

History of the French Expeditionary Force in Rhode Island

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On 1780 Jul 10 a convoy of seven ships-of-the-line four frigates, and thirty-three transports under Admiral Ternay delivered General Rochambeau and some 5,000 soldiers at Newport RI.

At right, "First Anchorage", by David R. Wagner us used with the artist's permission.



The five regiments built camps near Castle Hill (South of Brenton's Point) and to the east of Newport, near Bowery and East Bowery Streets. A line of cannon near Narragansett Avenue provided a defensive line across the island. A northern defense line was formed along Vernon Avenue in Middletown.



Many of the new arrivals were quite ill. The small town of Newport could not care for them all, so about a hundred were sent Roxbury MA (then known as New Boston). The Rhode Island Continental Regiment served as guards and local guides for the French as they established their camps and defensive battlements at Newport.

General Washington met with General Rochambeau in Hartford CT on 1780 Sep 20-22. Washington did not speak French, and Rochambeau did not speak English, yet they worked together well. Due to concern for fall storms it was too late for France to send more troops, so Rochambeau's troops settled in for the winter at Newport.

Admiral Ternay died at Newport RI on 1780 Dec 15 and is buried there. On 1781 January the British sent a naval squadron from New York City to blockade Newport. In spite of bad weather the French 64-gun *Eville* and two French frigates mauled the British ships.

Some reinforcements arrived on 1781 May 8 a French transport squadron arrived in Boston with about 6,300 soldiers. The commander was Admiral de Barras de Saint-Laurent, who now command of the squadron that Admiral Ternay had brought the previous year. The ships had left Brest in 1781 March, and about 600 men were so ill that they were left to recover in the barracks on Governor's Island in Boston Harbor.

The French Army Assembles in Providence RI

June 1781: The roads of RI, CT, and NY were now dry enough for easy passage of the wagon trains of supplies required to support large movements of troops. The French army in Newport began its march across Rhode Island and Connecticut to join the Continental army in its cantonment west of White Plains, near Dobbs Ferry NY. The allied troops conducted several probing attacks to test the British defenses around New York City while awaiting the French naval forces that would be required for a successful full-scale attack.

During the week of 1781 June 10 to 17 the French Army moved from Newport to Providence (22 miles) in small ships and large boats. They also established lines of communication and supply along Narragansett Bay's eastern shore. Fifty men from each of the five regiments (supported by local militia, including the Kentish Guards) were retained in Newport to guard the French siege cannon, which later served as the decisive element in the siege of Yorktown. In Providence Chastellux lodged at Joseph Russel's residence on Main Street, not far from the Market House. [Ref. Chastellux]

The French Army established a camp on the western edge of Providence (perhaps where I-195 and I-95 intersect now) to prepare for the long march to New York. Some 3,800 troops and 450 officers were ready to start on the long march -- including 600 in Lauzun's Legion in Lebanon CT. [Ref. [W3R Historical Survey for PA, by Robert Selig \(2007\), pp 81-83 and 88](#)]

Some 430 re-inforcements who had disembarked recently in Boston MA marched south and joined the assembly.

Order of March

The usual order of march for an extended march by the French Army [see TACRA] was for the main army to be divided into several units and to use an independent screening division as a buffer between the main army and the hostile force -- in this case the British, who might be brought in to attack from ships in Long Island Sound.

This dispersion of forces allowed the use of smaller campsites and spread out the impact on the environment (which provided water and forage for the horses and oxen) and on the local communities (which provided food and drink for the soldiers and housing for the officers). The dates below overlap because they encompass the arrival of the first unit and the departure of the last unit.

The lead unit had several important roles:

- The assistant quartermaster general (M. de Beville) was responsible for seeing that the main column took the correct path.
- The first division setup the campsites, with places for tents, water, food, firewood, pasturage, artillery park, and quarters for the officers. The following divisions cleaned and re-used the same campsites.
- The first division was preceded by thirty woodsmen, whose job was to clear and repair the road and to repair or build bridges as needed. The following divisions had fewer woodsmen.
- The baggage train of the expedition's commander (the Comte de Rochambeau) and the military chest (money) marched at the head of the first division. The baggage wagons of each other general officer marched at the head of the that division.

The baggage train of the expedition's commander (the Comte de Rochambeau) and the military chest (money) marched at the head of the first division. The baggage of each other general officer marched at the head of the division he commanded. Each division was accompanied by its own field hospital.

- Division 1 (under the Marquis de Chastellux)
the Bourbonnais Regiment and a quarter of the artillery.
- Division 2 (under the Baron de Viomenil)
the Royal Deux-Ponts Regiment and a quarter of the artillery.
- Division 3 (under the Comte de Viomenil)
the Soissonnais Regiment and a quarter of the artillery.
- Division 4 (under the Comte de Custine)
the Saintonge Regiment and a quarter of the artillery.

