

“The Spy Nobody Knew”

Throughout studies of the American Revolution, many hear and learn tales about the heroic men, women, and children who fought for their country. Names such as George Washington, Paul Revere, and Patrick Henry have embodied the story of the American Revolution and become symbols of the most important war fought in American history. However, many overlook the importance of the people who fought for a country that was not their own. At least 5,000 black and African American men and boys fought in the American Revolution (Harper, 9). They fought for a country that was not their own, where they were not considered American or even free. Black soldiers fought in every major battle in the American Revolution (Harper, 9), from the “shot heard ‘round the world” at Lexington and Concord, to the last battle of the American Revolution at Yorktown. These black soldiers served in brigades, regiments, and even George Washington’s Continental Army. One black soldier, in particular, would influence the outcome of the American Revolutionary War. His name was James Armistead.

Born into slavery around 1760, James grew up near Williamsburg, working on a tobacco farm. Unlike most slaves at the time, James was taught by his master how to read and write. When the Revolutionary War began, James’ master ran a military supplies store (Rockwell, 29) and in 1781, James learned that if a slave was given permission by their master, they could serve in George Washington’s Continental Army, and if America won the war, the slaves who had served would be freed. James’ master gave him permission to enlist, and James was assigned to serve under the French nobleman Marquis de Lafayette. From this moment forward, James Armistead’s enlistment would change the course of American history.

After enlisting under the French general Marquis de Lafayette, James was charged with the responsibility of being a messenger for Lafayette because of his extensive knowledge of Virginia's terrain and woods (Harrison, 4). However, after watching and meeting James, Lafayette had a different idea of how James could serve. He assigned James to be a spy for the Continental Army. He instructed James to pose as a runaway slave or black worker and seek shelter and work at nearby British camps. This allowed James to gain both the trust of the British and invaluable information regarding British troop movements and tactical details. James carried out his first mission without fail and was soon assigned an even more daunting and dangerous mission. When Benedict Arnold was revealed as a spy for the British and turned his back on George Washington and the Continental Army, he fled from the area but soon joined forces with British General Charles Cornwallis. This information was obtained by Lafayette, and he sent James to spy on Cornwallis. This is where "the infamous spy crossed paths with the spy nobody knew" (Rockwell, 13). James disguised himself as a runaway slave and was let into Cornwallis' camp. Here, James would collect valuable information, for he was soon working for General Cornwallis himself. Since very few slaves in colonial times knew how to read or write, Cornwallis would often spread his maps out and discuss his military and naval movements with his officers while James was in the same room. But James had been taught to read and write, so he stored this valuable information in his mind until he was able to pass what he had learned to Lafayette. Lafayette would later praise James' work, saying, "His intelligence from the enemy camp were industriously collected and more faithfully delivered." (Wright, 25) James became so convincing, that Cornwallis assigned him to spy on Lafayette. It was during this double-agent act that James would become the most important spy during the American Revolution.

While acting as a spy for the British, James could more easily meet with Lafayette and inform him about every movement the British troops and navy under Cornwallis intended to make. In late July of 1781, James reported to Lafayette that Cornwallis had organized his troops and moved his base from Portsmouth to Yorktown. This news was relayed to General George Washington, and he ordered Lafayette to hold Cornwallis and the British troops at Yorktown until he arrived with reinforcements (Davis, 52). Slowly, Lafayette's troops set a trap to corner Cornwallis by both land and sea. By early September, Continental soldiers were constructing trenches, and cannons were placed facing Cornwallis' camp. On September 26, the Siege of Yorktown began, and the British troops were surrounded and trapped on all sides. With the reinforcements from George Washington's troops, the siege lasted less than a month, and all the while, James Armistead was reporting British choices and movement back to Lafayette. On October 19, 1781, Lord Charles Cornwallis surrendered with his troops at Yorktown, and the last major battle of the American Revolution came to an end. The Americans had won the war, and with the bravery of the Continental Army and the intel from James Armistead, the victory was secured.

While the Americans rejoiced in their newly claimed liberty, James returned to the tobacco farm where he worked before the war. The act that allowed black slaves to fight in the Continental Army only recognized soldiers, and James was not recognized as a soldier but rather a spy, causing him to not qualify for the freedom he bravely risked his life for (American Battlefield Trust). After the Treaty of Paris was signed, James "petitioned for his release but was ignored" (Harrison, 4). When Lafayette discovered this, he wrote a certificate for James and petitioned for his freedom. James Armistead was granted freedom two years after the Revolutionary War and changed his name to James Armistead Lafayette in honor of the man who

helped him gain his freedom. James Lafayette bought a little farm in Virginia and lived there until his death in 1830.

Without James' service to the Continental Army, the movement of Cornwallis' troops would have remained unknown until discovered in battle. James Armistead Lafayette provided invaluable intel to Marquis de Lafayette, and his reports aided troops in the final battle of the American Revolution at Yorktown. While James Lafayette is rarely mentioned in American history and is barely known, he was the most influential spy in both the Siege of Yorktown and the American Revolution. James' efforts through his work not only secured victory in battle but also victory in a war that would ultimately design a new nation.

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