

BR. MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE'S FINAL AMERICAN TOUR, 1824-25

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This August will mark the bicentennial of the Marquis de Lafayette's final visit to the United States. Lafayette's goodwill tour, which began on August 15, 1824, and concluded thirteen months later, on September 7, 1825, became one of the most significant political and cultural events of the history of the early American Republic and firmly cemented the former soldier and French statesman as a uniquely American hero. His arrival was keenly welcomed by the country's Freemasons, who greeted him not merely as the last serving Major General of the American Revolution but as a Brother of the Mystic Tie. Throughout his hectic twenty-four state tour, Lafayette met with Masons, visited lodges, laid cornerstones, participated in initiations, and engaged in other Masonic activities. Consequently, he became one of the Fraternity's most public promoters, who helped a curious public learn more about the society and its values.

Lafayette received President, and fellow Freemason, James Monroe's invitation to return to the United States in March 1824. It came at a crucial juncture in Lafayette's life, as the young dashing officer of the American Revolution soon found himself embroiled in the tumultuous politics of revolutionary France. His involvement cost him his family's fortune, political goodwill, and, for a time, his freedom—for an attempt



Landing of Gen. Lafayette at Castle Garden, New York, 16th August 1824. Title from Calendar of Emmet Collection Source: Wikimedia Commons

to flee to the United States resulted in his capture and incarceration in an Austrian prison for five years. Following his release, secured by



Lafayette in Masonic Regalia

Image Courtesy of Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22, A.F. & A.M., Alexandria, Virginia. Jim Craig Photography

Napoleon Bonaparte, Lafayette kept a relatively subdued political career. He reclaimed his familial estate at La Grange but never fully recovered his fortune. He therefore hesitated to accept Monroe's invitation, as he could not afford to travel across the United States in his financial condition. News of his predicament reached American expats, who arranged to pay debts and ensure his arrival and reception, during which "the Nation's Guest" would be fully funded by a grateful nation. He acquiesced and set out for America in July 1824.¹

News of Lafayette's impending arrival traveled quickly throughout the United States. State legislatures drafted resolutions of welcome, drew up invitations, and passed bills to cover Lafayette's expenses. Cities and towns throughout the country held meetings and organized collections to host elegant banquets and social events. "Arrangement committees" formed across towns and cities to



Lafayette and the National Guard by Ken Riley. After alighting from his horse, Lafayette greeted and clasped the hand of each man, New York City, New York, July 14, 1825. Source: Wikimedia Commons (Public Domain)

plan parades, welcome ceremonies, cornerstone and monument dedications, and other public activities. This extended into Freemasonry, as grand lodges and other Masonic bodies made their own preparations to welcome their Brother.

Lafayette arrived in New York State, his first stop, on August 15. His son Georges Washington Lafayette, secretary Andre Levasseur, and a valet accompanied him on his voyage abroad and throughout the tour. Levasseur published an account of their travels when he returned to France, which serves as a helpful primary resource of their activities and includes brief mentions of Masonic activities. Georges and Andre also joined Freemasonry prior to their tour and accompanied Lafayette to Masonic meetings and events.²

Lafayette most likely received a number of letters and invitations to visit lodges and grand lodges whenever his schedule permitted. The earliest invitation may have come from St. Johns Lodge in Boston, Massachusetts. He arrived in Boston on August 25 and received a letter

from Joseph Eveleth, Master of St. John's Lodge, inviting him to meet in "Masonick Sanctuary" at their hall. His hectic schedule prevented the visit on that occasion, but he did eventually satisfy the lodge the following year when he returned to participate in the Bunker Hill Monument cornerstone ceremony.³

Lafayette returned to New York City on September 5. Six days later, on September 11, 1824, he participated in the tour's first Masonic activity—a fraternal visit with Jerusalem Chapter No. 8 and Morton Commandery No. 4, where he was initiated into the Royal Arch and Knights Templar, respectively. Nine days later, on September 20, he attended the Grand Lodge of New York's formal reception in Washington Hall. An estimated 500 to 600-hundred guests attended the banquet that evening, the largest Masonic banquet yet held during the trip so far.⁴

