

Chapter IX

YORKTOWN: THE GRAND SIEGE, 1781

After Virginians drove out their last royal governor in the summer of 1776, virtually no military action occurred in the state for three years. Still, Virginia was very important to the American cause as a supplier of men, materiel, food and tobacco, a great source of credit in trade with Europe.

Recognizing Virginia's importance, the British tried to weaken her position as soon as they had the manpower. In May 1779 British Maj. Gen. Edward Mathew conducted successful raids in the area surrounding Portsmouth and Norfolk. Then in December 1780 Brig. Gen. Benedict Arnold raided plantations along the James River. On 5 January 1781 Arnold capped his first assignment since deserting the rebels by capturing Richmond. State authorities were helpless to prevent these strikes, and as a result many valuable stores were destroyed.

Virginia presented a real problem for the British. Control of the state was obviously important, but other regions seemed even more crucial. Indeed, Generals Henry Clinton and Lord Cornwallis disagreed sharply over what should be done. Cornwallis wanted troops — detached from New York City if necessary — to start an immediate offensive in Virginia. On the other hand, the cautious Clinton refused to jeopardize New York. He wanted Cornwallis to exercise restraint until much-needed reinforcements arrived from Britain.

Clinton had reason for concern. In the spring of 1781 a major campaign in Virginia was far from General George Washington's mind. Instead, as he had ever since the painful loss of the city in 1776, Washington dreamed of recapturing New York. But both Chief Engineer Louis Duportail and the Comte de Rochambeau, the commander of the French forces dispatched to Newport the previous summer, were unenthusiastic about Washington's plans. For several weeks in March Duportail met with Rochambeau at Newport, where they discussed at length the plan to attack New York. In the following memorial to Washington, Duportail clarified his position on a New York offensive and advocated instead one against Charleston.

In Duportail's view success at New York depended on the fulfillment of several basic conditions: the enemy must not receive reinforcements, Admiral de Grasse must control the waters around New York, and the besieg-

ing army must outnumber the enemy by at least three to one. Confident that the Americans could be masters of the harbor at Charleston, Duportail recommended that "as soon as it is determined that we cannot undertake any thing against New York, we must embark all the French Troops and as many of the Americans as can be spared . . . and go . . . directly to Charlestown." Evidently he was alone in urging such a move. As plans to take New York progressed, he does not appear to have pressed the issue further.

1. DUPORTAIL ADVOCATES A CHARLESTON OFFENSIVE

Memorial of Louis Duportail to George Washington.

[March 1781]

. . . If it is determined that Count De Grasse cannot force the Hook [Sandy Hook], but if he is master of those Seas, I suppose 'till November when he must go to the West Indies, it is asked in what case we may attack New York.

I think that if the British at New York have not received any Reinforcement from Virginia and if Count De Grasse brings 4000 men with him we may undertake to attack New York, to speak more generally, to attack New York in the case mentioned here, I would have no less than thrice the number of Men which we suppose that the Enemy have, because the time for the siege is determined and if we don't succeed, we lose all our advantages we could get in other quarters. . . .

Let us suppose now, that the circumstances do not permit to attempt any thing against New York, then we must consider these two cases.

Either the Enemy shall have evacuated Virginia entirely or they shall have left a Garrison in Portsmouth.

If the Enemy have evacuated Virginia entirely, I suppose they have made this distribution of their Troops, they have sent 3000 Men to New York and 12,000 to Charlestown. I suppose besides, that Lord Rawdon has now 3500 and that in case of an Attack, the British may collect 1500 Militia that will make 8000 Men in all. Is it advisable to undertake something against Charlestown so Garrisoned?

I answer that we have here a circumstance like that at New York. I mean that the harbour may be *forced*, and that by the local circumstances, after you have forced it, you may Stay in it as long as you please. Although not in possession of the Town, so that with a moderate number of Troops you can reduce it by Famine, if not by force.

I cannot say what difficulty we could meet now in the attempt for forcing the bar; but I observe we must observe it cannot be defended by land Batteries, it must be defended only by Armed Ships, Frigates, floating Bat-

teries, Gallies, etc. When I was Prisoner near Charlestown, I heard the British had only sometimes one two or three small Frigates at most, with one or two Gallies for that purpose; if it is the case now, I think that it should be very easy to force the bar with four or five large Frigates, or better, one or two 44 Gun Ships. Admiral Arbuthnot,¹ in one of his Letters to Lord Germaine,² says there are 19 feet of Water upon the bar at high tide. I think this is enough for a 40 Gun Ship. After you have forced the bar and entrance of the Harbour, you may introduce two or three fifty Gun Ships in it and then I believe you could brave all the attempts of the Enemy to get in again, so the whole fleet of Ships of the line may go where they are more necessary.

When we are perfectly Master of the Harbour of Charlestown, we then may choose either to attack it, or to block it up according to our means and strength.

To block it up, I think 7000 Men are enough on the Land side between James and Ashley Rivers, because we may fortify them if necessary. The quantity of Troops we must have on James's Island, and on the other sides of Cooper and Ashley, either for the greater security of our Fleet or from hindering the Enemy from getting Provisions, it depends upon this how far up the Ships have been able to penetrate into the Harbour and the Rivers (because the Enemy can make obstructions in some places, but in the most advantageous case, I think 4000 Men part of which may be Militia shall fill our object.

So I think that with 1100 [11,000?] Men we can block Charlestown up entirely.

To attack it I would have at least 4000 More.

A difficulty occurs, is it possible to supply with Provisions, so large a number of Men in that Quarter.

I believe it is, if the Expedition takes place, it will be before the Rice is cut, so that we can get plenty either in Carolina or Georgia, where we may send a body of Troops for that purpose.

Besides, I observed already that after we are in possession of the Harbour, the Fleet may go away. I suppose it will go to Chesapeak; so far they shall cover perfectly well the Transportation of our Supplies. If Count De Grasse is obliged, in the beginning of November to return to the West Indies, I do not doubt he will leave a fleet Superior or at least equal to that of the Enemy, so that our Convoys shall be safe; besides, we know that from Chesapeak to Charlestown, there is between the Main and some Islands an interior Navigation which may render the transportation very easy. It is only necessary to have for that purpose some small Armed Vessels to protect them against Privateers. So I think that on account of the importance of the Capture of Charlestown this year, as soon as it is determined that we cannot undertake any thing against New York, we must embark all the French Troops and as many of the Americans as can be spared with plenty

Provisions, etc., and go, under the protection of the whole fleet, directly to Charlestown. . . .

—Washington Papers, roll 26.

In April 1781 Washington sent the Marquis de Lafayette to Virginia with a force including some of the sappers and miners. Washington intended Lafayette to stop Arnold's raids, but the operation was clearly secondary. Meanwhile on May 22 Washington met Rochambeau at Wethersfield, Connecticut, to discuss the long-awaited joint effort to crush the enemy. At Washington's insistence their talks focused on plans to retake New York City.

Washington knew beforehand that both his Chief Engineer and the French commander were not eager for an attack on New York. Nevertheless Washington included Duportail in the day-long discussions with Rochambeau. The Commander in Chief evidently had great confidence in his ability to win the two Frenchmen over. More importantly Washington valued Duportail's knowledge of the enemy position in New York, his proven ability to evaluate the rebels' strength, and his camaraderie with fellow French officers like Rochambeau. The Chief Engineer was a valuable asset indeed.

When the conference ended Rochambeau tentatively approved Washington's plan. Soon Washington got word of new monetary assistance from the French government. Now everything seemed to be in readiness. On May 28 he instructed Duportail to estimate the engineering department's needs for conducting a siege. In a matter of days the Chief Engineer responded. His evaluation includes a rare calculation of the manpower and time required to make some of the principal instruments of siegecraft—gabions, saucissons, and fascines.

2. DUPORTAIL'S ESTIMATE OF REQUIREMENTS FOR A NEW YORK SIEGE

New Windsor, June 2, 1781

Plancks for platteformes about 12 inches broad and 2 inches thick.

I make amount to 150 the number of Cannons of different Caliber and mortars which we Can get and which are necessary whether to batter the ennemy's lines on new york island or long island or to secure the Communications and some other things.

We must observe that the french army must be provided by us with the following articles.

Each piece Requires about 200 feet of plancks; for 150—30,000 feet. Saucissons (large fascines) for the batteries—72,000 feet. Gabions for



A GABION. *This replica of a gabion stands behind the restored American lines at Saratoga National Battlefield Park.*

batteries or trenches-4000 gabions. Fascines for the same-10,000 fascines.

The proportions of these things will be given to the officer appointed to superintend their Construction.

A man Can make a gabion in one day, so 500 men will make the 4000 gabion in 8 days.

A man Can make 36 feet of saucisson in one day, so 500 men will make the number Required in 3 days.



FASCINE KNIFE. *Sappers and miners used knives of this type to cut twigs and branches for fascines.*

Peterson, The Book of the Continental Soldier

500 men will make the 10,000 fascines in 6 days.

