

How The French Saved America

October 19, 1781: the day the world's greatest empire surrendered its crown to a dream that was never supposed to survive. A quiet tension hung in the air of Yorktown, Virginia. Something monumental was happening. As the British troops were both mentally and physically exhausted, the French navy filled Chesapeake Bay. After twenty-two grueling days, nine hundred casualties, and no way out, the Mother Country was forced to surrender. For the first time in history, a ragtag army of patriots, consumed by a hunger for liberty and a deep-seated contempt toward the British, was able to defeat a global superpower. Now, two hundred fifty years later, we see that one ally stands out among the rest: France. As a benefactor of over two million dollars, in addition to large amounts of supplies and munitions, France has been one of the most crucial allies in American history. Without French aid, America would be nothing like it is today; it might have never existed. The ideas of liberty and equality even helped inspire the French Revolution, sparking a movement among the common people. With all that in mind, it is no understatement to say that the French saved America.

Prior to the Declaration, the conflict between the American colonists and the British mother country escalated from mere friction to active conflict, brought on by both mutual propaganda and unfair taxation. In an effort to pay off the debt of the French and Indian War, the British taxed the colonists on everything from sugar and paper to tea and glass. Not only were the taxes excessive, but they were imposed without proper government representation. Without anyone to advocate for them, this sparked a fire in the colonists' hearts. Determined to make a better life for themselves and their families, the colonists began to protest. On March 5, 1770, an incident that would be the last straw for the already angered colonists, the Boston Massacre

unfolded. Early in the day, the Bostonians were “fuming over taxes and constant surveillance by the British military” (National Constitution Center 1). The small disagreement between a townsman and a British soldier quickly escalated to a small riot. Over the course of the day, more than two hundred colonists gathered to defend their own. Furious, the colonists became violent, allegedly resorting to throwing objects like snowballs, sticks, and small stones at the soldiers. As the scene was becoming increasingly chaotic, a person in the crowd yelled, “Fire!”, and a fog of confusion erupted as the soldiers shot into the crowd. In one moment, the relationship between the British and the American colonists was forever shattered. As the cloud of dust cleared, it became clear that three colonists were killed; two later died as a result of their wounds. Five innocent lives fell victim to the scars of battle. Driven by their anger, colonists like Samuel Adams and Paul Revere used the massacre as propaganda. *The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King-Street*, a painting by Paul Revere, was created to further fuel the anti-British sentiment. Depicting an organized firing by the British soldiers on an innocent group of colonists, the artwork was distributed to the public and provoked a storm of controversy. This eventually caught the attention of the French, who were eager to get revenge for their loss to the British in the French and Indian War.

1776: the year that redefined the American spirit. Enlightenment ideas from the colonies were flourishing throughout the globe. Principles of freedom and natural rights from philosophers like John Locke and Voltaire were spreading rapidly throughout Europe. Others, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Baron de Montesquieu, and Thomas Paine promoted concepts that were later used as the basis of American government in both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Back in the colonies, things were not so peaceful. A

pro-independence sentiment was rising rapidly among the colonists as General George Washington and the Continental army were getting stronger and local militia began to take arms. *Common Sense*, by Thomas Paine attacked the concept of monarchy and taught ideas of life, liberty, and natural rights. This inspired the colonists. On July 4, 1776, fifty-six revolutionaries risked their lives in what was then an act of treason: signing the Declaration of Independence. Written by Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence summarized the colonists' motivations to strive for liberty (Office of the Historian 1). Meanwhile in France, King Louis XVI was watching from afar, his interest sparked by the courage and boldness of the rebel colonists. Although the alliance between France and America had not yet been established, France was eagerly waiting for better military success in America before entering a cause that would take them into a war with their number one enemy (American Battlefield Trust 1).

