France Joins the Cause

When leaders of the American colonies boldly declared independence from Great Britain in 1776, they knew that without military supplies, naval power, and money their quest would fail. At that time Great Britain possessed the greatest navy and one of the best armies in the world. Well-trained and better-equipped British forces overwhelmed America’s Continental Army troops from the beginning of the Revolutionary War.

Facing a strong enemy with so few resources forced the Americans to search for allies to aid them in their cause. Beginning in 1775, contacts were underway between the Court of Louis XVI and the patriots. France had deep ties to North America, establishing settlements there long before the French and Indian War of the 1750s. There were, however, other motives for the king’s support of a colonial rebellion on a distant continent—bolstering his nation’s economic and political power worldwide, as well as averting France’s loss to Great Britain in the Seven Years War. The American mission was a success. Louis XVI agreed to provide muskets, mortars, gunpowder, and cash to the new nation. In 1778 France signed a “Treaty of Alliance” with the United States of America. Their recognition of the young country as a sovereign power safeguarded the fledgling nation respect throughout the world.

The Long March to Independence

The 4th of July saw 1,300 men of the Marquis de Lafayette’s Repatriation Force land on the coast of Virginia in July 1778. Generally Washington and Rochambeau agreed to wait until the spring of 1781 to launch a joint military offensive, so the French army spent the bitter winter in Newport, Rhode Island, and Lebanon, Connecticut. During that time, French officers prepared for the march that would unite them with Continental troops at the “Mouth of the River.” From there the allies planned to attack British forces overpowered America’s Continental Army in 1775. The 1776 campaign demonstrated that without military supplies, naval power, and money their quest would fail. At that time Great Britain possessed the greatest navy and one of the best armies in the world.

The first French forces left Newport on June 15, 1781. Moving thousands of men and their extensive baggage wagons before we can take any

Waving and children of the Continental Army and French troops who welcomed their husbands, brothers, and fathers to camp. These soldiers, supplied by sea, were caseted, cooked, and washed clothes for the men, often earning a bit of money for their own. They also nursed the wounded. American soldiers noted that during the primetime of women in the camp, but Washington made sure these “camp followers” protected a physical and financial barrier for the army. As the enlisted troops, they needed to be fed and sheltered, but not fight.

Allied Victory at Yorktown

The 300-mile trek from New York to Virginia took five weeks, during which allied troops endured heat, storms, floods, and fogs. The French and Americans separated for part of the route, moving under covered wagon and effectively defending British Gen. Clinton, who was not expecting an allied attack on New York.

The allies received encouraging news that on October 19 French Adm. de Grasse sailed from the Lees on the Delaware against British ships. De Grasse established a blockade of the Chesapeake Bay, cutting off out-ofland travel to support the British and allowing Cornwallis and his men to escape route from Yorktown. On September 28, 1781, when French and American forces arrived, Cornwallis was cornered and allied troops immediately opened cannon on British fortifications.

French and American artillery first fired on the British on October 8 & 9. Allied forces spiked British cannon and drove the British from the ramparts. Commodore Dandie, accompanied by Rear Adm. Lord Stirling, commanded the American gunners.

On October 14 an exhausted French soldier wrote to his diary, “The whole battle was full of confusion and sounded that our line was beaten to pieces.” Day later, with their defences shattered, the British called for a surrender. On October 19, 1781, British troops officially surrendered. Through two lines of soldiers—American on one side, French on the other—they laid down their arms.

The allied victory at Yorktown was the last significant military victory of the American Revolution and enabled the colonies to become a nation. The cooperation between Rochambeau’s forces under the leadership of Washington, the smart coordination of allied land and naval resources, and the able commanders during that long journey made the effort a success. When French troops marched back north to New England in 1783, they were welcomed and thanked by grateful Americans.

“the essential and End of the present defensive alliance is to maintain… the liberty, Sovereignty, and independence… of said united States.”

—From the “Treaty of Alliance,” 1778, National Archives and Records Administration
Discovering a Revolutionary War Trail

The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route combines a network of roads and waterways used by allied forces in the Yorktown campaign. Although population growth and urban development have erased almost all traces of the rural campsites and small towns that once sheltered Revolutionary War soldiers, the public can still visit historic sites that tell the Washington-Rochambeau story. Stroking the green in Lebanon, Connecticut, taking a sail on the Chesapeake Bay, seeing a Revolutionary War reenactment at Colonial Williamsburg, or exploring the battlefield at Yorktown, are just a few of many opportunities to interact with history.

Travelers driving I-95 from Massachusetts to Virginia now make the trip in less than a day, and GPS systems guide them to lodging, fuel, and restaurants. It is worth remembering, however, that in colonial times, most of this land was wilderness. If not for the detailed surveys, maps, and charts compiled by colonial surveyors, the public can still visit historic sites that tell the Washington-Rochambeau story. Stroking the green in Lebanon, Connecticut, taking a sail on the Chesapeake Bay, seeing a Revolutionary War reenactment at Colonial Williamsburg, or exploring the battlefield at Yorktown, are just a few of many opportunities to interact with history.

This map of Connecticut from Rochambeau’s personal collection titled “Connecticut, from the best sources” in 1786-87 is a special copy—Rochambeau spent eight months camped just west of Lebanon Green and Rochambeau’s forces occupied by Rochambeau’s army. The map shows the journey of the French Army—water route to the Continental Army near Newburgh, New York, in the summer of 1782, continuing all the way to Boston, and wintering in Virginia. The troops headed north in the winter of 1781-82. On October 19, 1781, Lord Cornwallis surrendered his forces at Yorktown, and the Continental Army, along with the French forces near White Plains, defeated the British. The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route is a national historic trail that connects more than 60 sites in nine states with federal, state, and local agencies and partnerships that support the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route. The places designated on this map are all open to the public. For locations, hours, directions, and other places of interest, visit www.w3r-us.org.

The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route. Visit other historic sites and scenic byways along the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route. The places designated on the map are all open to the public. For locations, hours, directions, and other places of interest, visit http://www.nps.gov.

The National Park Service maintains a partnership with the National WWII Association (www.war-memorial-nationalpark.com). Visit a site in the partnership and learn more about the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route through the National Park Service’s Facebook page. The National Park Service educates the public about the three-year presence of the French Expeditionary Force in the United States.

The National Park Service works with federal, state, and local agencies and partnerships along the nine-state corridor that constitutes the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route.