

Honoring a foreign-born hero of the American Revolution

By Sarah Thomas
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Salem —

Everyone knows the great heroes of the American Revolution - George Washington, John Adams, Ben Franklin. But great as these men were, they could not have won the war against the British Army, one of the most powerful military forces in the world, all alone.

The revolution succeeded largely with the military aid of France. Franklin and Adams both traveled to Paris to secure allegiance, but one of the most crucial, and unexpected, boons for American independence came when a 19-year-old French nobleman decided to take up arms in a foreign land.

That young man was Gilbert du Motier, better known as the Marquis de Lafayette. From securing a fleet of French ships to augment the larval Continental Navy, to bottling up General Cornwallis during the siege of Yorktown, Lafayette's contributions to the founding of our nation are incalculable.

Beyond being successful, Lafayette is also beloved. A celebrity in his day, Lafayette's 1824 tour of America - which brought him to Salem - resulted in renaming the American militia to the National Guard, a slew of monuments and renamed streets (such as Salem's own Lafayette Street), and an enduring legacy that lives on to this day.

That legacy will be celebrated in Salem's Hamilton Hall on Sept. 7 with a gala honoring the 255th birthday of the revolutionary hero. Une Fete pour l'Anniversaire du Marquis de La Fayette will take place at Hamilton Hall, bringing together local history buffs, Canadian professors, and even French

nobility in honoring the achievements of this singular individual.

"I was in the portrait gallery at the Massachusetts Historical Society in January, and I saw Lafayette's picture," said Becky Putnam, project director for the Bowditch Institute. The Institute fosters historical collaborations and is one of the sponsoring organizations of the Fete. "I knew he visited Hamilton Hall, and I got to thinking what a cool idea it would be to throw Lafayette a birthday party."

In addition to it being 255 years since Lafayette's birth, this weekend is also the 186th anniversary of Lafayette's tour through Salem. It was one stop on a whirlwind life that included stints in prison, an active role in the French Revolution, and advocacy for such progressive causes as abolition of slavery.

"I first got interested in Lafayette after reading a book on the country's 50th anniversary in 2002," said Alan Hoffman, a Boston attorney who is also a president of the Lafayette Society and the American Friends of Lafayette. Each May 20, the Lafayette Society celebrates Lafayette Day in Massachusetts with ceremonies at the Massachusetts State House and a medal ceremony for American veterans with the consul-general of France.

"In 2006 I translated a journal kept by Lafayette's assistant during his travels in America, and it was published," Hoffman said, noting there is much to admire about Lafayette's contributions to America.

"Did you know he saved the American whaling industry?" Hoffman said. "It's true. He actually got the lamplighters in Paris to agree to only use Nantucket whale oil in the city's oil lamps, which created an important market."

Putnam said that the goal of the fete was to make a party for Lafayette that was both cultural and fun.

"There will be authentic 19th century music by Larry Young of Marblehead, and French inspired foods like a dessert crepe station," Putnam said. "We will also be visited by the current Consul-General of France, which is like an ambassadorial position."

Along with Putnam and Hoffman, Charles Newhall, a teacher at St. John's Prep, is a co-chair of the fete. He said that the event's keynote speaker will be Francois Furstenberg of the University of Montreal.

"Furstenberg is a member of the Organization of American Historians' Distinguished Lectureship series, and will be giving a talk called 'When the United States spoke French: Trans-Atlantic Politics, Land, and Diplomacy in the Age of the Revolution,'" Newhall explained. "It's really exciting to get to hear from such an important historian so early in his career."

Tickets for the event will be \$20 for the lecture only and \$50 for the lecture and fete. Attendees may also become sponsors of the event for \$150, which grants two tickets and a \$50 tax-deductible donation.

"Lafayette was a military genius who, when we needed him, came over to America and helped us win our country," Putnam said. "We're very excited to be hosting a party commemorating him."