Sand bags—30,000. We shall probably want some more but I have been told the french army have 60 thousand.

Tools: Shovels—5000; Pick axes—2500; Axes—1200; Bill hooks—800. If the french army had no[t] enough for them, we must have more than it is Required here.

—Washington Papers, roll 78.

Late in June Washington readied his army for the strike on New York. Giving his commander the technical advice now expected of a good Chief Engineer, Duportail reconnoitered the enemy's works on northern Manhattan Island with Washington. On July 6 Rochambeau's army joined Washington at Dobb's Ferry, New York. Further reconnaissance of the enemy's works confirmed that a formal siege would be necessary. Timing, manpower, and the tools to carry out a siege were crucial considerations. The sappers and miners were busy making fascines and gabions and frequently helped the engineers with reconnaissance.³

On July 27 Duportail laid out the final plan for taking New York. He counted heavily on support from the French fleet, yet he judged success was possible without the fleet "if we have many troops and much time." Duportail was thinking in terms of twenty thousand men.⁴

3. DUPORTAIL'S PLAN FOR A NEW YORK OFFENSIVE

July 27, 1781

If one considers the nature of the ground in the northern part of the island of New York it will be recognized I think, that it will not be a very difficult thing to take a position on the other side of devil's [Spuyton Duyvil] creek; batteries can be established on the mountain on that side strong enough to soon force the enemy to abandon Fort Charles and after that we will be masters of Kingsbridge. The works on Cox hill are of small account by themselves and can easily be taken sword in hand. If however the enemy were to remain, after the evacuation or the taking of Fort Charles, which I do not think likely, the feeble state in which they leave the fort on Cox hill shows they do not intend to defend that part of the island, and that their veritable defense front is from Laurel hill to fort Tyron [Tryon].

Let us suppose that we are masters of Kingsbridge and have taken post on the other side, let us now see how we can progress. Considering the slope of the ground beyond forts Laurel hill and Tyron, its rocky nature, and the position between themselves . . . I do not think it practicable to attack them. . . . Doubtless, going at it properly it might succeed

but it is hazardous, so I would prefer the following manner to establish ourselves—which is to go by boats across the Harlem river and boldly take a position between New York and Fort Washington at a place impossible to determine before arriving on the island.

. . . Two things must be considered—whether we will have a French fleet in the Sound, or whether we will not. In the first place we need not fear to be troubled in the Harlem by vessels, galleys or armed boats of the enemy; we will have a much greater number of boats to transport our men; we can choose the place of debarkation upon a very much wider extent of ground; we will have fewer troops to oppose us; because the enemy will not be able to spare those on Long Island or even at New York. Success therefore seems to me very probable—it is much less so assuredly in the second case—that of not having a french fleet in the sound but it does not seem to me impossible even then, if we have many troops and much time.

—Kite, *Duportail*, pp. 201–02.

By the time Duportail delivered his plan to Washington, he realized that disappointing news had already reached the Commander in Chief. Given a choice of destinations by Rochambeau, Admiral de Grasse had chosen the Chesapeake Bay for a joint operation against the British. Washington took immediate steps to shift the campaign to Virginia. Time was of the essence. Not only had de Grasse chosen the far-off Chesapeake for his battleground, but he had also made known his intention to sail back to the West Indies in less than three months!

As Washington made new arrangements, Duportail had words of caution. “Is it not advantageous to pursue the preparations for the attack on New yourck,” he advised, in order “to deceive our army *et* so the enemy . . . if the enemy perceived we give up the idea of attacking New York they will reinforce portmouth Virginia, may be before we can get there.”⁵ Washington followed Duportail’s advice. Before going south, he had his men march through New Jersey as if heading for Long Island. He also left Maj. Gen. William Heath in the New York area to feign further siege preparations and protect West Point.

With incredible speed Washington’s 2,500 Continentals and Rochambeau’s entire army marched south. Washington reached Philadelphia before the end of August, Head of Elk on September 6, and the Virginia peninsula on the 14th.

On the way south the sappers and miners stopped in Philadelphia for several days “proving and packing off shells, shot, and other military stores.” While in Philadelphia they received shirts, overalls, and stockings, and each got a month’s pay in specie. Sgt. Joseph Plumb Martin recalled the men’s amazement: “This was the first that could be called money, which we had received as wages since the year ’76, or that we ever did receive till the close

of the war, or indeed, ever after, as wages.”⁶ The gesture could only have helped to encourage the sappers and miners to give their best to the coming campaign. And they did just that.

To facilitate the concentration of the French and American forces against the British in Virginia, Washington gave his two top-ranking engineers special assignments. He dispatched Duportail to alert de Grasse that the allied forces were coming, and he sent Lt. Col. Jean Baptiste de Gouvion to join Lafayette in Virginia.

The Chief Engineer caught up with de Grasse’s flagship at the mouth of the Chesapeake. With more than three thousand ground troops under his command, de Grasse had been planning an immediate attack on Cornwallis at Yorktown while the British general was still relatively unprepared. The meeting with Duportail on board the *Ville de Paris* changed his mind. Because he had known Duportail’s reputation for years, de Grasse told Washington, “I have not hesitated to open my heart to him and acquaint him with all my resources and my orders.”⁷ When their first exchange ended, de Grasse acknowledged that because of Washington’s letter and Duportail’s advice, “I have suspended my plans until the arrival of the Generals [Washington and Rochambeau], whose experience in the profession of arms, knowledge of the country and insight will greatly augment our resources.”⁸

Duportail made his own report on the meeting with the French admiral. Although he recognized the difficulties in making so vast a combined operation succeed, Duportail believed this was the last opportunity “of undertaking something serious” in the south. He advised that the rebels’ chances would be best if they prevented the enemy from getting provisions, thereby starving them out. His confidence in the “intelligence and good sense” of Lafayette was marked.

4. “WE MUST TAKE CORNWALLIS OR BE ALL DISHONOURED”

Louis Duportail to George Washington

Cape Henry, on board *Ville de Paris*
2 Sept 1781

Dear general:

I arrived here this morning at five o’clock after a long and tedious journey on many accounts. But the pleasure I have to see at last a french fleet of 27 sail of line in Your country makes me forget all the hardships I experienced. Something yet gives me some uneasiness. I am sorry not to find here admiral du Barras.⁹ Your excellency knows very well all the different inconveniency’s which were according to my opinion in his stay at Newport. Now I am afraid he shall not be able to get away. Long while ago

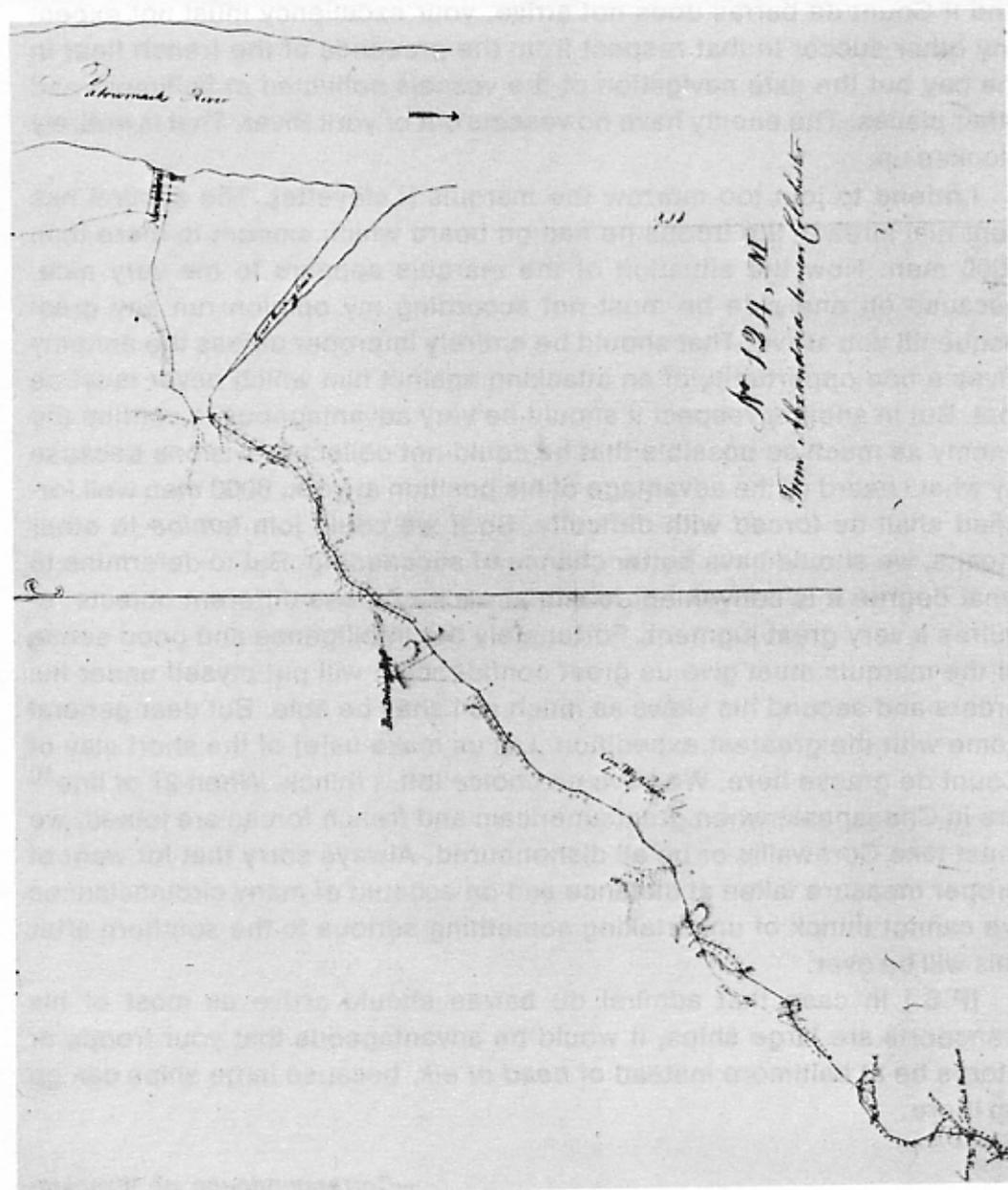
the british must know that the general rendezvous is in the Chesapeake. So they do not apprehend anything at New York from Count de Grasse's fleet. . . . Count de Grasse being obliged to it appears to be always determined to leave us in the time announced so we have only six weeks to operate. Unfortunately he cannot provide you with vessels for the transportation of your troops and the French army, at least in this moment. And if Count de Barras does not arrive, your excellency must not expect any other succor in that respect from the presence of the French fleet in the bay but the safe navigation of the vessels collected at Baltimore and other places. The enemy have no vessels out of York River. That is entirely blocked up.

