



Revolution in Richmond: Part III

By Bert Dunkerly

When Benedict Arnold's troops departed in January, 1781, Richmond had not seen the last of redcoats. That spring British troops returned to the area, occupying Petersburg. Then Lord Charles Cornwallis arrived in the state with a larger British force, having marched north from Wilmington, NC.

Cornwallis's army marched far and wide across the Commonwealth that summer, reaching Ox Ford on the North Anna (scene of a Civil War battle in 1864), and west towards Charlottesville. Returning to the east, Cornwallis's forces marched into Richmond in June on the Three Chopt Road, now a major US Highway. That summer General Lafayette led American troops in Virginia, but his force was too small to directly challenge the British, and he stayed out of striking distance.

Over 5,000 Redcoats, Germans, and Loyalists marched down Main Street, all of the troops who eventually ended up at Yorktown. From June 17-20, redcoats again patrolled the dusty streets of the state capital. During those four days they destroyed some homes (under what circumstances it is not clear), piled up tobacco in the streets and set fire to it, and destroyed valuable supplies like salt, harnesses, muskets, and flour. The streets that were once the scene of illuminations to celebrate the Declaration of Independence were now lit by the fires of destruction.

Various accounts noted the poor condition of troops: uniforms being tattered and many lacking good shoes. The weeks of hard marching were taking their toll. British officer John G. Simcoe wrote, *"the army was in the greatest need of shoes and clothing due to the constant marching."*



Main Street, Richmond, Virginia

Civilians peering out their windows would have seen a variety of troops: Scottish Highlanders, English Regulars from England and Ireland, Carolina Loyalists, Hessians, and runaway slaves who had joined them.

Cornwallis's forces began their march early on June 20, moving down Main Street to the Williamsburg Road, heading east towards Bottoms Bridge. In so doing, they passed by the future site of the Civil War battle of Seven Pines, and the Richmond Airport. Traces of the old Williamsburg Road run parallel to Route 60 from Sandston to Bottom's Bridge.

Lafayette's pursuing troops entered the town from the west on June 22nd, continuing on towards Bottoms' Bridge the next day. We have only three brief descriptions of the American army's pursuit through Richmond. They are all tantalizing, leaving us wishing for more details.

Lieutenant John Bell Tilden of the 2nd Pennsylvania Battalion described the unfinished canal and ruins of the Westham Foundry: *"This day I went to see the curious work of Mr. Ballertine- he had made a canal one mile in length, and about twenty feet wide, alongside of James River, in the centre of which he had built a curious fish basket, and at the end of the canal was a grist mill, with four pair of stones. Bordering on which was a Bloomery, Boring mill and elegant manor house, which was destroyed by that devilish rascal Arnold."*

Virginia militia Colonel Daniel Trabue wrote, *"Our militia was called for, and all other counties, also, and we all joined Gen. Lafayette. As he neared Richmond, Lord Cornwallis left the city in the evening. The next morning a little after sunrise. General Lafayette marched through the town with his army, each man's hat contained a green bush. I thought it was the prettiest sight I had ever seen. Lord Cornwallis had retreated, and our army advanced after them, passing through the city some 3 or 4 miles and then halted on the river road."*

Captain John Davis of the 3rd Pennsylvania Battalion wrote, *"This day passed through Richmond in 24 hours after the enemy evacuated it- it appears a place of much distress."*

Another Pennsylvanian, Lieutenant William Feltman of the 1st Battalion, noted that the British had *"destroyed a great quantity of tobacco, which they threw into the streets and set fire to it."* Feltman had the opportunity to break away from the camp and enjoy some leisure in the town, writing, *'spent the afternoon playing billiards and drinking wine.'* The Continental troops camped that night at Gillies Creek, just east of the city, where the battle in January had begun. They rose at 2 o'clock in the morning to resume their pursuit.

The troops moved on to Williamsburg and Yorktown, where a two-week siege in October resulted in the British surrender. The Yorktown campaign was the culmination of the Revolutionary War.

Richmond recovered and grew quickly after the war. Today there are few reminders of the Revolution in Richmond. A few tangible places to visit include Wilton Plantation, the First Freedom Center, St. John's Church, the Washington Monument on Capitol Square, and the site of the skirmish on Chimborazo Hill.



Washington Monument, Capitol Square, Richmond, Virginia

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