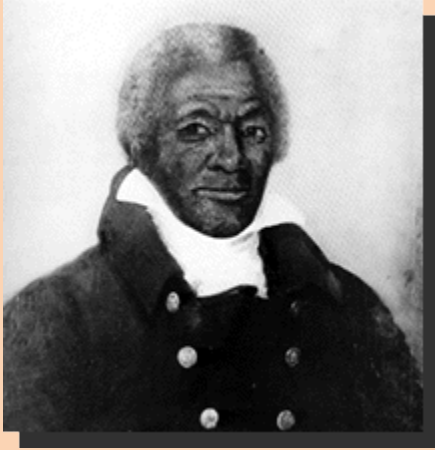


James Armistead Lafayette



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James Armistead, (c1759-1830) a slave, began his service with General Lafayette during 1781, when the young general was commanding forces pitted against General Cornwallis, to whose victory over General Gates in South Carolina many American slaves, who had joined the British on their promise of freedom, had contributed.

Trying desperately to raise four hundred laborers, teamsters, and badly needed cavalry mounts, Lafayette had advised General Washington that "nothing but a treaty of alliance with the Negroes can find us dragoon Horses [because] it is by this means the enemy have so formidable a Cavalry." And it was during this period, with Cornwallis still formidable and the Americans badly in need of intelligence as to his strength and strategy, that James Armistead sought his master's permission to join Lafayette.

His owner consenting, Armistead enlisted and served the future hero of the French Revolution so effectively that after the war the general was to state that his spying activities were "industriously collected and more faithfully delivered." Armistead had carried out important commissions so effectively that the general recommended him as worthy of "every reward his situation could admit of."

The brevity of Lafayette's testimonial understated his intelligent agent's resourcefulness. Taking advantage of British eagerness for Negro aid, Armistead had risked his life by pretending to supply Cornwallis with information damaging to the Americans -- a bit of playacting so perfectly performed that not until the defeated Cornwallis encountered him in Lafayette's headquarters was the black man's true loyalty and identity revealed.

The rest is irony. In 1786, Armistead, who by now expressed his continuing admiration for the marquis by calling himself James Armistead Lafayette, was rewarded for his services to the Revolution by being emancipated at the expense of the General Assembly of Virginia. In 1818, still free, but little changed in circumstance, the old ex-spy successfully petitioned the state for relief, acquiring after thirty years a veteran's pension.

The essential incongruity of his position was, however, unchanged. Although a recognized veteran of the Revolution and a free man, he was not a citizen. He had, nevertheless, emerged somewhat from the shadow in which he had stood in earlier years. And in 1824, during Lafayette's visit to Virginia, Armistead's now aging features were to share once more the general's glory.

John B. Martin, an artist as skilled in delineating a revolutionary veteran who was an ex-slave and spy as one who became chief justice of the Supreme Court (John Marshall), painted Armistead's portrait. Proud and dignified, he appears with his highly individualized features forcefully drawn, a dark, ruggedly

handsome man looking out at the viewer with quizzical expression. He wears a white neckcloth, his blue military coat bearing no medals is simply adorned with bright buttons embossed with the American eagle. Asserting an individual identity earned at the repeated risk of his life, James Armistead Lafayette affirmed an unshakable faith in the ideal democracy. His portrait now hangs in the Valentine Museum at Richmond, Virginia.

References:

Author: Ralph Ellison.

Picture Credit: Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia

Bibliography: Ellison, Ralph., *The Patriots*, edited by Virginius Dabney (1975).