

Plans for W3R Trail Progressing

by Ralph D. Nelson, Vice Chairman,
SAR-W3R Liaison Committee



At 10 AM on June 17 of 2004 Lee Patrick Anderson set out from the Colony House in Newport RI on a 650-mile trek to Yorktown VA. He was following the route of the French Expeditionary Force (*Expédition Particulière*) as they marched from Newport RI to Yorktown VA in the summer of 1781. His walk and the presentations made along the way educated the public on the historical events that are being commemorated and the many opportunities the trail provides for heritage tourism. My role was to drive the support van.

Why were the French Troops in Newport?

After several years of negotiations with France the U.S. delegation persuaded King Louis XVI to recognize the United States as an independent nation. Early in 1778 the two nations signed a treaty of commerce and a treaty of military alliance. Soon a force of twelve ships-of-the-line (battleships) and 4,000 soldiers commanded by Admiral d'Estaing was sent to the U.S. Fearing a French blockade, the British abandoned Philadelphia in June of 1778. Allied France-U.S. forces made unsuccessful attacks on British-occupied Newport RI in August 1778 and Savannah GA in September 1779. The U.S. and French commanders did not work well together, so the French force returned home.

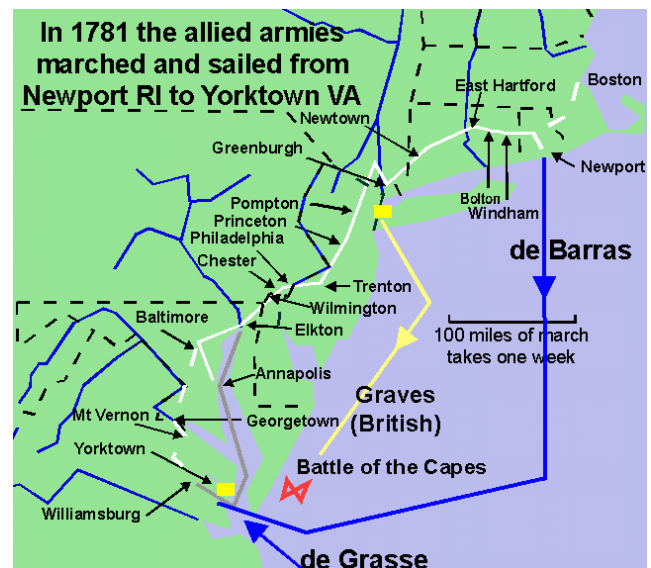
The French next chose General Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau, to command a new expeditionary force of 5,500 troops. They landed in Newport in July of 1780 after a long sea voyage. The convoy was guarded by a French naval squadron under the command of Admiral Ternay. The squadron was stationed in Newport and Boston for the next two and a half years.

The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route

The U.S. commander-in-chief, George Washington, developed an excellent working relationship with Rochambeau, and over the next year they developed several plans for dislodging the British from the U.S. Surveyors were dispatched to draw maps of the possible routes, carpenters built fleets of small boats to transport the armies across rivers, and quartermasters developed supply networks to provide food for men, horses, and oxen. In March 1781 American General Lafayette was sent south with three regiments of Continentals from the Ardsley NY camps to counter raids by a British army in Virginia.

In June of 1781 the French army marched from Newport to Providence, where it was joined by 400 reinforcements who had marched down from Boston. They continued across Connecticut to Ardsley NY. Lafayette arrived in Virginia just as General Cornwallis got there to command the 7,000-man British army there. Lafayette's forces grew to 5,000 as militia from nearby states and additional Continental regiments flowed in. While Washington and Rochambeau tested the British defenses around New York City, Cornwallis moved down peninsula and fortified the area around Yorktown VA.

French Admiral de Grasse had been sent to the Caribbean with a powerful fleet, charged with responsibility to defend French interests in that area. He had also been instructed to coordinate his efforts with those of Washington and Rochambeau. In August his fleet of 28 ships-of-the-line sailed north to the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. With the hope of isolating and defeating Cornwallis 8,000 French and U.S. soldiers made a rapid march south from New York.



The W3R is shown along the white line, with troop transport down the Chesapeake Bay shown in grey.

The French fleet fought off an attack by 19 British ships-of-the-line, preventing the evacuation of the British army at Yorktown. The French fleet added hundreds of naval cannon and 3,000 more French troops to the allied forces surrounding Yorktown. When the armies under Washington and Rochambeau arrived the allies were virtually assured of victory, and after a siege of nine days Cornwallis surrendered.

