

The Battle of Yorktown

In early 1781, things were not going well for the Patriots. Congress had no money to pay soldiers or supply the army. The British controlled most of the South, and they also held Philadelphia and New York City. How did the Patriots turn things around?

Hoping to stay in contact with the British naval fleet, Lord Cornwallis, now the chief British commander, set up a base at Yorktown, Virginia. From there he could be supplied by land or sea and could dispatch troops anywhere quickly. Washington, sensing an opportunity to trap the British Army, ordered Lafayette to keep Cornwallis occupied at Yorktown. He then combined his army with 4,000 French troops under the command of Comte de Rochambeau and marched south as the French rushed naval forces to seize control of the Chesapeake Bay.

The British fleet sent to rescue Cornwallis was defeated, and when the British attempted to escape by land, they were sent reeling back into their fortifications. Cornwallis found himself trapped by 16,000 American and French soldiers.

Around the clock, the Patriots poured shells into the British fortifications at Yorktown. In a daring night attack, Alexander Hamilton and Rochambeau captured two key British forts called 9 and 10, cutting off Cornwallis' final route of escape.

On the morning of October 17, 1781, Cornwallis penned the following words to Washington. "Sir, I propose a cessation of hostilities for twenty four hours, and that two officers be appointed by each side to settle terms for the surrender of the posts at York and Gloucester."

A lone British drummer boy and a red-coated officer with a white handkerchief began walking toward the Americans. After a week of constant cannon fire, it fell eerily silent. The only sound was the cadence of the drum.

On the 19th, Washington signed the final surrender terms just as a British fleet set sail from New York with thousands of reinforcements for what they were calling the all-or-nothing battle. But the battle had already been fought.

Later that day, 8,000 British troops surrendered in an open meadow. At their head was a general named Charles O'Hara (Cornwallis couldn't bring himself to surrender to the Americans). The British band played an appropriate tune as they laid their weapons down; "The World Turned Upside Down".



The Americans stood on one side of the road with the French on the other. Lafayette noticed that every British soldier faced the French in an attempt to block out the Americans. Lafayette, disgusted that the British would dishonor the Americans, snapped an order to his division's band. With a roll of the drums and a squeal of fifes the band exploded into a bold rendition of "Yankee Doodle".

The British instinctively swung their heads and stared into the eyes of their ex-subjects, but their general continued trying to ignore the Americans, offering his sword to Rochambeau. The French general pointed across the road to Washington who in turn gestured to his second in command, Benjamin Lincoln. Lincoln pointed to the open field where the Recoats were piling their muskets. Afterwards, Lafayette quickly rushed to his tent to send word to France. In a letter to a friend he wrote, "The play sir, is over."

Multiple Choice: *Select the choice that completes the statement or answers the question.*

1. _____ Which of these was the general commanding the French troops who assisted the Americans at Yorktown?
 - a. Lord Cornwallis
 - b. Comte de Rochambeau
 - c. George Washington
 - d. Marquis de Lafayette

2. _____ Who commanded the British troops that surrendered at Yorktown?
 - a. William Howe
 - b. Henry Clinton
 - c. Charles Cornwallis
 - d. John Burgoyne

3. _____ What is the significance of the Battle of Yorktown?
 - a. It was the final major battle of the war, and the Americans were forced to surrender.
 - b. It was the first time that rifled barrels were used in regular combat.
 - c. It was the last time that bayonets were used in regular combat.
 - d. It was the final major battle of the war, and it marked the surrender of the primary British Army.

4. _____ Which of these correctly identifies the song played by the British band during the surrender ceremony?
 - a. "Yankee Doodle"
 - b. "God Saved the King"
 - c. "We'll Meet Again"
 - d. "The World Turned Upside Down"

5. _____ Which of these messages was sent to a friend by the Marquis de Lafayette at the conclusion of the war?
 - a. "The play sir, is over."
 - b. "We have not yet begun to fight."
 - c. "Victory or death."
 - d. "We have met the enemy, and they are ours."

