Liz Covart (00:00:00) Ben Franklin's World is a production of the Omohundro Institute, and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Voice Actor as Nicholas Cresswell (00:00:08)

(Pen scratching) "April 29th, 1777, Dined at York-town 24 Miles from Hampton, Virginia. This is a pleasant town situated upon York River, which is Navigable for the largest Ships Close to the town. Here is several very good gentleman's houses built of Brick, and some of their Gardens layd out with the greatest taste of any I have seen in America but now almost ruined by the disorderly soldiery, and what is more extraordinary, their own Soldiers, the guardians of the people and defenders of their rights. Houses burned down, others pulled to pieces for fewel [fuel], most of the Gardens thrown to the street, every thing in disorder and confusion, and no appearance of trade. This melancholy scene fills the mind of the itinerant traveler with gloomy, and horrid Ideas. Here is a Battery consisting of 12 pieces of heavy Cannon, to command the River and a Company of Artillery stationed here, but they make a sorry appearance for so respectable a Corps, as the Artillery ought to be. Nicholas Cresswell" (Pen scratching)

Ed Ayres (00:01:14)

Most of the classic battles that we read about–Saratoga, Brandywine, Monmouth–all of those involve these large-scale movements of troops across the countryside. Yorktown was, in fact, a siege. Cornwallis was in the town, had already built defensive entrenchments around the town as well as some across the river at Gloucester. And he was simply behind the lines waiting when the French and Americans arrived.

Liz Covart (00:01:49)

Four and a half years before the Siege of Yorktown ended major military fighting in the American War for Independence, a young gentleman named Nicholas Cresswell traveled through the small village of Yorktown on Virginia's York River. What Cresswell saw reflected a town and community that had been disrupted and destroyed by the war. And yet, the destruction that Cresswell recorded, seems minor, when compared with the destruction the British, American, and French armies inflicted, four and half years later during the Siege of Yorktown.

Our Fourth of July commemoration continues in this second of two episodes about how everyday Americans experienced the American Revolution and its War for Independence. Our story picks up where our last investigation ended in Episode 332, with an investigation of how the war returned to Virginia and largely ended with the Siege of Yorktown in September and October 1781.

Where our exploration of British-occupied Philadelphia revealed how the War for Independence carried many dangers and disruptions for civilians who lived in big mercantile cities, our investigation of the occupation of Yorktown will demonstrate how the war also disrupted the lives of small, rural agricultural communities.

So how did the American War for Independence come to move south after 3 years of heavy fighting in the Northeast?

Ed Ayres (00:03:06)

The British initially focused on the Northeast, partly because they were convinced that the New Englanders, the Yankees, they were the real troublemakers that if they could be subdued, then, the revolution, the rebellion could be put down. Well, it didn't take them long to realize that was not the case, that there were far more Patriots than just the New England Yankees.

My name is Edward Ayres. I am the historian at the American Revolution Museum at Yorktown, Virginia, part of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation. And I have been historian there for a number of years and have always been fascinated with the history of colonial Virginia and the American Revolution.

The next phase was, well, if we occupy the main cities, what sort of were thought of as the capitals of this new rebellious group, New York, Philadelphia, then that will subdue them. Well, that didn't work either. The British could certainly hold any of those cities, Philadelphia or Boston or New York, but that didn't win the war. And they also realized that when they left those cities and went into the countryside, they were often found it very difficult to get any cooperation. The British thinkers thought, well, our problem is we need to operate in the south. That is where we will find more British support.

Liz Covart (00:04:43)

By the time British General Lord Charles Cornwallis entrenched his army at Yorktown in August 1781, a lot had changed in the British military approach to the American War for Independence.

The British defeat at Saratoga in October 1777, gave a significant boost to the diplomatic efforts of John Adams and Benjamin Franklin in France. The American victory at Saratoga was impressive and Franklin and Adams were able to use this victory to finally convince the French to ally with the new United States.

So for the last three years, between 1778 and 1781, Great Britain had been fighting a global war and its top priority was no longer the American rebellion. With France, Spain, and the Netherlands to contend with, Great Britain redeployed its army to protect its more lucrative Caribbean colonies and the shores of England.

(00:05:31) This left General Sir Henry Clinton, the commander in chief of British Forces in North America, in need of more help to gain ground in North America and defend the empire's beleaguered holdings in the Northeast.

Like many in Great Britain, Clinton believed that most southern Americans were actually loyalists who just needed the presence of the British Army to convince them to turn out for the British cause. So Clinton dispatched an army to Georgia and a force to Charleston, South Carolina. Their mission was to rally the loyalists, secure the southern colonies, and march north to reinforce the British presence.

This is how the War for American Independence came south after the British Occupation of Philadelphia. And the impacts of this war in the agricultural south looked very similar and also different from its impacts in the mercantile north.

Gretchen Johnson (00:06:20)

If you're not familiar with the area, Yorktown is situated right off of the York River and the York river's actually a beautiful river, its the shortest tributary to the Chesapeake Bay, it's also the deepest.