The Continentals returned to New York immediately, and the French fleet departed soon thereafter. After wintering in Virginia, the French army re-traced its steps to Ardsley NY and then to Providence RI and Boston MA, where the troops embarked on transports bound for further fighting in the Caribbean.

The W3R -- a National Historic Trail?

The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route (or W3R) is the route of the allied army from Newport RI to Yorktown VA (with an extension to Boston MA). Congress asked the National Park Service to evaluate the route as a National Historic Trail -- the first one east of the Mississippi River. The final NPS report should be ready for Congressional action in early 2005, just in time for commemoration of the 225th anniversary of the July 1780 landing of the French Expeditionary Force in Newport RI.

States, organizations, and individuals are now placing interpretive signs along the W3R to describe the events of 1780-83, the route of the march, and historic sites along the way. W3R groups in Rhode Island and Delaware have written Scout Historical Trail booklets to help youth follow in and understand the footsteps of history.

The W3R passes close to many major battlefields in the northern theater of war, so it is a "string of pearls" -- making isolated sites more valuable using a common theme. A W3R tour can start in Boston MA, where British regulars fought the first large battle of the American Revolution, and end in Yorktown VA, where British regulars fought the last major battle in the United States.

Events beyond the battlefield affect the outcome of a war. In 1780 the U.S. was having a monetary crisis -- paper Continental dollars were being refused by merchants, who considered them worthless. Merchants and politicians alike welcomed the French Expeditionary Force, which paid in silver coin (*livres*) to feed and house an army of 5,500 men. Taxes brought this silver to the U.S. government, which could then pay merchants in silver. When the French left after two and a half years here this silver remained in U.S. circulation, the amount of "hard" money in the U.S. had doubled, and the U.S. monetary system was on firmer ground.

Creating Public Awareness of the W3R

In June Lee Anderson wore lightweight summer clothes as he hiked much of the W3R in Rhode Island and Connecticut at a brisk 4.2 miles per hour. Often he was joined by re-enactors, Boy Scouts, and history buffs.



In Rhode Island a group of Boy Scouts joined with Lee Anderson and a re-enactor to march along a portion of the Washington-Rochambeau Route

In the evenings we gave talks on the W3R, wearing and explaining our Revolutionary War uniforms and giving a French soldier's views on marching 650 miles and spending two and a half years in a land 3,000 miles from home where the people do not speak his language.

At several cemeteries along the route we honored the French soldiers and sailors buried there. Some two thousand French soldiers and sailors died while serving in the U.S. Most died of disease -- the most significant risk for the military in those days.



Albin Weber performed the mourning ceremony at the grave of an unknown French soldier in Waterbury Connecticut

Lee was the honored guest at several gatherings of re-enactors and historians, he was interviewed by several newspapers, and he was videotaped for several newscasts. A brief photo-diary of his trek is available worldwide through the SAR-W3R Liaison Committee's Web site at www.AmRevandFrance.com.



At one point in Connecticut Lee Anderson was interviewed by a reporter to gather background information for a news story about his trek.

Developing the W3R Organization

In 1999 the SAR helped form a national coalition of organizations in favor of designating the W3R a National Historic Trail. In 2003-4 Ralph Nelson (DESSAR) chaired the team that re-organized the W3R, filed for incorporation, recruited directors from every state along the route, and established an honorary board of people with significant positions in the historical community.

The major activities of the W3R include publicizing the development of the W3R, promoting the W3R as a new tourism resource, bringing W3R needs (in preservation, research, and signage) to the attention of funding agencies, developing interpretive brochures, providing educational activities along the route, and supporting an artist who is painting one hundred historical scenes along the W3R.

SAR members from many states have supported the effort to preserve, mark, and enjoy the W3R. Russ Wirtalla (CTSSAR) helped get Congressman Larson of CT to introduce legislation. Ken Buckbee (president of the CTSSAR) marched with Lee in frontiersman uniform. Carl Nittinger (NJSSAR) is chair of the W3R in NJ and led the effort to secure funding for research into the documentation of the W3R in that state. Win Carroll (PASSAR) arranged for color guards, speakers, and publicity for the 225th anniversary of the signing of the 1778 treaty of amity and commerce, and he helped secure Gov. Rendell as honorary chair of the W3R in PA.

Ralph Nelson and Bill Severns (DESSAR) led the DESSAR to provide seed money that secured a 5:1 matching grant of state funds for research on the documentary resources of the W3R in Delaware. Robert Reyes (MDSSAR) co-authored a booklet of photographs, maps, and historical descriptions of several routes taken by the allied forces through Maryland. T. Fisher Craft (GASSAR) encouraged the George Washington Endowment Fund to provide support for signage along the route. SAR President General (1994-95) Stewart Boone McCarty is an honorary director and Registrar General Bruce Wilcox (VASSAR), Jim McCafferty (MDSSAR -- chair of the SAR-W3R Liaison Committee), and Ralph Nelson are directors of the W3R-US.

