

# CINCINNATI FOURTEEN



1783



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On the cover: Claude, chevalier de Chavagnac (1740-1812) by an unknown French artist, ca. 1784-1785. Chavagnac served under Admiral d'Estaing, rising to the rank of *capitaine de vaisseau* in 1781. He was an Original Member of the French Society. In this portrait he wears a full dress naval uniform with the Society Eagle and the Order of Saint Louis. The Society of the Cincinnati, The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection.

## Remarks by Jay W. Jackson at the Annual Meeting of the Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati on Saturday, June 25, 2011

This afternoon I would like to tell you about two books that I believe should be on your bookshelf. The first is written by a Connecticut Society member, Charles H. Lewis, and is entitled *Cut Off*. It is the story of Colonel Jedediah Huntington's 17th Connecticut Regiment at the Battle of Long Island on August 27, 1776. Since Chuck will be our speaker at our fall meeting, I will leave the details for him to present at that time. Suffice it to say that the book contains material relating to all the troops fighting that day and will be of particular interest to anyone whose propositus was present during the battle for New York.

The second book was written 186 years ago in French by August Levasseur and it describes General Lafayette's 1824-1825 tour of the United States. I became aware of Alan Hoffman's recent translation of the book into English through my daughter, Françoise Williams, who had discovered his translation when Mr. Hoffman spoke to the Daughters of the Cincinnati last January. His goal in publishing the translation was to restore Lafayette to the Pantheon of American Heroes. In 1824-1825 Lafayette was a superstar. Towns, streets and parks were named after him. Statues like the one that we saw exiting the State Capitol were everywhere. He was even so well known during the First World War that General Pershing sent his aide Colonel Stanton to Lafayette's grave at Picpus Cemetery in Paris where he said "Lafayette, Nous sommes ici". However, today most adults and almost all

children have no idea who Lafayette was. This is regrettable but 187 years ago when he arrived at the invitation of Congress and President Monroe, there was an unprecedented expression of emotion.

"Why did Lafayette engender such a great outpouring of love and admiration during his visit? There were a number of reasons. The time was right. It was the "Era of Good Feelings". It was a time of great optimism and pride in the successes that the liberated American Colonies had achieved. As Levasseur described it, there was a tremendous pride in the population growth, along with the growth of manufacturing, agriculture, commerce, and the arts and sciences, and the spread of public education. It was thought that the republican institutions that the Revolutions ushered in were the single most important cause of the great progress that American had made. Thus, there was an intense feeling of gratitude towards the military and political leaders who had won the Republic. Also, we should not forget that Lafayette had shed his blood at Brandywine and was the last surviving general from the Revolutionary War. In addition, preparations for America's Jubilee, the 50th Anniversary of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, had commenced."

*Lafayette in America* covers the General's 13-month marathon tour through each of the 24 states. From the time of his arrival at New York Harbor and the spectacular reception that he received in New York City in

August 1824, to his departure from Washington City in September 1825 and the farewell address of President John Quincy Adams, Levasseur chronicles Lafayette's pilgrimage and the ecstatic response of the American people to him. The speeches were moving, affectionate tributes to this adoptive American and to the country that he helped to found. The parades, the banquets, the balls, and the triumphal arches all attested to his unmitigated popularity.

However, Levasseur's journal does far more than chronicle Lafayette's triumphal tour. It contains numerous digressions from the General's journey and depicts a country bursting with pride in its revolutionary past and republican institutions and brimming with optimism born of the great successes that the last half century had produced.

The journal includes detailed descriptions of most of the states that Lafayette visited including their history, geography, population, constitution and customs. There are numerous flashbacks to the founding of the Colonies, the Revolution and the War of 1812.

There are poignant accounts of Lafayette's visits with the ex-Presidents Adams, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe. The account of Lafayette's visit to Monticello to visit Jefferson who was ailing and unable to travel was quite memorable. Both former Presidents Madison and Monroe also made the journey so that we had Lafayette in the same room with three men



who had served the United States as President for 24 years. Madison was well known to Lafayette because while he was serving as Secretary of State in France during the 1790s he had helped Lafayette's wife, Adrienne, escape to Austria by issuing her a United States passport in the name of Mrs. Motier of Hartford, Connecticut. He was able to do this because Connecticut in 1784 had made Lafayette and all his family citizens of Connecticut .

There is also a description of Lafayette's extended stay at the White House with John Quincy Adams and his family. When was the last time that you heard the name John Quincy Adams? It probably was 11 years ago when there were newspaper accounts after George W. Bush's election to the presidency saying that he was only the second man whose father had also served in the White House. There is an account of Lafayette's passage on the newly constructed Erie Canal and a description of the contested election of 1824 when John Quincy Adams was elected, not by the Electoral College but by the House of Representatives over Andrew Jackson. There are frequent references to members of the Society of the Cincinnati greeting and dining with Lafayette. We are told of Daniel Webster's great oration on June 17, 1825 at the laying of the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill monument and Lafayette's reply as well as John Quincy Adams farewell address in September 1825. There are countless other remembrances. To sum up, *Lafayette in America* can be seen as a series of snapshots of America 50 years after its birth.

It is almost eerie and strange to be reading all of these events from so long ago – not as we usually do in a dry way in a history book, but as contemporary events in which we are participants. Alan Hoffman is to be congratulated on his translation of this remarkable book which allows us who are living in the 21st century to see what life was like in the 18th and 19th.

However, what struck me most in the book and made the greatest impression on me were Levasseur's comments about our Declaration of Independence. Please remember that the words I am about to read to you were written by a Frenchman 186 years ago.

"Not only is the Declaration of Independence read every year on July 4th in the presence of the people assembled in the churches, but it is also read by a large number of families. It is not rare to find, in entering an American House, the Declaration of Independence written carefully and framed luxuriously. Nearly all children know it by heart. I have also often heard children 10 to 12 years old recite this part in English or in French and it is never without deep emotion that they spoke the oath that the last paragraph contains:

"We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name, and by authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be Free and

Independent States; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States they have full Power to Levy War, conclude Peace, contract alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts or Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

When was the last time you heard or read these words? I am afraid that we may all have lost the spark that prompted our ancestors to fight, bleed, and in many cases die for the principles contained in this Declaration.

We in the Cincinnati have an obligation to reverse this trend and to do everything in our power to support our officers and Frank Wadsworth and the Historical Education Committee in their efforts to promote our book, *Why America is Free*. We are doing this in conjunction with the Values through History program as well as our other historical education initiatives. If we don't do this who will? Let us never forget that our propositi pledged to each other, their lives, their fortunes and most important, their sacred honor.

Have a safe trip home. Have a wonderful 4th of July next week and never forget that it is our Declaration of Independence, signed at Philadelphia on July 4, 1776 that we are celebrating and commemorating.