

**The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail  
The Yorktown campaign in Personal Narratives**

By Samantha Driscoll  
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The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail commemorates the land and water trails followed by the American and French allied armies under General George Washington and General Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau through Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and what is now Washington D.C. The National Historic Trail mission is to identify, preserve, interpret, and celebrate the French and American alliance in the American Revolution. The military, logistical, and cultural significance of the trail to the final land battle of the American Revolution, the siege of Yorktown, deserves recognition as a pivotal point in American history. Without the assistance of thousands of French soldiers, many of whom gave their lives, the outcome of the war may have been very different.

The French and American alliance in the Yorktown campaign is a compelling story of military maneuvers, France's desperately needed help, and the brilliant risks taken by General George Washington. In the development of interpretation for the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route NHT, there was a story missing: the perspective of the Continental Army soldier. The soldiers on the ground experienced a historical turning point, yet there was a lack of information on what the Continental and French armies saw, felt, or experienced in the more tedious days of the Yorktown campaign. Through the generosity of the Society of the Cincinnati, specifically the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati 2013 Fellowship, I was able to conduct invaluable research to support a more dynamic interpretation of the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail. The results of this research will be used in all interpretive materials to come, including the website, social media, brochures, planning documents, interpretive panels, and guidebooks. The Society of the Cincinnati library in Washington D.C. is an inestimable source to telling the story of the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail.

The following information was pulled from four sources: three published journals and one manuscript orderly book. These sources are just the tip of the iceberg of the many important records and accounts in the Society of the Cincinnati library. For our purposes, the sources offer a look into the Yorktown campaign from a different perspective and flesh out the many statistics, facts, and descriptions of the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail. In order to improve the readability, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization errors have been corrected where the intent was obvious. Names, dates, and any ambiguous details have been left as deciphered from the text.

General Rochambeau and the French Army of 450 officers and 5,300 men landed in Newport, Rhode Island, on July 11, 1780. In September 1780, Rochambeau met with Washington in Hartford, Connecticut. The War was at a stalemate and Washington favored attacking New York City. By May of 1781, Washington and Rochambeau met again at Wethersfield, Connecticut, and confirmed the joining of their forces outside New York for a possible attack on the British there. Rochambeau's army sailed from Newport to Providence, and on June 18, 1781 began the march to meet the Continental Army in New York. Marching twelve to fifteen miles a day, the French met the Continental Army in Philipsburg on

July 6, 1781. While at camp in Philipsburg, the decision was made not to attack New York City, but to move south to Virginia. In order to allow the Continental and French armies to march south undetected, a series of tactics were devised to trick British forces into thinking there was an impending attack on New York City. As few officers as possible in the Continental and French armies were informed of the decision to march to Virginia; boats were built to give the impression that troops would cross over to Staten Island from the New Jersey shore; bake ovens were built, and contracts for foodstuffs to be delivered in New Jersey were issued; and decoy letters were sent along the most dangerous route with the express intent that they be intercepted. The tactics were successful, and by September 2, 1781, the troops had reached Trenton, New Jersey. The troops moved through Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland, with most troops embarking on vessels to travel the Chesapeake Bay, and met at Williamsburg, Virginia by September 25, 1781. From Williamsburg, the combined forces marched to just outside Yorktown, and undertook the siege that would ultimately win the American Revolution. The following excerpts provide a glimpse into key moments in this story, painting a clearer picture of the personal experiences of the soldiers involved in the campaign commemorated by the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail.

The first account is from the journal of recollections of Samuel Richards, Captain of the Connecticut line. Richards, while he did not march in the Yorktown campaign, was in Farmington, Connecticut when the French troops passed through on their way to join the Continental Army at Philipsburg. His account provides not only details on the management of French camps, but also captures the perceptions of the locals in watching this professional army and interacting with the French soldiers.

“Besides the officers who held rank in the army were many men of science, as Chatteilux and others who it seems were collecting and preparing materials for a practical description of things in the United States, and which were afterwards published by them. I was particularly struck- while in conversation with Count D’Ponts, who commanded the regiment DuPonts- to observe with what fluency and precision he spoke English. At a small distance one on hearing him, would not have supposed that he spoke any otherwise than a well educated English gentleman. I viewed their manner of encamping overnight, the perfect mechanical manner of performing all they had to do: such as digging a circular hole and making niches in which to set their camp kettles for cooking their food, and every necessary accommodation was performed in the most natural and convenient manner. They rose in the morning and paraded by daylight; soon struck tents and began their march which they completed-for the day-about noon, they pitched tents and set about their cookery.”<sup>1</sup>

From June 11, 1781 to September 3, 1781, Captain Christopher Marshall kept an Orderly Book, documenting the day-to-day events and announcements of the Continental Army. This document offers insight into the everyday experience of the Continental Army, General Washington’s orders, and the arrival of the French troops at Philipsburg. For future interpretive materials of the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail, this information paints a clear picture of the preparations made for such a historic event. For our purposes, the information selected pertains to the arrival of the French forces in Philipsburg.

