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Members of the American Friends of Lafayette gather at the Hornsby House Pavilion after a successful (albeit pared-down) annual Yorktown Victory Celebration.

The Curious Tale of the Man Holding the Horse in the Lafayette Memorial

by David Felsen

On October 18, 1824, a brown-eyed handsome man from Kent County, Virginia with a full head of gray hair and lively expression on his face found himself among the multitudes in Yorktown for a special occasion. The elderly man had worried he was too poor to equip himself for the big trip without assistance, but somehow he found a way. After all, he was there to see an old friend. On that day, the town was welcoming the Marquis de Lafayette, a hero of the Revolutionary War, on a reunion tour of sorts. A few days later, at a grand reception for the “Nation’s Guest,” outside the Capitol in Richmond, under an arch bearing the inscription “Temple of Independence,” Chief Justice John Marshall and many other officers from the Revolutionary Army and Navy gathered to greet the general.¹ In a speech praising him for his leadership in the decisive Yorktown campaign, Justice Marshall said:

Some of us served under you in that memorable campaign; many in the course of the war. While duty required obedience, your conduct inspired confidence and love. Time which has thinned our ranks, and enfeebled our bodies, has not impaired these feelings, they retain their original rigour.²

Marshall’s words may well have applied to the man from Kent County, but it’s unlikely that he heard them or joined the other veterans during this ceremony because according to the Richmond Enquirer, “no intoxicated or colored person...[was]...permitted to enter the square.” Being the latter, the man would not have been welcome. Instead, a few days earlier he waited among the crowds in Yorktown hoping to catch a glimpse of the general. When, at last, the Marquis passed by, he didn’t disappoint. Recognizing his old comrade immediately, he stopped the procession, called out the black man’s name and embraced him.³ The man was James Lafayette, the general’s comrade in arms at Yorktown and a Revolutionary War spy.⁴

I first learned about James Lafayette this past fall when I was looking for something to do with my tenth-grade history students in Park Slope, Brooklyn. As it happens, the Lafayette Memorial in Prospect Park is close to my home, and I thought it would be fun for the students to attempt to read this piece of public history like a text and see what it could tell them about Lafayette, the sculptor, and the period in which it was made. Before setting out, I did a quick Google search to bone up on the particulars of the memorial, only to find that it was the subject of a mystery, a mystery that would eventually lead me to a tweeting reporter, the Director of NYC Parks Art & Antiquities Department, a Revolutionary War spy, and history’s greatest gift himself, *Hamilton* creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda.



Fig. 1 Daniel Chester French. *Lafayette Memorial*, Prospect Park, Brooklyn, New York. Bronze, bas-relief on stele, 1917, NYC Parks photograph.

But first, a description of the memorial itself which sits where 9th street ends on the west side of Prospect Park. It is a monumental bronze bas-relief sculpture set in a pink granite stele. It is ten feet tall (the height of a basketball rim) by thirteen feet wide, (about the length of a midsize car). It is big. In order to enter the park on 9th street, the public must walk around it. It is a meeting place, a tourist destination and a welcome spot to sit for many. Unveiled in 1917, the stele was the work of the architect Henry Bacon, while the sculpture was created by Daniel Chester French, known best for the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., dedicated in 1922.

In the piece, Lafayette stands uniformed in the center, sword drawn, coolly observing the scene. Behind him are a horse and a leafy tree. To Lafayette's right, holding the horse is a man, also in uniform, who appears to be of African descent. He seems to be leaning away from the horse to avoid his gnashing teeth. The inscription on the front of the memorial reads:

The Marquis de Lafayette; this monument was erected and presented by Henry Harteau a distinguished citizen of Brooklyn to be an enduring tribute to the memory of one who as a friend and companion of the immortal Washington fought to establish in our country those vital principles of liberty and human brotherhood which he afterward labored to establish in his own.⁵

Conspicuously absent from the description is the identity of the man holding the horse. And so it seemed almost inevitable that someone would eventually ask: who is that man? What's surprising is that it took nearly a century for it to happen on the record.

Summer Brennan Gets “Mad”

On February 18, 2016, investigative journalist and author Summer Brennan was, according to one of six tweets she launched that day, “mad.”⁶ In a subsequent New York Magazine article, “The Invisible Black Man on a Prospect Park Statue,” Brennan explained that her frustration began to mount in 2009 when she first noticed the black man in the statue holding Lafayette’s horse and wondered who he was, because the inscription on the statue made no mention of him. She visited the New York City Parks Department website hoping for answers only to find a description that read: “The work, set in a picturesque pink granite stele designed by architect Henry Bacon, features a heroic-sized Lafayette standing next to his horse.”⁷ Undaunted, Brennan continued her online research and soon found evidence that convinced her that the black man in question was none other than the famed Revolutionary War spy, James Armistead⁸ Lafayette.⁹