My name is Gretchen Johnson. I'm a native of James City County, Virginia and I work for the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation at the American Revolution Museum at Yorktown. The Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation is made up of two museums, the Jamestown Settlement which is in Williamsburg and the American Revolution Museum at Yorktown. Currently, I work on a recreated Middling Tobacco farm here at the living history part of the museum.

Liz Covart (00:06:57)

Five regions make up the state of Virginia. These regions start along Virginia's Atlantic Coastline and work their way west to the state's western border. From east to west these regions are The Coastal Plains or Tidewater region, the Piedmont, the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Valley and Ridge region, and the Appalachian Plateau.

Understanding these regions of Virginia is really important because region has played an important role in Virginia's politics and agricultural economy from the first English settlement at Jamestown in 1607. Yorktown is part of the Tidewater region.

Marcus Nevius (00:07:31)

And it's called the Tidewater in fact because the Chesapeake Bay ebbs and flows and because the rivers ebbs and flow. The major rivers being the Potomac, the Rappahannock, York, and the James.

I'm Marcus P. Nevius, associate professor of history and Africana studies at the University of Rhode Island. I'm also the author of *City of Refuge: Slavery and Petite Marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp, 1763-1856*. And I'm very, very passionate about all things African Americans in the early Republic and the history of slavery in the broader Atlantic World.

And then beyond the main rivers, we have much smaller tributaries, which, to some degrees are navigable to a point. And it's along these tributary rivers and waterways that colonial presence expands over the course of the 17th and early 18th centuries. About a hundred miles inland or so to the west of the Chesapeake Bay is a geographic feature that's essentially known as the fall line. And it's at this fall line where the navigable courses of the tide rivers essentially come to an end. The most famous of course perhaps might be at Richmond, where the James River's fall line actually meets but where also Richmond is established at the headwaters essentially of the fall line. To the west of the fall line we have the Piedmont region. The Piedmont region is where the action really is in the 18th century, it's the place where Washington's generation of planters essentially establishes their mark.

Ed Ayres (00:09:11)

The location of Yorktown is quite striking. First of all, the York River at this point narrows, so that the opposite side of the river is much closer. That's referred to as Gloucester Point, along the river all the way down to the Chesapeake Bay. On the Yorktown, or the southern side of the river, there is a very high bluff. Not a cliff exactly, but very high ground. And that is where the main street was laid, a very straight, long main street. And it was where the church was located, it was where the courthouse was located. It was the site of a number of wealthy merchants, brick houses. It was where a lot of the larger stores were, some taverns or ordinaries. Below that high ground, along the actual shore of the river where the piers were, is where the ships would come in.

Gretchen Johnson (00:10:13):

So all around the town all of that would have been farmland, a ton of farmland. Probably 90 plus percent of Virginians are gonna be living in a rural setting on a farm at the time. The average in colonial Virginia, the average is poor and enslaved. So the vast majority of all people living in the colonies are going to be considered poor or enslaved. Yorktown probably because of the tobacco, it's gonna be slightly, I wouldn't say more prosperous, but middling is a little more common than poor. But the vast majority of people are living on farms.

Ed Ayres (00:10:50)

Yorktown's creation and its importance for its first 50 years was totally tied to the tobacco trade. Even though the York River is not one of the longest rivers penetrating into Eastern Virginia, its tobacco got the reputation of being of the highest quality. At one point, around 1750, more tobacco was exported from the York River basin than all the other four rivers put together.

Liz Covart (00:11:23)

Tobacco served as English North America's first cash crop, which is a crop grown for its commercial power rather than for use by its owner. Tobacco was indigenous to Virginia, but the Virginia plant proved too bitter for English tastes. So in 1612, Jamestown resident, John Rolfe, began experimenting with tobacco seeds from the West Indies. Rolfe found that this crop grew really well in Virginia's Tidewater soils and in 1613 he shipped the fruits of his labors back to England, which widely accepted his tobacco and clamored to buy it.

By the mid-18th century, tobacco had evolved into Virginia's major agricultural business and export. In order to keep up with the demand for this labor-intensive crop, Virginians needed more help. At first they enlisted indentured servants, but there never seemed to be enough servants to keep up with demand. So then Virginians began to import enslaved people.

Marcus Nevius (00:12:19)

Tobacco production for about a century to the 1780s had largely been the economic engine of the Tidewater Virginia region. That engine was driven by slave labor and enslaved Africans who by the 1780s were probably second and third generation, in most cases. People whose forebears had labored on tobacco plantations.

Enslaved men and women would, as early as January, in any given growing season, enter into the fields and prepare the fields for planting seeds, which would happen by mid-February. And then several weeks of tending to very young tobacco plants would be the world that enslaved people would engage from Monday to Saturday in most cases and perhaps on Sundays too. The first crops would be ready for harvest by late Summer and perhaps a second crop in the early Fall, and by the late fall and early winter months, essentially

by December, the fields would be cleared of any of the previous season's crops and the process of preparing tobacco leaves for market, hanging them in tobacco houses, stripping them of the stalks, rolling them into massive hogsheads that Virginia became so famous for. These large roles of tobacco that in some cases weighed as much as a ton, and were rolled down the river Bluffs to the wharves where they were picked up by vessels that then carried them onto various points in the Atlantic World.

