The American Revolution marked the beginning of an age of democratic revolutions that swept over France and challenged the old order throughout the Atlantic world. The French officers who served in the American War of Independence, whether as idealistic volunteers or resolute soldiers of their king, remembered the experience for the rest of their lives. Many preserved their reflections on the revolution in America in daily diaries, private journals, and carefully composed memoirs, leaving us with a remarkable array of perspectives on America, Americans, and the first act in the age of revolution.

None of them could have foreseen that the war for America was a prelude to an even greater upheaval that would transform France. The astonishing turmoil of the French Revolution shaped and colored memories of the war for America. For some, the American war was a distant reflection of their unshakeable loyalty to their martyred king. Others cast themselves as chroniclers and historians of the American war, recognizing that they were witnesses to events that had changed their world. For the most visionary, the war for America was the first stage in an international struggle for liberty. Together their reflections remind us that historical memory is fragile, always shifting, and often very personal.
Eighteenth-century France was dominated by aristocrats for whom military service was the primary path to social advancement and personal glory. The officers of the French army and navy were drawn almost entirely from the aristocracy. Most welcomed the war for America as an opportunity to serve their king, restore the honor of France (diminished by defeat in the Seven Years’ War), and win distinction for themselves.

Dozens of French army officers volunteered for service in the Continental Army, and hundreds more arrived in America with Admiral d’Estaing in 1778, General Rochambeau in 1780, and General Saint-Simon in 1781. As aristocratic soldiers of a king, most regarded their rebel allies and republican ideals with skepticism. Many were fascinated by the American landscape and others by the character and habits of Americans. A few, among whom the young marquis de Lafayette proved the most important, recognized the war for America as a struggle for liberty, equality, natural and civil rights, and responsible citizenship—ideals inspired by the Enlightenment.

French memories of the war for America were reflected in the way families honored their dead. Thomas François Lenormand de Victot (1742-1782) died of disease at Fort Royal on Martinique in April 1782. His family commissioned this dramatic allegorical portrait to memorialize his sacrifice. It depicts the fallen French officer’s spirit standing between Death and wounded sailors, who are receiving their last rites—Fort Royal and de Grasse’s fleet in the background.
Less than a year after the Revolutionary War ended, French officers who served in America formed a branch of the Society of the Cincinnati, the hereditary order founded in New York in 1783 to memorialize the principles of the American Revolution and the service of the men who fought for American independence. The Société des Cincinnati de France, formally established at a meeting in Paris on July 4, 1784, became extremely popular among French officers, as both a familiar military order recognizing their service to the king and a unique patriotic organization celebrating the Franco-American alliance that defeated Great Britain. More than two hundred veterans of the American war joined the French Society, whether they had served in the French military under the king or in the Continental forces under the American Congress.

The French Society was active for ten turbulent years before it went dormant during the violent height of the French Revolution. French officers clamored for membership in the organization but confusion over the rank necessary for eligibility and who could approve applications for membership dominated its early months. Louis XVI, who sanctioned the Society’s Institution in December 1783, became patron of the Society in France and approved membership for officers. The French Society’s association with the king and membership drawn almost entirely from the aristocracy forced the organization to go dormant by 1793 during the French Revolution, which abolished all royal orders and trappings of nobility.

The Society’s Institution named seven senior French officers individually as members of the organization, including Admiral de Grasse (1722-1788). In accepting Society membership and the right to wear its insignia, de Grasse wrote to Washington that “this visible symbol can add nothing to the sincere attachment which I feel for the brave defenders of American Independence, and that this further association with them and with yourself will ever be to me a source of boundless satisfaction.”

French officers desired to join the Society in part to be able to wear its gold insignia, a prestigious honor comparable to the Saint Louis and other European orders. This example belonged to the comte de Lauberdière, an aide-de-camp to Rochambeau.
Robert-Guillaume, baron de Dillon (1754-1837) was born in 1754 near Bordeaux, France, to an ennobled family of Irish descent. At age twenty-four he joined Lauzun’s Legion, an elite volunteer cavalry regiment, serving first in Senegal and then, in May 1780, sailing with his regiment to America as part of Rochambeau’s expeditionary force. He served as Lauzun’s mestre de camp with the rank of colonel until the end of the war. For his service in America, Dillon was awarded the croix de Saint-Louis and membership in the Société des Cincinnati de France.

