

Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route

Delaware

Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route
National Historic Trail
Massachusetts to Virginia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



“When the news arrived here of the surrender of Lord Cornwallis, the citizens to manifest their joy, erected a flag pole near the State House, on which were hoisted the American Continental Colors a little above those of the British.”—Delaware’s celebration reported in the Pennsylvania Packet, 1 November, 1781

Washington and Rochambeau in the Siege of Yorktown, October 17th, 1781 by Louis-Charles Auguste Couder © RMN-GRAND PALAIS / ART RESOURCE, NY

Map of the route to Yorktown ROCHAMBEAU MAP COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

France & Independence

In 1781, the American and French allies combined their armies at a pivotal turning point in the War of Independence. Under the command of General George Washington and French General Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau, the armies marched south to lay siege to Yorktown, Virginia. In a decisive victory, they captured the British Army under General Charles Cornwallis, 1st Marquess Cornwallis. This single campaign ensured American independence.

The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail follows the routes used between 1781 and 1783 by allied American and French forces to and from the successful siege of Yorktown, Virginia. This network of roads and water trails winds over 700 miles through nine states and the District of Columbia.

Take this Revolutionary Route and explore historic sites and communities that once hosted Revolutionary War soldiers. Learn the stories of people who helped pave the way to victory and an independent United States.

George Washington: 1732-1799

Congress chose George Washington to command the Continental Army in 1775. His strategic insight and leadership culminated in American independence. After the war, Washington resigned his military command. He became the first President of the United States in 1789.



Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau: 1725-1807

The French nobleman and distinguished officer was appointed commander of the French Army sent to America in 1780 to fight the British. After success there, he continued his military career until 1792. Arrested in 1794 during the French Revolution, he was released later that year and retired to his estates.

A POWERFUL ALLIANCE

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Delaware River to Chesapeake Bay

It took several days for the French and Continental troops to pass through 26 miles of Delaware on their way to Yorktown, from September 4 through September 7, 1781. Some 4,300 French soldiers alone marched through Wilmington, Delaware, along with nearly 2,000 horses, 800 oxen, close to 1,000 officer servants, over 300 waggoners, dozens of female camp assistants, equipment and baggage trains. While encamped in Wilmington, the largest town in Delaware, these troops more than quadrupled the population.

The troops followed the “King’s Highway” (today’s Philadelphia Pike/Route 13) into the City of Wilmington. It was the only road from the south to Philadelphia and points north. Caesar Rodney took this road on his famous 18-hour journey on the night of July 1/2, 1776. He rode to Philadelphia to cast the crucial vote for the colonies to unanimously declare independence from Great Britain.

Despite its small population, the City of Wilmington rivaled Philadelphia in the importance of its commerce, being a major source of fine flour and destination for tobacco transported overland from “Head of Elk” (Elkton, Maryland), to be loaded on ships plying the Delaware River.

Reaction to the French army’s presence was mixed. Many Huguenots, Moravians, and Quakers had fled religious persecution and wars in Europe to settle in Delaware, and many were pacifists. Some Delawareans had fought the French previously during the French and Indian War. On the other hand, many Delawareans remembered with resentment the month-long British occupation of Wilmington in 1777.

Delawareans also prized the hard currency that the French used to pay for goods and services. Silver coin temporarily replaced fluctuating Continental dollars and state currency as the state’s only legal tender in 1781.



Caesar Rodney, President of Delaware (1728-1784), commemorated on the US quarter. His administrative authority ensured a steady, continuous purchase and delivery of supplies before and during the march to Yorktown. Rodney prevented significant desertions of Continental troops and tamped down fights that broke out between Loyalists and Whigs in southern Delaware.

The main body of Continental soldiers headed southwest from Wilmington on dirt roads, arriving in Christiana on September 6, 1781. French troops passed through a day later, in two separate groups. A contingent of Continental troops had arrived a few days earlier by boat to help unload artillery, ammunition and other supplies from boats that came up Christina Creek from the Delaware River.

Christiana was the critical staging area prior to the 10-12 mile march to Elkton,