Ed Ayres (00:14:01)

There were times in the 1750s when, Yorktown was a bustling place with as many as 50 to 60 ocean-going merchant ships waiting off the port to be escorted back to Great Britain. The tobacco trade dominated almost everything, but of course there were subsidiary jobs that went along with that. Coopers were very, very important when the tobacco was brought in to be inspected, the barrels, the hogsheads they were called, had to be opened up and repaired. Tobacco farmers needed to purchase hogsheads. Carpenters were important. People who supplied rope and things that the ships needed were very important. People who ran taverns or ordinaries were important. And then of course there were the merchants who ran the stores and sold the imported goods from Great Britain and Europe. And there were of course governmental officials, county officials and British imperial officials who were port inspectors. So in one way or the other almost everyone's job revolved around the tobacco trade.

Liz Covart (00:15:20)

The deep waters of the York River allowed Yortkown to emerge as a large shipping center for the tobacco trade. As Ed Ayres just mentioned it seemed like everyone in Yorktown was involved with some aspect of the tobacco trade. But there were also people who weren't involved with this trade. People who lived around the village and worked on their family farms. There were also indigenous peoples who lived in the surrounding area who came to Yorktown to trade.

Gretchen Johnson (00:15:47)

There are obviously a lot of free white farmers and there are some free people of color living here as well, but a huge portion of the population is enslaved. As many as 70 percent of Virginians would've had access to at least one person that was enslaved at the time. You would've seen some Virginian Indigenous people, maybe not living in the town of York, you know, possibly on farms, but they might have come into town to do big business. You know you see people of mixed background, you see people of all classes in the area. I think that sometimes surprises people, we kind of picture colonial America being very white and it is, you know there's a lot more Europeans here, specifically English in this area, but there are huge amounts of other folks as well.

Marcus Nevius (00:16:35)

What was see in Virginia is a mixed population of African descended people. Many of whom don't speak in African language because they've been born locally, some of whom do retain certain elements of African language because perhaps they're first generation or perhaps their parents were first generation. And we find that both populations are intermixed on the various plantations throughout the Tidewater. So we have opportunities looking at these various mixed populations to see some elements of the population practicing religious customs, understanding the world from African spiritual worldviews but we have also other populations of African descended people who move more toward the monotheistic cultures and practices of the Anglican church. We see infusions of European influences and African influences and even Native American influences in the ways in which local African peoples or African descended peoples prepare their meals. All of this to me really generates a picture of a much more cosmopolitan population than I think we may have considered in the past.

Liz Covart (00:17:54)

Although not a large, mercantile port city like Philadelphia, Yorktown was still an important, bustling port town. It was a cosmopolitan town with a diversity of peoples living and working in the area.

However, the American Revolution began to change the economy of Yorktown and its population.

Ed Ayres (00:18:12)

At one point in the 1750s, there were as many as 1800 to 2000 people living in Yorktown. There were 250 to 300 structures there. However, very soon after the Revolution began there seems to have been a general Exodus of residents from the town for a lot of reasons.

Gretchen Johnson (00:18:38)

When you go to war with people, they tend to not wanna do business with you or trade with you a whole bunch, but it doesn't stop people initially from still growing tobacco because, you know, it's what they grew for a century and half to make money. So they kept growing it, thinking they could get it out and it didn't necessarily work like that.

Ed Ayres (00:18:53)

Virginians kept thinking that the French, if they could just get their tobacco to France, but of course with the British Navy in control of the Atlantic, that only worked in rare occasions. But even then there were speculators, merchants in Philadelphia who bought up the tobacco crop, the first two or three years thinking they would be able to then sell it. But eventually by about 1778 or 79, Virginians grew less and less tobacco

and they shifted their production to provisions, wheat, corn, fodder for animals, livestock for meat. Growing demand for homespun textiles meant that cotton was increasingly grown because no more cloth was imported from Great Britain.

Liz Covart (00:19:54)

The American War for Independence greatly slowed and at times stopped the Virginia tobacco trade. And this change altered the work and daily rhythms of everyday life. Here's Gretchen Johnson.

Gretchen Johnson (00:20:08)

If we're talking about farms, a lot of their work would've been the same before, during, and after the war. But I think during the war they just might be doing a lot of little extra things. Something that we talk about often on our recreated farm is textile production. So before the war, you're getting 90 plus percent of your fabric and cloth from England or at least through England. And people are sometimes surprised by that because they kind of picture everybody making everything themselves, from scratch. But when you really think about what would go into that; somebody had to get flax seeds, you would have had to sew them. It grows relatively fast, but let's say that's 60 days it's in full bloom and maybe 90 to 100 days it's ready to be harvested. And then it has to be redded or rotted and has to be rippled. You have to pop the seeds off the top and then you have to dry it out again. And then you have to break it open and knock away the broken pieces and hackle it, you know, which is kind of the equivalent to carding if you know about wool and cotton. And then you would have to spin it, and then if you had a loom, and a lot of people didn't, someone would have to weave it, and you'd have to have thousands of yards of yarn to set up a loom and they would have to weave it, and if you know what you're doing, you can actually weave it pretty quickly, but let's say you wove enough for a gown, that might be five and half yards of fabric. Then you would have to maybe die and cut it into a shape and sew it into an outfit. And you are still running the tobacco farm somehow.