Dillon’s manuscript journal covers the period November 1780 through the siege of Yorktown, where, commanding a troop of hussars, he was wounded in a cavalry fight near Gloucester, Virginia, in early October 1781. During his travels in America he recorded candid observations of the people he met. In addition to comments on men of prominence, such as Washington and Lafayette, Dillon also wrote about the appearance and manners of American women, whose “defiant modesty” was at times a challenge to his aggressive flirtations.

Journal of Robert-Guillaume, baron de Dillon
Covering the period 1780-1781
The Society of the Cincinnati,
Gift of Remy Galet-Lalande, 2014

Dillon’s journal begins in November 1780 when Lauzun’s Legion was in winter quarters in Lebanon, Connecticut. He received permission to explore the country on his own, traveling from New England down to Virginia and back to Connecticut to rejoin his regiment before they marched south to Yorktown.
François-Jean de Beauvoir, marquis de Chastellux (1734-1788) was already a celebrated soldier and man of letters when he arrived in America as a major general on the staff of General Rochambeau. He had served with distinction as a colonel during the Seven Years’ War, but he was better known in France as a writer and philosopher. Fluent in English, Chastellux was the chief liaison between Rochambeau and Washington.

Chastellux was well acquainted with contemporary ideas about the natural world and about the nature of America and he was determined to make his own observations and come to his own conclusions. Among the spectacles he sought out was Virginia’s Natural Bridge, which he visited after Yorktown.

Contemporary writers suggested that geological oddities like Niagara Falls and the Natural Bridge offered clues to the origins of the New World. Chastellux avoided biblical explanations for natural phenomena and rejected the idea that the bridge had been formed by rushing water, but he could find no evidence that it had been formed by an earthquake or a volcano. “It belongs to the learned of both worlds to judge of it.” To facilitate that learned inquiry, Chastellux persuaded Rochambeau to order the baron de Turpin of the royal corps of engineers to return to the bridge to take detailed measurements. This engraving—the first depiction of the bridge—reflects Chastellux’s scientific curiosity about America.
In this portrait, painted in the last year of his life, Oyré wears the croix de Saint Louis and the Eagle of the Society of the Cincinnati—reminders of his service to his king and his participation in the fight for American independence.

Accompanying Chastellux on his travels through Virginia was François-Ignace Ervoil, chevalier d’Oyré (1739-1798). A captain in the royal corps of engineers, Oyré was one of eight French engineers who joined forces with their counterparts in the American army to play an essential role in the planning and conduct of the Siege of Yorktown. Oyré received special commendation for pushing the second parallel of entrenchments forward to allow the capture of Redoubt 9, a crucial step towards the allied victory. He was promoted to the rank of major in 1782 and rose to lieutenant colonel the following year.

After his return from America, Oyré transcribed his notes of his wartime experiences into five small notebooks. Recalling the march south to Yorktown in the fall of 1781, Oyré described being part of a select group of officers accompanying General Rochambeau who made an overnight stop at Mount Vernon on September 11. General Washington had proceeded them by two days and was there to greet them. It was the first time, Oyré noted, that the American commander had been home since the start of the war.
Based in Saint-Domingue during the American Revolutionary War, Jean-Baptiste Dupleix de Cadignan (1738-1824) participated in the Sieges of Savannah and Pensacola. In August 1781, his regiment sailed with the French fleet to the Chesapeake where it would play a critical role in the Siege of Yorktown. After witnessing the British surrender on October 19, Dupleix de Cadignan returned to the West Indies. He won commendation and a pension for his valor during the French invasion of St. Kitts in 1782.

Dupleix de Cadignan’s two-volume journal covers his participation in military campaigns over a period of nearly thirty years. The section on the war for America runs more than three hundred pages, from his departure for Saint-Domingue in September 1777 to his return to France in 1782. Drawing from personal notes, logbooks, official reports, and contemporary histories, he created a highly detailed chronicle of the war that procured American independence.