The American victory in Saratoga proved to the world, and specifically to France, that the American troops were capable of holding their own against the largest army in the world. Often viewed as the “turning point” of the Revolutionary War, the Battle of Saratoga demonstrated a decisive victory and solidified a strategic partnership with France. As General John Burgoyne approached the Hudson River Valley, American General Horatio Gates had built up defenses near Bemis Heights, overlooking the Hudson (American Battlefield Trust 1). Although Burgoyne’s troops dug trenches as they waited for help, none came. Burgoyne then launched a second attack on the Americans at Bemis Heights in October, but it proved unsuccessful. With no way to escape, Burgoyne surrendered to Gates on October 17, 1777. This victory finally convinced France to sign both the Treaty of Alliance and the Treaty of Amity and Commerce on February 6, 1778. By finalizing the treaties, Benjamin Franklin and his fellow American

diplomats secured a partnership that not only provided the funding of billions of dollars but also crucial supplies like gunpowder, troops, and weapons. The Treaty of Alliance agreed that neither France nor America would stop fighting with Britain until independence was granted (American Battlefield Trust 1). In addition to this treaty, France also signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, which solidified the trade network between the two countries. This was especially significant as France became the first country in history to recognize America as a sovereign nation. Without the victory at Saratoga to prove their capability, the Americans likely would not have gained French financial support, troops, and naval power that ultimately made the victory at Yorktown possible.

In October of 1781, the world was turned upside down as one of the greatest underdogs in history, the American colonists, was able to defeat the global superpower, Great Britain. It was not merely American grit, but the additional presence of 5,300 French troops under the command of the Comte de Rochambeau, working side by side with Washington's forces, that drove the British to surrender (American Battlefield Trust 1). In September of 1781, Washington faced the decision to move his troops North to New York or South to Yorktown. With British General Cornwallis in occupation of Yorktown, Washington, along with Rochambeau, chose to move their forces of over 8,000 men south to Virginia, after hearing that the French navy would be available for a siege south of New Jersey (American Battlefield Trust 1). On October 14, American and French forces planned a surprise attack on British bunkers #9 and #10. To avoid compromising their position, soldiers were told not to load or prime their weapons and to wait for the code word, "Rochambeau." To prevent British escape, Col. Alexander Hamilton's force attacked redoubt #10, and Lt. Col. John Laurens' troops covered the rear. After twenty-two days

of fighting, the battle was won. On October 17, 1781, a British officer waved a white handkerchief tied to a sword, signaling surrender. On September 3, 1783, Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and John Adams met alongside British representative David Hartley to sign the Treaty of Paris and end the war.

Taking all this into account, the victory over Britain would not have been at all possible without our greatest and first ally, France. Through the writing of this essay, I have learned so much about my country and the American spirit. I think that everyone should know where they came from because it is part of who we are. As Americans, we should know what sets us apart from all other nations: grit. We know that hard work and perseverance are just part of the American way. If we see something that needs to be done or changed, we will do whatever it takes to ensure it happens. We can learn so much from our founding fathers, like bravery, perseverance, and doing what is right even when it might come with a cost. These men risked their lives in order to make a better life, not only for themselves, but for their children and everyone who is yet to come. That is the true American spirit.

Works Cited

- American Battlefield Trust. "Battle of Saratoga Facts & Summary." *American Battlefield Trust*, 17 Oct. 2018, www.battlefields.org/learn/revolutionary-war/battles/saratoga.
- "Battle of Yorktown Facts & Summary." *American Battlefield Trust*, 5 Dec. 2018, www.battlefields.org/learn/revolutionary-war/battles/yorktown.
- Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum. "10 Causes of the American Revolution." *Boston Tea Party Ships*, 17 May 2024, www.bostonteapartyship.com/article/10-causes-of-the-american-revolution.
- "Fighting for Independence: An Alliance with France." *The National Museum of American Diplomacy*, diplomacy.state.gov/online-exhibits/diplomacy-is-our-mission/security/fighting-for-independence-an-alliance-with-france/.
- "French Alliance, French Assistance, and European Diplomacy during the American Revolution, 1778–1782." *State.gov*, 2018, history.state.gov/milestones/1776-1783/french-alliance.
- Museum of the American Revolution. "France and the American Revolution." *Museum of the American Revolution*, www.amrevmuseum.org/france-and-the-american-revolution.
- NCC Staff. "On This Day, the Boston Massacre Lights the Fuse of Revolution - National Constitution Center." *National Constitution Center – Constitutioncenter.org*, 5 Mar. 2023, constitutioncenter.org/blog/on-this-day-the-boston-massacre-lights-the-fuse-of-revolution.
- Office of the Historian. "The Declaration of Independence, 1776." *State.gov*, history.state.gov/milestones/1776-1783/declaration.

Shaw, Travis. "France in the American Revolution." *American Battlefield Trust*, 6 Jan. 2021,

www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/france-american-revolution.

"Timeline of the Franco-American Alliance." *American Battlefield Trust*, 17 Apr. 2023,

www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/timeline-franco-american-alliance.