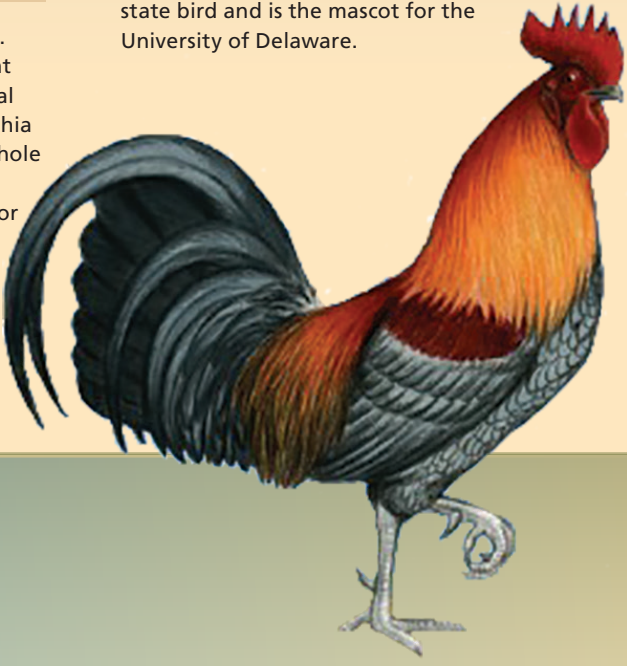
where the allied forces were to re-group. Christiana was one of the most important shipping centers in Delaware and a crucial trade center on the route from Philadelphia to Baltimore. Northern Delaware as a whole was strategically important as a supply depot and military transportation corridor throughout the Revolutionary War, a critical overland link in the transport of troops and materials between the Delaware River and Chesapeake Bay. These operations could avoid exposure to the British warships patrolling the Atlantic coast.

Fighting Blue Hens & Unsung Heroes

The soldiers of the state’s one regiment participated in many of the important battles of the war and were particularly critical to the success of the Continentals in the southern theatre. Their bravery earned them the nickname of “The Fighting Delawareans” and “Blue Hen’s Chickens” after a gamecock with a fierce reputation. The Blue Hen was adopted by the Delaware General Assembly in 1939 as the official state bird and is the mascot for the University of Delaware.

African-Americans were legally not allowed to serve in the militias of Delaware during the Revolutionary War and later. However, one free black—Edward Harmon—joined Captain Robert Kirkwood’s 1st Delaware Regiment as a common soldier in 1777. He was the only African-American from Delaware who applied for, and was granted, a pension in 1818. Remarkably, several other African-Americans, slave and free, are noted on pay records as serving in the Delaware Regiment, possibly as express riders, cooks, and teamsters. Others showed their loyalty by paying taxes in bushels of wheat for the support of the army, just like their white neighbors.

Delaware’s African Americans supporting the troops emphasizes the irony of freedom denied for some who fought for freedom. The 1790 census shows 70 percent of the state’s black population remained enslaved after the American Revolution.



The Troops Return North

The allied troops took the same overland route from Head of Elk/Elkton through Delaware, returning from Yorktown, as they had heading south. They made their way in different groups, the Continentals during November of 1781, by land and water, and the French by land in August of 1782. The allied troops took with them more than 1,600 sick and wounded (some 14% of the French troops alone) who would rest at hospitals along the way, including the Wilmington Academy. Rochambeau’s forces headed to Boston, ultimately bound for the West Indies, but in 1783 received word they would be returning to France.

The British and Americans had signed the Preliminary Articles of Peace.

Lauzun’s Legion returned to Wilmington in late October of 1782 and stayed at the Wilmington Academy until the following spring. The Legion’s 550 men were available to support a French detachment in Baltimore if needed. Rochambeau, too, returned south, traveling across Delaware to Baltimore in January of 1783. He would sail to Annapolis the same day and embark January 8 on the French frigate Emeraude along with his son and sixteen officers. Avoiding the British, they returned to France several days later, along with the best wishes of a grateful nation.



Indian Hut of Dr. James Tilton (1745-1822). The hut was first used successfully to combat disease at the Continental encampment at Morristown, New Jersey, in the severe winter of 1779-1780.

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Revolutionary Health Care

Disease claimed more lives of soldiers than did the battles themselves. An estimated 25,000 American soldiers died during active military service, of which about 8,000 died in battle and the rest from disease. Hospitals were few, tools were crude, and not much

was known about the causes and treatments of common illnesses. The few existing military hospitals lacked adequate sanitation, with patients crowded into filthy tents and buildings. Thousands of cases of typhus, smallpox and dysentery were contracted in the hospitals.

Dr. James Tilton was instrumental in improving care for the sick and wounded during the Revolutionary War. One of few physicians with solid professional training and experience, he joined the local militia that became part of the First Delaware Regiment. As the regimental surgeon and commander of several military hospitals, he saw firsthand the horrific conditions at the hospitals. To counteract these conditions, he invented the “Indian Hut,” or “Tilton Hut.” This pioneering effort to construct isolation wards and erect barriers against cross infection greatly reduced the spread of infectious disease in army hospitals.

“...Many a fine fellow have I seen brought into the hospital, for slight syphilitic infections and carried out dead of a hospital fever.”

—Dr. James Tilton, commenting on Revolutionary War hospitals in “Economic observations on military hospitals : and the prevention and cure of diseases incident to an army,” 1813.



Delaware officers played important roles in the Washington-Rochambeau story, including (l to r) Dr. James Tilton, Physician and Surgeon General of the United States Army; Allen McLane, a master spy for George Washington; and Captain Robert Kirkwood (not shown), a hero of the Southern campaigns.

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