Witn...ing history

This contemporary French engraving of the British surrender at Yorktown depicts the moment, described in Dupleix de Cadignan’s journal, when General Charles O’Hara, representing Lord Cornwallis, tried to present the British commander’s sword to Rochambeau, who in turn pointed him toward General Washington.
Henri-Dominique, chevalier de Palys de Montrepos (1733-1803) joined the royal corps of engineers in 1753 and had attained the rank of major by the time he came to America as part of Rochambeau’s expeditionary force. For his services at Yorktown he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and sous brigadier of his corps. He was a knight of the order of Saint Louis and became a member of the Société des Cincinnati de France in 1792. He served as a maréchal de camp during the French Revolution but retired from service under suspicion of anti-revolutionary activity.

Palys de Montrepos’ journal documents his voyage across the Atlantic from France to America, the army’s arrival and residency in Newport, Rhode Island, and their subsequent march to Yorktown in 1781. The journal is silent on the details of the Yorktown siege and allied victory, but it picks up again as the French troops marched from Virginia north to Boston, from where they would depart for France. The orders to march were given on June 24, 1782. The soldiers marched from Williamsburg in four divisions of about one thousand men each, departing on subsequent days beginning on the first of July. The third division, in which Palys de Montrepos marched, crossed the Potomac at Georgetown, then part of the state of Maryland, on July 20. They camped about a mile to the east on Rock Creek in the vicinity where the Society of the Cincinnati’s headquarters, Anderson House, now stands.
The expenses of the American war drove the French government to insolvency, hastening the outbreak of revolution in 1789. Moderate revolutionaries led by Lafayette proclaimed a new era of tolerance, equality before the law, and respect for natural rights.

Moderation collapsed in 1792. On August 10, revolutionaries stormed the Tuileries, slaughtered the king’s guards, and arrested the king. Louis XVI was executed on January 21, 1793. From June 1793 through July 1794, tens of thousands of French citizens were arrested as enemies of the state and nearly seventeen thousand were condemned to death during the period of political violence known as the Terror.

Scores of aristocratic officers of the American war were executed during the Terror, including Admiral d’Estaing, who had commanded the first French expedition in support of the American revolutionaries and was twice wounded in the Siege of Savannah. He went to the guillotine in April 1794. His crime was testifying to save the life of Marie Antoinette.
Jean-Baptiste-Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau (1725-1807) had been a military officer for thirty-eight years when Louis XVI appointed him commander of the French expeditionary force sent to aid the American fight for independence. With an army of five thousand men, he sailed from the French port of Brest in early May 1780, arriving in Newport, Rhode Island, in mid-July. The following summer he and Washington, under whose orders he served, combined forces to march to Virginia to entrap Cornwallis’s army at Yorktown. For his service to the United States, Rochambeau received a proclamation of thanks from Congress and two captured British cannons.

In 1791, Louis XVI appointed Rochambeau maréchal de France. Rochambeau commanded the Army of the North during the early years of the French Revolution, but he was arrested during the Reign of Terror in 1794 and narrowly escaped execution. Pleading his case to the court, the general who had fought for liberty on two continents invoked the “principles I learned from Washington, my colleague and my friend, when we were fighting side by side for American independence.” He was released after the execution of Robespierre and returned home. Rochambeau lived out his last years at his château on the banks of the Loire in central France. It was during this period of retirement that Rochambeau wrote his memoirs, reflecting on his experiences over seven decades of war and political transformation.

“Manuscript des mémoires politiques et militaires du Maréchal de Rochambeau”
Jean-Baptiste-Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau
Covering the period 1725-1807
The Society of the Cincinnati, Gift of the Rochambeau family, 2016

Having survived the Reign of Terror and witnessed Napoleon’s rise to power, Rochambeau wrote with special feeling about George Washington’s resignation and return to civilian life at the end of the Revolutionary War.
Claude-Anne de Rouvroy, marquis de Saint-Simon-Montbléru (1743-1819) was intensely loyal to his king through a military career that spanned sixty-three years. Ordered north with Admiral de Grasse in August 1781, he joined in the Siege of Yorktown, where he commanded the left flank, barring a British escape by the road to Williamsburg. The highest-ranking officer wounded on either side, he remained at his post and joined the other allied generals in receiving the British surrender.

