

Surrender of the British General Cornwallis to the Americans, October 19, 1781

Introduction

These three documents—a map, a manuscript, and a print—tell the story of the surrender of British commander Charles Cornwallis to American General George Washington. In October 1781, the successful siege of Yorktown, Virginia, by General Washington in effect ended major fighting in the American Revolution. The American Army and allied forces defeated a British force there under Lord Charles Cornwallis, and on October 17, Cornwallis raised a flag of truce after having suffered not only the American attack but also disease, lack of supplies, inclement weather, and a failed evacuation.

The map shows what Yorktown looked like before British military fortification. It displays key roads and buildings, but there are no fortifications or regimental positions shown. The map also features an intriguing endorsement: “You will deliver the town immediately,” penned apparently in haste in what appears to be Cornwallis’s hand, meaning it was probably created just before the British captured and began fortifying Yorktown in summer 1781.

On October 6, allied forces under Washington began digging the first siege line, and on October 9 the fighting began. British forces were cut off from their supply lines, and—running out of ammunition, suffering high casualties—Cornwallis attempted to evacuate his troops. The evacuation was thwarted by stormy weather, however. On October 17, Cornwallis was forced to seek a truce and cease-fire to negotiate his army’s surrender.

Cornwallis and Washington began negotiating the terms of British surrender in their correspondence of October 17, 1781. Cornwallis knew that his soldiers had been devastated by continual artillery fire from Knox over several weeks, that Clinton’s reinforcements were weeks from arriving, and that a renewal of hostilities would cause more death and bloodshed. This copy of the final list of terms, known as the Articles of Capitulation, was created by Samuel Shaw, Henry Knox’s aide-de-camp.

The final Articles of Capitulation reflect the concerns and compromises of the two sides over the surrender of British troops and the treatment of loyalists. Article 3 states that: “the garrison of York will march out to a place to be appointed in front of the posts, at two o’clock precisely, with shouldered arms, colors cased, and drums beating a British or German march. They are then to ground their arms, and return to their encampments, where they will remain until they are dispatched to the places of their destination.”

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A second major bone of contention for the British involved the treatment of loyalists. Washington tacitly acknowledged Cornwallis's right to facilitate the escape of loyalists and American deserters in Article 8 by allowing Cornwallis unregulated use of the sloop *Bonetta* for carrying dispatches to British headquarters in New York City: "The *Bonetta* sloop-of-war to be equipped, and navigated by its present captain and crew, and . . . to be permitted to sail without examination."

On the morning of October 19, Cornwallis signed two copies of the Articles, which were returned to Washington's headquarters. As if to instruct posterity as to where this victory was really achieved, Washington added a short paragraph at the end: "Done in the trenches before York, October 19th, 1781."

On October 19, 1789, at two o'clock that afternoon, the surrender ceremony commenced. This print, an 1845 lithograph, depicts the surrender at Yorktown. The print shows a defeated Lord Cornwallis surrendering his sword to General Washington. A regal and serious Washington stands with open hands ready to accept Cornwallis's offering. This transaction, however, was not the one that actually took place. In reality, Cornwallis chose not to participate in the surrender, citing illness and leaving General Charles O'Hara to lead the British troops. Washington, refusing to accept the sword of anyone but Cornwallis, appointed General Benjamin Lincoln to accept O'Hara's sword. Though Cornwallis did not really present his sword to Washington at the surrender, this print captures, if not a true moment, a patriotic feeling forged by the end of Revolutionary hostilities and the birth of a new nation from the ashes of war.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and the transcript. A comparison of the transcript with the handwritten image may be interesting. Use as much of this information as well the print of the Surrender of Cornwallis and your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions.