I intend to join tomorrow the marquis [Lafayette]. The admiral has sent him already the troops he had on board which amount to more than 3000 men. Now the situation of the marquis appears to me very nice, because on one side he must not according to my opinion run any great risk till you arrive. That should be entirely improper unless the enemy gives a fine opportunity of an attack against him which never must be lost. But in another respect it should be very advantageous to confine the enemy as much as possible that he could not collect provisions because by what I heard of the advantage of his position at York, 6000 men well fortified shall be forced with difficulty. So if we could join *famine* to other means, we should have better chance of succeeding. But to determine to what degree it is convenient to aim at each of these different objects requires a very great judgment. Fortunately the intelligence and good sense of the marquis must give us great confidence. I will put myself under his orders and second his views as much as I shall be able. But dear general come with the greatest expedition. Let us make use of the short stay of Count de Grasse here. We have no choice left, I think. When 27 of line¹⁰ are in Chesapeake, when great American and French forces are joined, we must take Cornwallis or be all dishonoured. Always sorry that for want of proper measure taken at distance and on account of many circumstances we cannot think of undertaking something serious to the southern after this will be over.

[P.S.] in case that admiral du Barras should arrive as most of his transports are large ships, it would be advantageous that your troops or stores be at Baltimore instead of *head of Elk*, because large ships can go up there.

—*Correspondence of Washington and de Grasse*, pp. 12–14.

On September 2, when Washington dispatched Gouvier to join Lafayette, he gave him special instructions. Worried about the roads his



On September 2 when Washington dispatched Gordon to join Lafayette, he gave him special instructions. Worried about the north, he

troops and supplies would travel to the Virginia peninsula, Washington ordered the engineer to follow a specific route and report on road conditions, particularly any required repairs. "If you could incite the inhabitants as you passed along to set about this necessary business," Washington instructed him, "it would facilitate the movement of our waggons etc. which must go by land greatly."¹¹

Gouvion went by land from Baltimore to Elkridge Landing and then on to Bladensburg, Georgetown, and Fredericksburg. He arrived at camp near Williamsburg on September 10, just four days ahead of Washington and Rochambeau. Unfortunately none of his reports have been found, nor is it clear how successful he was in persuading local citizens hastily to repair their roads.

Considering the many factors involved, the coordinated concentration of American and French troops and supplies in Virginia was achieved with remarkable ease. Both armies were determined to redeem their alliance. Even though Cornwallis's men were outnumbered, suffering from illness, protected by less than formidable defenses, and had little chance of escaping, the allies decided to undertake a full-scale siege of Yorktown.

Although several of Duportail's engineer officers were still imprisoned following their capture at Charleston in 1780, the allies had more than a dozen engineers at Yorktown. The progress of the siege reflected the presence and the influence of Marshal Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban, master of eighteenth-century siegecraft. In just three weeks the siege progressed methodically through several stages: initial investment on September 28; reconnaissance; digging of the first parallel and lines of circumvallation and countervallation; construction of batteries and a zigzag; heavy artillery fire; a second parallel completed with the dramatic storming of two enemy redoubts; continued heavy artillery fire; and, on October 19, final capitulation by the enemy.

Records of the action at Yorktown abound. From these, several have been selected because they best reflect the role of the Continental Army's Corps of Engineers and its companies of sappers and miners. This siege represented the most concerted effort by these units during the entire Revolutionary War.

THE ROAD FROM ALEXANDRIA. *This map of a Virginia road is one of twenty maps marking the route from Philadelphia to Yorktown, prepared by the geographer's department under the direction of Simeon DeWitt (1756-1834), Robert Erskine's successor as geographer. These maps helped guide the armies of Washington and Rochambeau on their march south in 1781. The route surveyed here crosses the Great Hunting Creek southwest of Alexandria, skirts Washington's Mt. Vernon, and passes Pohick Church to a point (near Colchester) below the Pohick River.*

Courtesy New-York Historical Society, New York City

Although he penned his account years after the Revolution, Sergeant Martin of the sappers and miners left a powerful record of the entire siege. Selections from his reminiscences follow throughout the remainder of this chapter. In the first he described with ready wit the initial preparations for the siege.

5. "HERE AGAIN WE ENCOUNTERED OUR OLD ASSOCIATE, HUNGER"

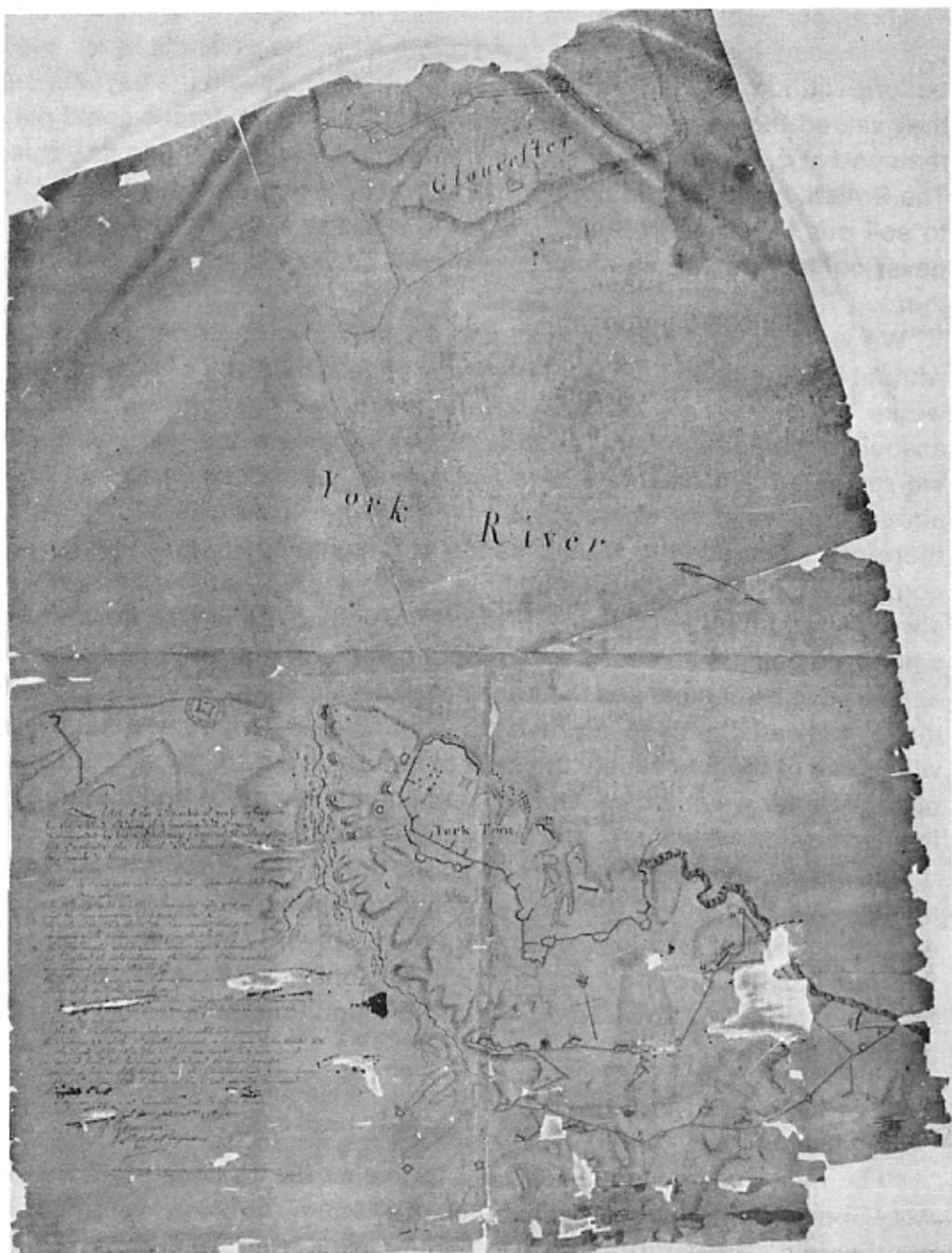
From the narrative of Joseph Plumb Martin.