Believing that James had been wrongfully erased from the memorial, Brennan would periodically tweet her dismay but to no avail. Nothing changed until February 2016 after she tweeted the following: “Since it’s #BlackHistoryMonth can somebody finally pls fix the description of this statue on the @NYCParks website?” Apparently @NYCParks had considerably upped their social media game in 2016, for within the hour, they responded apologizing for the oversight and promising “to do some research this week to give James Armistead Lafayette his due.”¹⁰ After the tweets, Brennan had a phone conversation with the Director of NYC Parks Art & Antiquities, Jonathan Kuhn, who confirmed his commitment to “amend the content to fully tell the story of James Armistead Lafayette.” Two weeks later, Brennan’s magazine piece concluded on the sour note that no changes had been made to the website.¹¹

Jonathan Kuhn Keeps A Promise

To learn more, I emailed Jonathan Kuhn who kindly took the time to call and discuss the dramatic events of 2016. Kuhn confirmed that he had indeed done significant research into the man holding Lafayette’s horse not only in response to Brennan’s tweets and her article, but also spurred on in part by some unwelcome attention from *Hamilton* creator Lin-Manuel Miranda who tweeted out Brennan’s article to his two million plus followers.¹² Talk about pressure! According to Kuhn, as with many investigations, the deeper he looked the murkier things got. After discussions with, among others, the Lafayette College Director of Special Collections, Diane Shaw, Lafayette biographer, Laura Auricchio, and Donna Hassler, an expert on Daniel Chester French, Kuhn reached a conclusion about the man holding the horse and published the following description of the memorial on the NYC Parks website in March of 2016: “Some historians have speculated that the figure of the groomsman [sic] in Le Paon’s painting and other related engravings of the time is James Armistead (Lafayette).” Kuhn also included a brief bio of James and had a historical sign installed with the same text as the website adjacent to the memorial. So, at least according to NYC Parks, the groom in the painting and engravings that French based his sculpture on was *possibly* James Lafayette. Murkier indeed.

I also learned from Kuhn that a historical sign was first placed at the site in 2001 as part of NYC Parks campaign to bring a sense of community and history to parks, playgrounds and memorials. With help from local college students, NYC Parks researched, wrote, and installed over 2000 of the 24" x 36" wooden signs so that the public would know how, for example, Adam Yauch Playground got its name and who he was.¹³ The first sign at the Lafayette Memorial disappeared at some point between 2002 and 2009 (when Summer Brennan first noticed the monument) and like the website that launched Brennan's tweets, it did not include information about James. Kuhn described this in his phone call with Brennan as "an omission" and "not an intentional oversight."¹⁴

So, we have a groom on a memorial who may be James Lafayette or not. This raises a few questions: why do some historians believe it is he and when did they start believing it? Was he intentionally erased from the record, or simply overlooked? Finally, if James isn't the man in the memorial who, if anyone, could he be? Perhaps it's best to start with what the sources tell us about James and his connection to General Lafayette.

James Lafayette Earns His Freedom

James (the Lafayette will have to wait) was born into slavery in Virginia around 1748 by his own reckoning. He was the property of William Armistead, Jr., the military supply commissary for the General Lafayette during his Virginia campaign. James worked in Armistead's office and was believed to be literate. Lafayette relied heavily on spies to keep him informed of the enemy's movements. Slaves, generally ignored by soldiers, were ideal for this kind of work. At some time before July of 1781, James asked for and received Armistead's permission to volunteer to serve Lafayette and his Army of Virginia. James did this hoping that through his service to the colonies he would earn his freedom.¹⁵

Much has been claimed about exactly what services James performed for Lafayette. It's generally agreed by historians that he infiltrated General Cornwallis' camp under the guise of a forager (someone who found food for the army). During this time, thousands of runaway slaves were joining the British army because of Lord Dunmore's 1775 promise of freedom in return for service. In July and August of 1781, shortly before the pivotal battle of Yorktown, Lafayette's letters to Washington reveal that he was getting valuable intelligence about the enemy from a "servant to Lord Cornwallis."¹⁶ It is widely believed by historians that this source was James, and that he had risked his life to gain intimate access to the British Commander. In order to convince Cornwallis of his commitment to the loyalist cause, James played the role of double agent and provided the British with token intelligence about the Americans.

Meanwhile, James' reports were critical in convincing General Lafayette that Cornwallis was committed to his position in Yorktown and could be defeated if Washington's army came down from New York and the French Fleet trapped the British army at Yorktown.¹⁷ On September 5, in the Battle of the Capes, the French fleet led by the Comte de Grasse defeated and drove the British fleet back to New York, ending any hope of resupply for James' unwitting source, Cornwallis. On September 14, Washington and his army arrived and joined in the siege of Yorktown. On October 19, 1781 the British surrendered at Yorktown in the last significant

battle of the Revolutionary War, arguably making James one of the most effective double agents in the history of American warfare.

There's no indication that James was either officially recognized or rewarded at the end of the war. Instead, he remained enslaved to William Armistead, and it was only a chance encounter with Lafayette in 1784 at the Virginia State Capitol in Richmond where Armistead was a member of the House of Delegates, that saved James from this fate. To show his appreciation for James' extraordinary service, Lafayette, who held well-documented anti-slavery beliefs, kindly wrote him the following commendation:

This is to certify that the bearer by the name of James has done essential services to me while I had the honour to command in this state. His intelligences from the enemy's camp were industriously collected and faithfully delivered. He perfectly acquitted himself with some important commissions I gave him and appears to me entitled to every reward his situation can admit of.