In ensuing days, Lafayette received similar welcomes by grand lodges, as he headed south to Washington, D.C. He visited the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania on Octo-

ber 2, Delaware on October 6, and Maryland on October 8. He arrived in Washington on October 12 and toured neighboring Virginia and Maryland before returning back to Washington for the winter. During an emotional trip to Mount Vernon to visit George Washington's tomb, Lafayette met George Washington Parke Custis, Washington's step-grandson and family historian, who presented Lafayette several items belonging to Washington, including a "Masonic jewel and sash." According to newspaper accounts, Lafayette cut the sash into small pieces and distributed it to the children and guests in attendance.⁵

Before departing on his spring campaign through the southern and western boundary states, Lafayette visited Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22 in Alexandria, Virginia, on February 21. He beamed with pride at the opportunity to wear George Washington's regalia, which had been donated to the lodge for safekeeping. Two days later, he boarded a steamboat to begin his southern tour. On March 9, he participated in the Masonic cornerstone ceremony for the new monument to Revolutionary hero Baron De Kalb in Camden, South Carolina. In Charleston, six days later, he met with local Knights Templar and a committee of Cerneau-affiliated Scottish Rite Masons. Lafayette joined the Cerneau Rite sometime in September 1824, while in New York. The Cerneau delegation's decision to visit Lafayette publicly while in Charleston, the home of the Mother Supreme Council of the A.&A.S.R., rustled more than a few feathers. Nevertheless, Lafayette remained affiliated with the Cerneauists after his return to France.⁶

In Savannah, Georgia, Lafayette participated in two Masonic cornerstone ceremonies for the memorials of Revolutionary War generals Nathanael Greene and Casimir Pulaski. Both ceremonies occurred on the same day, March 21, and were followed by a banquet hosted by the Grand Lodge of Georgia. Lafayette attended Masonic receptions in Alabama and Louisiana before beginning his trek up the Mississippi River and its tributaries in mid-April. On April 29, he visited the Grand Lodge of Missouri, where he became an honorary member. On May 4, he arrived in Nashville and visited that state's grand lodge with future president and Past Grand Master Andrew Jackson as his escort.⁷

Lafayette visited lodges in Kentucky, Ohio, western Pennsylvania, and "Western Virginia" in May. Misfortune struck on May 8 when his steamboat collided with an unseen obstruction and capsized. While everyone on board survived the midnight ordeal, Lafayette's personal papers, gifts, and large sum of money sank with the vessel. It is unclear what precious Masonic relics had been lost that evening, as the trip's collection had yet to be cataloged. In June, he began his trip through western and northern New York state en route to Boston to participate in the Bunker Hill monument cornerstone and made fraternal visits along the way.⁸

Now back in Boston, Lafayette briefly met with St. John's lodge prior to the public ceremonies for the new Bunker Hill monument. The first monument had been funded and erected by the city's local Masons, and Lafayette joined representatives from the grand lodges of Massachu-

setts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont for what became the largest Masonic event of his tour. He made a brief trip up north and visited with Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire Masons, before returning to New York for the final leg of his tour in July 1825. His last visit to a grand lodge occurred on July 25 in Delaware. He arrived back in Washington, D.C., in late August and spent the next weeks preparing for his return to France in early September.⁹

Lafayette's goodwill tour captured the heart and spirit of early U.S. society. It demonstrated the full extent of American hospitality and a reverence for one of the last surviving heroes of the American Revolution. For Freemasons, the tour provided a unique opportunity to highlight the Fraternity's virtues and values. Grand lodges and local bodies seized on this momentum and opened their halls to host public events, contributed towards city and town collections, and arranged other activities like cornerstone ceremonies to showcase the Fraternity's prominence. In turn, Lafayette lavished great praise on his fellow Brethren. He took great care to meet with leaders in local government, the armed services, and Freemasonry wherever he traveled, a symbolic gesture that helped ensure the Fraternity's place in public discourse for decades and centuries to come. •

ENDNOTES

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2. Levasseur, 13.

3. *History of Saint John's Lodge of Boston in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston: Seaver-Howland Press, 1917), p. 86.

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8. "After the ceremonies..." *The Nashville Whig*, May 28, 1825.

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