

# James Armistead

James Armistead was born in the 1700s. He was enslaved by a man named William Armistead in Virginia. Virginia would turn out to be an important stage for what would effectively be the last major conflict of the Revolutionary War.

In 1781 Major General Marquis de Lafayette arrived in Yorktown, VA—on March 14th of that year. Lafayette hoped to capture Benedict Arnold, who was by now a Brigadier General in the British army.

In May of 1781, Major General Charles Cornwallis, on the British side, also arrived in Virginia.

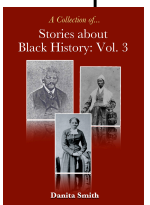
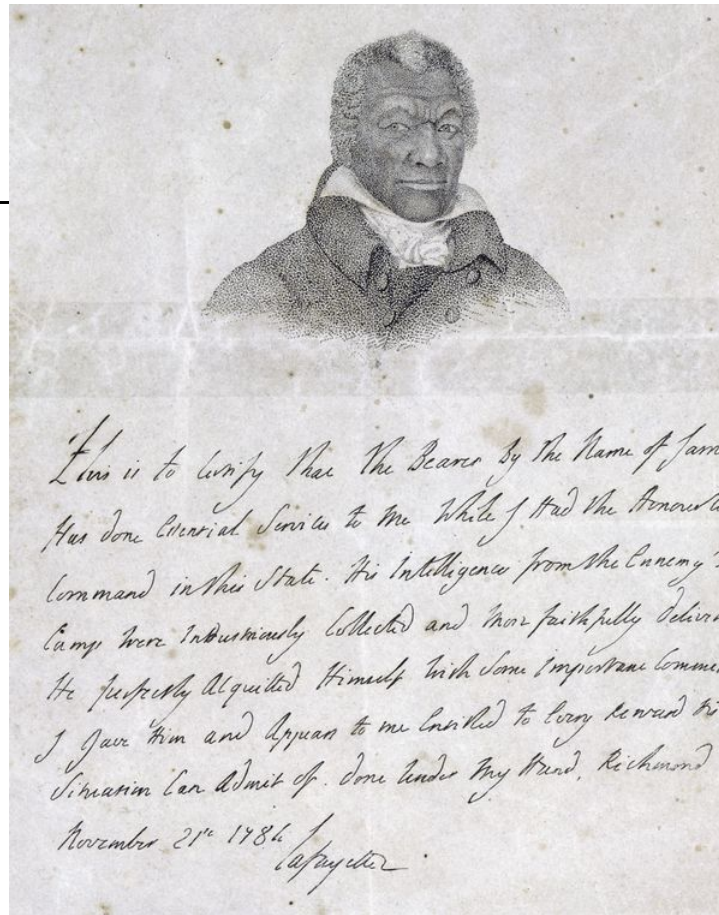
Cornwallis was in command of thousands of troops. He hoped to stop the flow of rebels from Virginia to other parts of the South. He also hoped to deal a blow to the economy of Virginia, as Virginia's tobacco and food crops were partly used to help fund the Revolutionary War.

Cornwallis made his presence felt and on July 9, 1781 Marquis de Lafayette wrote:

“This devil Cornwallis is much wiser than the other generals with whom I have dealt. He inspires me with a sincere fear, and his name has greatly troubled my sleep.”

While all of this was going on, James Armistead was allowed to “volunteer” for the Revolutionary War even though he was an enslaved man. He was a member of the Continental Army, but would soon be called upon to do other tasks.

When Marquis de Lafayette met James Armistead he realized that Armistead (and others) could be a valuable asset to him as a spy.



# James Armistead

Lafayette instructed James Armistead to go to the British side and to pretend to be running away from enslavement.

You see in 1775 the British, under Lord Dunmore in Virginia, declared all indentured servants and “Negroes” to be free who were willing and able to bear arms for “His Majesty’s Troops”—those who belonged specifically to Rebels (Loyalists were not included).

“...I do hereby farther declare all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels,) free that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining his Majesty's Troops as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper Sense of their Duty, to his Majesty's Crown and Dignity.

