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AT LARGE: New book takes us along on Lafayette's farewell tour of U.S.

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WHEN ALAN HOFFMAN went off in search of a publisher for his massive manuscript on Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Montier -- better known as General Lafayette -- it was only natural that he find himself at Lafayette Press in Manchester.

And so it is that Lafayette Press is the publisher of record for "Lafayette in America."

That's the title of Alan Hoffman's 600-page book. It's an exhaustive recounting of Lafayette's return to the nation he first embraced at the age of 19, when he outfitted his own ship, fled his native France and came to join the staff of Gen. George Washington.

Five years later, as a 24-year-old major general, Lafayette helped that fledgling nation win a decisive battle at Yorktown in 1781.

In the years that followed, Lafayette's stature in America grew and grew.

More than 20 cities and towns in the United States were named in his honor, as well as countless roads, parks and city squares, and let us not forget our very own Mount Lafayette in the White Mountains. Thus, there was a rock-star quality to Lafayette's 1824-1825 triumphant farewell tour of America, and the book that recounts the events on that tour is a triumph for Alan Hoffman.

For more than two years, the attorney from Londonderry sat at his dining room table and pored over a vast journal compiled by Auguste Levasseur, who was Lafayette's private secretary. To compound matters, Levasseur's journal was written in French.

"When I first found it at the Brattle Bookshop in Cambridge, they dusted it off and put me at a table and when I opened to the preface, it shocked the heck out of me," he said. "I had taken six years of French a long time ago, but for some reason, I was able to read it without any trouble."

What began as a hobby came to border on obsession for Alan.

"I don't type," he explained, "so I was translating the material in long-hand. After a while, I had this hand-written manuscript that was nine inches high. I was about a year and a half into it and that's when I first thought, 'Hey, maybe I should publish this.'"

A wise decision, as it turns out.

Although the official publication date for "Lafayette in America" is July 1, the book is already available at some rather prominent locations. You can find copies at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington, Mass., at the new Bunker Hill Museum in Charlestown, Mass., and in the gift shop at the Mount Vernon estate of George Washington.

While that early commercial success has exceeded Alan's expectations, he hopes his original intent in translating Levasseur's journal comes to fruition.

"One reason I wanted to get the translation published was because this man, General Lafayette, was one of the greatest men of his time and is underappreciated today," he explained. "Lafayette had star quality. He was self-effacing, charming and charismatic."

"For a man who was raised as a member of the nobility, he definitely had the common touch ... and I hope that by spreading the story of Lafayette on his farewell tour -- as well as the history of the Revolution as told in Levasseur's flashbacks -- this book will help to highlight his unique place in American history."

Prominent among the places Lafayette visited on that grand tour were Portsmouth and Concord.

Lafayette's Portsmouth visit came on Sept. 1, 1824, and as his secretary noted, "A thousand children from different schools were arranged in double rows on his way, and although these poor children had for their entire headaddress wreaths of flowers, and rain was falling profusely, none of them wanted to leave his post."

Those children were joined "by nearly the entire population" of Portsmouth, plus New Hampshire Gov. David Lawrence Morril "who came expressly to welcome (Lafayette) and who greeted him in the name of the state."

Morril was there to greet Lafayette yet again -- as was the father of a President-to-be, Gen. Benjamin Pierce -- when the general's farewell tour brought him to Concord on June 22, 1825.

After a tour of the State House, Levasseur noted that "people were joyously setting up tables for 600 guests on the public square (and) the General had the pleasure of being seated in the middle of more than 200 Revolutionary officers and soldiers, who could hardly contain the joy that the presence of their old friend aroused in them."

For those of us who call New Hampshire home, a momentous moment lay in store.

"It's not in the book," Alan Hoffman said, "but a Colonel (Philip) Carrigain had written a song for the occasion. It was set to the tune of an old Scottish fighting song, and in that song written about Lafayette, it's the first time New Hampshire was referred to as the Granite State."

The text of the song was reprinted three days later in the Concord Record, and for the record, here's the lyric of the first verse:

"North, and South, and East, and West,
Grateful homage have express'd
Greeting loud the Nation's Guest.
Son of Liberty,
Whom Tyrants curs'd when Heaven approv'd,
And millions long have mourn'd and lov'd
He comes by fond entreaties mov'd,
The GRANITE STATE to see."

The wine glass that Lafayette used to toast that song is at the New Hampshire Historical Society, and now, so is Alan Hoffman's "Lafayette in America."

The timing behind the release of the book couldn't be much better. In September, the American Friends of Lafayette will convene to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Lafayette's birth and they will do so -- not coincidentally -- at Lafayette College in Easton, Penn.

Alan will be there, of course, and the guest speaker at that event will be David McCullough, the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of John Adams and Harry S. Truman.

Let the record show that McCullough is a fan of Alan Hoffman.

"When I found out he was going to be speaking," Alan said, "I sent him a copy of the book and I can't tell you how surprised I was when I got a hand-written letter from him. He said some nice things about the book so I told my publicist and she said, 'Let's use that!'"

"I told her I wouldn't want to do it without his permission," Alan added, "so I wrote him and asked and I got another hand-written note from him saying, 'Anything I can do to help promote this book, don't hesitate.'"

And that makes two of us.

Alan Hoffman's "Lafayette in America" (\$30.00) is published by Lafayette Press of Manchester. For more information, call 617-951-1817 or go to <http://www.lafayetteinamerica.com>.