Soon after landing we marched to Williamsburg, where we joined General Lafayette, and very soon after, our whole army arriving, we prepared to move down and pay our old acquaintance, the British, at Yorktown, a visit. I doubt not but their wish was not to have so many of us come at once as their accommodations were rather scanty. They thought, "The fewer the better cheer." We thought, "The more the merrier." We had come a long way to see them and were unwilling to be put off with excuses. We thought the present time quite as convenient, at least for us, as any future time could be, and we accordingly persisted, hoping that, as they pretended to be a very courtly people, they would have the politeness to come out and meet us, which would greatly shorten the time to be spent in the visit, and save themselves and us much labor and trouble, but they were too impolite at this time to do so.

We marched from Williamsburg the last of September [1781]. It was a warm day [the twenty-eighth]. When we had proceeded about halfway to Yorktown we halted and rested two or three hours. Being about to cook some victuals, I saw a fire which some of the Pennsylvania troops had kindled a short distance off. I went to get some fire while some of my messmates made other preparations, we having turned our rum and pepper cook adrift. I had taken off my coat and unbuttoned my waistcoat, it being (as I said before) very warm. My pocketbook, containing about five dollars in money and some other articles, in all about seven dollars, was in my waistcoat pocket. When I came among the stangers they appeared to be uncommonly complaisant, asking many questions, helping me to fire, and chatting very familiarly. I took my fire and returned, but it was not long before I perceived that those kindhearted helpers had helped themselves to my pocketbook and its whole contents. I felt mortally chagrined, but

THE WORKS AT YORKTOWN. Colonel Gouvion of the Corps of Engineers drew this plan of the British defenses and the American and French siege works.

Record Group 360, National Archives



there was no plaster for my sore but patience, and my plaster of that, at this time, I am sure, was very small and very thinly spread, for it never covered the wound.

Here, or about this time, we had orders from the Commander in Chief that, in case the enemy should come out to meet us, we should exchange but one round with them and then decide the conflict with the bayonet, as they valued themselves at that instrument. The French forces could play their part at it, and the Americans were never backward at trying its virtue. The British, however, did not think fit at that time to give us an opportunity to soil our bayonets in their carcasses, but why they did not we could never conjecture; we as much expected it as we expected to find them there.

We went on and soon arrived and encamped in their neighborhood, without let or molestation. Our Miners lay about a mile and a half from their works, in open view of them. Here again we encountered our old associate, Hunger. Affairs, as they respected provisions, etc., were not yet regulated. No eatable stores had arrived, nor could we expect they should until we knew what reception the enemy would give us. We were, therefore, compelled to try our hands at foraging again. We, that is, our corps of Miners, were encamped near a large wood. There was a plenty of shoats all about this wood, fat and plump, weighing, generally, from fifty to a hundred pounds apiece. We soon found some of them and as no owner appeared to be at hand and the hogs not understanding our inquiries (if we made any) sufficiently to inform us to whom they belonged, we made free with some of them to satisfy the calls of nature till we could be better supplied, if better we could be. Our officers countenanced us and that was all the permission we wanted, and many of us did not want even that.

We now began to make preparations for laying close siege to the enemy. We had holed him and nothing remained but to dig him out. Accordingly, after taking every precaution to prevent his escape, [we] settled our guards, provided fascines and gabions, made platforms for the batteries, to be laid down when needed, brought on our battering pieces, ammunition, etc.

—Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle*, pp. 228–30.

The following account by Michel Capitaine du Chesnoy¹² carried the story from the placement of troops—Claude Henry, the comte de St. Simon, on the left, Rochambeau in the center, and the Americans on the right—and focused on engineer activity in the crucial stage of reconnaissance. As Capitaine made clear, reconnoitering was a challenge at Yorktown. An important development in the early stage of the siege was the enemy's decision to abandon their advance positions, redoubts at Pigeon Quarter along the Goosley Road. The Americans and the French quickly took them over and converted them to their own use.

6. "THE ENTIRE PLACE WAS SCATTERED WITH EARTH WORKS, WAS BRISTLING WITH POINTED STAKES"

From the Yorktown journal of Capitaine du Chesnoy.

On the 29th [September 1781], the American engineers, those of the army of Rochambeau and those of the division of the Marquis de St. Simon, numbering 13 all told, formed in three divisions, each of four, de Querenet [Guillaume, Querenet de La Combe] commanding the body of French engineers (Desandroun [Jean-Nicholas Desandrouins] being dangerously ill at Williamsburg); Duportail, American Brigadier, commanded the engineers attached to the same service. . . .

On the 29th, reconnoissance of the place was made; a broad, deep ravine traversed by a swampy brook surrounded half of the place on the right; for a distance of more than 800 toises (4800 feet), in front the enemy had placed abbatis on the summit (three quarters of this extent was cut by deep ravines); they had established a large redoubt on the right at the very crest of the hill, this redoubt was covered with pointed stakes and by a heavy abbatis which was well made; in front (nearer us) the enemy had made the ground difficult (to cross) by trees cut down and left facing us; near the brooks we have just mentioned, which emptied into the York River, [were] two other redoubts, bristling with stakes and palisaded, and surrounded by an abbatis, spread out towards their center; between them was the York-Williamsburg road; they occupied the crest of the higher ground of the other side of the ravine about 350 toises (2100 feet) from the center of the town; in front of these, the terrain sloped towards the countryside; their left was covered by three batteries distant from 300 . . . toises (1800 feet) to 400 toises (2400 feet) from the center of the town, with an abbatis in front of them. This was supported, on one corner, by a body of chasseurs, with a battery near a destroyed mill, which was at the other end of their left; for a ditch they had a creek; these batteries likewise all occupied high ground, and in front of which the plain sloped down and hid from view all the trenches with which they had covered the town of York.

It can be seen from this description, how difficult it was to make a reconnoissance of the place; all that could be investigated were the more forward fortifications, and even as to these, in several aspects, the details were difficult to ascertain, and then it was only imperfectly. They had encamped part of their troops between the redoubts and the batteries, and the main town, in a way that indicated they could extend them and defend them with the advantages of the lay of the land and of the high ground. We would be obliged to attack them with great force, and we should not have been able to do this without great loss, if the enemy had not abandoned these redoubts and batteries.

This happened on the 29th to the 30th. In the morning of the 30th our troops perceiving this, took immediate possession; 100 men entered the redoubt of Pigeon Quarter and 50 that of Penny Hill, one of the two batteries near by was changed into a redoubt, and we constructed a middle one at the head of the big ravine; this work progressed under the annoying fire of the enemy.

Thereafter reconnoissances were more easily made; these we carried on until [October] 5th; meanwhile the heavy artillery was unloaded, and the troops prepared themselves for the work of the siege, and munitions were carried to the artillery park, and in this interval from the 30th of September to October 5th, Baron Viomenil attacked the advance abatis of the redoubt on the left, and forced the enemy to withdraw into their works.

The entire place was scattered with earth works, was bristling with pointed stakes, and enveloped or covered with abatis, which Lord Cornwallis had had constructed after the approval of the army of the Count de Grasse. It seems that he had not at first expected any attack except from the troops commanded by Major General de la Fayette, and the Marquis de St. Simon; learning, however, of the arrival of the armies of General



SIEGE OF YORKTOWN. *The drawing depicts Washington and Rochambeau consulting with staff members at Yorktown.*

Record Group 148, National Archives

Washington and Rochambeau, he . . . constructed detached works . . . while awaiting the investment. He also had worked meanwhile upon another trench on his exposed left (his right was protected by a ravine which could not be crossed). During the reconnoissance from September 30th to October 5th, we perceived new works completed at night, and these he continued to construct up to the very moment our batteries opened fire. . . .