*Done under my hand, Richmond,
November 21st, 1784.
Lafayette¹⁸*

In December of 1784, shortly after his reunion with Lafayette, James petitioned the Virginia House of Delegates for his freedom and was turned down for reasons that remain unclear even though he used the general's sterling letter of recommendation to make his case. After two more years of enslavement, in the fall of 1786, James was allowed by William Armistead to mount another emancipation campaign.¹⁹ In a petition to the Assembly, an unknown author wrote that James joined Lafayette's command because he was "Perswaded [sic] of the just right which all mankind have to Freedom, notwithstanding his own state of bondage." In other words, James joined because he believed in the promise of the Declaration of Independence for black people even if most of the founders didn't, and he thought his service would earn his liberty. The petition went on to describe how James risked his life for the revolutionary cause, cited the general's commendation as proof and simply asked that James, "be granted that Freedom, which he flatters himself he has in some degree contributed to establish; & which he hopes always to prove himself worthy." This time the petition was granted. According to the statutes, on October 11, 1786, along with a host of laws including: "An act Against Conspirators" and an "An act to encourage the apprehending of horse steelers [sic]," the Assembly passed "An act to emancipate James, a negro slave, the property of William Armistead, a gentleman." The second section of the act began, "Be it therefore enacted that the said James shall from and after the passing of this act enjoy as full freedom as if he had been born free."²⁰ We can only imagine what hearing or reading those words must have meant to James. And he wasn't alone, in the years following the war, the same assembly also saw fit to emancipate Caesar Tarrant, William Boush, Jack Knight, Saul Mathews, David Baker, Pluto, and Richard Pointer for their war service.²¹

Lest we think too highly of the legislators actions, the third section of the act to free James called for an assessment of his value so the Assembly could reimburse Armistead for his

loss out of the “general fund.”²² All sentiment aside, James had been property and his freedom was bought from his enslaver by the state in return for a service.

“A Black Man Even”

A free man now, James showed his appreciation for the general by choosing the surname Lafayette. According to research compiled by the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, even though some sources continue to refer to him as “James Armistead Lafayette,” he clearly did not choose that name, and never used it himself. In 1787, he was officially known as James Lafayette when he was listed in the property tax book of Kent County Virginia as the head of a household with three slaves in residence and some horses. It’s likely that the slaves listed were not, as some have claimed, people that James owned, but his children with his free wife, Sylvia. This bizarre set of circumstances was possible because according to Virginia law, James’ children would still have been the property of their mother’s owner if they had been born while she was enslaved.²³ James was free but there would have been constant reminders of his status as a second-class citizen.

As of 1792, James and Sylvia, like all free blacks in Virginia, would have been required to register with local officials and pay 25 cents a year for a paper certificate which they would have carried with them at all times to prove their status should the need arise. As a free black, James would have been heavily taxed and lived with the knowledge that if he failed to pay taxes he could be sold back into slavery. Without the full rights of citizenship, life by any standard must have been challenging for the war hero. While the records show that James managed to buy forty acres of land, it was too poor to yield any crops of value which is perhaps why James was still hiring himself out to work late into his 60s and why in 1818, at the age of 70, he applied to the Virginia Assembly for a State pension in return for his service during the war. Based on James’ claim that he was “poor and unable to help himself,”²⁴ the Assembly gave him \$60 and awarded him a pension of \$20 every six months which he would travel to the Capitol in Richmond to collect.²⁵ Even a slave state like Virginia had enough respect for the merit of James’ service that they couldn’t deny his right to a pension.

James was getting by on this pension in 1824 when General Lafayette returned triumphantly to Virginia as part of a twenty-four-state tour of his beloved America. Despite his race, over forty years after his secret service to the general, James’ heroism was still well enough remembered for *The Richmond Compiler* to consider a reunion a great story, “Would not the recognition of this faithful old negro by our illustrious visitor at the scene of his former glory be a spectacle worthy to be remembered,” wondered the *Compiler*. The paper even did enough digging to discover that James was “too poor to equip himself for the occasion without some aid.”²⁶

Apparently, “some aid” was provided as James made the long trip to the battlefield at Yorktown and joined the crowds hoping to see the Marquis. In a popular novel, *Edge Hill*, published in 1828, James’ exploits during the war were depicted with what can generously be described as vivid imagination. However, the final scene rings true as it shows an aged James holding Lafayette’s life-changing 1784 testimony for all to see, “this document so flattering to

the sable patriot and volunteer, was triumphantly exhibited by him at Yorktown.” The book ends with the complete text of the Marquis’ recommendation.²⁷

The *Richmond Enquirer* described the anticipated reunion between the general and his spy with effusive praise for the former and a backhanded compliment for the latter:

A black man even, who had rendered him service by way of information as a spy, for which he was liberated by the State, was recognized by him in the crowd, called to him by name, and taken into his embrace.²⁸

For the *Enquirer*, the idea that the Marquis would recognize “a black man even” was proof of the great man’s surpassing magnanimity.