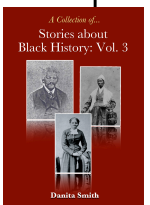
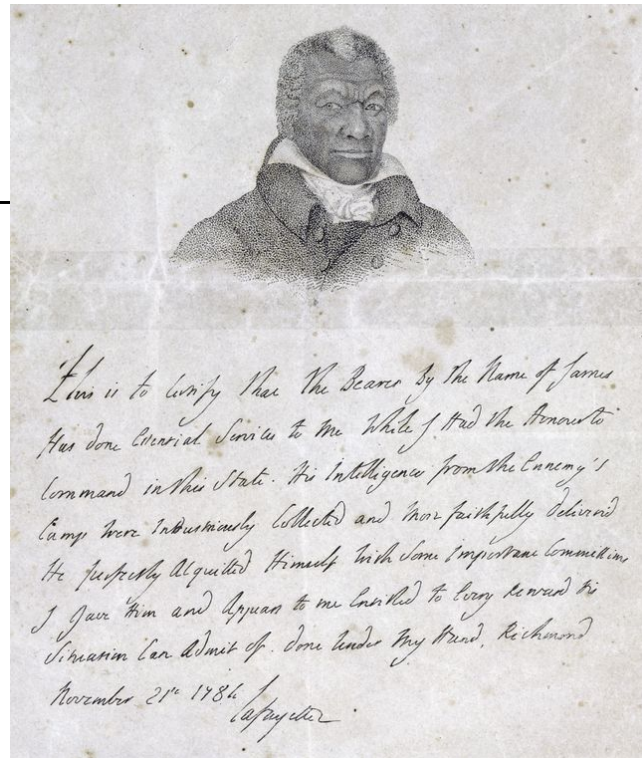
GIVEN under my Hand on Board the Ship WILLIAM, off Norfolk, the 7th Day of November, in the sixteenth Year of his Majesty's Reign.”

- Lord Dunmore, November 1775

So Lafayette decided that James Armistead could be the perfect spy if he could pretend to runaway and gain access to enemy’s camp.

James Armistead did go to British encampments and he was so well received and believed that Benedict Arnold and General Cornwallis made use of his skills.

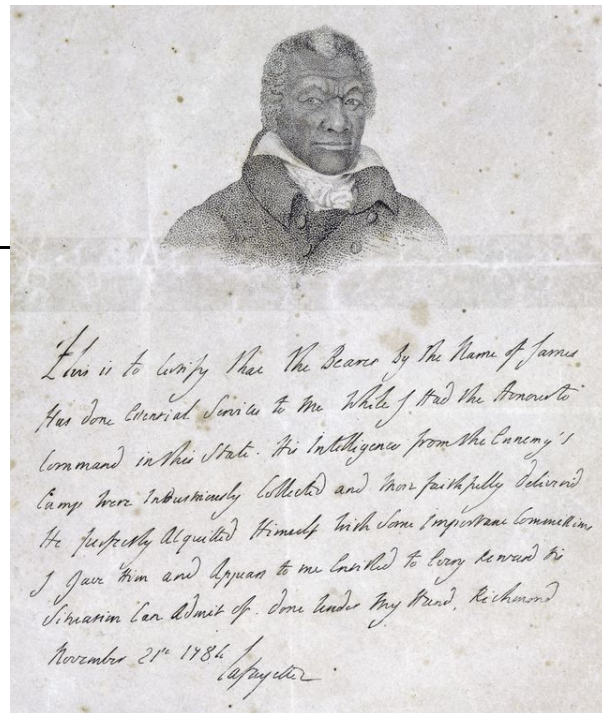
Reportedly he was asked to help guide British troops around the area. He also became a servant of several commanders, including Cornwallis himself. In this role he had access to secret information and would often funnel that information to Lafayette on the American side.



# A Double Spy

General Cornwallis believed Armistead so much that he asked Armistead to spy on the Americans and on Lafayette.

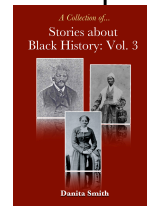
As a double spy James Armistead could freely go to the American side (because they knew he was spying for them) and he could also freely go to the British encampment because they believed he was actually spying for them.



Although he does not mention James Armistead's name, most believe that this letter, dated July 31, 1781, from Marquis de Lafayette to George Washington speaks of James Armistead's espionage. He wrote:

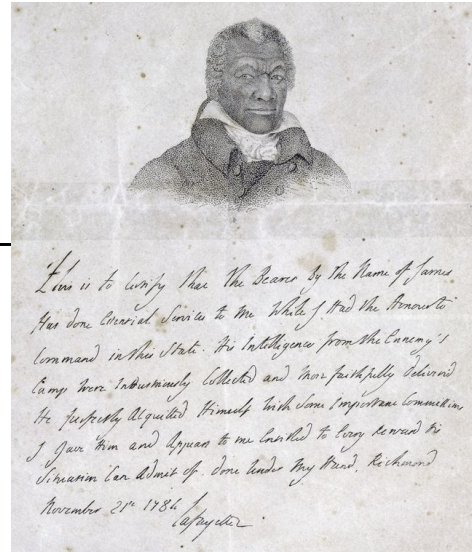
“My Dear General

A Correspondant of Mine Servant to Lord Cornwallis writes on the 26th july at Portsmouth, and Says His Master, Tarleton, and Simcoe are Still in town But Expect to Move—the Greatest Part of the Army is Embarked—There is in Hampton Road one 50 guns ship, and two Six and thirty Guns frigats &c. 18 Sloops loaded with Horses—There Remain But Nine vessels in Portsmouth who Appear to Be getting Ready—Mylord's Baggage is yet in town—His lordship is So Shy of His papers that My Honest friend Says He Cannot get at them—there is a Large Quantity of Negroes—Very Valuable indeed—But No vessels it Seems to take them off—What Garrison they leave I do not know—I shall take Care, at least, to keep them Within Bounds—the troops I Mentionned in My last to Have Crossed over in Nineteen Boats from Portsmouth to Norfolk were it is Said Going to Sowel's Point—a Good Embarking place—from what is Said of the Negroes, tho' it is not very plain, I Should Rather think they are Working on the Water Side—My Accounts from Portsmouth are later than the fellow's Epistle, But as a Servant Has opportunities to Hear I thought it was Worth Communicating to Your Excellency.”





# Valuable Informant



Yes, Marquis de Lafayette notes that there was a large quantity of Negroes with the British and that they were “Very Valuable indeed”—referring to them as if they were property and not people seeking to obtain their own freedom—and he appears to want to keep them from getting away, “But No vessels it Seems to take them off—What Garrison they leave I do not know—I shall take Care, at least, to keep them Within Bounds...”

James Armistead gave Lafayette all kinds of information, including specifics about equipment and plans. In return, Lafayette also gave James Armistead false information to give to British commanders, which they did use to make decisions that ended up being very important as it relates to the Battle of Yorktown.

Of course, as you know, General Cornwallis surrendered at the Battle of Yorktown on October 19, 1781. This was the last major conflict of the Revolutionary War and the Treaty of Paris was later signed in September of 1783.

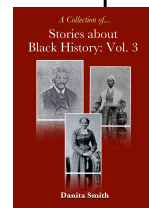
After his time in the Revolutionary War, James Armistead was returned back into slavery—despite having expertly served American interests during the war.

His owner, William Armistead, was a member of the House of Delegates in Richmond, VA. While in Virginia, Marquis de Lafayette encountered James Armistead. There, he wrote personal letter of recommendation for James Armistead. He wrote:

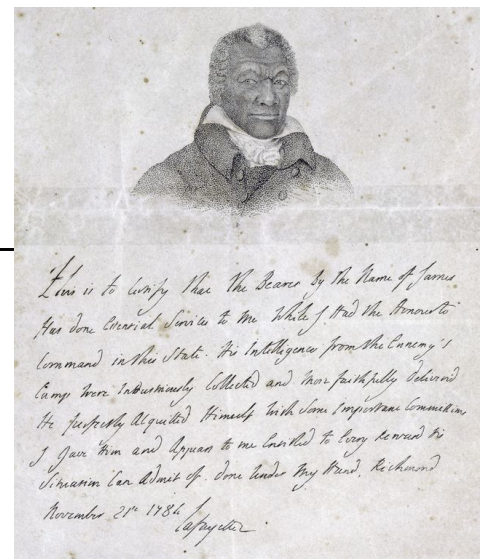
“This is to Certify that the Bearer by the Name of James Has done Essential Services to Me While I Had the Honor to Command in this State. His Intelligence from the Enemy’s Camp were Industriously Collected and Most Faithfully deliver’d. He perfectly Acquitted Himself With Some Important Commissions I Gave Him and Appears to me Entitled to Every Reward his Situation Can Admit of.”

Done under my hand, Richmond, November 21st 1784

Lafayette



# Finally Freed in 1787



James Armistead took this information and submitted a formal petition to the General Assembly to be freed from slavery because of his service during the war. The General Assembly, however, adjourned before a final decision could be reached.

James Armistead then submitted another petition on November 30, 1786 and, this time, the House of Delegates passed an act freeing him on December 25, 1786.

The Senate passed the bill on January 1, 1787 and James Armistead became a free man.

(Note: James Armistead took on the last name of Lafayette after his emancipation, he died on August 9, 1830).

**What type of recognition do you think James Armistead deserves, today, for his service during the Revolutionary War?**

References: Smith, Danita. "James Armistead Lafayette: A Patriot Spy". Black and Education, 18-2018-2020. Accessed online July 2, 2023, <https://blackandeducation.org/stories/2018/1/8/jameslafayette>

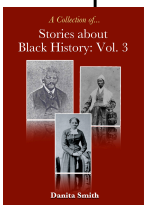


Image: Public domain, reproduction of Marquis de Lafayette's testimonial on James Armistead's espionage.