We still continued constructing the trenches, the redoubts and the communications toward the rear; half of the engineers had mounted the trenches from the 6th to the 7th, and from the 7th to the 8th, but from the 8th to the 9th they mounted in divisions, and thus continued during the remainder of the siege. On the 9th, in the afternoon, some batteries being found ready to fire, both French and American, a few shots were fired.

—S.W. Jackson Collection, Yale
University Library.

On October 6, as work began on the first parallel, Washington issued general orders for the conduct of the siege. The orders indicated the manner in which the trenches would be manned and relieved, delineated duties and responsibilities, and specified the desired measurements to be used in making gabions, fascines, and hurdles. Sections 43 and 44 defined the responsibilities and authority of the engineer officers.

7. REGULATIONS FOR THE SERVICE OF THE SIEGE AT YORKTOWN

From George Washington's general orders.

October 6, 1781

1. The service of the siege will be performed by Divisions alternately; the Fatigue men will first be detailed out of the Division and the remainder will form Battalions under their respective Commanders to guard the Trenches; the first night there will be an exception to this Rule; the first regiment of each Brigade will that Night form a Division, Commanded by Major General Lincoln.

2d. The divisions shall be warned for the Trenches, the preceding evening, and they are to furnish no guards when they mount the Trenches.

3d. No Officer or soldier of a Regiment Commanded for the Trenches will be excused from Mounting unless he be sick; the quarter guard of each regiment will alone remain in Camp.

4th. The Major General of the Division which Mounts, will be Major General of the Trenches, the Brigadiers will Mount with their Brigades.

5th. The General Officers of the Trenches will reconnoitre carefully all the Avenues, places of Arms and advantageous Angles, that he may determine in Consequence the order and position of the Troops, in case of attack.

6. The Inspector of the Division which Mounts, will do the duty of Major of the Trenches. He will make the detail of the service of the troops during the twenty four hours that he shall be there, and attend to the punctual observance of Orders.

7. He will visit before hand all the Posts of the Trenches, and visit them again when the troops are posted there in order to make a state of them, and communicate promptly to each the orders of the General Officer: near whom he is to keep himself to receive them. Each Brigade to send to the General of the trenches an orderly Officer.

8. The Major of the Trenches will be instructed by the General Officers, of the Alarm posts in case of a Sally, and take care to inform the Troops of it.

9th. An officer of rank will be appointed by the Commander in chief to act as superintendant of the deposit of the Trenches, for the following important service during the whole siege vizt. To take charge of all the sand bags Fascines, Gabions, Hurdles and other Materials deposited at the place which the Engeneers will appoint and keep an accurate state of them.

10th. He is to deliver the sand bags and necessary tools for the work, and take care that the tools are redelivered when they are no longer wanted. . . .

16. He will above all watch over every thing which relates to order and regularity in the Trenches, except in the disposition of the Troops, which is the particular province of the Major of the trenches.

17. The Trenches shall be releived [*sic*] every Twenty four hours unless a particular order to the contrary by the General in which case the the relief shall be in the rear of the others.

18. The General having fixed the hour for Mounting the trenches, . . . the parade for assembling the Reliefs [shall] be on the ground sufficiently before hand to give the General Officers and Adjutant General time for inspection. . . .

25. All the troops either relieving or relieved will March with Drums beating Colours flying and carry Arms to the place from whence they are to file off when they will support their Arms.

26. When the Troops shall have taken their post in the trenches, the standard bearers will plant their standards upon the Epaulments and sentries will be posted with proper intervals, with orders to give Notice of whatever they may see coming out from the place and of the shells that may be thrown by the Enemy, but no notice to be given or any movement to be made for Cannon shot.

27. The sand-bags will be desposed on the Epaulments of the Trenches, to cover the sentries.

28. The officers will cause each soldier to work in his place to enlarge the trench and strengthen the Epaulments.

29th. No honor to be rendered in the trenches when the Commander in Chief and Generl. Officers of the Trenches visit them; the soldiers will stand to their Arms facing the Epaulment and ready to mount the banquet.

30. When the Troops retire from the Trenches, they will March in reversed Columns. . . .

33. The Infantry are to make the number of Gabions, etc., ordered them.

34. The Gabions are to be three feet high including the end of the Pecquetts [pickets] which are to enter the ground, they are to have two feet and a half diameter and be formed of Nine Picquetts, each of two and a half inches circumference interlaced with branchery, striped of leaves to be equally closed at top and bottom, in order that they may not be larger at one end than the other.

35. Hurdles shall be six feet long and three feet wide and shall be made of Nine Picketts, each of two inches and a half to three inches circumference, equally distant from each other and interwoven with stronger Branchery than that employed for the Gabions.

36. The Fascines are to be six feet long and six inches through, to be made of branchery, the twigs of which are to be crossed, to be bound with Withs and each end and in the middle, to each fascine, three picketts of three feet long and two or three inches diameter.

37. The Brigades shall always have at the head of their Camp, the stated Number of fascines which they will replace in proportion as they are used.

38. The Commandants of Corps shall be responsible for the observance of the dementions of the Materials employed in the trenches inattention in this point being very pernicious to the service.

39. Each soldier going to the Trenches either to mount Guard or Work shall take with him a fascine to be left at the Deposit of the Trenches. . . .

43. The fatigue men are to March near each other and Observe the greatest silence when the Engineers place them.

44. The Officers who Command the fatigue parties will be constantly with their detachments and exactly observe the directions of the Engineers.

45. When the work is Commenced they are to walk constantly along their detachments to make the soldiers perform their duty obliging them to cover themselves with alacrity and afterwards to perfect the work.

46. The Officers of covering parties will cause their soldiers to sit down, hinder them from quitting their Musquetts which they are to hold before them, the butt on the ground.

47. The advanced posts of such Detachments as are Commanded by Non Commissioned Officers will remain prostrate until the trench is sufficiently deep to cover a man to the waist; when the Detachment with their advanced Posts will retire into the trenches, to Occupy the Head of the Work which shall have been made.

48. In the saps, Batteries and other places adjacent to the deposits of powder no soldier is to be permitted to smoke.

49. In case of a sally, the Fatigue men are to retire briskly into some part of the Trenches where they may not embarrass the Troops, they are to retire in preference to the place where their Arms were lodged.

50. The Troops will march briskly out of the Trenches and repair to the place of Arms, batteries, Angles and Avenues which shall have been designated to them from whence they may defend it more advantageously and take the enemy in reverse or flank, taking particular care not to occupy the banquet for the defence of the Epaulment: but always to post themselves in the reverse of the Trenches.

51. During the sally all the Batteries will direct their fire upon the front of attack in order to desperse the besieged.

52. When the troops shall have repulsed the Enemy, they are not to pursue them but wait the orders of their General Officers to resume their posts in the Trenches.

53. As soon as the attack is finished, the Officers of fatigue will reconduct their detachments to Work and call the rolle, that any absent soldiers may be punished at return to Camp.

54. At the hour for withdrawing the fatigue, the Detachments are to return in good order and the Officers are to report to the Commandant of the Regiment what has been the conduct of the soldiers.

55. Besides the fatigue men of the trenches a sufficient detachment shall be given to the superintendant of the Deposit in the Trenches whose service shall be for twenty four hours: this officer is to employ them in collecting the tools, in making the different distributions, in going with the Litters, and bringing the wounded to the hospital of first dressings.

—Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 23:179–85.

The journal of Capt. James Duncan, a company commander in Colonel Moses Hazen's regiment, described siege preparations from the point of view of an officer performing fatigue duty under the engineers' direction. Such accounts are rare. The following excerpt carries the story through the opening of the first parallel and on to the opening of the American batteries on October 9. Enemy artillery fire was intense as the trenches were dug, but soon the trenches were so deep that scarcely any harm resulted. Duncan reiterated "that the enemy by evacuating their [advance] works had given us an amazing advantage."

8. "THE ENEMY KEPT UP AN ALMOST INCESSANT FIRE"

From James Duncan's Yorktown diary.

October 1 [1781]—About 8 o'clock this morning the French grenadiers attacked and carried a small battery, with the loss of four killed and six wounded. Ten companies were ordered out early this morning for fatigue, of which I had the honor to command one. Until 11 a.m. we were employed in cutting and stripping branches for gabions. On being furnished with shovels, spades, pickaxes, etc., we were ordered up to the lines, where we continued inactive until about an hour before sunset. In the meantime, the engineers were employed in reconnoitering the enemy's works, and fixing on proper places to break the first ground. Let me here observe that the enemy by evacuating their works had given us an amazing advantage, as the ground they left commanded the whole town, and nothing but the reasons before alleged could have justified them in so doing, as by contrary conduct they must have very much retarded the operations of the siege.

