

## Lafayette was the First American Idol



Written by J. Dennis Robinson



### FAMOUS PEOPLE

Almost 50 years after the American Revolution, a French nobleman toured the entire United States. Greeted everywhere by cheering crowds, Lafayette embodied the soul of the new America, and in September 1824, he rocked the house in Portsmouth, NH. A new book translated by a NH lawyer, tells the full story.

### LAFAYETTE IN NEW HAMPSHIRE 1824

He was the American idol of 1824. Untold thousands stood in every kind of weather to catch a glimpse of General Lafayette of France as he visited all 24 American states in a grand 13-month tour. Everywhere Lafayette traveled -- buildings, towns, streets and children were named in his honor. According to the *Portsmouth Journal*, Lafayette's arrival in Portsmouth, NH on September 1, 1824 was an event too big for words. "There was a glow of unaffected delight on every countenance," the newspaper reported. Only George Washington had the power to rouse such patriotic fervor from the citizens of this new nation, but Washington had been dead and buried for a quarter century.

The Marquis de Lafayette was just 19 years old when he came to the aid of Gen. George Washington's rag-tag army in 1778. Spending his own inheritance to support American troops, wounded in battle, Lafayette was influential in convincing King Louis XVI to send French ships, men and supplies that helped turn the tide against the British at the Battle of Yorktown. Many historians believe that, without Lafayette, the American Revolution might never have succeeded.

That belief was certainly held by many Portsmouth citizens in 1824 as the last living major general of the American Revolution paraded into town. A thousand Portsmouth school children wearing Lafayette pins and hats made from flowers shouted their welcome against the blare of marching bands. BP Shillaber, a well-known Boston publisher and writer, recalled the moment to his dying day. As a boy of 10 Shillaber participated in the "rapturous welcome" and witnessed the exciting arrest of pickpockets who worked the joyous crowd.

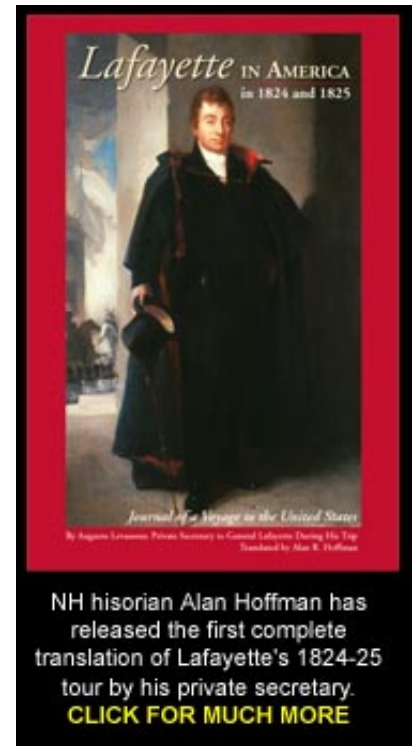
It was a fast-paced tour for stagecoach days, and since every town wanted to host Lafayette, the brief Portsmouth visit required a good deal of political finagling. The accommodating General left Boston on August 31, breakfasted in Marblehead at 8am, dined in Salem at 2pm, slept in Newburyport and arrived the next day in New Hampshire.

The 67-year old veteran made his way from Hampton Falls, NH and Greenland, up what is now Lafayette Road. The procession moved from Wibird Hill, site of today's Lafayette School, to the "compact" part of town through an arch of evergreens decorated with signs noting each of the General's famous battles. As in city after city, admirers mobbed Lafayette, including 30 local veterans of the Revolution, some of them sobbing with emotion. The general stopped to rest at the home of the late NH Governor John Langdon, just up the street from the William Pitt Tavern where he had reportedly lodged four decades earlier at the close of the war in 1784. There were the usual formal speeches at Portsmouth's Jefferson Hall, followed by a grand ball at Franklin Hall attended by 300 ladies. Lafayette stayed a full hour talking with guests after the event, then returned to the Langdon mansion at 10 pm along streets that were highly illuminated so the lingering throngs of admirers could catch a final glimpse. After another hour of socializing, a night coach whisked the French hero back to Boston.

