

CONTINENTAL ARMY TRUNK

Diversity in the Continental Army



PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS

“Four Soldiers” —Verger Watercolor Courtesy of Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library

Learning Goal

The Franco-American alliance during the Revolutionary War was critical in securing American independence. King Louis XVI of France sent supplies and soldiers as part of the promised support, including French officer Jean Baptiste Antoine de Verger who arrived in the United States with General Rochambeau’s troops. While in Yorktown, Virginia, Verger created a watercolor depicting soldiers in the Continental Army now nicknamed “Four Soldiers.” In this lesson, students will investigate this image for indicators of diversity within the ranks of the Continental Army and explore how the common ideal of liberty unified American soldiers despite their regional differences.

The French Alliance and The Journals of French Officers

American victory at the Battle of Saratoga persuaded France that the United States was a worthy ally. The two countries soon formed an alliance with an official treaty. France had already been secretly shipping supplies to the rebels. By the end of 1777 the Americans had received two and a quarter million pounds of gunpowder from the French—ninety percent of the total they obtained from all sources—and those French supplies made victory at Saratoga possible. The treaty promised French troops would support the Continental Army and in a surprising and unprecedented move, King Louis XVI ordered his army commander in chief, Jean-Baptiste de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau, to be subordinate to a foreign ally commander: George Washington.

In July 1780, General Rochambeau arrived in Newport, Rhode Island with 5,500 well equipped professional troops. Rochambeau and Washington soon met to lay plans for attack; Washington focused on British occupied New York City, but any attempt to retake the city seemed unwise. Then some news presented an interesting prospect; British commander Lord Cornwallis had moved his army near Yorktown, Virginia on the Chesapeake Bay. In a coordinated strategy, Washington feigned an attack on New York City while Rochambeau moved his troops south to Yorktown.

Journals of French officers who served in Rochambeau's army provide great insight into American life at the time of the Revolutionary War. In addition to writing about their military duties, these educated French officers wrote in detail about the people, landscapes and customs they encountered. French officer Jean Baptiste Antoine de Verger made this watercolor drawing in his journal near Yorktown, Virginia in the fall of 1781. It is now nicknamed "Four Soldiers."

The Siege of Yorktown

In the summer of 1781, George Washington and a combined Franco-American army marched south to Virginia to confront British general Lord Cornwallis and his forces. Cornwallis and his army occupied Yorktown in August, planning to rest and resupply before continuing the conquest of Virginia. Although it made a convenient port, Yorktown was located on a narrow peninsula between the James and York rivers that offered Cornwallis little hope of escaping by land. A small army under the command of the Marquis de Lafayette managed to contain the British army on the peninsula, while a French fleet under Admiral de Grasse trapped the British from the Chesapeake Bay. As the Franco-American army rushed south to close the trap, Cornwallis waited for assistance that would never come.

Washington relied heavily on Rochambeau's seasoned experience in laying siege and in late September the allied forces began siege operations, which included artillery bombardments and infantry advancements. The British raised the white flag on October 17. Cornwallis formally surrendered two days later. News of the surrender at Yorktown convinced Parliament to cease conducting the war, which was unpopular with merchants and the British public for its trade disruption and vast expense. The following two years brought uncertainty about the Crown's next move. Skirmishes continued throughout the states and a major naval battle ensued in the Caribbean in which British Admiral Rodney defeated Admiral de Grasse at the Battle of the Saintes. British history usually emphasizes this Royal Navy victory as the close of the American War of Independence. Two years after the allied victory at Yorktown, King George III recognized his former North American colonies as "free sovereign and independent States." The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1783, officially closed the war.

“Four Soldiers” and Diversity in the Continental Army

Jean Baptiste Antoine de Verger probably drew “Four Soldiers” in his journal soon after the Siege of Yorktown before the American army departed Virginia for New York.

The figure on the far left is a light infantryman from the First Rhode Island Regiment, Continental Line. This regiment was nicknamed the “Black Regiment” because most of its soldiers were African-American. The figure wears the signature cap of the regiment with anchor and blue and white plumes. He also wears a white jacket with fringed cape and collar, white overalls, and buff leather crossbelt. This image is one of earliest known depictions of an African-American soldier.