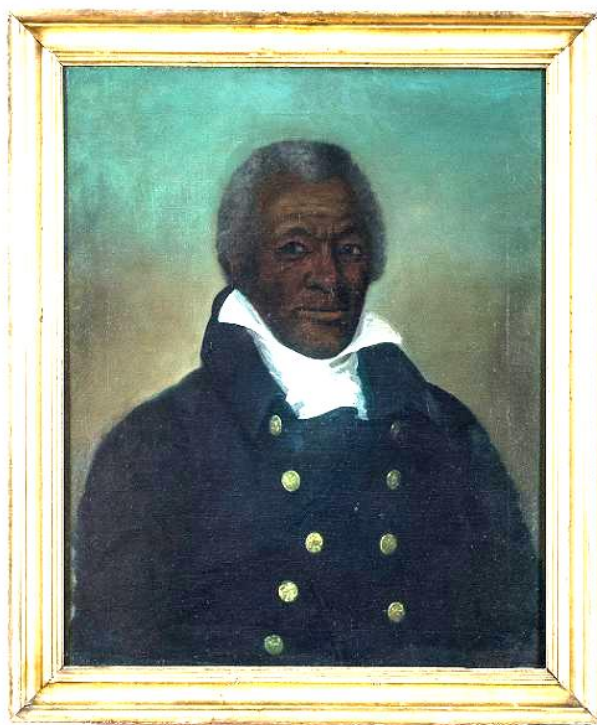


Fig. 2 John Blennerhasset Martin, *James Armistead Lafayette*.
Oil on canvas, 1824. The Valentine, Richmond, Virginia.

At some point in 1824, possibly around the time of the festivities described above, James found himself sitting for a portrait by Richmond artist John Blennerhasset Martin. How this was arranged is unclear. Born in Ireland and recently arrived in America, Martin would later be known for a series of portraits of Chief Justice John Marshall one of which hung in the U.S. Supreme Court building.²⁹ This is how Ralph Ellison, in 1974, described James in this painting that now hangs in Richmond’s Valentine Museum: “Proud and dignified, he appears with his highly individualized features forcefully drawn, a dark ruggedly handsome man looking out at the viewer with quizzical expression.” James wears a white neck cloth and a dark blue military coat. Fastened to the coat and clearly on display are silver buttons stamped with the American eagle. Ellison concludes his piece with a worthy tribute to James, portraying him as, “Asserting

an individual identity earned at the repeated risk of his life and offering an unshakeable faith in the ideal of democracy.”³⁰

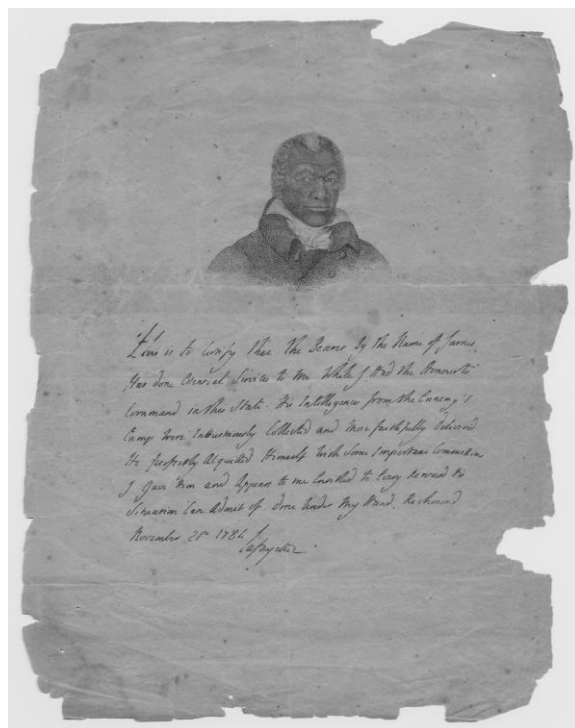


Fig. 3 Facsimile of the Marquis de Lafayette's original certificate commending James Armistead Lafayette for his revolutionary war service with portrait after John B. Martin." Engraved Broadside, ca. 1824. New York Public Library Digital Collections.

It was unusual for a black person to sit for a portrait at this time, and while we don't know exactly who or what brought James and the artist together, we do know that Martin was interested in James' valor during the War of Independence because he made an engraving of the portrait which included a facsimile of the Marquis' testimony. Martin then published broadsides of the engraving that accompanied Lafayette's grand tour celebrating the kindness of the gallant general who honored his promises even to a slave. By 1828, after he had been featured in newspapers, the subject of a portrait and a broadside, as well as the supporting character in a popular novel, it's hard to imagine a more famous black man in America than the Marquis' "essential" spy, James Lafayette. For the *other* hero of Yorktown, this would be his last moment in the sun during his lifetime.

In March of 1830, James made his last trip to Richmond to collect his \$20 pension. At some point not long after, he moved to Baltimore where, coincidentally, a twelve-year old Frederick Douglass was coming of age. On August 9 of that year, James died without fanfare. Sadly, there's no record of where he was buried or of his descendants.³¹ Four years later, when General Lafayette died, Congress was draped in black as the nation mourned the death of a hero. John Quincy Adams delivered a three-hour eulogy in the Capital in which he claimed, "The

name of Lafayette shall stand enrolled upon the annals of our race high on the list of the pure and disinterested benefactors of mankind.”³²

Erased?