1. Identify and explain those aspects of the surrender that complicated the process.
2. How did General Washington demonstrate a keen understanding of the feelings of the victorious Americans regarding "the honors of war"?
3. Why did Washington allow the defeated British to use the sloop *Bonetta* to travel back and forth to New York City?
4. Some accounts of the surrender claim the British troops marched in surrender ceremonies to the tune, "The World Turned Upside Down." If this is true, why is that title extremely

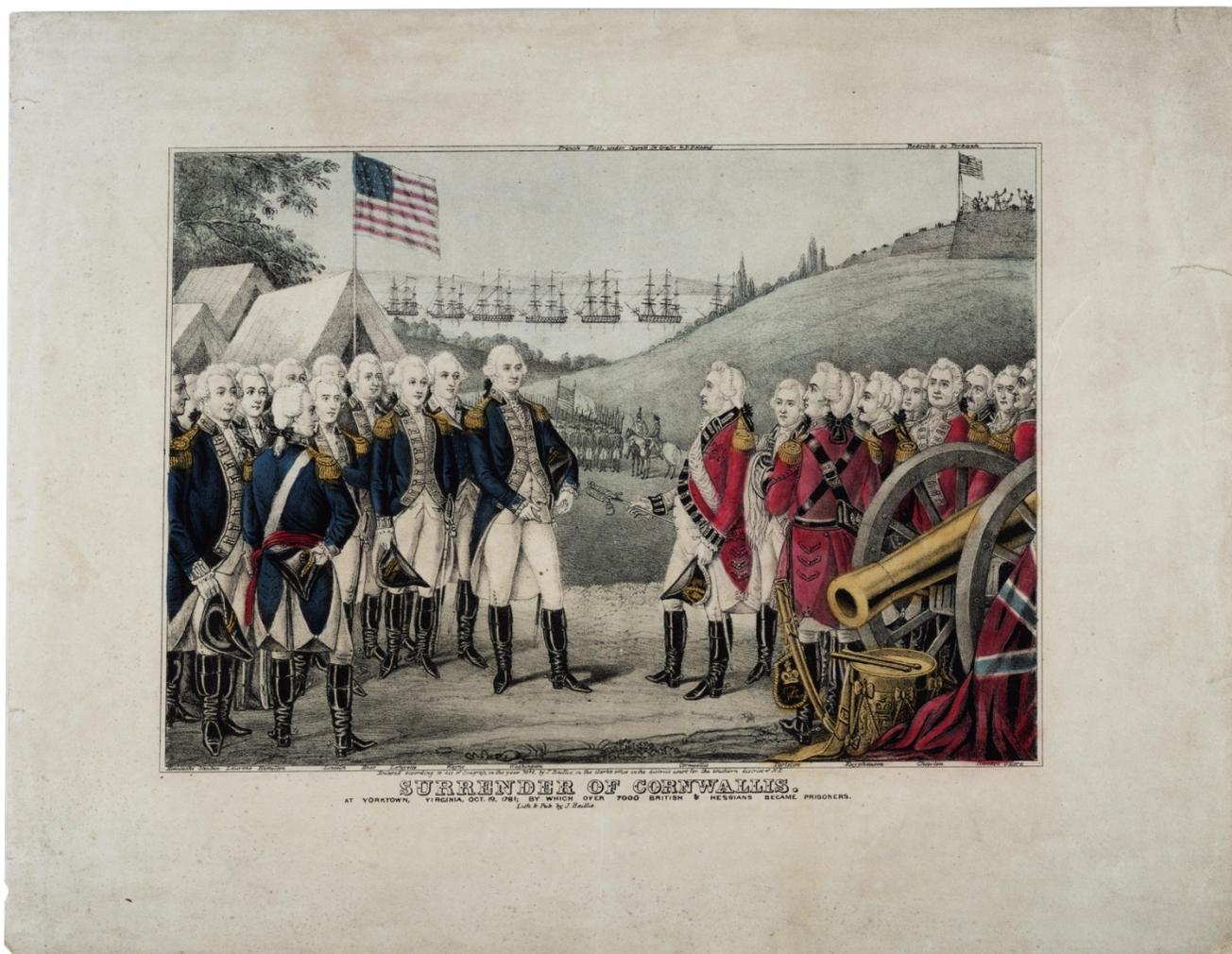
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appropriate? (Note: The lyrics to that tune can be obtained from the Internet)

5. To what extent do you accept Cornwallis's refusal to attend the surrender because he claimed illness?
6. Why do you think the artist depicted the surrender showing both Washington and Cornwallis even though Cornwallis was not there and Washington did not accept the sword?