Liz Covart (00:21:35)

The inability of Virginia's tobacco producers to grow tobacco as they had in the pre-war period hurt the economy of Yorktown. And so did the move of Virginia's government. Since 1699, Williamsburg had served as the capital of Virginia. Located less than 15 miles from Yorktown, the prominence of Williamsburg had helped attract business and merchants to the Yorktown area. But in 1779, Governor Thomas Jefferson and his government relocated the capital of the state to Richmond.

Ed Ayres (00:22:06)

There had been a feeling for some time, even before the Revolution started, that because population growth and expansion to the west, into the Piedmont had surged starting with the 1740s and 50s, that perhaps the

capital needed to be closer to where the center of population was beginning to develop. The outbreak of the Revolution simply accelerated what would probably have happened eventually anyway. With British Naval power dominating, ability to get to anywhere with these four rivers that struck deep into the heart of Tidewater, it was thought Williamsburg was not a very safe place to be. Richmond was further removed from the British Navy to strike and much safer to have the center of government.

Liz Covart (00:23:00)

Events in 1775 and 1776 also caused Virginians to think about the safety of their capital. Although the worst fighting would not visit Virginia until 1781, Virginians who lived along the state's Middle Peninsula and along the Virginia Peninsula, which is where both Williamsburg and Yorktown are located, had experienced the fear, fighting, and disruptions of war as early as 1775.

Marcus Nevius (00:23:25)

In April 1775, British Brass decided to order the seizure of the arsenal in New England. Virginia's last royal governor, John Murray, Lord Dunmore, issues a similar order to seize the arsenal at Williamsburg. And he justifies the decision to do so by claiming that the arsenal would be safer aboard his vessel in the James than it would be in Williamsburg, in the event that enslaved people rose in revolt and descended upon Williamsburg and captured the arsenal.

The Virginia House of Burgesses did not respond well to Dunmore's fearmongering, nor to Dunmore's order to take the arsenal aboard, what essentially becomes derisively known as his floating town, but Dunmore keeps up the warnings that enslaved people would rise in revolt.

Liz Covart (00:24:20)

By 1775, Virginia had a total population of about 500,000 people. Of those 500,000 people, about 210,000 were enslaved. Virginia had more enslaved people than any other mainland British colony. The knowledge that nearly half of Virginians were enslaved made Dunmore's warnings about slave revolts seem not farfetched and very real.

Marcus Nevius (00:24:45)

As news of the Siege of Boston filters into Virginia in late June and early July, 1775, we have an equally deteriorating situation of imperial control in Virginia. By which, June 1775, we find Dunmore taking refuge in the floating town on the river. And we find that enslaved people do respond to these rapidly deteriorating conditions by flooding to the British line at Dunmore's floating town. So essentially Dunmore's floating town

becomes a compilation of people who remain loyal to him and increasing numbers of enslaved people who also move as they are able to, when they're uninhibited by Virginia Patriots.

Liz Covart (00:25:36):

No longer safe at the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg, Lord Dunmore removed himself and his government to a group of British naval ships floating in the James River. Dunmore and his followers lived aboard these ships between May 1775 and August 1776. As Marcus Nevius mentioned, the number of civilians living aboard prompted revolutionaries to collectively refer to these vessels as Dunmore's "floating town."

Marcus Nevius (00:26:03):

The highest ranking imperial officials like Dunmore would get whatever we would consider the best of accommodations on the largest of these vessels. But a wider range of loyalist men, women, and children, and enslaved people are then essentially forced to live aboard decks or below decks. They live in squalid conditions. They live in highly communicable disease environments. Smallpox runs rampant throughout the floating town as it moves, especially beginning in 1776 from Norfolk up the Chesapeake Bay toward Maryland and then back down.

Liz Covart (00:26:44):

As Dunmore's floating town consisted of naval ships, these ships sometimes harried towns along coastal Virginia. This is in part why Nicholas Cresswell, our young traveler, recorded that Yorktown looked to be in shambles in 1777.

The floating town also attracted large groups of enslaved people everywhere it went, and the British put these people to work. Women performed domestic duties and men often took up arms for the British. By late October and early November 1775, enslaved people had begun to comprise large percentages of the British military in Southside Virginia. These men were happy to prove their worthiness for freedom by acting with bravery and valor on the battlefield.

Inspired by their actions, Lord Dunmore sat down and put his quill to paper. (Pen scratching)

Marcus Nevius (00:27:30)

Between April 1775 and April 1776, Dunmore is really tasked with the challenge of doing as much as he can to retain the Crown's authority, because he is, of course, the Crown's designee as Virginia's last royal governor. But he also finds that increasing numbers of enslaved people have heeded what they have heard as a rumor, the call to join British forces to defend the empire in exchange for freedom. And so by late October 1775, Dunmore has decided to deputize, empower, or otherwise create a segregated regiment of enslaved people who might fight for the empire against the Virginia Patriots. They're of course led by white officers but the document that Dunmore issues in the second week of November 1775 becomes known as Dunmore's Proclamation, and it proclaims that enslaved people can move to imperial lines and engage imperial officials in the project of becoming members of this Ethiopian regiment in exchange for freedom in defense of the empire.

