This Day in History… September 6, 1757

Birth Of Marquis de Lafayette

On September 6, 1757, Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier de Lafayette, better known as the Marquis de Lafayette was born in Chavaniac, in Haute Loire, France to a wealthy family. With ancestors who'd fought alongside Joan of Arc, Lafayette developed an early hunger for military glory.

His father died on the battlefield when Lafayette was two years old. His mother and grandmother died when he was 13. The young orphan inherited a great fortune. Descended from a long line of soldiers, Lafayette studied at the Military Academy at Versailles. When he was 16, he married Marie Adrienne Françoise de Noailles, the daughter of one of the most powerful families in France. Shortly after his marriage, Lafayette became a captain in the cavalry. However, he disliked court life, and soon grew interested in the events of the American Revolution.

Serving in the French military, he traveled to Metz for duty, and by chance, attended a dinner with the Duke of Gloucester, the younger brother of King George III. As the Duke complained about the American colonists and mocked their revolutionary beliefs, Lafayette realized his mission. As he later recalled, "My heart was enlisted… and I thought only of joining my colors to those of the revolutionaries."

Lafayette returned to America in 1824 and visited all 24 states, including a tearful visit to Washington's tomb.

George Washington had such an impact on Lafayette that he named one of his children after him.

Against the orders of his king, Lafayette bought his own ship, convinced several French officers to accompany him, and sailed for America. On June 13, 1777, he arrived near Charleston, South Carolina, and volunteered his services to the war effort.

At first, the Continental Congress was unimpressed with Lafayette, who spoke little English. They'd received offers from countless other Frenchmen seeking glory. But, when he agreed to serve without pay, the cash-poor Continental Congress appointed him a major general. He ended up paying over $200,000 of his own money during the war for his staff's salaries, uniforms, and other expenses.

Ben Franklin reportedly urged George Washington to take the 19-year-old Lafayette under his wing. The two men met on August 10, 1777. Lafayette humbly explained he was there to learn, not to teach, which impressed Washington, and the two grew close quickly. In fact, after Lafayette was shot in the leg during the battle at Brandywine Creek, Washington summoned his personal surgeon and told him to treat Lafayette as if he were his son. Impressed with Lafayette's courage, Washington recommended him for divisional command, which he received.

In his later years, Lafayette was offered and declined the chance to become the French dictator.

Lafayette's victory at Gloucester earned him the command of a division. He served at Valley Forge during part of the terrible winter of 1777-78. Lafayette also fought at the battles of Barren Hill and Monmouth, and during the campaign to capture Rhode Island.

Battle of Yorktown stamp pictures Generals Rochambeau, Washington, and DeGrasse.

In 1779, Lafayette returned to France to smooth out relations and get the support of the French fleet. Though he received a hero's welcome, he was briefly imprisoned for defying his king. Lafayette then returned to America to aid in the American victory at Yorktown. When he returned to France in 1782, Lafayette was received as a "hero to two worlds."
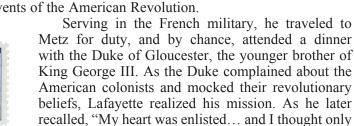
Lafayette and Washington remained close, despite the ocean between them. They wrote each other regularly and Lafayette even sent Washington the key to Bastille after he led the attack there. When Lafayette died on May 20, 1834, America went into mourning, and Congress requested that citizens wear black for a month to honor his memory.

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