In 1855, one of America's first black historians, the New England abolitionist, William C. Nell, wrote *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*.³³ A series of brief profiles of courage organized by state, the book is among the first histories devoted to black American slaves, including Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote a moving introduction in which she argued for the importance of black historiography:

Each record of worth in this oppressed and despised people should be pondered, for it is by many such that the cruel and unjust public sentiment, which has so long proscribed them, may be reversed, and full opportunities given them to take rank among the nations of the earth.

Abolitionists were well aware that in order for blacks to advance, they needed a past. James Lafayette would seem to have been an ideal candidate to join the record at this point, but in an entire chapter devoted to the contributions of black Virginians he earned no notice. Why wasn't he included?

On May 10, 1917, over eighty years later, on a bright spring day in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, thousands of Americans turned out to honor General Lafayette yet again. A clutch of top-hatted dignitaries along with the former Commander in Chief of French forces *lui-même*, Marshal Joffre, gathered around the focus of the celebration: The Lafayette Memorial.³⁴ The same memorial that would trouble Summer Brennan a century later for failing to identify the general's comrade in arms, the heroic spy, James Lafayette. Was Brennan right? Had he somehow been a victim of “erasure”?

The historiography of this period would suggest that James' story, like that of so many black Americans before and after him, may have been either unknown, or intentionally buried. At a time when the Dunning School of history could ignore or erase the achievements of blacks and the country during Reconstruction and replace it with a narrative that praised white supremacy, this seems possible. At a time when *The Birth of a Nation* could be shown in the White House it seems likely. In 1915, the year of that infamous screening, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote this devastating critique of African American historiography:

In order to paint the South as a martyr to inescapable fate, to make the North the magnanimous emancipator, and to ridicule the Negro as the impossible joke in the whole development, we have in fifty years, by libel, innuendo and silence, so completely misstated and obliterated the history of the Negro in America and his relation to its work and government that today it almost unknown.³⁵

In the climate described by Du Bois, it seems unreasonable to expect that James Lafayette would be fondly remembered by the white establishment. So, it should not have been expected to find mention of James in the memorial inscription. Or, to see a word in the *Brooklyn Eagle's*

extensive coverage of the unveiling about the man holding Lafayette's horse, let alone James.³⁶ So, who was this man? Perhaps the answer can be found in the unusual story of how the memorial came to be?

Henry Harteau was a Brooklyn merchant of French descent with an outsized affection for his hero, General Lafayette.³⁷ Later in life, he was a Parks Commissioner which likely inspired him to leave \$35,000 in his last will and testament to the City of Brooklyn to commission a statue of Lafayette in Prospect Park, "as an expression of my admiration for that noble and patriotic man and of my appreciation, in which my country shares, of his aid in establishing our republic."³⁸ Harteau's death from typhoid in 1895 kicked off years of legal wrangling by descendants who weren't eager to see their potential inheritance turned to stone, as it were. Ultimately, Harteau's bequest prevailed and the executors gave the commission to Daniel Chester French (1850-1931), the sculptor behind the Lincoln Memorial. French later recalled that Harteau envisioned a design that followed "in its general features a painting by a French artist...The painting shows a full-length figure of the youthful Lafayette with a negro holding a horse." French would keep the key elements of the painting, Lafayette, horse and "negro," but how was the identity of James Lafayette somehow invisible to the man who carved the Great Emancipator? Or, was there no identity for him to see?



Fig. 4 Le Paon, Jean Baptiste. "Lafayette at Yorktown," Oil on canvas, 1783-85, Lafayette, Pennsylvania, Lafayette College, Kirby Collection of Historical Paintings.

The piece that Harteau had in mind as a model for his statue was Jean Baptiste Le Paon's (1738-1785), *Lafayette at Yorktown* (1782) which the general modestly commissioned of himself along with an engraving by Noel Le Mire (1724-1801). Le Paon's painting shows a uniformed Lafayette standing before his spirited bay horse pointing to a distant military scene. A young black man in a bright red uniform with an earring and a plumed hat holds the horse's reins and looks to the general. Is this James Lafayette? A superficial comparison of this young man and the elderly James Lafayette in the Martin portrait provides no definitive proof. Likewise, eyeballing the Le Paon, the Martin and French's memorial all at once fails to deliver the bolt of illumination that one would hope for.



Fig. 5 (From left to right) Le Paon, *Lafayette at Yorktown*, Martin, *James Armistead Lafayette* and French, *Lafayette Memorial*. Excerpted and arranged by the author.

The fact that Lafayette commissioned the Le Paon painting would lead one to think that he must have made his ideas about the piece known, but there's no direct evidence to suggest that he intended for the black man in the painting to be James, the man he relied on at Yorktown. Accordingly, in Le Mire's engraving, *Conclusion de la Campagne de 1718 en Virginie* after Le Paon's painting, both the caption on the image and the extensive descriptive text sold with the engraving make no mention of the man gripping Lafayette's prancing bay horse. Who, then, if anyone, is he?