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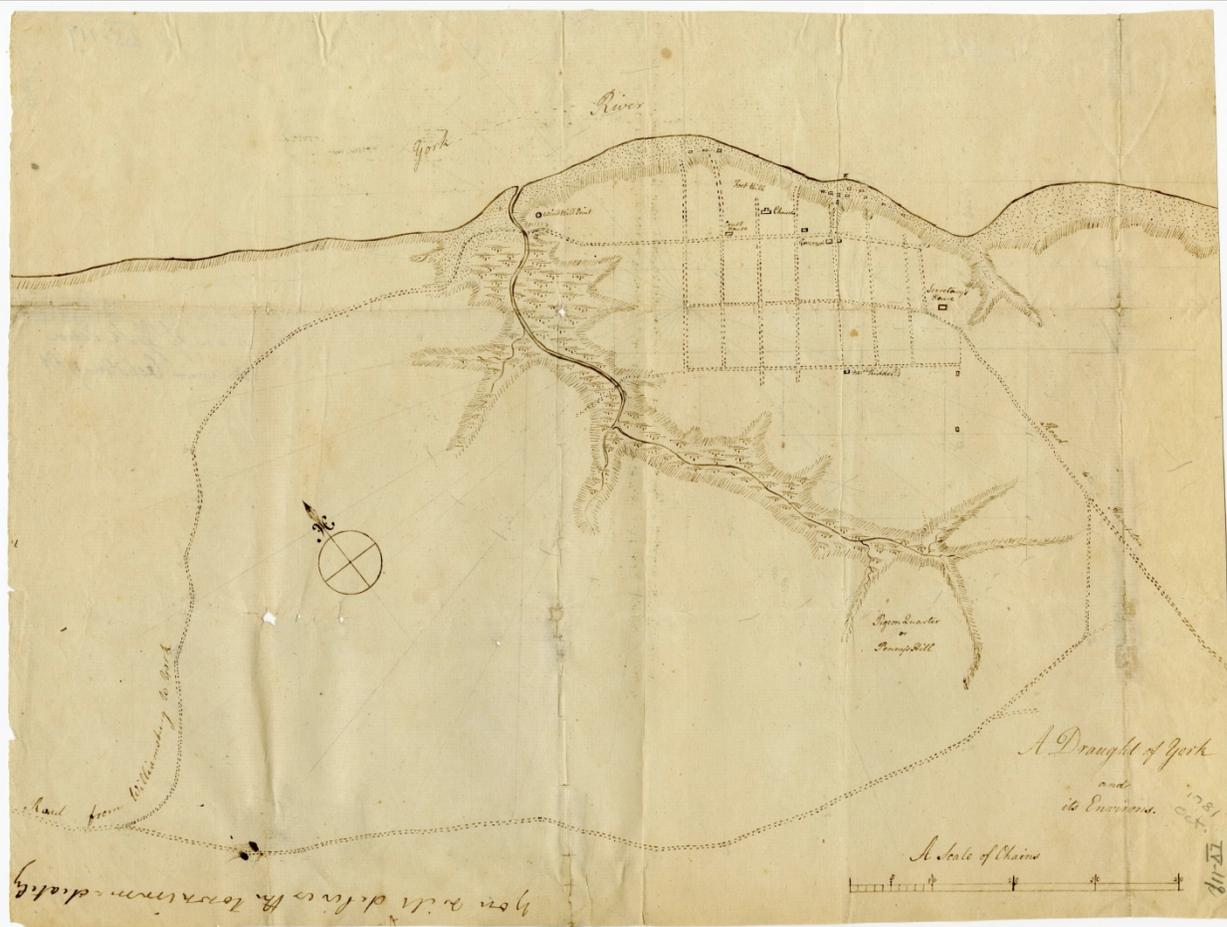
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Surrender of Cornwallis, print by James S. Baillie, 1845. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02918.02)

