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Figure 1: The British surrender their Armies to General Washington after their defeat at York Town in Virginia, October 1781.

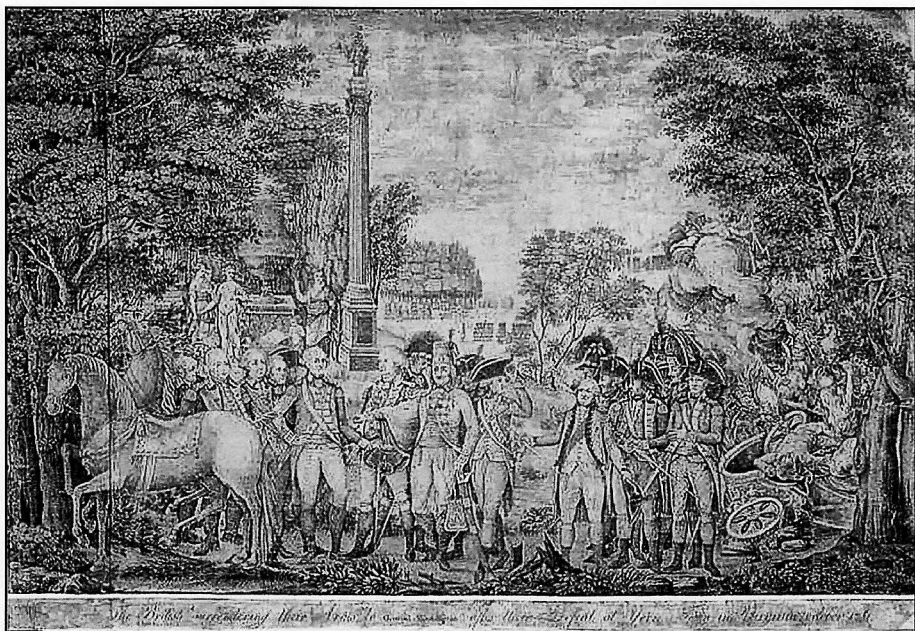
The Arlington House Engravings of the British Surrender at Yorktown: Too Often Overlooked?

BY DEAN A. DEROSA

In the morning room and in the second-floor hall of Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial (the US National Park Service historical site on the grounds of Arlington National Cemetery), hang two framed engravings, entitled “The British Surrendering their Arms to Gen. Washington after their Defeat at Yorktown in Virginia, October 1781.” The two art pieces, first published in 1819, are drawn by John Francis Renault and engraved by Tanner, Vallance, Kearny & Co. The morning room engraving is in color, while the second floor engraving is inscribed in black ink (Figure 1). The caption at the base of the two engravings reads, “To the defenders of American independence, this print is most respectfully inscribed by their fellow citizen, Jn. Fcis. Renault, assistant secretary to the Count de Grass, and engineer to the French Army, at the siege of York.” Thus, the twin engravings are drawn by a participant in the Siege of Yorktown, if not also a witness to the historic British surrender and subsequent surrender ceremony, which for all intents and purposes ended major hostilities during the American Revolution.

The allegorical background of the engravings depicts not only the field upon which the British, Continental, and French armies stood during the surrender ceremony, but also a number of classical images and symbols of human discord, victory, and liberty, described in an 1804 prospectus apparently in reference to an early, circa 1810-1815 version of the Renault drawing (Figure 2) upon which the published engraving would eventually be based, that are largely lost upon us today. Except for captions identifying the most important historical figures who participated in the Yorktown surrender ceremonies, some other prominent individuals in the engravings are also almost lost upon us today – the major leaders of the opposing combatants in the Yorktown siege. No doubt, the individuals and allegorical imagery would have been familiar to George Washington Parke Custis, the master of Arlington House, and other knowledgeable men of his generation, to whom the American Revolution still loomed especially large in the history of the then young and fast-expanding United States.

Still, with the aid of the engravings’ captions, notes provided by the aforementioned period prospectus and the US Library of Congress description



Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Figure 2: The British surrender their Armies to General Washington after their defeat at York Town in Virginia, October 1781.

of the artwork, and a little investigation into the history of the British defeat at Yorktown, we can identify with a reasonably high degree of certainty all the individuals depicted in the two Renault-Tanner *et al.* engravings hanging at Arlington House.

The individuals in the two engravings are presented in three groups, plus, at the far left, Washington's white charger (Blueskin) attended by Washington's long-time enslaved valet and personal companion, William (Billy) Lee. Note that William Lee attending Blue Skin does not appear in Renault's 1810-1815 version of the surrender scene (along with some other, small differences in the characters illustrated), indicating that Renault or possibly another artist refined the original drawing before the black-ink and color images were finally engraved.

By group, from left to right, we have in the Arlington House engravings:

Group 1: *An unidentified civilian* (specified in the 1804 prospectus as an interested farmer), Gen. Benjamin Lincoln (Washington's second-in-command), Comte de Rochambeau (Commander-in-Chief, French Expeditionary Force), Lt.

Col. Alexander Hamilton, *An unidentified Continental Army officer*, and Gen. George Washington (Commander-in-Chief, Continental Army).

Group 2: Gen. Henry Knox (Continental Army), *An unidentified Continental Army dragoons officer*, Duc de Lauzun (Colonel, French Expeditionary Force), Gov. Thomas Nelson (also General, Virginia Militia, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence), and Marquis de Lafayette (General, Continental Army).