One possible answer is that he's not James Lafayette at all. Instead, he's either an anonymous slave or a generic black African, part of what Lafayette biographer, Laura Aurricchio, described as "a centuries-old tradition of picturing black grooms or pages in portraits of European noblemen."³⁹ The man in the bright uniform with an earring and fancy hat (an unlikely outfit for a spy) is only an accessory to complement a general, like his horse. Another example of artists using black Africans as ornaments for great white men can be found in a Le Paon painting already owned by General Lafayette of his idol George Washington with a turbaned black valet tending to his horse in the background. It was this piece that the general was hoping his portrait would accompany as part of a set when he made the commission.

So it would appear that, at least as of 1917, the man fending off the Marquis' nipping mount is not James Lafayette. The question is, what changed in the next century to convince Summer Brennan and others that he was?

“Negro History”

In 1915, just a few years before the unveiling of the Lafayette Memorial in Prospect Park, the black historian and educator, Carter G. Woodson, founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in Chicago. Woodson was the driving force behind Black History Month and, like W.E.B. Du Bois, was determined to push back against the dominant white narrative of history and give black Americans and their history a platform. Of the importance of black history, he wrote, “Not to know what one's race has done in former times is to continue always a child.”⁴⁰ In 1916, ASNLH printed the first edition of *The Journal of Negro History*, an academic publication still in print under the title *The Journal of African American History*. The quarterly was edited by Woodson and featured the work of black historians including Woodson whose piece on “The Negroes of Cincinnati Prior to the Civil War” was in the inaugural issue along with a section on historical documents like, “What the Negro was thinking in the Eighteenth Century.” There was also a review of books including one on John Wesley Cromwell’s, *The Negro In American History: Men and Women Eminent in the Evolution of the American of African Descent*.⁴¹ Written in 1914, this book makes no mention of James Lafayette in any of its nearly three hundred pages.⁴² James, alas, would have to wait until 1942 to be recognized by the black academy in Volume 27, no. 3 of the *Journal of Negro History* when Luther Porter Jackson, a black history professor from Virginia State College (founded as Virginia Normal and Industrial Institute, and now Virginia State University), referenced his Yorktown exploits in the comprehensive article “Virginia Negro Soldiers and Seaman in the American Revolution.” Jackson relied on state archives to tell the story of James’ manumission and pension, and he even included the names of the male slaves listed above who, like James, had earned their freedom through military service in the Revolution.⁴³ Jackson would make no mention of James’ appearance in works of art by Le Paon or otherwise. That would have to wait.

“The Black Presence”

The Act of Congress which brought the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. to life in 1962 called for it to “function as a free public museum for the exhibition and study of portraiture and statuary depicting men and women who have made significant contributions to the history, development, and culture of the people of the United States.”⁴⁴ With the only complete set of Presidential portraits outside of the White House, it is very much an “establishment” institution.⁴⁵ And yet, in 1973, undoubtedly influenced by the civil rights movement and as part of a wave of Bicentennial celebrations prior to 1976, the gallery made a clear statement about who belonged in its hallowed halls when it launched a monumental exhibition of over 200 works from nearly fifty collections featuring black Americans called *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution*. In words that echoed Woodson, Du Bois and Stowe before them, the exhibition catalog left no doubt about the intent of the show:

...to help restore to the national memory a historic fact that has been long suppressed or forgotten -- the living presence of black men and women during the thirty years that stretched from the martyrdom of Crispus Attucks in the Boston Massacre of 1770 to the conspiracy of Gabriel Prosser in Virginia at the turn of the century.⁴⁶

Many of the images were of anonymous people but, according to the catalog, the curators and researchers were able to supplement "their portraits with documentary evidence of their activities and characters" so as "to arrive at a fuller understanding of the *dramatis personae* of the epoch."⁴⁷ Among the well-documented figures in the exhibit were the Poet Phillis Wheatley, Crispus Attucks, martyr of the Boston Massacre, and our hero holding the horse in the Le Paon painting, identified at last, possibly for the first time, as "James Armistead Lafayette."

It would be wonderful to tell you at this point that the catalog provided the long-awaited direct evidence that this was James. Sadly, the text accompanying Le Paon's *Lafayette at Yorktown* in the catalog refers to the major events of James' life already enumerated above but makes no claim that James is the other man in the Le Paon painting, and neither does the descriptive text of the painting. It does, however, seem that the display of the Le Paon in such proximity to the biographical text of James was intended to lead those who attended the show and the readers to assume that the man holding Lafayette's horse was James. Indeed, to this day, the description of the painting on the National Portrait Gallery website describes "James Armistead Lafayette" as the other "sitter" in the scene besides the general.⁴⁸

This might explain why Ralph Ellison only a year after the exhibit in his 1974 essay "James Armistead Lafayette" confidently identified James as the man holding Lafayette's horse in the Le Paon painting which now hangs at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania. Ellison thoroughly captures James (who he calls Armistead) in all his elaborate finery, "in the lobe of his left ear the gleam of a golden earring evokes European fantasies of exotic blackamoors."⁴⁹ It's as if Ellison somehow doubts that this really is the man he's profiling:

...while Lafayette and his horse are drawn realistically, the shadowy Armistead appears a figure of fable, perhaps a lesser noble who has strayed to the New World after accompanying the blacker of the Three Wise Men to Bethlehem.⁵⁰