Lauzun's Legion of Foreign Volunteers (hussars and infantry) served as the screening unit, which followed a path between the main route of the French army and Long Island Sound to detect and deflect any British attack from that direction.

Start of the March to New York

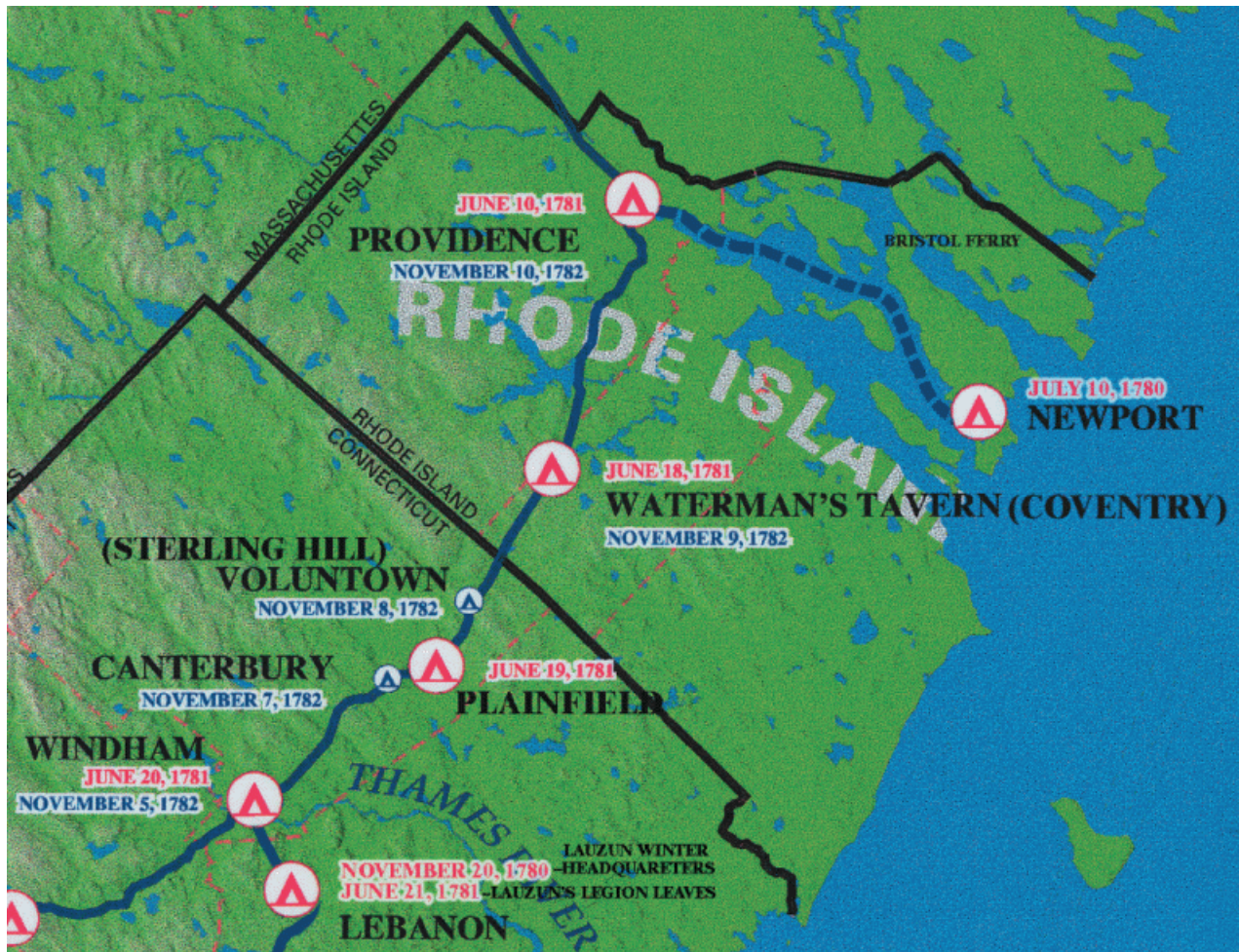


"Grand Parade through Providence"

by [NEW VIEW](#) [David R. Wagner](#)
(used with the artist's permission)

1781 June 18 (Sunday): The great movement that would decide the outcome of the American Revolution began with the Bourbonnais Regiment (as the senior regiment) marching out of Providence. They reached Coventry (about 15 miles to the southwest) that evening and camped near **Waterman's Tavern** -- near what is now Pottersville,

1781 June 19 (Monday): The first Division crossed into Connecticut.



The Rhode Island portion of the W3R® campsite map.
 NOTE: These W3R® campsite-and-trail maps were developed during the 2000-2005 National Park Service study of significance, feasibility, and environmental impact.
 The orientation is tilted; north is about 45-degrees left of straight up.