Liz Covart (00:28:55)

Although enslaved people throughout the rebellious colonies interpreted Dunmore's Proclamation as applying to all enslaved people-- men, women, and children– who fled to British lines, his offer of freedom was actually more limited. First, Dunmore's order applied only to enslaved people in Virginia and happened to be enslaved by revolutionaries. And second, it only applied to enslaved men who enlisted in Dunmore's Ethiopian regiment.

But regardless of its narrow focus, Dunmore's Proclamation proved popular among the enslaved and among the British officials. The proclamation offered enslaved people an avenue to freedom while it offered the British increased military forces and it actively worked to disrupt the British North American agricultural economy.

Now although Dunmore's Proclamation was limited, it ultimately proved a successful model and strategy. In 1779, British commander-in-chief Sir Henry Clinton used Dunmore's Proclamation as a model for his more sweeping Philipsburg Proclamation.

Marcus Nevius (00:29:55)

So enslaved people by law, in most cases, are not able to just walk up to Patriot lines and offer themselves for service. General Sir Henry Clinton is very much aware of these limited issues of enlistments to free or freed people of African descent in the various colonies of the Northern theater of war, and from Philipsburg, New York by 1779 realizes that the next logical step started perhaps by Dunmore several years before is to broaden Dunmore's mandate. So Clinton isn't necessarily acting directly on Dunmore's advice, but he's acting on the broader principle, and the broader military expedient that enlisting enslaved people from Patriot lines, from Patriot locations can be a military advantage to the British.

Liz Covart (00:30:58)

As enslaved people flocked to British lines to secure their freedom, the War for American Independence continued to rage after the British evacuated Philadelphia in June 1778.

Unable to defeat the Continental Army and crush the revolutionary spirit in the northern colonies-turned-states, Sir Henry Clinton shifted British military strategy to the south.

Ed Ayres (00:31:20)

As early as 1780, the British besiege Charleston, South Carolina and took it. They later took Savannah, Georgia and then left a force under General Charles Cornwallis to subdue the Carolinas. And for a while it seemed to work, Cornwallis defeated one much larger American force at the Battle of Camden. Then a new general was appointed by George Washington, General Nathaniel Greene, and Greene was skilled in making better use of the local militia and Cornwallis soon found out that he could not, in fact, count on very much loyalist support of the countryside. And very bad British defeats at King's Mountain and Cowpens convinced Cornwallis that he was not going to be able to subdue the countryside of North and South Carolina. Greene was able to fight him to a standstill at the Battle of Guilford Courthouse. Cornwallis thought, well, where's the one place that we have not tried to conquer before, the place that's been supplying men, material, and financial support, Virginia. And that is when he decided to join a force that had already landed in Eastern Virginia early in 1781.

Liz Covart (00:32:52):

The force Cornwallis decided to meet and combine forces with had landed in Virginia in January 1781. This force was under the command of the American hero-turned-traitor, Benedict Arnold.

Virginia had not seen a major military engagement on its soil since the Battle of Great Bridge in December 1775. Now although the British Navy blocked its tobacco trade, there was no large-scale fighting to prevent Virginians from farming. So Virginia farmers, like those who lived in and around Yorktown, shifted their farming practices to growing the wheat and livestock the Continental Army needed.

Virginians' efforts to supply the Continental Army hindered the British military's efforts to destroy it. So Clinton dispatched Benedict Arnold to torch Virginia farms and generally wreak havoc across the state.

Just how much havoc did Arnold and his British force raise? We'll find out from Ed Ayres just after we take a moment to thank our episode sponsor and our partner on this Fourth of July series, the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

(00:33:54) Are you looking for a unique way to further your interest in early American history? Would you like to take a journey of historic proportions?

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And now, let's go find out just how much havoc Benedict Arnold raised.

Ed Ayres (00:35:03)

Arnold struck rapidly up the James River, burned a good part of the new capital in Richmond, retired back down the river, and was then later reinforced by General Phillips. All Washington could do was to send General Lafayette with a small force of light infantry detached from his Continental Army and Lafayette with the help of some militiamen did the best he could to hobble or at least hinder Arnold and Philips's force from being too terribly destructive. But then Cornwallis decided that in fact he should abandon Carolina and join up with the British forces already in Virginia, which he did in the summer. Cornwallis now vastly outnumbered Lafayette. All Lafayette could do would be sort of nipping at Cornwallis' heels, just to make sure that Cornwallis had to be a little careful and not extend himself too much. And that was the way the situation stood until everything changed in the late summer of 81 with the news that a large French fleet would come up from the Caribbean and be operating off the Middle Atlantic Coast later that summer.

Liz Covart (00:36:40)

As Arnold and Philips conducted their raids of the Virginia countryside, Cornwallis marched north from the Carolinas. He arrived at Petersburg on May 20, 1781.