Ellison concludes his profile by comparing the mythical man in the Le Paon with the real man in the portrait by John B. Martin: "Armistead, the former spy, is no longer clothed in fantasy. Proud and dignified, he appears with his highly individualized features forcefully drawn..."⁵¹

In the wake of the National Portrait Gallery exhibit and the Ellison piece, James Lafayette once again became a widely recognized historical figure in the United States. He was featured in academic papers like "A Mission of the most secret and important kind: James Lafayette and American Espionage in 1781" (1981), and the Jamestown/Yorktown Foundation is supporting a well-researched biography currently in the works. He's the star of children's books like *Black Heroes of the American Revolution* (1992), and *A Spy Called James* (2016). During Black History Month he has earned his rightful place among black patriots, and there's even been an historical interpretation of James at Colonial Williamsburg since 2005.⁵² The internet has also been kind to James. A quick Google search of "James Armistead Lafayette" reveals over two hundred and forty thousand hits, which brings us to why it was so easy for Summer Brennan in February of 2016 to do some basic online research and reasonably come to the conclusion that the man holding the horse in the Lafayette Memorial was a representation of James Lafayette.⁵³ If only it were so.

In the absence of direct proof, one is left to conclude that James Lafayette is not the other man in the Le Paon painting and therefore not the man holding the horse in the Lafayette Memorial. The claim or suggestion at the 1973 National Portrait Gallery exhibit that it was James was made without any direct evidence, and generic black grooms as ornament to white European men were a common trope in paintings from this time. So, why would the National Gallery draw this conclusion? Without our hearing from them directly, it seems possible that the curators, hoping to insert more black patriots into the revolutionary narrative, simply wanted it to be him and made it so. Why the clearly documented and much more flattering portrait of the elderly James by Martin wasn't enough for the show is another question. Since the National Portrait Gallery show, many historians and galleries have been happy to go along with the innocent fiction that James is the man in the Le Paon. So why not go along? After all, it may not be him but shouldn't it be? Perhaps it should? Or, consider this: rather than reducing him to just the black man holding the white man's horse, a member of the supporting cast, wouldn't a more fitting commemoration for one of America's greatest spies be a memorial of his own? At present none exist and there are no plans. On the other end of Prospect Park from the Lafayette Memorial, NYC Parks is building a well-deserved monument to another great American, Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman to run for President. Certainly, one of America's greatest spies deserves a similar tribute.

About the Author

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¹ *Richmond Enquirer*. [volume] (Richmond, Va.), 29 Oct. 1824. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The foregoing is an attempt to imagine some of the scene from James' perspective based on primary source accounts of the day and John B. Martin's 1824 portrait.

⁵ "Prospect Park," Prospect Park Monuments - Lafayette Memorial : NYC Parks, accessed February 25, 2020, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/B073/monuments/883>

⁶ Summer Brennan, Twitter Post. February 18, 2016, 1:39pm.

⁷ Summer Brennan, "The Invisible Black Man on a Prospect Park Statue," *Intelligencer* (Intelligencer, February 29, 2016) <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2016/02/invisible-black-man-on-lafayetes-statue.html>

⁸ Armistead was the name of James' former owner, William Armistead. For this reason he is referred to in most secondary sources as "James Armistead Lafayette." However, according to the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, in the primary sources where the literate James signed his name, he signed it James Lafayette or Fayette. Out of respect for this choice, and to avoid confusion, I'll refer to him as James or James Lafayette except when quoting a source.

⁹ In an email exchange with Brennan who graciously responded despite being sick with Coronavirus, I asked her what source she used for the claim that the man holding the horse was James Armistead Lafayette, and she pointed me to the following article published in 2019: Thad Morgan, "How a Slave-Turned-Spy Helped Secure Victory at the Battle of Yorktown," History.com (A&E Television Networks, February 4, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/battle-of-yorktown-slave-spy-james-armistead>)

¹⁰ Summer Brennan, Twitter Post. February 18, 2016, 1:39pm.

¹¹ Summer Brennan, "The Invisible Black Man on a Prospect Park Statue," *Intelligencer* (*Intelligencer*, February 29, 2016)

¹² Lin-Manuel Miranda, Twitter Post. February, February 29, 2016, 5:49pm.

¹³ "Historical Signs," *Historical Signs: NYC Parks*, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/historical-signs>)

¹⁴ Summer Brennan, "The Invisible Black Man on a Prospect Park Statue," *Intelligencer* (*Intelligencer*, February 29, 2016)

¹⁵ Slave Belonging to William Armistead who entered the service of the Marquis de Lafayette asks to be Granted his Freedom, Legislative Petitions, New Kent County, 30 November 1786, Box 179, Folder 10, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁶ Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert Du Motier Lafayette, *Memoirs, Correspondence and Manuscripts of General Lafayette*. London: Saunders and Otley, 1837.

¹⁷ John Salmon, "'A Mission of the most secret and important kind': James Lafayette and American Espionage in 1781." *Virginia Cavalcade* 31 (1981): 78–85.