A fierce royalist, Saint-Simon emigrated to Spain in 1792 and organized a legion to fight the French revolutionaries in the Pyrenees. After the execution of Louis XVI, Saint-Simon served the Bourbon kings of Spain. He commanded his legion until he was severely wounded. Appointed a general in the Spanish army, he commanded Spanish troops in the defense of Madrid in 1808 and was captured when the city fell. Saint-Simon was released from prison in 1814 and was showered with honors by the restored Bourbon king of Spain, Ferdinand VII. He ended his career as captain-general, the highest rank in the Spanish army, and a grandee of Spain of the first grade, the highest rank in the Spanish aristocracy.
Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert Du Motier, marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834) devoted his life to the cause of liberty. Commissioned a major general in the Continental Army at nineteen, Lafayette soon established himself as one of General Washington’s most trusted officers. He sailed back to France in 1779 to persuade Louis XVI to increase support for the United States, and returned to command the small army that pinned Cornwallis at Yorktown until Washington and Rochambeau arrived. He returned to France as an international hero.

Lafayette welcomed the French Revolution as an opportunity to secure the kind of liberty for France that he had fought for in America. He wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, inspired by his experience in the American Revolution, and sent the key to the fallen Bastille to George Washington “as a missionary of liberty to its patriarch.” Unable to contain the violent radicalism of the Jacobins, Lafayette fled France in 1792. Captured by the Austrians, he was imprisoned for four years. Many of his friends and members of his family died on the guillotine. He returned to France to find most of his fortune confiscated. Despite these misfortunes, Lafayette remained optimistic about the ultimate triumph of liberty, and never wavered in his devotion to it.

Champion of liberty

The Marquis de La Fayette Major General in the Armies of the United States of America
Charles Willson Peale, artist and engraver
Philadelphia, 1787
The Society of the Cincinnati, The Robert Charles Lawrence Ferguson Collection

Based on Charles Willson Peale’s life portrait of Lafayette in 1780, this mezzotint captures the direct gaze of the idealistic, young major general in his Continental Army uniform. Of the American Revolution, Lafayette wrote in his memoir, “Such a glorious cause had never before attracted the attention of mankind.”

General Lafayette at the Anniversary of the Battle of York Towne, Oct. 19, 1824
William Russell Birch (1795-1854) after Ary Scheffer (1795-1858)
ca. 1824-1834
Enamel on copper

This portrait celebrates Lafayette’s return to Yorktown while on a tour of the United States in 1824 and 1825. A crowd of more than ten thousand greeted the French hero on the forty-third anniversary of the British surrender, recalling their triumph decades earlier. Lafayette dined on the battlefield with fellow war veterans under George Washington’s headquarters tent.
During Lafayette’s visit to Virginia in 1824, George Washington’s adopted granddaughter Eleanor (Nelly) Parke Custis Lewis presented Lafayette with a distinctive Society insignia Washington had owned. Lafayette treasured the symbol of his participation in the American Revolution and his ties to its beloved leader. In 1830, Lafayette gave permission to Charles Stewart Dawes, a member of the Massachusetts branch of the Society, to have this replica made for Dawes to take with him back to America.

This exhibition brings together some of the greatest treasures of the American Revolution Institute’s collections, in combination with several key items on loan from private individuals. The Institute is especially grateful to members of the Rochambeau family for their gift of General Rochambeau’s manuscript memoir and to Remy Galet-Lalande for his gift of the original journal of Robert-Guillaume, baron de Dillon. Several of the featured books, manuscripts, and works of art were purchased with special grants from a private foundation and through the generosity of donors to the Institute’s acquisitions funds. Many of the other items exhibited are part of the Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection, which honors the memory of a member of the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Virginia who died of wounds sustained in combat in Vietnam.

In addition, the Institute gratefully acknowledges the lenders to the exhibition: Comte Patrick de Rouvroy de Saint Simon, The Schorr Collection, and a private collector who prefers to remain anonymous.

Special thanks go to Dr. Robert A. Selig, whose deep knowledge of the French officers and their experience in America during the Revolutionary War guided and informed this exhibition.
The American Revolution Institute of the Society of the Cincinnati promotes knowledge and appreciation of the achievement of American independence, fulfilling the aim of the Continental Army officers who founded the Society of the Cincinnati in 1783 to perpetuate the memory of that vast event. The Institute supports advanced study, presents exhibitions and other public programs, advocates preservation and provides resources to teachers and students to enrich understanding of our War for Independence and the principles of the men and women who secured the liberty of the American people.