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Image



[Map of Yorktown, Virginia], October 1781. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02437.10669)

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Image

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Articles of Capitulation,
settled between his Excellency General
Washington, Commander in Chief of the com-
bined Forces of America and France; His
Excellency the Count de Rochambeau, Lieu-
tenant General of the Armies of France,
Great Cors of the royal and military order
of St. Louis, commanding the auxiliary
troops of His Most Christian Majesty in
America; and His Excellency the Count de
Grasse, Lieutenant General of the naval
armies of His Most Christian Majesty,
Commander of the order of St. Louis, com-
manding in chief the naval army of France
in the Chesapeake - on the one part.
- and the Right Honorable Earl Cornwallis,
Lieutenant General of His Britannic
Majesty's Forces, commanding the garrison
of York and Gloucester; and Thomas Sp-
rmonds Esquire commanding His Britannic
Majesty's naval Forces in York River, in
Virginia - on the other part.

Article 1.
The garrisons of York
and Gloucester, including the
officers and seamen of His Bri-
tannic Majesty's ships, as well
as other mariners, to surren-
der themselves prisoners of war
to the combined Forces of Ame-
rica and France. The land
troops to remain prisoners to
the United States - the navy
to the naval army of His
Most Christian Majesty.

Article 1.
Granted.

Charles Cornwallis, [Articles of capitulation settled at Yorktown], October 19, 1781. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02437.09555)

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Transcript

Charles Cornwallis, [Articles of capitulation settled at Yorktown], October 19, 1781. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02437.09555)

^v Articles of Capitulation,

Settled between his Excellency General Washington, Commander in Chief of the combined Forces of America and France; His Excellency the Count De Rochambeau, Lieutenant General of the Armies of [*inserted*: the King of] France, Great Corp of the royal and military order of S^t. Louis, commanding the auxiliary troops of His Most Christian Majesty in America; and His Excellency the Count de Graffe, Lieutenant General of the Naval Armies of His Most Christian Majesty, Commander of the order of S^t. Louis, commanding in chief the naval army of France in the Chesapeak – on the one part. – And the Right Honorable Earl Cornwallis, Lieutenant General of His Britannic Majesty’s forces, commanding the garrisons of York and Gloucester; and Thomas Symonds Esquire commanding His Britannic Majestys Naval forces in York River, in Virginia – on the other part.

^v Article 1.

The garrison of York and Gloucester, including the officers and Seamen of His Britannic Majesty’s Ships, as well as other Mariners, to surrender themselves prisoners of war to the combined forces of America and France. The land troops to remain prisoners to the United States – the navy to the naval army of his Most Christian Majesty.

Article 1.

Granted.

[2] ^v Article 2^d.

The artillery, arms, accoutrements, military chest and public stores of every denomination, shall be delivered, unimpaired, to the heads of departments appointed to receive them.

Article 2^d.

Granted.

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v Article 3^d.

At 12^o clock this day the two redoubts on the left flank of York to be delivered – the one to a detachment of American infantry, the other to a detachment of French grenadiers. The garrison of York will march out to a place to be appointed in front of the posts, at 2^o clock precisely, with shouldered arms, colors cased, and drums beating a British or German march. They are there to ground their arms and return to their encampment where they will remain until they are dispatched to the place of destination. – Two works on the Gloucester Side will be delivered at 1^o clock to detachments of French and American troops appointed to possess them. The garrison will march out at 3^o clock in the afternoon, – the cavalry with their swords drawn, trumpets sounding – and the infantry in the manner prescribed for the garrison of York. They are likewise [3] to return to their encampment until they can be finally marched off.

Article 3^d.

Granted.

v Article 4th.

Officers are to retain their side arms – both officers and soldiers to keep their private property of every kind, and no part of their baggage or papers to be at any time subject to search or inspection. The baggage and papers of officers and soldiers taken during the siege, to be likewise preserved by them. – It is to be understood that any property obviously belonging to the inhabitants of these states, in the possession of the

Article 4th.

