

## Henry Knox and Lafayette

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I had the pleasure to speak here at Montpelier in the summer of 2008.

In preparing for today, I recalled having said, “In Washington, Lafayette found a father; in General Nathaniel Greene, an uncle; and in Henry Knox, an older brother.”

I thought to myself: How clever! Then I realized that I was just quoting Lafayette from the speech he made on June 25, 1825 in the Senate Chamber of the State House in Portland, then the capital city of the newly formed state, in response to Governor Parris, who had harangued him there.

In his reply, Lafayette said, “At an early period of the Revolution, and of my own life, I found in Washington a father, in Knox, a brother.”

Henry Knox was born in Boston on July 25, 1750 and, thus, joined the American Revolution in 1775 at the age of 25. When Lafayette, who was born in 1757, arrived in Philadelphia in July of 1777, he was just short of his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, and Knox was just 27. Knox and Lafayette were of the same generation.

So, you might ask, was Lafayette’s reference to Henry Knox as his “brother” merely rhetorical or formulaic, as in “brother-in-arms”? Or did the two heroes of the American Revolution actually share a close personal bond that made it natural for Lafayette to refer to him as his brother during the Farewell Tour? I submit that the latter is clearly the case.

Lafayette and Knox served together at the Battle of the Brandywine in September 1777 and spent time together at Valley Forge that winter. They both had important roles in the Battle of Monmouth Court House in June 1778. In September of 1780, Knox and Lafayette were in the party that Washington brought to his summit meeting with General Rochambeau in Hartford, Connecticut. On their return to camp, they stopped at West Point and learned of Benedict Arnold’s treason. Knox and Lafayette were members of the court-martial jury that convicted Major André as a spy and condemned him to death by hanging.

On August 18, 1781, during Lafayette’s Virginia Campaign, previous to the arrival of the French West Indian Fleet and the Allied Armies from the North, Lafayette frankly expressed his extreme anxiety about confronting Cornwallis in a letter to Knox.

“Lord Cornwallis’s abilities are to me more alarming than his superiority of forces,” he conceded. “I ever had a great opinion of him. Our papers call him a mad man, but was ever any advantage taken of him when he commanded in person? To speak plain English, I am devilishly afraid of him.”

They both played important roles during the siege of Yorktown in September and October of 1781.

In 1783, Washington, as president of the new Society, appointed Lafayette to vet foreign officers who served in the Continental Army for membership in the French Society of the Cincinnati. Lafayette, like Knox, who was one of the founders of the Society, had a sentimental attachment to the Society, which he saw as an association of veterans and companions-in-arms. Thus, he wrote Knox in January, 1784:

“The disbanding of our Army, I must confess, affects me with some painful feelings – and altho’ it is a proper measure not to keep a standing Army, yet I could not help sighing at the first news that the Continental Army was no more. We have so intimately, so brotherly lived together, we have had so much to fear, so much to hope, we have united ourselves through so many changes of fortune, that the parting moment cannot but be painfull [sic].”

Knox and Lafayette spent time together in Boston in October 1784 during Lafayette’s 4½-month visit to the United States after the Treaty of Paris was signed and ratified. Knox, along with veterans of the Massachusetts Line, greeted Lafayette at his lodging, where Knox delivered an address extolling French aid in winning American independence, calling upon patriotic and enlightened historians “to enumerate the marquis’s actions in the field and his efforts to promote the happiness of the United States,” and placing him “on the same list with Condé, Turenne and so many other immortal heroes of France.”

During this visit to Boston, Knox, James Warren, and others spoke to Lafayette about the disastrous condition of the whaling industry in Marblehead, Nantucket and other new England fishing towns. Added to the injury done by an 8-year war was the insult that the English were now excluding American whale oil from their markets. Lafayette listened. He brokered a contract between the city of Paris and Nantucket whalers to light all the streetlamps of Paris with Nantucket whale oil. He also lobbied successfully for most-favored-nation treatment for whale oil and other American products in several French ports.

During the Farewell Tour in October 1824 at a banquet held in Lafayette’s honor in the rotunda of the University of Virginia, Jefferson, who was also involved in these efforts as ambassador said: “I only held the nail; [Lafayette] drove it.” The people of Nantucket at town meeting in 1786 voted to dedicate every cow on the island to produce a 500-pound cheese for Lafayette.

The close bond between Lafayette and Knox is shown by the fact that in May, 1785 Lafayette invited Knox to send his son to his household in Paris so that he could receive a European education. Two additional events in 1785 illustrate the closeness of their relationship.

When Knox’s brother Billy was confined in London due to his mental illness, Lafayette offered to help. In a letter to Knox dated June 12 1785, after Lafayette had learned Billy’s whereabouts, Lafayette wrote, “Now, my dear friend, that I have found him out, you may be as easy as if you were yourself in Europe.”

Also in 1785, Lafayette became the godfather of one of Knox's short-lived sons.

I will conclude by returning to Portland on June 25, 1825.

After Lafayette left the Senate Chamber, he was brought to the home of Daniel Cobb, a Revolutionary War veteran, which had been prepared to receive him and to serve as his headquarters. There, he held court for several hours, greeting delegations from surrounding towns and villages, members of the Portland Masonic Lodge, and the President of Bowdoin College, who conferred a Doctor of Law degree on him. One of the delegations that travelled to greet Lafayette – a distance of 75 miles on what is now US Route 1 – was from Thomaston. Included in the Thomaston delegation was Lucy Flucker Knox, now Mrs. Thatcher.

Levasseur, in *Lafayette in American in 1824 and 1825*, the book I translated, described their meeting this way:

“As soon as he was able to step away a moment from the common group, he [Lafayette] proceeded to Mrs. Thatcher, daughter of his illustrious companion in arms Henry Knox, with whom he conversed up to the time when they came to advise him that the authorities were waiting for him to take his place at the public banquet prepared by the citizens.”

So it was that Lafayette spent some quality time with the daughter of his great friend, Henry Knox.