Future W3R Activities

Lee Anderson's hike is the first of several activities involving the entire length of the W3R. In 2005 there will be history camps for youth in several states, and the SAR-W3R Liaison Committee is developing a bus tour covering most of the route in the fall. In 2006 there will be several large marches and encampments involving hundreds of re-enactors in French and U.S. uniforms. In 2008 U.S. compatriots will visit Paris to join our French compatriots at a symposium on "European Involvement with the American Revolution". Updates will be posted on the SAR-W3R Liaison Committee's Web site.

What Can You Do to Help?

Check our Web site, read more about French assistance during the Revolution, and write your U.S. Representative about designating the W3R as a National Historic Trail (PL 106-473). If there is a W3R organization in your state, join it. Help write interpretive materials or develop a Scout historical trail. Wherever you live create and present a talk or display on the W3R and French assistance during the Revolution. Join the many SAR compatriots who are already active and enjoying this 225th anniversary celebration!

French Ground Units at Yorktown (Commanders):

Those that followed the W3R in 1781 June:

- French regiments of regular infantry:
 - Bourbonnais (Marquis de Laval de Montmorency)
 - Royal Deux Ponts (Comte Christian de Forbach)
 - Saintonge (Comte de Custine)
 - Soissonnais (Comte de Saint Maisme)
- The second battalion only of French artillery:
 - Auxonne (Goulet de La Tour)
- French light infantry and hussars (light cavalry):
 - Volontaires-étrangers (Duc de Lauzun)

Those that came with de Grasse's fleet in 1781 Aug:

- French regiments transported with de Grasse' fleet:
 - Agenais (Comte d'Autichamp) -- two battalions
 - Dillon (Count Arthur Dillon)
 - Irish-heritage families and volunteers
 - Gâtinais (Marquis de Rostaing)
 - Touraine (Vicomte de Poudeux)
- Two companies of the Régiment d'artillerie de Metz
- Soldiers from the ships' own garrisons

U.S. Continental Units at Yorktown (Commanders)

Those that followed the W3R from NY in 1781 March:

- Massachusetts Continentals (Col. Vose)
- New Jersey Continentals (Col. Barber)
- Mixed light infantry (Col. de Gimat -- from France)
 - from various MA, CT, and RI regiments

Those that followed the W3R from NY in 1781 June:

- Pennsylvania Continentals (Gen Wayne; 4 regts)
- Proctor's Continental Artillery (LTC Forrest)

Those that followed the W3R from NY in 1781 August:

- New Jersey Continentals (two regiments)
- First New York Continentals
- First Rhode Island Continentals (Colonel Olney)
- Colonel Hazen's Regiment (Canadian)
- Lamb's Continental Artillery (New York)
- Colonel Scammel's light troops (New Hampshire)

Those who did not march the W3R:

- militia from VA, NC, SC (Gen. William Campbell)
- Virginia Continentals (Gen. Steuben -- from Europe)
- Maryland Continentals (Gen. Clinton; several regts)
- Delaware Continental recruits (Capt. Bennett)

SOURCES

- "Statement of Historical Significance of the W3R", by Robert Selig *et al.* (National Park Service, 2003)
- "Marching to Victory - a guide to the Yorktown Campaign through Maryland and the District of Columbia", by Robert Reyes and Nicholas Fry (Maryland Society, Sons of the American Revolution, 2001)
- The American Campaign of Rochambeau's Army, 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783** (two volumes), by Howard C. Rice, Jr., and Anne S.K. Brown (translators and editors) (Princeton Univ. Press and Brown Univ. Press, 1972)
- "The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route in the State of X", by Robert Selig -- a series of reports on state document and architectural resources for the W3R. X = CT, NY, and DE to date; RI, NJ, and PA in progress.
- For more resources, see the "Learn More" page of www.AmRevandFrance.com

GRAPHIC CREDITS

All photos and drawings were done by the author.



Compatriot Ralph Nelson is shown offering a lecture on the W3R project. A member of the National Society Executive Committee for 2004-5, he is a former President of the Delaware Society and is currently serving as that Society's Historian. His SAR experience also includes having been Vice President General for the International District. He holds the Minuteman Award and the Gold and Silver Distinguished Service Medals. He serves on a variety of National Committees