Cornwallis' men were tired, exhausted from the heat, and very hungry. Every time Cornwallis sent out foraging parties for food, pro-revolutionary and disaffected militiamen and civilians would harry and prohibit his men from gathering farm stores. Cornwallis' men were so weak that disease had begun to take its toll. His army of 7,000 only had 5,000 men fit for duty. Further, while at Petersburg, Cornwallis found that General Philips had ordered him to reinforce Portsmouth at the mouth of the James River on the Chesapeake Bay.

Cornwallis marched to Portsmouth and found it too low and swampy to be healthy so he left a detachment of 400 men to hold the port and marched the rest of his army north to Yorktown. Cornwallis knew Yorktown to occupy high, healthier ground and that it had a deep river channel and a good harbor for British naval reinforcement.

Voice Actor as Eliza Ambler (00:37:43):

(Pen Scratching) "Richmond, 1781: Our removal from York to this place, which I considered one of the calamities of my life, lost much of its bitterness when I found, the succeeding fall, that you and your much loved family would also be obliged to follow. No sooner had you from necessity been forced to join us, and we were looking forward to days of happiness, than we were forced to separate again. Even here we found no rest for the sole of our foot. Another alarm this morning! Should it be confirmed that the British are really coming up James River, my poor dear mother will not continue a moment. Poor dear, soul, what sufferings are hers!" (Pen scratching)

Gretchen Johnson (00:38:23)

It's hard to describe why people would leave or wouldn't leave depending on what was going on. And so the best comparison or analogy we had was when there's a big hurricane coming and we know it's coming and the government, the local government or the federal government tells you, you got to get out. And so there's obviously people who don't leave, and sometimes people will question, well, why wouldn't they leave? They were told to go. And I think we don't think about everybody having somewhere to go. So maybe you're not leaving because there's nowhere else for you to go, so you stay and there are people who maybe don't have the opportunity to leave, or maybe you don't want to leave. So you do see some people staying, but as far as the town goes, a lot of people had left by the time the Siege come or were even given the opportunity to leave.

Ed Ayres (00:39:10)

For the 1781 events, Yorktown's final history, Yorktown is a pale shadow of what it had been just 25 years earlier when it was a bustling, thriving port. But it seems that almost as soon as the Revolution started, the town seemed to suffer an exodus of its residents. The people who stayed behind were also worried that being on the river, they were vulnerable to British depredations. which there was a great deal of that going on along the main river's penetrating into the interior of Virginia.

Marcus Nevius (00:39:53)

White Virginian residents of Yorktown who had the means to evacuate before the Franco American forces assembled on the frontier, did exactly that, they moved and that's not just the story of Yorktown. That's the story of just about every location where the belligerents moved. Those who were of means and able to move away generally moved away from the frontlines. And sometimes they did so while taking their enslaved people with them to remove them from the prospect of escape to the British. But others did make the choice to leave enslaved people behind to protect property. And for those enslaved people who were left behind, typically men, as women and children were considered valuable enough to be moved away. Their's was an experience of hunkering down essentially, attempting to perhaps throw up small breastworks or small abbati, around a street or at a certain strategic location on a street in the center of Yorktown so as to throw up at least one more roadblock for an advancing force.

Liz Covart (00:41:01)

Everywhere the British and American armies went, American civilians had to make a decision of whether to stay or flee their homes. Like Americans in cities, Americans in the countryside needed family or friends they could run to. If they didn't have family or friends, they often stayed and hunkered down as the armies waged war.

When Lord Cornwallis arrived in Yorktown on August 2, 1781, he arrived knowing that he would have to make a stand. Lafayette's army continued to chase his men everywhere they went and a combined Franco-American force under the commands of Generals George Washington and the Comte de Rochambeau was on its way south from New York to end the British presence in Virginia.

Ed Ayres (00:41:42)

Washington only took a portion of the continental soldiers outside of New York with him when he and Rochambeau marched south. The march south was very complicated, took quite a while. Some of the soldiers marched overland to the top of the Chesapeake Bay and were then taken south on a flotilla of smaller transports. The artillery and the calvary marched continually over land the whole way. Washington and

Rochambeau couldn't conceal the fact that troops were moving, but they tried to make it look like the combined French-American force was shifting south of New York, implying they might try to attack New York. But by the time Clinton finally realized what had happened it was beyond his ability to stop them.

Marcus Nevius (00:42:45):

Before the Franco-American force arrived at Yorktown, the British had arrived and put the enslaved people, some of whom had marched with Cornwallis' force from the Carolinas, to the arduous labors of preparing Yorktown's outer defenses. Preparing the abbati, preparing the ditches, the parallels that the British would use to move artillery pieces back and forth or to move troop forces back and forth at a subterranean level so as to stay below the artillery fire of the belligerent forces as they arrived. So this experience would've been one of great anxiety, one of arduous labor, one of surviving disease, and one of great anticipation as intelligence of the Franco-American force's movements toward Yorktown began to arrive in Yorktown.

Ed Ayres (00:43:40):

Yorktown was in fact, a siege. Cornwallis was in the town, had already built defensive entrenchments around the town, as well as some across the river at Gloucester. And he was simply behind the lines waiting when the French and Americans arrived. They, of course, then built these offensive siege lines for their cannon to start pounding and bombarding Cornwallis to force him to surrender.