The engineers having fixed on and chained off the ground in two different places to erect their works within point blank shot of the enemy, the parties were called on. Five companies were ordered to an eminence on the right and five to another on the left. It happened to be my fate to be stationed on the left, a place the most dangerous of the two, as it was nearest to the enemy, and more exposed to the fire from the enemy's batteries.

We were now conducted to a small hollow near the ground. Five men were ordered by the engineer to assist him in clearing away the rubbish, staking out and drawing the lines of the work. This was in the face of open day, and the men went with some reluctance; a little before this we had a shot from the enemy which increased their fears. At dusk of evening we all marched up, and never did I see men exert themselves half so much or work with more eagerness. Indeed, it was their interest, for they could expect nothing else but an incessant roar of cannon the whole night. I must confess I too had my fears, but fortunately for us they did not fire a shot that whole night. I am at a loss to account for it, for the moon shone bright, and by the help of their night glasses they must certainly have discovered us. We were relieved about daybreak, and scarcely had we left the trenches when the enemy began their fire on both works from three pieces.

October 2—The works were so far finished in the course of the preceding night that the men worked in them this day with very little danger, although the enemy kept up an almost incessant fire from two pieces of artillery. A drummer, rather too curious in his observations, was this day killed with a cannon ball. . . .

October 5—We had more firing from the enemy last night than any night since the commencement of the siege, but don't learn that they did

any other harm than delay the operation of the works. This day the regiment was employed in cutting and making fascines, and a regiment from every brigade in the army ordered out for some extra fatigue duty this evening. . . .

October 7—The regiments ordered for the extra duty were last night employed in drawing the line of circumvallation. This line extends itself to the river on each side the town, and at all places nearly equally distant and better than 200 yards in front of the former works. The enemy discovered us, although the night was pretty favorable, but the chief of their fire was directed against the French. They were, no doubt, much astonished in the morning to find themselves so completely hemmed in on all sides, and trenches so deep that we could sustain little or no harm from their fire. . . . Our orders were this night that if the enemy made a sortie and attempted to storm the trenches we were to give them one fire from the banquet, rush over the parapet and meet them with the bayonet. . . .

October 8—The fire of the enemy was this day chiefly directed against the parties employed in erecting batteries. We were relieved about 12 o'clock and sustained no harm during our tour excepting two men badly wounded; but we had scarcely left the trenches when a man working on the parapet had his arm shot off. . . .

October 9—Last night the troops in the trenches as well as great part of this day, were busily employed in finishing the batteries, and about 4 o'clock this afternoon an American battery was opened

—*Pennsylvania Archives*, 2d. ser., 15:749–50.

Joseph Plumb Martin preferred duty in the trenches every third day to the intervening two days in camp, where “we had nothing else to do but attend morning and evening roll calls and recreate ourselves as we pleased.” Martin’s penchant for action was reflected in his vivid portrayal of events during the same period covered by Duncan above. Here is an account filled with drama: General Washington, unrecognized, visiting the trenches and then ceremoniously breaking ground; the troops entrenching under the nose of the sidetracked enemy; and rebel batteries opening fire on the enemy as the French troops shout, “Huzza for the Americans!”

Martin also clarified the role of the sappers and miners in laying out the lines and described the rebels’ success in surprising the enemy.

9. “THE BRITISH WERE LED TO IMAGINE THAT WE WERE ABOUT SOME SECRET MISCHIEF”

From the narrative of Joseph Plumb Martin.

On the fifth of October [1781] we began to put our plans into execution.

One-third part of all the troops were put in requisition to be employed in opening the trenches. A third part of our Sappers and Miners were

ordered out this night to assist the engineers in laying out the works. It was a very dark and rainy night. However, we repaired to the place and began by following the engineers and laying laths of pine wood end-to-end upon the line marked out by the officers for the trenches. We had not proceeded far in the business before the engineers ordered us to desist and remain where we were and be sure not to straggle a foot from the spot while they were absent from us. In a few minutes after their departure, there came a man alone to us, having on a surtout,¹³ as we conjectured, it being exceeding dark, and inquired for the engineers. We now began to be a little jealous for our safety, being alone and without arms, and within forty rods of the British trenches. The stranger inquired what troops we were, talked familiarly with us a few minutes, when, being informed which way the officers had gone, he went off in the same direction, after strictly charging us, in case we should be taken prisoners, not to discover to the enemy what troops we were. We were obliged to him for his kind advice, but we considered ourselves as standing in no great need of it, for we knew as well as he did that Sappers and Miners were allowed no quarters, at least, are entitled to none; by the laws of warfare, and of course should take care, if taken, and the enemy did not find us out, not to betray our own secret.¹⁴

In a short time the engineers returned and the afore-mentioned stranger with them. They discoursed together some time when, by the officers often calling him "Your Excellency," we discovered that it was General Washington. Had we dared, we might have cautioned him for exposing himself too carelessly to danger at such a time, and doubtless he would have taken it in good part if we had. But nothing ill happened to either him or ourselves.

It coming on to rain hard, we were ordered back to our tents, and nothing more was done that night. The next night, which was the sixth of October, the same men were ordered to the lines that had been there the night before. We this night completed laying out the works. The troops of the line were there ready with entrenching tools and began to entrench, after General Washington had struck a few blows with a pickax, a mere ceremony, that it might be said "General Washington with his own hands first broke ground at the siege of Yorktown." The ground was sandy and soft, and the men employed that night eat no "idle bread" (and I question if they eat any other), so that by daylight they had covered themselves from danger from the enemy's shot, who, it appeared, never mistrusted that we were so near them the whole night, their attention being directed to another quarter. There was upon the right of their works a marsh. Our people had sent to the western side of this marsh a detachment to make a number of fires, by which, and our men often passing before the fires, the British were led to imagine that we were about some secret mischief there, and consequently directed their whole fire to that quarter, while we were entrenching literally under their noses.

As soon as it was day they perceived their mistake and began to fire where they ought to have done sooner. They brought out a field piece or two without their trenches, and discharged several shots at the men who were at work erecting a bomb battery, but their shot had no effect and they soon gave it over. They had a large bulldog and every time they fired he would follow their shots across our trenches. Our officers wished to catch him and oblige him to carry a message from them into the town to his masters, but he looked too formidable for any of us to encounter.

I do not remember, exactly, the number of days we were employed before we got our batteries in readiness to open upon the enemy, but think it was not more than two or three. The French, who were upon our left, had completed their batteries a few hours before us, but were not allowed to discharge their pieces till the American batteries were ready. Our commanding battery was on the near bank of the [York] river and contained ten heavy guns; the next was a bomb battery of three large mortars; and so on through the whole line. The whole number, American and French, was ninety-two cannon, mortars and howitzers. Our flagstaff was in the ten-gun battery, upon the right of the whole. I was in the trenches the day that the batteries were to be opened. All were upon the tiptoe of expectation and impatience to see the signal given to open the whole line of batteries, which was to be the hoisting of the American flag in the ten-gun battery. About noon the much-wished-for signal went up. I confess I felt a secret pride swell my heart when I saw the "star-spangled banner" waving majestically in the very faces of our implacable adversaries. It appeared like an omen of success to our enterprise, and so it proved in reality. A simultaneous discharge of all the guns in the line followed, the French troops accompanying it with "Huzza for the Americans!" It was said that the first shell sent from our batteries entered an elegant house formerly owned or occupied by the Secretary of State under the British government, and burned directly over a table surrounded by a large party of British officers at dinner, killing and wounding a number of them. This was a warm day to the British.

—Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle*, pp. 230–34.

Continental Army surgeon James Thacher, in his journal, emphasized again the rigors of opening the trenches and the horror of working under artillery fire. The following excerpt contains a particularly evocative description of the view from the trenches of the bombshells, which "in the night . . . appear like a fiery meteor with a blazing tail . . . gradually descending to the spot where they are destined to execute their work of destruction." When the American batteries were ready on October 9, "Washington put the match to the first gun, and a furious discharge of cannon and mortars immediately followed."