The first mention of the impending arrival of the French troops is on June 13, 1781, with a rambling but patriotic entry by Captain Marshall.

“We shall in all likelihood be in the army of our illustrious ally consisting of some of the first officers and best disciplined Troops in Europe and every laudable sentiment of pride and every [vener] of honor and every principle of patriotism and zeal for service and unite to impel over warmest exertions to be in the best possible order and the disadvantage and difficulties which from inevitable circumstances we labor under instead of depressing should inspire us to surmount them and that we are involved in them is only our misfortune not to make efforts to conquer them will be our fault and if we cannot be so well prepared as we ought at last let us be as much so as we can.”<sup>2</sup>

On June 27, 1781, now at camp in Peekskill, the orders of the day announced the impending arrival of Rochambeau’s forces. Although in the language of Washington and his generals, excerpts like this provide understanding about the news the soldiers were receiving day-to-day. Of particular interest is the appeal from Washington to promote relationships between the two armies.

“The commander in Chief has the pleasure of announcing to the Army the approach of the Troops of his most Christian Majesty under the command of his Excellency Lieut. General Count de Rochambeau. The General assures himself that it will be needless to recommend to the officers and soldiers of the American Army a cultivation of acquaintance and friendship with our generous allies...To the officers of all ranks the Genl. Recommends the strictest attention to their several duties to those of the day and on guards he particularly enjoins the most pointed observance of the Rules and Regulations for the Establishment of Discipline. Independent of the necessity of the utmost care and circumspection at all times we shall be more than commonly bound to practice them hence forward we shall be daily under the eyes of officers of the first distinction improved by long service.”<sup>3</sup>

On June 30th, it was announced that the French troops had been delayed and the Continental Army would march to meet them on their way.

“The General is desirous of showing all the respect in his power to those Generous Allies who are hastening with the zeal of friends and the order of soldiers to share with us the fatigues and dangers of the campaign he prepares to receive them at some other convenient place and for this purpose will march the whole Line of the American Army at the encampment at 3 o'clock on Monday morning next.”<sup>4</sup>

The orders of July 3 find the Continental Army at a new encampment at Valentines Hill, awaiting the arrival of the French troops.

“The Commander in Chief takes the earliest opportunity of expressing his thanks to the Duke De Luzerne his officers and men for the very extraordinary zeal manifested by them in their rapid performance of their march to join the American Army and the Genl. also takes occasion to thank the officers and men of the American Army for the [illegible] with which they have exported themselves under the fatiguing march of yesterday and last night. The troops who were engaged this day merits particular thanks.”<sup>5</sup>

The long awaited arrival of the French troops was completed by July 6th.

“The commander in chief with pleasure embraces the earliest public opportunity of expressing his thanks to his Excellency, the count de Rochambeau for the unremitting zeal with which he has

prosecuted his march in order to form the long wish for junction between the French and American forces an event which must afford the highest degree of pleasure to every friend to his country and from which the happiest consequences are to be expected. The General entreats his Excellency the Count to convey the officers under his immediate command the grateful sense he entertains of the cheerfulness with which they have performed so long and laborious a march at this extreme hot season.”<sup>6</sup>

Captain Marshall appears to remain in the New York area for the remainder of the entries in his Orderly Book and does not march in the Yorktown campaign. However, his account through his duties offers a useful timeline of how the Continental and French armies joined together in 1781 at the outset of the campaign.

The next account picks up the story as the troops are leaving New York. The diary of Captain James Duncan of Colonel Moses Hazen’s Regiment observed the movements of the Yorktown campaign. Duncan’s account of 1781 is important to the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail, as he describes the sudden switch from the target of New York City to Yorktown.

“The army were never so universally deceived in regard to the operations of the campaign as at this time. New York was thought to be the object, and no maneuver left untried to confirm this opinion, when all on a sudden, the army decamped from W.Plains, crossed the North river, and proceeded by a circuitous route to Springfield, in New Jersey, where, after a halt of a few days (in order the better to deceive the enemy), they took their route for Trenton, at which place the artillery stores with our regiment and some other troops embarked. We were now no longer at a loss to know our place of destination.”<sup>7</sup>

Once the destination was established, the troops had to move quickly. Although some troops did move by land, the main columns utilized water transport once they arrived at the Chesapeake Bay. Captain Duncan related the scene upon arrival at Head of Elk, Maryland.

