

Commission for Historical Statues in the United States Capitol,

I humbly submit James Armistead Lafayette for consideration of a statue in the United States Capitol.

The year 2026 will mark an important milestone in American history – it will be 250 years since the United States declared itself to be an independent nation free from British rule. For Virginia, the United States Semiquincentennial (250th anniversary of our independence) gives the Commonwealth an opportunity to look back on its role in the American Revolution, to remember Virginia's revolutionary experience, and reevaluate the meaning of the Revolution when so many Americans were excluded from the rights expressed within the Declaration of Independence.

The story of one unknown revolutionary Virginia hero accomplishes all of these – James Armistead Lafayette.

James Armistead was born into slavery in New Kent County, Virginia. Though most sources indicate Armistead was born in 1748, there are conflicting accounts that also place his birth in 1760. Armistead spent the first few decades of his life in bondage as a slave owned by the wealthy New Kent County planter William Armistead.

In 1781, upon gaining his master's consent, he joined the Revolutionary army under the command of the Marquis de Lafayette. Up until 1781, the Revolutionary War had left Virginia largely unscathed. But as the eyes of British commanders turned southward, American turncoat Benedict Arnold, now a general in the British army, was given command of a 1,600-man loyalist army to wreak havoc and raid Virginia. Armistead joined the Marquis de Lafayette's ranks sometime after Benedict Arnold captured, raided, and burned Virginia's new capitol of Richmond during the first days of January 1781. Lafayette immediately saw the value of an enslaved man in his service, and asked Armistead to serve as a spy. Lafayette and Armistead knew that throughout the country, the British had found willing help among the America's enslaved population. Taking their opportunity to find freedom through serving the British, countless thousands of slaves stole themselves and ran away from their masters to join the British. In British service, runaway slaves provided valuable information to the British about their Patriot masters, acted as guides for both the British army and navy through unfamiliar territory and waters, and served within British ranks as soldiers and sailors. Armistead and Lafayette used British trust in runaway slaves to their advantage and Armistead became an American spy.

Posing as an enslaved runaway, Armistead joined Benedict Arnold's army and gained his trust. Armistead's deception was so deep that Arnold entrusted Armistead to guide British troops through unfamiliar Virginia roads and wilderness. Armistead's access to the top levels of British command was complete. As an enslaved man, many British officers treated Armistead as if he were invisible, and freely talked among themselves about sensitive information which Armistead overheard.

Upon his arrival in Virginia with his own British army, General Lord Cornwallis even asked Armistead to spy on his behalf on the Americans.

Armistead was able to freely steal way from the British army to deliver information to other American spies that was relayed to Lafayette and General Washington. Remarkably, British commanders trusted Armistead so much that during the siege of Yorktown, he was able to go freely through British lines, whereupon he delivered reports to Lafayette and Washington.

In fact, it was Armistead's intelligence that allowed Washington to prevent the British from reinforcing Yorktown and ensuring the British surrender at Yorktown on Oct. 19, 1781.

After the Revolutionary War, Armistead was returned to his owner and returned to slavery. Unfortunately, Virginia's Emancipation Act of 1783 only freed slaves who had served as soldiers during the war, not as spies.

In 1784, the Marquis de Lafayette was disturbed to learn Armistead was still held in bondage. Lafayette wrote on Armistead's behalf saying he had more "industriously collected and more faithfully delivered" intelligence than any other spy during the war, and that he was "entitled to every reward his situation can admit."

Armistead won his freedom in 1786 when the Virginia General Assembly recognized his service as an American spy and paid his owner for his freedom.

Upon gaining his freedom, Armistead adopted a new last name to honor his commander —Lafayette. Little is known about James Armistead Lafayette's life after he earned his freedom. What is known is that he continued to live in New Kent County as a free black man with his wife and children. It is also known that he reunited with the Marquis de Lafayette once more during the Marquis' grand tour of America in 1824.

James Armistead Lafayette's date of death is also a mystery; he either died in 1830 in Baltimore or in 1834 in New Kent County. James Armistead Lafayette should be considered one of Virginia's greatest Revolutionary heroes, but few Virginians recognize his name today. There is no monument to this great hero in Virginia — only a roadside marker near his birthplace and place of enslavement marks his tremendous accomplishments.

As the United States Semiquincentennial of independence approaches there is no greater opportunity for the Commonwealth to display our values than this. Replacing the Capitol statue of Robert E. Lee – a Virginian who fought to keep Americans in chains – with James Armistead Lafayette – a Virginian who fought to make America free despite not being free himself. Virginia is a center of the revolutionary narrative; James Armistead Lafayette's name deserves to be mentioned alongside George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

Respectfully yours,

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