10. "I HAVE A FINE OPPORTUNITY OF WITNESSING THE SUBLIME AND STUPENDOUS SCENE"

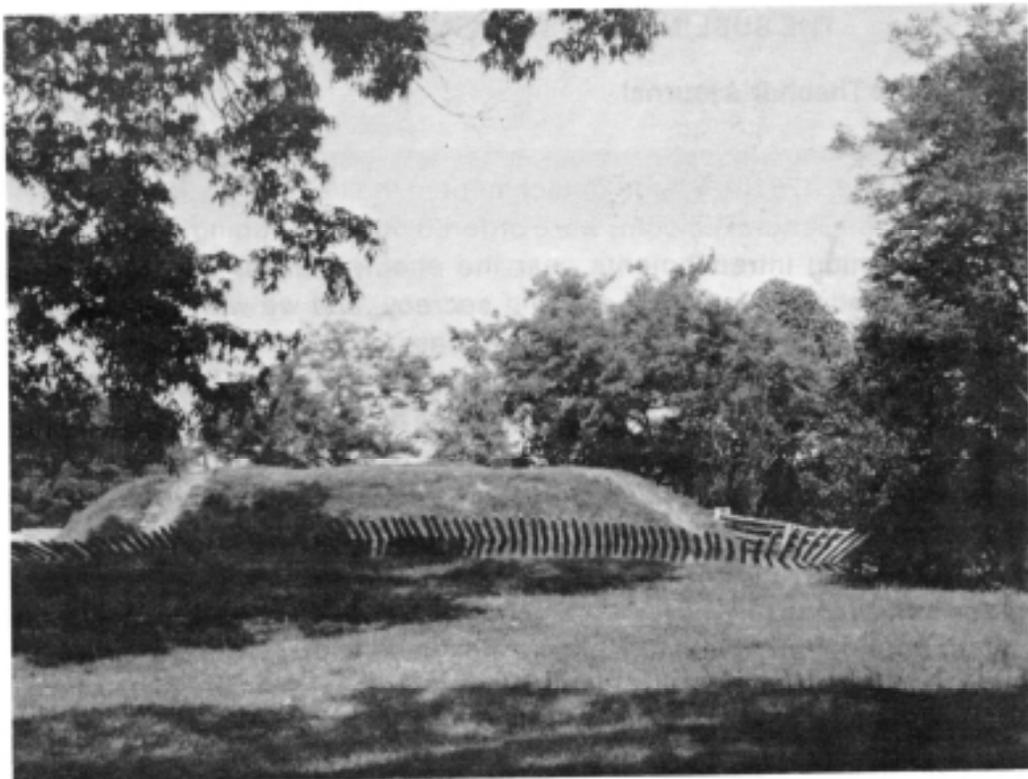
From James Thacher's journal.

7th [October 1781]—A large detachment of the allied army, under command of Major General Lincoln, were ordered out last evening, for the purpose of opening intrenchments near the enemy's lines. This business was conducted with great silence and secrecy, and we were favored by Providence with a night of extreme darkness, and were not discovered before day light. The working party carried on their shoulders fascines and intrenching tools, while a large part of the detachment was armed with the implements of death. Horses, drawing cannon and ordnance, and wagons loaded with bags filled with sand for constructing breast works, followed in the rear. Thus arranged, every officer and soldier knowing his particular station, orders were given to advance in perfect silence, the distance about one mile. . . .

Our troops were indefatigable in their labors during the night, and before day light they had nearly completed the first parallel line of nearly two miles in extent, besides laying a foundation for two redoubts, within about six hundred yards of the enemy's lines. At day light the enemy having discovered our works, commenced a severe cannonade, but our men being under cover received no injury. . . .

8th, and 9th—The duty of our troops has been for several days extremely severe; our regiment labors in the trenches every other day and night, where I find it difficult to avoid suffering by the cold, having no other covering than a single blanket in the open field. We erected a battery last night in front of our first parallel, without any annoyance from the enemy. Two or three of our batteries being now prepared to open on the town, his Excellency General Washington put the match to the first gun, and a furious discharge of cannon and mortars immediately followed, and Earl Cornwallis has received his first salutation. . . .

10th–15th—We have now made further approaches to the town, by throwing up a second parallel line, and batteries within about three hundred yards, this was effected in the night, and at day light the enemy were roused to the greatest exertions, the engines of war have raged with redoubled fury and destruction on both sides, no cessation day or night. The French had two officers wounded, and fifteen men killed or wounded, and among the Americans, two or three were wounded. I assisted in amputating a man's thigh. The siege is daily becoming more and more formidable and alarming, and his Lordship must view his situation as extremely critical, if not desperate. Being in the trenches every other night and day, I have a fine opportunity of witnessing the sublime and stupen-



REDOUBT NO. 10. *The photographs provide two views of the restoration at Yorktown showing fraisework of the redoubt captured by Americans during the siege.*



dous scene which is continually exhibiting. The bomb shells from the besiegers and the besieged are incessantly crossing each others' path in the air. They are clearly visible in the form of a black ball in the day, but in the night, they appear like a fiery meteor with a blazing tail, most beautifully brilliant, ascending majestically from the mortar to a certain altitude, and gradually descending to the spot where they are destined to execute their work of destruction. It is astonishing with what accuracy an experienced gunner will make his calculations, that a shell shall fall within a few feet of a given point, and burst at the precise time, though at a great distance. When a shell falls, it whirls round, burrows, and excavates the earth to a considerable extent, and bursting, makes dreadful havoc around.

—Thacher, *Military Journal*,
pp. 337–40.

A major aspect of the allied siege was the storming of Redoubts Nine and Ten, two works standing about 300 yards in front of the main enemy line. Control of these positions was essential to completion of the second parallel.

Beginning on October 11 the French constructed an epaulement as near as possible to the two enemy redoubts. Then artillery was moved into place. On the 14th subordinates told Washington all was in readiness for a direct attack. The Americans, led by Lt. Col. Alexander Hamilton, would take Redoubt Ten, the French would take Redoubt Nine. At eight in the evening, an unusual hour for an attack that was chosen deliberately to achieve surprise, prearranged gunfire gave the signal. The allies moved forward simultaneously. Each force met with resistance but each succeeded.

Hamilton's unit included a contingent of sappers and miners charged with clearing the way for the infantry through the protective abatis. Martin was one of the besiegers. His depiction of the action is his best chronicle and among the finest of the Yorktown accounts.

11. "I THOUGHT THE BRITISH WERE KILLING US OFF AT A GREAT RATE"

From the narrative of Joseph Plumb Martin.

The siege was carried on warmly for several days, when most of the guns in the enemy's works were silenced. We now began our second parallel, about halfway between our works and theirs. There were two strong redoubts held by the British, on their left [Redoubts Nine and Ten].

It was necessary for us to possess those redoubts before we could complete our trenches. One afternoon [14 October 1781], I, with the rest of our corps that had been on duty in the trenches the night but one before, were ordered to the lines. I mistrusted something extraordinary, serious or comical, was going forward, but what I could not easily conjecture.

We arrived at the trenches a little before sunset. I saw several officers fixing bayonets on long staves. I then concluded we were about to make a general assault upon the enemy's works, but before dark I was informed of the whole plan, which was to storm the redoubts, the one by the Americans, and the other by the French. The Sappers and Miners were furnished with axes and were to proceed in front and cut a passage for the troops through the abatis, which are composed of the tops of trees, the small branches cut off with a slanting stroke which renders them as sharp as spikes. These trees are then laid at a small distance from the trench or ditch, pointing outwards, and the butts fastened to the ground in such a manner that they cannot be removed by those on the outside of them. It is almost impossible to get through them. Through these we were to cut a passage before we or the other assailants could enter.

At dark the detachment was formed and advanced beyond the trenches and lay down on the ground to await the signal for advancing to the attack, which was to be three shells from a certain battery near where we were lying. All the batteries in our line were silent, and we lay anxiously waiting for the signal. The two brilliant planets, Jupiter and Venus, were in close contact in the western hemisphere, the same direction that the signal was to be made in. When I happened to cast my eyes to that quarter, which was often, and I caught a glance of them, I was ready to spring on my feet, thinking they were the signal for starting. Our watchword was "Rochambeau," the commander of the French forces' name, a good watchword, for being pronounced *Ro-sham-bow*, it sounded when pronounced quick, like *rush-on-boys*.

We had not lain here long before the expected signal was given, for us and the French, who were to storm the other redoubt, by the three shells with their fiery trains mounting the air in quick succession. The word *up, up*, was then reiterated through the detachment. We immediately moved silently on toward the redoubt we were to attack, with unloaded muskets. Just as we arrived at the abatis, the enemy discovered us and directly opened a sharp fire upon us. We were now at a place where many of our large shells had burst in the ground, making holes sufficient to bury an ox in. The men, having their eyes fixed upon what was transacting before them, were every now and then falling into these holes. I thought the British were killing us off at a great rate. At length, one of the holes happening to pick me up, I found out the mystery of the huge slaughter.

As soon as the firing began, our people began to cry, "The fort's our own!" and it was "Rush on boys." The Sappers and Miners soon cleared

a passage for the infantry, who entered it rapidly. Our Miners were ordered not to enter the fort, but there was no stopping them. "We will go," said they. "Then go to the d-I," said the commanding officer of our corps,¹⁵ "if you will." I therefore forced a passage at a place where I saw our shot had cut away some of the abatis; several others entered at the same place. While passing, a man at my side received a ball in his head and fell under my feet, crying out bitterly. While crossing the trench, the enemy threw hand grenades (small shells) into it. They were so thick that I



ACTION AT YORKTOWN. *A French artist made this lithograph to portray the taking of Yorktown by the allied forces.*

Library of Congress

at first thought them cartridge papers on fire, but was soon undeceived by their cracking. As I mounted the breastwork, I met an old associate hitching himself down into the trench. I knew him by the light of the enemy's musketry, it was so vivid. The fort was taken and all quiet in a very short time. Immediately after the firing ceased, I went out to see what had become of my wounded friend and the other that fell in the passage. They were both dead. In the heat of the action I saw a British soldier jump over the walls of the fort next the river and go down the bank, which was almost perpendicular and twenty or thirty feet high. When he came to the beach he made off for the town, and if he did not make good use of his legs I never saw a man that did.

