

Museum Around the Corner

Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

While Benjamin Franklin was in Paris seeking support for the American bid for independence in 1776, he met with Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier de La Fayette, better known (and much easier to say) as the Marquis de Lafayette. Franklin had little convincing to do. On December 7, 1776, the Marquis signed a contract with Silas Deane in Paris and accepted the commission as Major General in the American Army. Because Congress has no funds to transport him and other volunteers to America, he used his own wealth to buy a ship and called it La Victoire.

On June 13, 1777 the Marquis along with his friend, Baron deKalb arrived in the colonies. Heading for Charleston, the Marquis found the British in control of the port there and opted to veer a little to the north. It seems that around midnight, the Marquis landed on the shore of Winyah Bay, on Captain Benjamin Huger's summer home at North Island.

Huger was immediately on alert at the sound of his dogs barking, and soon a knock on his door caused him alarm, thinking no good could come so late at night. Upon opening his door he was astonished to see the young Marquis and his entourage. Refreshments were prepared, introductions made and soon the two aristocrats began to form a friendship to last a lifetime.

The Marquis explained that he was on his way to visit Henry Laurens near Charleston (the President of the Continental Congress and later, the only American to be imprisoned in the Tower of London), then continue on to join George Washington.

He went back to France in 1778 and returned to American shores in 1780 with French troops. He commanded American forces in Virginia during the campaign against Major General Lord Charles Cornwallis, where he played a key role entrapping the English general at Yorktown. Without the Marquis' French troops, we may not have been able to win our war for independence. He was so dedicated to the American cause that when he died in 1834, he was buried with soil from Bunker Hill poured over his grave.

Fast forward to June 13, 1952. Georgetown is celebrating the 175 Anniversary of the landing of the Marquis here. Festivities abounded throughout the day with a parade, luncheon at the National Guard Armory, special issuing of a new postage stamp commemorating the 1777 arrival, and the presentation of a sword bearing the image of the Marquis that dates to the French Revolutionary period and was carried by an officer in the French National Guard which Lafayette commanded. The presentation was made by the French Ambassador Monsieur Henri Bonnet to Mayor Sylvan Rosen.

Over the years since that grand day in 1952, the sword has disappeared. As far as anyone knows, it has not been displayed in the City Hall building on Fraser Street. If any of our readers has any recollection of when or where the sword was last seen, please contact the Historical Society on our Facebook page or at 843-545-7020.

Americans have not forgotten the contribution and friendship of the Marquis. On July 4, 1917, three months after American troops joined the Great War, words came at Lafayette's grave at Picpus Cemetery in Paris. At the close of a brief ceremony an American flag was placed over Lafayette's grave, Colonel Stanton, an aide to U.S. General John J. "Blackjack" Pershing, declared: "Lafayette, we are here."