Granted.

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garrison, shall be subject to be reclaimed.

v Article 5th.

Article 5th.

The soldiers to be kept in Virginia, Maryland or Pennsylvania, and as much by regiments as possible, & supplied with the same rations of provisions as are allowed to soldiers in the service of America. A field officer from each Nation, viz^[r] British, [and such] & Hessian, and other officers on parole, in the proportion of one to fifty men, to be allowed to reside near their respective regiments to visit them frequently and be witness of their treatment. And that these officers may receive and deliver clothing and other necessaries for them, for which [passports] are to be granted when applied for.

Granted.

Ar [4] v Article 6th.

Article 6th.

The General, Staff, and other officers, not employed as mentioned in the above article, and who chuse it, to be permitted to go on parole to Europe, to New York, or to any other American maritime posts as present in the possession of the British forces, at their own option, and proper vessels to be granted by the Count de Graffe to carry men under flags of truce to New York, within ten days from this date, if possible, and they to reside in a district to be agreed upon hereafter until they embark. The officers of the civil departments of the Army and Navy to be included in this article. Passports to go by land to be granted to those to whom vessels cannot be furnished.

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v Article 7th.

Article 7th

Officers to be allowed to keep soldiers as servants, according the common practice of the service. Servants not soldiers, are not to be considered as prisoners and are to be allowed to attend their Master.

v Article 8th.

Article 8th.

The [Bonetter] sloop of War to be equipped and navigated by its present captain and crew, and left entirely at the disposal of Lord Cornwallis from [5] from the hour that the capitulation is signed, to receive an Aide de Camp to carry dispatches to his H. Clinton – and such soldiers as he may think proper to send to New York, to be permitted to sail without examination, when his dispatches are ready. His Lordship engaging on his part that the ship shall be delivered to the order of the Count de Graffe, if she escapes the dangers of the seas – that she shall not carry off any public stores – Any part of the crew that shall be deficient on her return, and the soldiers passengers, to be accounted for on her delivery.

v Article 9th.

Article 9th.

The traders are to [preserve] their property and to be allowed three months to dispose of or remove them. And those traders are not to be considered prisoners of war.

The traders will be allowed to dispose of their effects. The allied army having the right to pre-emption. The traders to be considered as prisoners of war on parole.

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v Article 10th.

Natives or inhabitants of different parts of this Country at present in York or Gloucester, are not to be punished on account of having joined the British Army.

Article 10th.

This article cannot be assented to – being altogether of civil resort.

Ar [6] V Article 11th.

Proper [*struck: articles*] [*inserted: hospitals*] to be furnished for the sick and wounded – they are to be attended by their own surgeons on parole, and they are to be furnished with medicines and stores from the American hospitals.

Article 11th.

The hospital stores now in York and Gloucester shall be delivered for the use of the British sick and wounded – passports will be granted for procuring them further supplies from N. York, as occasion may require – and proper hospitals will be furnished for the reception of the sick and wounded of the two garrisons.

v Article 12th.

Waggons to be furnished to carry the baggage of the officers attending the soldiers, and to surgeons when traveling on account of the sick – attending the hospitals at public expence.

Article 12th.

They will be furnished if possible.

v Article 13th.

The shipping and boats in the two harbours, with all their stores, guns, tackling and apparel, shall be delivered up in their present state to an

Article 13th.

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officer of the navy, appointed to take possession of them, previously unloading the private property, part of which had been on board for Security during the Siege.

Granted

Ar [7] ^v Article 14th.

Article 14th.

No article of the of the capitulation to be infringed on pretext of reprisal, and if there by any doubtful expressions in it, they are to be interpreted according to the common meaning and acceptance of the words.

Done at York in Virginia, this 19th day of October 1781.

Corwnallis

Th^{os}. Symonds

[*docket*]

Article of Capitulation

19 Octo 1781.