“We arrived at Christiana bridge and from there marched by land to the Head of Elk, where the French troops with the rest of our army joined us in a very short time. Here we were delayed for 6 or 7 days, being busily employed in embarking ordinance stores of all kinds on board the vessels. In the meantime the French troops with some other corps of our army proceeded by land For Baltimore. The bay not being able to furnish a sufficient number of vessels, the Rhode Island regiment with ours was obliged to embark on board a number of flat-bottomed boats, which had been constructed at Albany and brought to this place.”<sup>8</sup>

The vessels carried the troops down the Chesapeake Bay, with the aim of reuniting the Continental and French armies at Williamsburg, Virginia. Captain Benjamin Bartholomew, Company Commander in the 5th Pennsylvania Regiment of the U.S. Continental Line kept a journal in 1781. He was with General Anthony Wayne and 800 Pennsylvania Regulars sent to meet the Marquis de Lafayette in Virginia, prior to the siege of Yorktown. Although Captain Bartholomew was not part of the Continental troops travelling what is now the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail, he was present for the siege of Yorktown, and thus part of the Yorktown campaign. In September of 1781, Bartholomew and his troops merged with the Yorktown campaign.

“A number of our officers rode down to the river and see the French fleet...had the agreeable satisfaction of seeing our good allies, land on Jas.[Hog] Island. This day bet a beaver hat with

Major Hamilton that Cornwallis would surrender prisoner before the 3d. of October 81.”<sup>9</sup>

“Embarked at 7OClock A.M. in a number of small boats belonging to the French fleet (leaving our tents and baggage behind.)”<sup>10</sup>

Bartholomew wrote on September 4, 1781 that he had joined the Marquis Detachment near Williamsburg, where they were reviewed by the Marquis de Lafayette and the French Commander St. Simon. On September 10, the troops were informed of the French victory in the Battle off the Capes that secured French control of the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. On September, 14, Bartholomew wrote of twenty-one pieces of cannon fired upon General George Washington’s arrival. The entry for September 25 was,

“Troops continued landing and marching to their encamping ground near the Capital-this day, bet a beaver hat with Major Hamilton that Cornwallis would surrender himself prisoner before the 27th October 81.”<sup>11</sup>

The Continental and French armies set out for Yorktown from Williamsburg on September 28, 1781. As the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail is the story of the route to and from the siege of Yorktown, I will not be addressing specific accounts of the siege itself. The journals of Captain Benjamin Bartholomew and Captain James Duncan provide detailed descriptions of the siege of Yorktown. As soldiers on the ground, the description is much more detailed than that of just military maneuvers. While these entries are not explored within this article, they are recommended sources for future research.

The journal of Captain Samuel Richards provides a rare account of the return route north after the Yorktown campaign. The French forces spent the winter of 1781-1782 camped in Williamsburg and the surrounding area. The French forces marched north in July of 1782, giving Americans an opportunity to give thanks to their country's ally. The French infantry sailed out of Boston Harbor on Christmas Day 1782.

“Being in Boston I saw the part of the French army which had acted in the siege of Yorktown in September and October previous enter the town under the command of Baron Viominel to embark on board shipping which had arrived and were lying readying to receive them. I conversed with some of the officers and noticed the high gratification they appeared to feel in adverting to their fortunate success in this country.”<sup>12</sup>

The American Revolution officially ended on September 3, 1783 with the Second Treaty of Paris and British acknowledgement of America’s independence. By the end of November, British forces evacuated New York City. The Siege of Yorktown, while not the end date of the War, turned the tide for the Americans. The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail honors the cross-cultural significance of the French-American alliance in the Yorktown campaign and America's great success in the American Revolution. Through the immeasurable resources of the Society of the Cincinnati library, the interpretation of the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail will now include the important first-person experiences of the soldiers. The research is just beginning, as the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail continues its mission to promote knowledge and appreciation of the achievement of American independence and honor the Continental Army and their French counterparts who served together in the American Revolution.

1. Samuel Richards, *Diary of Samuel Richards, Captain of Connecticut Line, War of the Revolution, 1775-1781*, (Philadelphia: Published by his great-grandson, 1909): 75.
2. Captain Christopher Marshall's orderly book for the Massachusetts 10th regiment, 11 June 1781-3 September 1781. Entry for June 13, 1781. The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection, The Society of the Cincinnati, Washington, D.C.
3. Marshall, Entry for June 27, 1781.
4. Marshall, Entry for June 30, 1781.
5. Marshall, Entry for July 3, 1781.
6. Marshall, Entry for July 6, 1781.
7. James Duncan, "Diary of Captain James Duncan of Colonel Moses Hazen's Regiment: in the Yorktown Campaign, 1781," *Pennsylvania Archives, Second Series, Volume 15*: 744.
8. Duncan, *Pennsylvania Archives*, 744-745.
9. Benjamin Bartholomew, *Marching to Victory: Capt. Benjamin Bartholomew's Diary of the Yorktown Campaign, May 1781 to March 1782*, ed. E. Lee Shepard, entry for September 1-2, 1781 (Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 2002).  
Bartholomew, Benjamin, 1752-1812.; Shepard, E. Lee (Edwin Lee), 1951- ed. - Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 2002.  
Entry for September 1-2, 1781.
10. Bartholomew, Entry for September 3, 1781.
11. Bartholomew, Entry for September 23, 1781.
12. Richards, 83.