Group 3: Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton (British Dragoons), Gen. Charles Cornwallis (Commander, British Army Southern Forces), Lt. Col. Robert Abercrombie (British Army), Gen. Charles O'Hara (Cornwallis' second-in-command), Com. Thomas Symonds (Royal Navy), Lt. Col. Thomas Dundas (British Army), and Lt. Col. Lord Chewton (George Waldegrave, Earl Waldegrave, Viscount Chewton -- British Army).

Although Renault participated in the Yorktown siege and likely attended the surrender ceremony, his engravings do not accurately document the participants in the ceremony. Foremost, they misrepresent that Lord Cornwallis personally attended the surrender ceremony. By all historical accounts, Cornwallis begged off attending the ceremony for the reason of being "indisposed" (he may well have been ill given his squalid living conditions at the time of the surrender, plus sheer exhaustion from the stress of command during the siege). In his place, Lord Cornwallis designated his second-in-command, Gen. O'Hara, to surrender his sword at the ceremony. It is not clear that the Duc de Lauzun played a central role in the surrender ceremony, namely, directing Cornwallis to surrender his sword to George Washington. Further, it is widely understood that Gen. O'Hara surrendered Cornwallis' sword not to George Washington, but rather, at Washington's insistence, to Gen. Lincoln, Washington's second-in-command. This followed the military protocol of the 18th Century, namely, that equals surrender to equals.

Finally, in addition to Cornwallis, other notables in the engravings might not have attended the surrender ceremony at Yorktown. An important case in point is Lt. Col. Tarleton -- "Bloody Tarleton" as he was known to many in the Continental Army who had opposed his dragoons during the preceding year or more of fighting in the Carolinas and Southern Virginia. During the Yorktown siege, Tarleton was headquartered at the Gloucester Point, across the York River from Yorktown, where he was effectively pinned down by French forces (under Lauzun). Following Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown, Tarleton would surrender his forces to the American and French forces at Gloucester Point in a separate ceremony.

Still, the Renault engravings at Arlington House most likely convey a great deal of factual information and accuracy as to the uniforms and even

possibly the likenesses of the individuals represented. Moreover, all the individuals were undoubtedly important participants in the Siege of Yorktown or attended the historic surrender ceremony. In this vein, Banastre Tarleton may be distinguished by his signature “Tarleton helmet” and the absence of two fingers on his right hand (lost at the Battle of Guildford Court House earlier in 1781). And, the uniforms of Lord Cornwallis and Lord Chewton are clearly distinguished from those of the other British officers by their star insignias, presumably denoting their peerages and their membership in the Order of the Garter.

Finally, what can be said of the three remaining, unidentified individuals in the Renault engravings? Given historical records, we might attempt to reasonably guess their identity.

First, although specified in the 1804 prospectus to be an “interested farmer,” the unidentified civilian in Group 1, particularly given his more formal than casual attire, might more reasonably be considered “Secretary Nelson,” the Secretary of Colonial Virginia and the uncle of Gov. Thomas Nelson. His was the prominent brick house in Yorktown, the Nelson House, used by Gen. Cornwallis as headquarters during the siege until heavy artillery bombardment by the combined American and French forces made its continued use untenable. Under a flag of truce during the siege, Secretary Nelson carried communications from Lord Cornwallis to General Washington and joined the allied forces.

Second, the other unidentified Continental Army officer in Group 1 is suspected to be Prussian-born Gen. Friedrich von Steuben, who was so instrumental in beginning the proper training of the Continental Army in 1778. Like Gens. Knox, Lafayette, and Lincoln, and Gov. Nelson, he commanded a major division of the American forces during the Yorktown siege, and he certainly attended the subsequent surrender ceremony.

Last and most interestingly, we come to the unidentified American dragoons officer in Group 2. This cavalryman is likely Lt. Col. Henry Lee III -- Light-Horse Harry Lee, the father of Robert E. Lee and the recipient of a Continental Congress Gold Medal for the actions and bravery of his dragoons during the Battle of Paulus Hook in 1779. He did not participate in the Yorktown siege. However, he did attend the British surrender at Yorktown, having arrived shortly before the ceremony with dispatches to George Washington from Gen. Nathanael Greene, head of the Southern Campaign of the Continental Army. Light-Horse Harry Lee faced Banastre Tarleton and his British dragoons on more than one battlefield during the Southern Campaign, explaining Renault’s juxtaposition of the two helmeted figures in the engravings. Moreover, Lee was by far the most prominent American cavalry officer in attendance at the British surrender.

It is undocumented whether either of the two Renault-Tanner *et al.* engravings of the British surrender at Yorktown ever hung at Arlington House. However, the two engravings found at Arlington House today appropriately reflect the historic and patriotic themes of the artwork that George Washington Parke Custis is known to have owned and displayed proudly in his “Washington Treasury.” In addition to representing the pinnacle of George Washington’s achievements during the Revolutionary War, the engravings of the British surrender at Yorktown would have held special meaning to Mr. Custis and his family on at least two more counts. First, they depict the historic event that unfolded shortly before the unfortunate and related death of Mr. Custis’ father, John Parke Custis, who fatally contracted “camp fever” during the Battle of Yorktown while serving as a civilian aid to his step-father, George Washington. And second, the Custis and Lee families at Arlington House would have surely recognized Light-Horse Harry Lee, to whom Mr. Custis devoted an entire chapter in his popular volume of “Washington Recollections” (compiled and published posthumously by his daughter, Mary Custis Lee, with the assistance of Benson Lossing), among the other historic individuals portrayed in the Renault-Tanner *et al.* engravings of the British Surrender at Yorktown.

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