburg* to visit Mount Vernon. He spent a day at the home and tomb of his former mentor George Washington.

Lafayette spent 111 days in the Washington region out of the 391 days he was on tour. He passed through Alexandria on additional occasions. On December 14, 1824, Lafayette stopped to visit with the Mayor of Alexandria and to pay his respects to Mrs. Anne Hill Carter Lee, widow of Light Horse Harry Lee, on his way from Mount Vernon to Washington City. On February 21, 1825, Lafayette participated in a Washington Lodge, No. 22 Masonic ceremony at City Hall. Afterwards, he dined on a "splendid and sumptuous dinner" with the Lodge members at Claggett's Hotel. On September 7, 1825, Lafayette boarded the steamboat *The Mount Vernon* and passed Alexandria on his way to his ship *The Brandywine* that returned him to France.



Alexandria resident and educator, Benjamin Hallowell, married Margaret Farquhar the day before Lafayette's visit with Mrs. Lee on Oronoco Street. Both of these major events inspired him to write this poem:

*Each lover of liberty surely must get
Something in honor of La Fayette.
There's a La Fayette watch-chain,
a La Fayette hat,
A La Fayette this, and a La Fayette that.
But I wanted something as lasting as life,
And took to myself a La Fayette wife.*



To commemorate Lafayette's visit to America, decorative wares such as miniatures, portraits, gloves, ribbons, and ceramics were created and sold in many of the cities along the General's route. The mug fragment on the left is from 44AX93 Feature 11 and the coffee can on the right is from 44AX1 Feature 7. Both are lustered transfer printed pearlware pieces, decorated with the engraving "Lafayette Crowned at Yorktown." Photograph by Gavin Ashworth for Ceramics in America.

Lasting Legacy

Lafayette died in 1834, still a true believer in the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence. To honor him and these founding ideals, over 35 cities nationwide took on his name. Other counties and streets bear his name, including Alexandria's Fayette Street. His legacy in the United States can be seen in these ideals, as well as everything from tchotchkes to town names. Communities also preserved historic sites connected to his visit. Here in Alexandria, American Legion Post 24 purchased and restored what is now known as Gadsby's Tavern Museum because of its affiliation with Lafayette's visit. This home, where Lafayette stayed in 1824, is still referred to today as the "Lafayette House."



Before Lafayette arrived in Alexandria, preparations for his lodging began with a conversation between neighbors and friends.

As custom, the party should have stayed at Mayor Roberts house, but it was quickly realized his house was too small to accommodate the esteemed visitor and his traveling companions. Mayor Roberts asked his friend and neighbor Mrs. Lawson for the use of her home. It was requested she and her family vacate for his overnight visit. Today, the house is still known as the "Lafayette House." From the collection of the Office of Historic Alexandria.



CITY OF ALEXANDRIA EST. 1749

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