All that were in the action of storming the redoubt were exempted from further duty that night. We laid down upon the ground and rested the re-

mainder of the night as well as a constant discharge of grape and canister shot would permit us to do, while those who were on duty for the day completed the second parallel by including the captured redoubts within it. We returned to camp early in the morning, all safe and sound, except one of our lieutenants,¹⁶ who had received a slight wound on the top of the shoulder by a musket shot. Seven or eight men belonging to the infantry were killed, and a number wounded.

—Martin, *Private Yankee Doodle*, pp. 234–37.

Thacher provided another view of the assault, stressing the reasons why the Americans suffered fewer casualties than their French counterparts. Clearly one reason for the difference was that the Americans barely waited for their sappers and miners to clear the way, while the French—“perhaps because they were formalists”—let their own pioneers completely finish the job.¹⁷

12. “THE ASSAILANTS BRAVELY ENTERED THE FORT . . . WITHOUT FIRING A SINGLE GUN”

From James Thacher’s journal.

The enemy having two redoubts, about three hundred yards in front of their principal works, which enfiladed our entrenchment and impeded our approaches, it was resolved to take possession of them both by assault. The one on the left of the British garrison, bordering on the banks of the river, was assigned to our brigade of light infantry, under the command of the Marquis de la Fayette. The advanced corps was led on by the intrepid Colonel Hamilton, who had commanded a regiment of light infantry during the campaign, and assisted by Colonel Gimat. The assault commenced at eight o’clock in the evening [14 October 1781], and the assailants bravely entered the fort with the point of the bayonet without firing a single gun. We suffered the loss of eight men killed, and about thirty wounded The other redoubt on the right of the British lines was assaulted at the same time by a detachment of the French, commanded by the gallant Baron de Viominel. Such was the ardor displayed by the assailants, that all resistance was soon overcome, though at the expense of nearly one hundred men killed and wounded. [*In a note Thacher provided the following explanation:*]

The cause of the great loss sustained by the French troops in comparison with that of the Americans, in storming their respective redoubts, was that the American troops when they came to the abattis, removed a part of it with their hands and leaped over the remainder. The French troops on coming up to theirs, waited till their pioneers had cut away the abattis secundum artem, which exposed them longer to the galling fire of the enemy. To this cause also is to be ascribed the circumstance, that the redoubt assailed by the Americans, was carried before that attacked by the French troops. The Marquis de la Fayette, sent his aid, Major Barbour [William Barber] through the tremendous fire of the whole line of the British, to inform the Baron Viominel, that "he was in his redoubt, and to ask the Baron where he was." The major found the Baron waiting the clearing away the abattis, but sent this answer, "tell the Marquis I am not in mine, but will be in five minutes." He instantly advanced, and was within or nearly so, within his time.

Of the defenders of the redoubt, eighteen were killed, and one captain and two subaltern officers and forty two rank and file captured. Our second parallel line was immediately connected with the two redoubts now taken from the enemy, and some new batteries were thrown up in front of our second parallel line, with a covert way, and angling work approaching to less than three hundred yards of their principal forts. These will soon be mantled with cannon and mortars, and when their horrid thundering commences, it must convince his Lordship, that his post is not invincible, and that submission must soon be his only alternative. Our artillery men, by the exactness of their aim, make every discharge take effect, so that many of the enemy's guns are entirely silenced and their works are almost in ruins.

16th—A party of the enemy, consisting of about four hundred men, commanded by Colonel Abercrombie, about four in the morning, made a vigorous sortie against two unfinished redoubts occupied by the French, they spiked up seven or eight pieces of cannon, and killed several soldiers, but the French advanced and drove them from the redoubts, leaving several killed and wounded.

—Thacher, *Military Journal*,
pp. 341–43.

The same night that the allies took Redoubts Nine and Ten they worked feverishly to extend their second parallel to incorporate the captured works. By dawn on the 15th the task was finished—a remarkable twelve-hour accomplishment. Cornwallis valiantly continued his fight for survival, but the loss of the two redoubts was decisive. Furthermore, the position of the allied artillery improved considerably.

On the 16th a last-ditch effort by the redcoats to retreat to Gloucester across the York River, Long Island-style, failed. The next morning the allies bombarded the main British position with such force that the enemy's works began to collapse, rendering them incapable even of returning the fire. Thacher described the situation on the 17th:

The whole peninsula trembles under the incessant thunderings of our infernal machines; we have leveled some of their works in ruins and silenced their guns; they have almost ceased firing. We are so near as to have a distinct view of the dreadful havoc and destruction of their works, and even see the men in their lines torn to pieces by the bursting of our shells. But the scene is drawing to a close.¹⁸

Later that same day, a British officer carried a white handkerchief before the enemy lines. Firing ceased. By sunset terms of surrender had been exchanged. They were formalized the next day and signed officially two days later.

At two o'clock on the afternoon of 19 October 1781 — allegedly to the tune "The World Turned Upside Down" — British troops marched slowly onto the Yorktown battlefield to lay down their arms before the assembled allied troops. "It was a noble sight to us," recalled Joseph Martin. "The British paid the Americans, seemingly, but little attention as they passed them, but they eyed the French with considerable malice depicted on their countenances."¹⁹

As Duportail was quick to point out and Washington readily acknowledged, officers in the Corps of Engineers and the companies of sappers and miners had made significant contributions to the siege. Afterward the Chief Engineer spoke highly of Colonel Gouvion — "great marks of satisfaction can scarcely be denied this officer." He further requested promotions for himself, Gouvion, and Capt. Etienne [Stephen] Rochefontaine, a French volunteer serving as an engineer since 1778, "according to the usages established in the European service."²⁰

To Congress Washington wrote respectfully of Duportail:

His judgment in council, and well-conducted valor in the field claim the highest applause, and have secured to him the esteem and confidence of the army. His plan and conduct of the late attacks in the . . . successful siege of York . . . afford brilliant proofs of his military genius, and set the seal of his reputation; while they entitle him to my warmest thanks.²¹

Gouvion, in the Commander in Chief's words, had acted "with that energy and precision which constitute the great Engineer."²² Although Washington recognized that promotions for the three engineers who had served him at Yorktown might affect "the tranquility of the Army,"²³ he endorsed them.

13. WASHINGTON TESTIFIES TO THE ENGINEERS' DISTINGUISHED SERVICE

George Washington to the President of Congress.

Head Quarters near York, October 31, 1781

Sir

. . . I should conceal Sentiments with which I am very strongly impressed, and do Injustice to very conspicuous Merit, if I did not upon the present Occasion, offer my Testimonies to the distinguished Abilities and services both of Genl. Du portail and Lt. Colo. Gouvion; their Claim to the particular Attention of Congress, at this Juncture, is founded upon the practice of Europe; a Siege being considered as the particular province of the Corps of Engineers, and as entitling them, when attended with a Success, important in itself, and in its Consequences, to the great Military Rewards. These Officers besides are supported by a series of Conduct in the Line of the Department, which makes them not depend merely upon the present Circumstances. For these reasons I am induced to recommend Genl. Du portail's Memorial to Congress for the grades which he specifies, and the leave of Absence; the latter being by no means incompatible with the good of the Service at the present period, as I am reduced, notwithstandg. all my Efforts, to the Necessity of retiring into Winter Quarters.

—Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington*, 23:307–08.

The appeal succeeded. Duportail became a major general, Gouvion a colonel, and Rochefontaine — who would become Chief Engineer in 1794 — a major. With Congress's blessings, Duportail and Gouvion hurried home to France to enjoy a much-deserved leave.

Duportail recommended that either the Chevalier de Laumoy or the Chevalier de Cambray-Digny serve as Chief Engineer in his absence. But since both were still prisoners, the Chevalier de Villefranche assumed command and retained it until Laumoy's release in August 1782. Duportail did not return until late that year. Kosciuszko remained in the Southern Department and Rochefontaine returned north with Washington.

After Yorktown Washington returned to West Point with the main elements of his Army, including the sappers and miners. Some two thousand regulars headed south to reinforce Greene, and Rochambeau's army regrouped at Newport. De Grasse had commitments in the West Indies and

in early November, despite Washington's entreaties that he stay, the admiral sailed away.

In retrospect, the war was clearly over with the surrender at Yorktown, but in 1781 that fact was not immediately evident to the rebels. The enemy still held New York City, Savannah, Charleston, and Wilmington, North Carolina. After several months, however, events confirmed that the Yorktown defeat had indeed dealt the British the final decisive blow.