Marcus Nevius (00:44:13):

For those enslaved people who were left behind, typically men, their's was a context of attempting to find, gather, and protect as much small arms as they possibly could and to cooperate in doing so in some of these neighborhoods, so that they might be able to, if faced with literal close quarters combat, they'd be able to at least defend themselves. And ultimately many of them were among the casualties of the war, as the Franco-American forces bombarded Yorktown to almost dust over the course of the several weeks of bombardment in October 1781. And in their last days, those who survived resorted to all manner of survival.

Ed Ayres (00:45:03):

Cornwallis, he was also, of course, running short of food and supplies. A number of his horses, they ran out of fodder for them, and killed them deliberately rather than give them away to the Americans. The other thing they did was these able-bodied male African Americans that had left their masters and joined Cornwallis earlier, they ran out of provisions and food. A lot of them had smallpox and he turned them out of the lines. And there are accounts, it was pretty chilly by the third week of October. There are accounts of the Americans finding these poor men, many of them sick and dying, huddled, practically naked with no food in the ravines, because of course they didn't want to be re-enslaved and recaptured, which a lot of them were.

Liz Covart (00:45:57):

It took time for the combined Franco-American force of nearly 17,000 men to travel to Yorktown and establish its siege lines. Like the British, the French and Americans established their lines by ripping up farm fields, tearing down buildings, and taking whatever supplies it needed from surrounding homes.

As the armies developed and built up their entrenchments, the French and British navies met at the Battle of the Capes.

Both the French and British dispatched fleets from the Caribbean to reinforce their armies. On September 5, 1781, near the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, the Comte de Grasse's fleet of 37 ships met British Admiral Graves's fleet of 19 ships and for two and half hours these fleets pounded each other with cannon fire.

Ed Ayres (00:46:41):

There was no absolute clear decisive victory, but the British admiral simply decided he needed to be repaired and went back to New York, leaving DeGrasse in total command of the Chesapeake Bay, which meant that Cornwallis was not going to be reinforced. He was getting hemmed in, he could no longer even now send parties out to raid for food and livestock and fodder. And with Lafayette's force now augmented with these 3,000 French soldiers, he was pretty much hemmed in where he was and running out of supplies before the allied army even gotten there. So this naval superiority made all the difference.

Liz Covart (00:47:31):

The entry of the French into the American War for Independence had changed everything. Where the opening of a global theater had pulled British soldiers and supplies away from North America, it had sent French troops and supplies to North America. In addition to naval support, the French sent an army of professional soldiers to augment the Continental Army. The combined Franco-American force that met Cornwallis at the Siege of Yorktown totaled nearly 17,000 men. Meanwhile, Cornwallis had about 5,000 men fit for duty.

The Siege of Yorktown began on September 28, 1781.

Ed Ayres (00:48:09):

One thing that helped them plan the siege was there was a very deep, long creek ravine stretching from the York River south a long, long ways. And there was no way that the British would've been able to have escaped across that so the siege lines were basically built from that ravine back toward the east and connecting up with the York River east of the town itself. There were two lines, the first one, and in both cases, the French occupied the left-hand half and the Americans the right-hand half. You should think of them as necklaces upon which are strung cannon batteries and something called redoubts, which were small fortified areas where a number of soldiers would be stationed to protect the cannon batteries because of course the vast bulk of the army, both French and Americans were way behind the lines and then rotated in and out of the siege lines as necessary.

Liz Covart (00:49:25):

In addition to their superior numbers, the French and American armies also held the superior position.

Vastly outnumbered, without hope of reinforcement, and horribly positioned with their backs to the York River, Cornwallis and his army experienced three weeks of heavy bombardment from French and American artillery. By mid-October, Cornwallis had no choice but to surrender, which he did on October 19, 1781.

Ed Ayres (00:49:50):

His soldiers were increasingly coming down ineffective from illness or wounds. The allied bombardment was so severe that the opening in your defensive trenches are called embrasures for the cannon to fire out through, the bombardment was so severe, he even closed up some of the embrasures. Most of his artillery was not proper defensive artillery. He had to use a lot of cannon taken off a couple of warships that were with him. The French and the Americans had far bigger guns, huge caliber guns.

He really did the only responsible thing, calling for peace terms because professional soldiers were a real investment in training and skill. And a lot of these men of his were veterans of some years. And you simply didn't waste lives like that unnecessarily.

Gretchen Johnson (00:50:54):

Cornwallis' surrendering, I think was probably unbelievable to folks, at least that's the way I would've thought of it.

Ed Ayres (00:51:04):

The basic, accepted account is that Cornwallis himself pleaded illness and did not attend the surrender in person and sent his second in command General O'Hara. Ceremonially O'Hara emerged and symbolically offered his sword to General Rochambeau because it would've been unthinkable to surrender to an American. Rochambeau, always the diplomat, demured and referred him to Washington. So then he approached Washington. Well, Washington was not going to accept as the commander in chief, a surrender from the second in command so he deferred to his second in command, who happened to be General Lincoln, who had been forced to surrender at Charleston almost two years earlier. The British had denied General Lincoln honors when he surrendered at Charleston, so Washington refused to allow the British to surrender with honors at Yorktown which basically meant they had to march out with their flags furled, their drums muffled.

