

LAFAYETTE¹

Gilbert Motier de La Fayette was born in 1757 with a title into an ancient and noble family and was destined to become heir to a great fortune.

Little is known about his Masonic record. He probably became a Mason in France at age 18. It is known that he had considerable pride in the Fraternity and held it in high esteem.

He was not particularly well educated and was a dismal failure at the social graces and was the object of derision.

A marriage was arraigned, and at age 16 he married a girl of 14. His father-in-law was a domineering man and was higher in the social strata than Lafayette.

It was with this background that he conceived the idea of an American adventure. The American notions of liberty and equality were completely alien to young Lafayette. What did inspire him was the opportunity of a war where he could perform great deeds and return to France a hero and those who ridiculed him in the past would have to look up to him.

He had to leave France secretly as the king was opposed to his scheme. He made his way to Philadelphia where he appeared before the Continental Congress, and offered his services, without pay, as a major general. Now you know exactly what Congress thought about the request of a nineteen year old with no military experience and who was just beginning to learn English. They denied his request. But there were those, among them Ben Franklin, who suggested that his highborn status might prove useful as we were very much in need of France as an ally. As a result Congress agreed to grant Lafayette a commission as a major general.

However, Congress conveniently neglected to inform Lafayette that his commission was an honorary one. Consequently he arrived at Washington's headquarters fully expecting to be given command of a large number of troops.

Out of this difficult beginning, grew one of the most well know friendships in our history.

Lafayette's baptism of fire took place at Brandywine where he was wounded. His great bravery and coolness under fire did not go unnoticed. When he recuperated Washington began to entrust him with the command of forces.

During the latter part of the war Lafayette demonstrated considerable tactical skill. Following the surrender at Yorktown, and the end of hostilities, Lafayette, now 24 years old, had proven his worth as a military leader and could now return to France certain to be welcomed and acclaimed for his deeds.

Bro. Lafayette had become a supporter of the American ideals embedded in the Declaration of Independence. The contrast of self-reliance and love of freedom of the common man in America and acceptance of an oppressive system by the average Frenchman, who had been conditioned for centuries not to think for himself, was not lost on him.

His respect for Bro. Washington's profound dignity and all that he represented lent considerable motivation to Lafayette's later life. Also Lafayette's American experiences left him with an appreciation of Masonic virtues practically unknown among those of his class in France.

Upon returning to France he was a great celebrity and was the object of tremendous praise and admiration. The king and his ministers sought his advice on affairs of state involving America.

This great popularity provided him with an opportunity to expound on his beliefs of the rights of the citizenry to vote, equitable taxation, the formation of a legislature, and limitations on the powers of the king. These are reasonable ideas to us, but under the autocratic rule of the Bourbons, such ideas were so radical that a man had to be very brave or foolish to utter them in public.

Two years later Lafayette made a visit to America where he was extremely popular and was received with great enthusiasm. His visit, lasting

four months was a continual series of receptions and banquets. His first stop was to see Washington at Mt. Vernon where he presented him with a beautiful Masonic apron that Madame Lafayette had made and is now in the museum of the Grand Lodge Of Pennsylvania. After their final visit at Annapolis they were reluctant to part. This was the last time they were to see each other. Many years would pass before Lafayette returned to America.

Times were turbulent in France as the French Revolution was nearing. In those years he was to further establish himself as a champion of the rights of man, as a philanthropist concerned with the welfare of those less fortunate, and as an extremely brave man who, through personal confrontation with unruly mobs, worked to control violence.

As the political tides raged during the French Revolution his own class despised him for his humanitarian ideas. His ideals were so unacceptable to the revolutionists as to force him to flee the country for his life. This resulted in five years of harsh political imprisonment until the excesses of the Revolution had run their course. The Napoleonic Era, the restoration of the Bourbons and constant political turmoil lasted for many years. Lafayette was never to rise to power, but his voice was frequently heard, calling for a government sensitive to the needs of the people.

Lafayette received many invitations over the years to visit America but delayed such a trip because of the French political situation. Finally, as a result of requests in the form of a joint resolution from Congress and a personal invitation from Pres. Monroe, he decided to make the trip. He arrived in 1824 accompanied by his son George Washington Lafayette. Even though it had been forty years since his last visit he was received with a welcome that had never before been given to a foreigner. The trip lasted 15 months during which he visited all 24 states of the Union, appeared before Congress, Revolutionary War veterans, and with political leaders at all levels and at numerous public functions. He visited the President and the two great founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.

His greatness and accomplishment can best be summed up with the words addressed to him by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania on Oct. 24, 1824, ".....In America, as the companion and friend of the wisest and best of mankind, you will ever be regarded as one of the founders of the greatest, purest and happiest of republics; while in your native land it cannot be forgotten, that amidst the storms of political revolution, and through every vicissitude of personal fortune, you have stood an inflexible example of consistency, moderation and firmness."

He returned to France in 1825 at the age of 68. He gradually retired from public life and died in 1830.

One can only hope that the virus of freedom and democracy will spread to places such as the middle east and Asia just as it did with Lafayette and in France.

While not a Mason, Pres. Dwight D. Eisenhower, had a great respect for the Fraternity when he stated, "what couldn't a million Masons do if they made a concerted effort to change the world. We could approximate brotherhood in the twinkling of a eye."²

¹ Archdeacon, H. C., The Short Talk Bulletin, vol. 80, Dec. 2002

² Lancaster, C. N., The Role of Masonry Today, The Scottish Rite Journal, Aug. 2000, p 24-27