

Student Resource Sheet 2

Marquis de Lafayette Biography

Marquis de Lafayette (born September 6, 1757, Chavaniac, France—died May 20, 1834, Paris) French [aristocrat](#) who fought in the Continental Army with the [American colonists](#) against the [British](#) in the [American Revolution](#). Later, as a leading advocate for [constitutional monarchy](#), he became one of the most powerful men in [France](#) during the first few years of the [French Revolution](#) and during the [July Revolution](#) of 1830.

Early life and the American Revolution

Lafayette was born into an ancient noble family in the [Auvergne](#) region of central France. Orphaned in his early teens, he had already inherited an immense fortune by the time he married Adrienne de Noailles, the daughter of the influential duc d'Ayen in 1774. He joined the circle of young courtiers at the court of King [Louis XVI](#) but soon [aspired](#) to win glory as a soldier. Hence, he traveled at his own expense to the American colonies, arriving in Philadelphia in July 1777, 27 months after the outbreak of the [American Revolution](#). With no combat experience and not yet 20 years old, Lafayette was nonetheless appointed a major [general](#) in the Continental Army, and he quickly struck up a lasting friendship with the American commander in chief, [George Washington](#). The childless general and the orphaned aristocrat seemed an unlikely pair, but they soon developed a surrogate father-son relationship. It was as thus that Lafayette distinguished himself among a large colorful group of European soldiers of fortune and idealists—among them [Frederick William, Freiherr von Steuben](#), of [Prussia](#) and [Tadeusz Kościuszko](#) and [Kazimierz Pułaski](#) of Poland—who had joined the Continental Army to fight for American independence. The more Washington saw of the young Frenchman, the more impressed he was and the closer the two became.

Lafayette served on Washington's staff for six weeks, and, after fighting with distinction at the [Battle of the Brandywine](#), near [Philadelphia](#), on September 11, 1777, he was given command of his own division. He conducted a masterly retreat from [Barren](#) Hill on May 28, 1778. Returning to France in February 1779, he worked with American emissaries [Benjamin Franklin](#) and [John Adams](#) to help persuade the government of [Louis XVI](#) to send additional troops and supplies to aid the colonists. Lafayette arrived back in America in April 1780 with the news that 6,000 infantry under the command of the [comte de Rochambeau](#), as well as six [ships of the line](#), would soon arrive from France. He was given command of an army in Virginia, and in 1781 he conducted hit-and-run operations against forces under the command of [Benedict](#)

[Arnold](#). Reinforced by Gen. “[Mad](#)” [Anthony Wayne](#) and militia troops under Steuben, Lafayette harried British commander Lord [Charles Cornwallis](#) across Virginia, trapping him at [Yorktown](#) in late July. A French [fleet](#) and several additional American armies joined the siege, and on October 19 Cornwallis surrendered. The British cause was lost. Lafayette was hailed as the “Hero of Two Worlds,” and on returning to France in 1782 he was promoted to *maréchal de camp* (brigadier general). He became an honorary citizen of several states on a visit to the [United States](#) in 1784.

The [French Revolution](#)

During the next five years, Lafayette became a leader of the liberal aristocrats (dubbed the Fayetteistes) and an outspoken advocate of religious toleration and the abolition of the [slave trade](#). A republican at heart, Lafayette nonetheless remained an aristocrat with strong ties to many members of the ruling royal family. Though he was torn between those two worlds, his friend [Thomas Jefferson](#) predicted that Lafayette’s strong republican sympathies would win out. Nevertheless, as the [French Revolution](#) unfolded, Lafayette continued to support the government of [Louis XVI](#) and the idea of a [constitutional monarchy](#). Elected as a representative of the nobility to the [Estates-General](#) that [convened](#) in May 1789, Lafayette supported the maneuvers by which the bourgeois deputies of the [Third Estate](#) gained control of the Estates-General and converted it into a revolutionary [National Assembly](#). With [Jefferson’s](#) help, he composed a draft of the [Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen](#), which he presented to the Assembly on July 11. After extensive revisions the document was adopted on August 27. Meanwhile, on July 15, the day after a mob [stormed the Bastille](#), Lafayette had been elected commander of the newly formed national guard of Paris. His troops saved Louis XVI and Queen [Marie-Antoinette](#) from the fury of a crowd that invaded [Versailles](#) on October 6, and he then escorted the royal family to [Paris](#), where they became hostages of the revolution.

For the next year, Lafayette’s popularity and influence were at their height. He supported measures that transferred power from the [aristocracy](#) to the [bourgeoisie](#), but he feared that further democratization would encourage the lower classes to attack [property rights](#). When a crowd of petitioners gathered on the [Champ de Mars](#) in Paris (July 17, 1791) to demand the abdication of the king, Lafayette’s guards opened fire, killing or wounding about 50 demonstrators. The incident greatly damaged his popularity, and in October he resigned from the guard.

Appointed commander of the army at [Metz](#) in December 1791, Lafayette hoped to suppress the radical democrats after [France](#) went to [war](#) with Austria in April 1792. His plans failed, and on August 10, 1792, the monarchy was overthrown in a popular [insurrection](#). With [Maximilien de Robespierre](#)'s power on the ascent, Lafayette would have been tried for treason had he not defected (August 19) to the Austrians, who held him captive until 1797. While Lafayette and his immediate family survived the [Reign of Terror](#), members of his wife's family did not. He then retired from public life, partially to protest the dictatorial regime of [Napoleon Bonaparte](#), and settled down as a gentleman farmer. In 1803 [Jefferson](#)—then president of the United States—offered to make Lafayette governor of the newly acquired [Louisiana Territory](#), but Lafayette declined. He sat in the Chamber of Deputies during most of the reign of King [Louis XVIII](#) (1814–24).

Return to the United States and final years

In 1824 Lafayette accepted an invitation from his old friend Pres. [James Monroe](#) to visit the [United States](#), where he was received with [adulation](#). Crowds by the thousands greeted him, and he was lauded in cities across the land. The visit included emotional stops at Washington's grave and at [Monticello](#), where the ailing 81-year-old Jefferson lauded and feted his old comrade. Lafayette became the first foreign citizen to address the [U.S. House of Representatives](#), which he did on December 10, 1824. As a direct result of that tour and the patriotic enthusiasm that it inspired, dozens of cities across the [country](#) were named in his honor.

During the turmoil of the short-lived [July Revolution](#) of 1830, when the antirepublican King [Charles X](#) was forced to [abdicate](#), Lafayette was given the opportunity to lead a [military](#) coup and seize control of the government. He declined and instead led the moderate faction that ousted Charles X and installed the duc d'Orléans, [Louis-Philippe](#), as the "citizen king" of France. Lafayette retired six months later. He died in 1834 and, in accordance with his wishes, was buried with dirt from [Bunker Hill](#) that he and his son had collected during his last trip to America. In 2002 Lafayette became the fifth person in U.S. history to be granted honorary citizenship.