Marcus Nevius (00:52:21):

Enslaved people, those who survived at Yorktown, disease, the siege, malnutrition, many of whom were recaptured by the Franco-American forces. Theirs would've been an experience of being taken as prisoners of war and then being subjected to the harsh disease-ridden, malnutrition defined contexts of the Franco-American prisoner of war camps, which were maintained into 1783, until the diplomatic end of the war.

Liz Covart (00:52:55):

After Cornwallis' surrender, Washington wasted little time in returning to New York. He didn't want the British to take advantage of his weakened position at New York nor did he want the British to capture his men while they marched north.

Ed Ayres (00:53:07):

The British was sent off as prisoners very quickly because, of course, Washington didn't know if the British fleet would come back and if it would defeat DeGrasse this time or if DeGrasse would leave. So they marched them off quickly to get them out of the way. He went back up to New York very quickly leaving behind only some new Continental recruits who were to be whipped into shape and marched South to join Nathaneal Greene. But the French stayed, wintered over, spread out around four or five different areas– Jamestown, Yorktown, Williamsburg, West Point–And they didn't march back north until the following spring

Marcus Nevius (00:53:50):

The big takeaway from Yorktown, of course as it relates to the enslaved people and civilian people who experienced the war, was total destruction. Yorktown was decimated. Civilians lose their lives, mainly from

the various artillery volleys that are cast back and forth. But also from the significant tropical diseases, more broadly, endemic diseases such as smallpox, which ravage the population at Yorktown.

Gretchen Johnson (00:54:22):

The town is destroyed during the siege. So I think the town never truly recovered. The lack of tobacco going out, you know, really devastated the town. Sometimes people will say, wow, it's still a cute little town. And I really think that has a lot to do with the war. It never really recovered financially from that, then it wouldn't be built up. It wouldn't become a Boston or a Philadelphia or even a Richmond because they never got it back. Some people left and didn't come back, you know, tradespeople would've moved on. A lot of people from Williamsburg moved to Richmond when that became the capital of Virginia. I think it kind of devastated the town and the surrounding farms. And I'm sure some of them stayed, especially if they were landowners, and rebuilt, but I imagine that's when a lot of folks picked up roots and left, you know, moved on to somewhere else.

Liz Covart (00:55:10):

While the British, French, and American armies marched off, Yorktown's civilians came home to utter devastation. Their homes had been destroyed, their farms dug up for siege lines, and many of their enslaved people had either run away to British lines or died defending their property.

Still, some residents returned and tried to rebuild.

Ed Ayres (00:55:31):

The offensive siege lines were filled in very rapidly because they didn't want them used in case the British did come back. The defensive ones around the town were not and there are complaints because they've become mosquito breeders and they were disrupting the town. So there are some complaints in the county records asking for state help to level these works and rehabilitate the town. But there's really, you know without the impetus for trade and commerce and profit that had existed before. There's just not a great deal of capital or resources to do a lot of reconstruction. The town didn't disappear. It was still a good port so there was some commerce going on and also the fisheries and oysteries continued to grow in importance but it certainly was a very, very quiet backwater by 1800.

Liz Covart (00:56:44):

Unlike cities, rural towns like Yorktown that had been devastated by the War for American Independence didn't necessarily recover after their destruction. As Ed Ayres just noted, Yorktown didn't disappear, but it also never regained its pre-war economy or reclaimed its status as a small, but thriving port town.

The British defeat at the Siege of Yorktown proved to be the end of major military engagements in North America. After months of negotiation, American and British representatives signed the Treaty of Paris, which ended the war and recognized American independence, on September 3, 1783.

The end of fighting gave Americans a chance to rebuild their lives and build a new nation. It also gave them a chance to recover from the traumatic experiences they had suffered during the war.

The American War for Independence was dangerous and wrought havoc on all levels of American society. Whether a soldier or civilian, one could not escape the horrors of battlefield carnage, shortages of food and supplies, or the disruptions the war had caused on nearly every aspect of everyday life.

Liz Covart (00:57:49):

This episode was co-written and co-produced by Holly White and Liz Covart.

Kate Gruber of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation provided additional assistance with this episode.

Joseph Adelman and Holly White served as our voice actors.

The music for this episode came from Blue dot sessions.

You'll find more information about our guests, Edward Ayres, Gretchen Johnson, and Marcus Nevius, on the show notes page: "Ben Franklin's World Dot Com slash Three Three Three.

If you enjoyed this episode, please share it with your friends and family.

This episode of Ben Franklin's World is supported by an American Rescue Plan grant to the Omohundro Institute from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Production assistance for the podcast comes from the Omohundro Institute's Digital Audio Team: Joseph Adelman, Martha Howard, and Holly White. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music.

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Finally, Joe, Holly, and I really hope you've enjoyed our two-episode Fourth of July series. If you have suggestions for our future series, please reach out, liz@benfranklinsworld.com

Ben Franklin's World is a production of the Omohundro Institute, and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

P.O. Box 8781, Williamsburg, Virginia, 23187-8781 | Tel. (757) 221-1114 | oieahc@wm.edu