TRUE/FALSE: *Indicate whether the statement is true or false. If the statement is false, write the correct word or phrase in the space provided to make the statement true.*

6. _____ The chief British commander who set up a base at Yorktown, Virginia was William Howe. _____

7. _____ Cornwallis sent a note to Rochambeau asking for a meeting to surrender. _____

8. _____ Washington signed the final terms of surrender on October 19th, 1781. _____

9. _____ The British general who led the surrender was Charles O'Hara, because Cornwallis couldn't bring himself to surrender to the Americans. _____

10. _____ Lafayette ordered his band to play "God Bless America" during the British surrender. _____

Name _____

Guided Reading: *Fill in the blanks below to create complete sentences.*

1. From Yorktown, Virginia, Lord Cornwallis could be supplied by _____ and dispatch troops anywhere quickly.
2. General Washington sensed an opportunity to trap the British at Yorktown, so he ordered _____ to keep Cornwallis occupied.
3. After the British fleet sent to rescue him was beaten back, Cornwallis found himself trapped by 16,000 American and _____ soldiers.
4. In a daring night attack, _____ and Rochambeau captured two British forts.
5. On _____, Cornwallis wrote a note to Washington, agreeing to surrender.
6. Washington signed the final terms of surrender just as a British fleet with thousands of _____ set sail for an “all or nothing battle”.
7. On October 19th, 1781, _____ British troops surrendered in an open meadow.
8. During the surrender, the British soldiers faced the French, refusing to look at the _____.
9. The Marquis de Lafayette ordered his band to play _____.
10. The British general, who was surrendering, first attempted to offer his sword to _____.

Vocabulary Check: *Select the option that best identifies the use of the underlined word.*

1. _____ In the second paragraph, the word dispatch means
 - a. To put to death.
 - b. To dismiss (a person), as after an audience.
 - c. To send off or away with speed, as a messenger, telegram, body of troops, etc.
 - d. To transact boldly or speedily.

2. _____ In the third paragraph, the phrase reeling back seems to mean
 - a. A rotatory device attached to a fishing rod.
 - b. To unwind.
 - c. Withdrawing without delay or hesitation; immediately.
 - d. To sway or rock under a blow, shock, etc.

3. _____ “Sir, I propose a cessation of hostilities for twenty four hours, and that two officers be appointed by each side to settle terms for the surrender of the posts at York and Gloucester.” What did Cornwallis mean by cessation?
 - a. A temporary or complete stopping; discontinuance.
 - b. An act or instance of seceding.
 - c. The state of being renewed.
 - d. To add to, support, or uphold.

4. _____ “After a week of constant cannon fire, it fell eerily silent.” In the previous sentence, the word eerily implies
 - a. According to or depending on custom; usual; habitual.
 - b. Unlawful; against tradition.
 - c. Able to be foretold or declared in advance.
 - d. Uncanny, so as to inspire superstitious fear; weird.

5. _____ “The British instinctively swung their heads and stared into the eyes of their ex-subjects...” In the previous passage, the word instinctively implies
 - a. According to or depending on custom; usual; habitual.
 - b. According to new practices.
 - c. Prompted by or resulting from or as if from instinct; natural; unlearned.
 - d. Not reacting visibly to something that might be expected to produce manifestations of an emotion or feeling.

Student Response: *Please respond to the questions raised below. A thorough response should be a paragraph of at least three to five complete sentences.*

6. Why do you suppose that the surrendering British soldiers at Yorktown could bring themselves to surrender to the French (their traditional enemies), but not the Americans? In your opinion, why did George Washington point to his second in command when O’Hara offered the general his sword?

Name _____

Battle of Yorktown Multiple Choice:

- 1) B
- 2) C
- 3) D
- 4) D
- 5) A

True/False:

- 6) F – Lord Cornwallis
- 7) F - Washington
- 8) T
- 9) T
- 10) F – “Yankee Doodle”

Guided Reading for Battle of Yorktown:

- 1) Land or Sea
- 2) Lafayette
- 3) French
- 4) Alexander Hamilton
- 5) October 17, 1781
- 6) Reinforcements
- 7) 8,000
- 8) Americans
- 9) “Yankee Doodle”
- 10) Rochambeau

Vocabulary Check:

- 1) C
- 2) C
- 3) A
- 4) D
- 5) C

Student Response for Battle of Yorktown:

- 1) Responses will vary, but students might mention that the British thought it was more honorable to lose to a traditional power or that they were sending a message that the Americans could not have won without French help. Washington pointed to his second in command because the commanding British general, Cornwallis, dishonored the Americans by sending O’Hara to surrender the army. Lincoln was the second in command of the American army at Yorktown.