The second figure shows a musketeer or line infantryman who is likely from the Second Canadian Regiment, also known as Congress’s Own. This regiment was first created by Congress to invade Quebec. The figure wears regulation clothing, except for his red overalls. He wears a felt tricorne hat, brown regimental coat with lapels and cuffs buttoned back to show the light red facing color, black stock (necktie), and white crossbelt with yellow metal belt plate to hold his saber.

The third figure is a rifleman wearing clothing characteristic of a soldier who came to the Continental Army from the frontier. He wears a fringed hunting shirt with homespun overalls and carries a large pouch, powder horn and axe. This rifleman wears plumes in his wide brimmed hat.

The last figure is a gunner of the Continental Artillery. He wears the uniform prescribed by General Washington in General Orders on October 2, 1779, blue coat, faced scarlet, with white waistcoat and breeches, and black felt hat. He wears a waist pouch and powder horn and holds a lighted match or port-fire. Washington ordered his soldiers to wear a combined black and white cockade at Yorktown in honor of the French alliance. Verger’s artillery man only has white in his cockade.

Verger’s watercolor of the four foot soldiers shows the diversity in clothing found in the Continental Army. The Continental Army struggled for resources throughout the war. The states were responsible for equipping the soldiers sent to the army, but rarely provided sufficient supplies. Soldiers usually wore their own clothing or the limited clothing they received from their states. There was no uniform standard for the Continental Army until 1779 when France shipped a supply of wool uniforms. Because of this shipment, Washington prescribed a uniform standard in his October 2 General Orders. The new uniforms helped bring more unity and order to the Continental Army.

Differences among the soldiers reached deeper than their motley clothing. These volunteers came from distant regions in the new country, which varied greatly in attitudes about race, class, and customs. The various states seemed like foreign countries in relation to one another. In the case of the Second Canadian Regiment soldier, he did come from a foreign country and his first language was presumably French. The rifleman came from the American backcountry, in Pennsylvania or Virginia. These sharpshooters were fiercely independent, accustomed to living in a region with few people and surviving in rugged terrain. It is unknown from what region the artilleryman came. If he is a New Englander, he would have had a sense of community and equality more fluid than soldiers who came from the South where more rigid social hierarchies were commonplace. Lastly, the soldier of the First Rhode Island Regiment or “Black Regiment,” was a formerly enslaved man who served in the army for its promise of personal freedom at the end of the war. He and other black men served along-side white soldiers, making the Continental Army the first racially integrated national institution in the United States. These volunteers, despite their regional differences, came together under Washington’s leadership to fight in the common cause of liberty.

Class Discussion

Elementary Level Discussion

1. What do you think you would write or draw in your journal if you were in a foreign country?
2. What does the drawing show about soldiers in the Continental Army?
3. Are the soldiers in the drawing different from what you imagined a Continental soldier to look like? Explain your answer.

Middle Level Discussion

1. What kinds of observations would you expect a French army officer in America for the first time to write in his journal?
2. How could the similarities and differences among the soldiers affect military order in the Continental Army?
3. The Rhode Island Regiment soldier is drawn as an equal to the other soldiers. What does this suggest about the race relations Verger observed among soldiers in the Continental Army?

High Level Discussion

1. What kinds of observations would you expect a French army officer in America for the first time to write in his journal?
2. Would observations by French army officers be a reliable source of information about the Continental Army? Support your answer.
3. What does the drawing suggest about race relations in the Continental Army?
4. How could diversity in race, class, or custom among the soldiers affect the operations of the Continental Army?

Additional Resources

Related videos from the *America in Revolution* lecture series:

Hardships of the Continental Army

http://library.fora.tv/2013/02/22/Hardships_of_the_Continental_Army

Battle of the Chesapeake

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkTIjn4Ph0s>

The Seven Years' War

http://library.fora.tv/2012/03/15/Revolutionary_War_Lecture_I_The_Seven_Years_War

Rochambeau and Lafayette

http://library.fora.tv/2012/03/15/Revolutionary_War_Lecture_II_Rochambeau_and_Lafayette

Victory at Yorktown

http://library.fora.tv/2012/03/15/Revolutionary_War_Lecture_III_Victory_at_Yorktown

King Louis XVI

http://library.fora.tv/2012/03/15/Revolutionary_War_Lecture_IV_Louis_XVI

Sources

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