We can follow Lafayette's entire Farewell Tour through the journal of Auguste Levasseur, the general's secretary. Levasseur was hired to document the trip and send back upbeat dispatches to France proving that the 50-year old American "experiment" in democracy was thriving. A fresh new translation of Levasseur's journal by Alan R. Hoffman features a poignant meeting in the streets of Portsmouth. Lafayette was always a strong advocate of Indian rights and the abolition of slavery. His secretary was astonished to see a group of destitute Native Americans, down from Canada, selling trinkets to the crowds. He wrote:

"Their clothes had no other character than those of a pauper; crosses and rosary beads had replaced their beautiful feather headdresses, their fur skins and their weapons; no longer did their intoxicated faces have that expression of noble pride which, they say, so particularly distinguished the savage man."

Hoffman, a Boston attorney living in Southern, New Hampshire, admits he became obsessed with Lafayette after learning about his 1824-25 tour. Unable to find a complete English version of Levasseur's journal,



Hoffman bought an antique 1829 copy in French and translated it himself by hand. His two-year labor-of-love is now a 600-page independently published book.

One of my goals," Hoffman told the NH Gazette, "was to just play a part in restoring Lafayette's reputation. No one knows who he is today."

That is true, Hoffman says, even of people currently living in roughly 60 cities across the country named Lafayette, Fayette and Fayettesville. All were dedicated to our esteemed "National Guest", as Gen. Lafayette was known during his American tour. Indeed, Lafayette became so emotionally connected to the United States that he took dirt from the excavation of the Bunker Hill Monument in Massachusetts and shipped it to France so he could be buried in American soil. America, in response, became emotionally connected to him.

Lafayette's highly documented "Farewell Tour" still has much to tell us about America's evolving self-image half a century after the Revolution. Lafayette also helps us understand our confusing national relationship with France, inherited from British history. Portsmouth citizens were instrumental in defeating the French in Nova Scotia in 1745, battled them in the French and Indian Wars, were allied to them in the Revolution, and again fought them in the Quasi-War with France. This historic love-hate relationship continues to the present day, although reduced to a battle of words.

Perhaps more than any figure besides Washington, Lafayette made an impact on local lore everywhere he went. Scores of towns have their Lafayette legends. According to one Portsmouth story, Lafayette instigated a drag race through town during his first trip in 1784, pitting his customized carriage against a state-of-the-art Concord coach. Stewards of the Warner House point to a stained carpet where the general spilled his wine. A decorative tablecloth with 15 stars was reportedly used during a reception at the Langdon Mansion. According to Alan Hoffman, former New Hampshire governor Benjamin Pierce missed his own son's graduation at Bowdoin College in order to greet Lafayette on his arrival at Portsmouth in 1824. Pierce's jilted son Franklin later became president of the United States.

Young Lucy Elizabeth Penhallow set her version of the Portsmouth visit to paper in a letter to her aunt on September 2, 1824 "while the impression is still fresh in my memory." Lucy was among the women who met "the great, the noble, the virtuous Lafayette" at the evening gala. She offered him "some leaves of geranium" and stood by his side for fully half an hour. Lucy was also able to interview the General's well-mannered son George Washington Lafayette, whom she liked, but found pale and fatigued by the proceedings, unlike his energetic and personable father.

Lucy Penhallow, in her excitement, comes closest to defining why Lafayette's visit meant so much to so many. In 1824 Portsmouth was at the beginning of an economic decline. The formerly great seaport had lost its maritime trade and young people of long-important families were leaving the city in droves to make their fortunes elsewhere. Portsmouth residents who stayed behind developed a powerful nostalgia for the city's glorious past, and the more they looked back, the more glorious the past became. Lafayette represented the best of men in the best of times, and to see him in the flesh filled people of the era with an unspeakable sense of gratitude – and of hope for a nation barely half a century old.

Meeting Lafayette, was for Lucy "one of the happiest moments in my life." The chance to finally express her deep gratitude personally to the hero of the Revolution, Lucy wrote, "made one feel ten times more of an American than I did before." Lafayette, in his year-long travels, helped 24 not-very-united-states define a central national character. Americans now saw themselves, despite all differences, as a thankful and patriotic people in love with liberty.

SOURCES: (1) [\*Lafayette in America in 1824 and 1825\*](#), translated by Alan R. Hoffman (2007); (2) *Lafayette, Hero of Two Worlds* by Stanley J. Idzerda, Anna C. Loveland & Marc. H. Miller (1989); (3) *Lafayette, Hero of Two Worlds* by Olivier Bernier 1983; and (4) Portsmouth Athenaeum Vertical File including newspaper clippings, letters and writings by Ray Brighton.

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