¹⁸ "Lafayette's Testimonial to James Armistead Lafayette." George Washington's Mount Vernon. Accessed April 8, 2020. <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/spying-and-espionage/american-spies-of-the-revolution/lafayettes-testimonial-to-james-armistead-lafayette/>.

¹⁹ Katherine Gruber, "Slave and Revolutionary War Spy James Lafayette," September 28, 2016. Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, Virginia <https://www.c-span.org/video/?415962-1/slave-revolutionary-war-spy-james-lafayette>.

²⁰ William Waller Hening, ed, "The Statutes at Large, Being a Collection of the Laws of Virginia." P. 380. Google Books. Printed by and for Samuel Pleasants, junior, printer to the commonwealth, 1823. Accessed March 7, 2020. <https://books.google.com/books?id=wOrTLRd0328C&pg=PA380#v=onepage&q&f=true>.

²¹ L. P. Jackson, "Virginia Negro Soldiers and Seamen in the American Revolution." *The Journal of Negro History* 27, no. 3 (1942): p.274. Accessed April 12, 2020. doi:10.2307/2715325.

²² William Waller Hening, ed, "The Statutes at Large, Being a Collection of the Laws of Virginia." P. 381. Google Books. Printed by and for Samuel Pleasants, junior, printer to the commonwealth, 1823. Accessed March 7, 2020. <https://books.google.com/books?id=wOrTLRd0328C&pg=PA380#v=onepage&q&f=true>.

²³ Gruber, Katherine. "Slave and Revolutionary War Spy James Lafayette," September 28, 2016. Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, Virginia

²⁴ "James Lafayette." *History Is Fun*. Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, Virginia Accessed April 9, 2020 <https://www.historyisfun.org/learn/learning-center/james-lafayette/>.

²⁵ Gruber, Katherine. "Slave and Revolutionary War Spy James Lafayette," September 28, 2016. Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, Virginia <https://www.c-span.org/video/?415962-1/slave-revolutionary-war-spy-james-lafayette>.

²⁶ Quotations in this paragraph from the *Richmond Compiler* are as quoted in Auricchio, "Lafayette at Yorktown." p. 24.

²⁷ James E. Heath, *Edge Hill, or The Family of the Fitzroyals, A Novel* (1828)

²⁸ *Richmond Enquirer*, October 29, 1824 <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024735/1824-10-29/ed-1/seq-3/>

²⁹ Kathryn Lynn Mahone, "The Irish community in antebellum Richmond, 1840-1860" (1986). Master's Theses. Paper 448.

³⁰ Ralph Ellison. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison. "James Armistead Lafayette."* New York: Modern Library, 2003.

³¹ Katherine Gruber. "Slave and Revolutionary War Spy James Lafayette," September 28, 2016. Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, Virginia <https://www.c-span.org/video/?415962-1/slave-revolutionary-war-spy-james-lafayette>.

³² John Quincy Adams, *Oration on the Life and Character of Gilbert Motier de Lafayette* (Boston: S. Colman, and Russell, Odiome & Co., 1835), 88.

- ³³ William C. Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution, with Sketches of Several Distinguished Colored Persons*. (Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1855)
- ³⁴ "10 May 1917, Page 1 - *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* at Newspapers.com." Brooklyn Public Library. Accessed March 19, 2020. <https://bklyn.newspapers.com/image/55292975/?terms=>.
- ³⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, and David Levering Lewis. *Black Reconstruction in America*. Free Press, 1998. p. 723
- ³⁶ "10 May 1917, Page 1 - *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* at Newspapers.com." Brooklyn Public Library. Accessed March 19, 2020. <https://bklyn.newspapers.com/image/55292975/?terms=>.
- ³⁷ Suzanne Spellen and Montrose Morris, "The Man Who Gave Us the Lafayette Statue in Prospect Park," *Brownstoner*, June 15, 2015, <https://www.brownstoner.com/neighborhood/clinton-hill/the-man-who-gave-us-the-lafayette-statue-in-prospect-park/>.
- ³⁸ Quotation from Henry Harteau's will in this paragraph are as quoted in Auricchio, "Lafayette at Yorktown," p. 23.
- ³⁹ Laura Auricchio, "'Lafayette at Yorktown (1782): Transformations and Interpretations.'" *"A True Friend of the Cause" Lafayette and the Antislavery Movement*, 2016, 17–31.
- ⁴⁰ Carter G. Woodson, "NEGRO HISTORY WEEK." *Negro History Bulletin* 47, no. 1 (1984, reprint of Vol. XI, April 1926): 10-11. Accessed April 15, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/44176551.
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- ⁴² John W Cromwell, *The Negro in American History*, Google Books (The American Negro Academy, 1914), <https://books.google.com/books?id=IY5GAAAAMAAJ&q=lafayette#v=onepage&q&f=false>
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- ⁴⁶ Sidney Kaplan and Emma Nogrady Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution*, Revised ed. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 3, <http://www.questiaschool.com/read/6395857/the-black-presence-in-the-era-of-the-american-revolution>.
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- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
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- ⁵² "Podcasts on History.org: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's Official History and Citizenship Website." James Armistead - Past & Present Podcasts: Colonial Williamsburg Official Site. Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://podcast.history.org/2005/09/26/james-armistead/>.
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