

# Yorktown and the Treaty of Paris

The Battle of Yorktown (September 28 – October 19, 1781)

The Battle of Yorktown, also known as the Siege of Yorktown, was the culminating and decisive battle of the American Revolutionary War. Fought in Yorktown, Virginia, it marked the effective end of major hostilities between American and British forces. A combined Franco-American effort, the battle demonstrated the strategic importance of international alliances and coordinated military planning.

## Background and Lead-Up to the Battle

### **The Southern Strategy**

By 1781, the British under General Charles Cornwallis had shifted their focus to the Southern colonies, believing they could rally Loyalist support and regain control. Despite initial successes, Cornwallis's campaign in the South faced increasing resistance from American forces led by Generals Nathanael Greene and Daniel Morgan. After setbacks such as the defeat at the Battle of Cowpens (1781) and a costly victory at Guilford Courthouse, Cornwallis retreated to Virginia to regroup and resupply.

### **Establishment at Yorktown**

Cornwallis marched his army to Yorktown, Virginia, a coastal town on the Chesapeake Bay. Believing Yorktown to be a defensible position and a good location for naval resupply and reinforcement, Cornwallis fortified his position. However, his reliance on British naval superiority would prove to be a critical error.

### **Washington and Rochambeau's Plan**

In the summer of 1781, American General George Washington and French General Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau, were camped near New York, planning an attack on British forces there. When they learned that French Admiral François de Grasse was sailing to the Chesapeake with a powerful fleet, they shifted their focus to Cornwallis at Yorktown. This decision initiated one of the most successful military campaigns of the war.

## The Siege of Yorktown

### 1. Franco-American Movement

Washington and Rochambeau led a 400-mile march from New York to Virginia, carefully concealing their true objective. By early September, de Grasse's fleet had arrived in the Chesapeake and defeated a British naval squadron under Admiral Thomas Graves in the Battle of the Capes (September 5, 1781). This victory gave the French control of the Chesapeake Bay, cutting off Cornwallis from reinforcements and escape by sea.

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## 2. Encirclement of Yorktown

By September 28, 1781, Washington and Rochambeau had assembled a combined force of approximately 17,000 troops, including 8,800 Americans and 7,800 French soldiers. Cornwallis, with about 8,000 troops, found himself surrounded by land and sea.

The Franco-American forces began siege operations, systematically digging trenches and positioning artillery. By October 6, they had completed the first parallel trench, allowing them to bombard the British fortifications with cannon and mortar fire.

## 3. Assault on British Defenses

The critical moment of the siege came on October 14, 1781, when American and French troops launched a nighttime assault on two key British redoubts (fortified positions) guarding Yorktown. Redoubt 9 was captured by French forces under the Marquis de Lafayette, while Redoubt 10 fell to American troops led by Alexander Hamilton. These victories allowed the allies to complete their second parallel trench, bringing their artillery even closer to British lines.

### Cornwallis's Surrender

With his defenses crumbling, supplies running low, and no hope of reinforcement, Cornwallis attempted a desperate escape across the York River on October 16. A storm thwarted the effort, and he was forced to request a ceasefire two days later. On October 19, 1781, Cornwallis formally surrendered his army to Washington, marking the end of major combat operations in the American Revolution.

### Aftermath and Impact

#### 1. Strategic Consequences

The surrender at Yorktown effectively ended British hopes of subduing the American colonies by force. While some skirmishes continued, the loss of Cornwallis's army was a severe blow to British morale and military resources.

#### 2. Legacy

The Battle of Yorktown demonstrated the importance of Franco-American cooperation. French naval power, ground troops, and financial aid were critical to the victory. Yorktown also cemented Washington's reputation as a brilliant military leader and secured his place in history as the "Father of His Country." The Battle of Yorktown is remembered as one of the most decisive and symbolic victories in American history. It highlighted the importance of strategic coordination, the role of international alliances, and the resilience of the American cause. The siege's success paved the way for the birth of the United States as an independent nation.

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## 3. Treaty of Paris (1783)

The British government, under increasing pressure and facing war with other European powers, began negotiations to end the conflict. The Treaty of Paris, signed on September 3, 1783, formally recognized American independence.

### *The Treaty of Paris (1783)*

*The Treaty of Paris, signed on September 3, 1783, formally ended the American Revolutionary War between Great Britain and the United States. It also included agreements with France, Spain, and the Netherlands, who had been allied with the American cause. This treaty marked a pivotal moment in history, officially recognizing the United States as an independent nation and reshaping territorial boundaries in North America.*

## Background to the Treaty

### 1. Military Context

By 1781, the British defeat at the Battle of Yorktown left their military in a precarious position. Although some skirmishes continued, the British were stretched thin by conflicts with other European powers, including France and Spain, who had joined the war to weaken Britain's global dominance.

### 2. Diplomatic Negotiations

In 1782, preliminary peace talks began in Paris. The American delegation included Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay, while British interests were represented by David Hartley and Richard Oswald. Franklin played a key role in ensuring French support while securing favorable terms for the United States.

Although France had been a staunch ally, the American negotiators were wary of French intentions to limit U.S. territorial expansion. Franklin, Adams, and Jay bypassed French mediation, negotiating directly with Britain to ensure advantageous terms.

## Key Provisions of the Treaty

### 1. Recognition of American Independence

- Britain formally acknowledged the United States as a free, sovereign, and independent nation, relinquishing claims to governance over the former colonies.

### 2. Territorial Boundaries

- The treaty established generous borders for the new United States:
- North: To the Great Lakes and Canada.
- South: To Spanish Florida (returned to Spain as part of a separate agreement).
- West: To the Mississippi River, effectively doubling the size of the new nation.

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## 3. Fishing Rights

- Americans were granted the right to fish in the rich waters off Newfoundland and in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, ensuring continued access to vital economic resources.

## 4. Debt and Property

- Americans agreed to honor debts owed to British creditors and to recommend that states restore confiscated property to Loyalists. However, this clause was largely unenforceable and caused tension in subsequent years.

## 5. Prisoner Exchange and British Withdrawal

- Both sides agreed to release prisoners of war, and Britain promised to evacuate all military forces from American territory. However, British troops lingered in frontier forts in the Northwest Territory, leading to disputes later resolved by the Jay Treaty (1794).

## 6. Restoration of Peace

- The treaty formally ended hostilities between Britain, the United States, France, Spain, and the Netherlands. Britain also ceded Florida back to Spain and made concessions to France in the Caribbean.

### Impact of the Treaty

#### 1. For the United States

- The treaty solidified American independence and expanded the nation's territorial reach, laying the groundwork for westward expansion.

- It allowed the new nation to focus on internal governance and economic development without the immediate threat of British interference.

#### 2. For Great Britain

- While Britain retained Canada, the loss of its American colonies marked a significant blow to its global influence.

- However, Britain soon shifted focus to its empire in India and the Pacific, rebuilding its power in other regions.

#### 3. For France

- France achieved its goal of weakening Britain and regaining prestige but incurred massive debts, contributing to the financial crisis that fueled the French Revolution (1789).

#### 4. For Spain

- Spain regained Florida and strengthened its position in the Americas, though it remained wary of American expansionism.

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## Legacy of the Treaty of Paris

The Treaty of Paris remains one of the most consequential agreements in modern history, formally establishing the United States as a nation and reshaping the geopolitical landscape of the 18th century. It highlighted the importance of diplomacy in achieving national objectives and underscored the challenges of balancing diverse international interests. While it brought peace, the treaty also set the stage for new conflicts, particularly in the frontier regions and with displaced Loyalists.