

Timeline of the Siege of Yorktown



In January 1781, the prospects for victory looked grim for the American cause. The Continental Congress was out of money, American soldiers suffered from a lack of food and pay, and General Washington faced mutinies in several major units of his army. But by the end of the year a combined force of American and French troops defeated the British under Lord Cornwallis at the decisive Siege of Yorktown. The Siege of Yorktown was the last major battle of the American Revolution.

The following timeline details important events in the Siege of Yorktown.

PRELIMINARY EVENTS

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| May 8, 1781 | French frigate <i>Concorde</i> arrived in Boston with news that a large French fleet departed Brest, France, in March to assist with military operations against the British. When George Washington learned the news, he called for a conference with General Rochambeau, the commander of French land force in America, to discuss strategy. |
| May 20, 1781 | British General Lord Cornwallis, commanding a large British army, arrived in Petersburg, Virginia, from North Carolina. |
| Late May 1781 | General Washington met General Rochambeau at Wethersfield, Connecticut, and tried to convince him to join an attack on British-held New York. While no firm plan was made to attack New York, Rochambeau agreed to bring his French army from Newport, Rhode Island, to join American forces around New York. |
| August 1-2, 1781 | Lord Cornwallis moved British forces from Portsmouth, Virginia, to the tobacco port of Yorktown on the York River and began building earthworks to fortify his position. |
| August 14, 1781 | General Washington learned that the large French fleet under Admiral Comte de Grasse was heading to the coast of Virginia. Washington recognized an opportunity to defeat Lord Cornwallis in Virginia with the aid of French naval support. |
| August 19, 1781 | American and French forces began their long march from New York City to Virginia. |
| August 30, 1781 | Admiral Comte de Grasse arrived at the Chesapeake Bay with the large French fleet he sailed from France. In addition, he brought another 3,000 French soldiers. |
| September 2, 1781 | Allied forces (American and French) entered Philadelphia on their long march south. They reached Head of Elk (present Elkton, Maryland) by September 8. Most of the American and French forces continued their travel by ship to Virginia though some, including cavalry and wagon trains, continued by land. |
| September 5, 1781 | British Admiral Graves, commanding a British fleet of nineteen warships, found a larger French fleet in the Chesapeake. Both fleets exited the Chesapeake Bay and prepared for battle off Cape Henry. The battle matched the British fleet against twenty-four French warships. The ensuing battle would be known as the Battle of the Capes. Though both fleets were damaged during the battle, the British fleet suffered more extensive damage, causing them to scuttle one of their ships. After the initial battle, both fleets sailed southeast for several days. |

September 9, 1781

The French fleet reversed course and returned to the Chesapeake Bay. Several days later, the British fleet broke contact and returned to New York City. Admiral de Grasse learned that a small French fleet under Admiral de Barras entered the Chesapeake Bay unchallenged during the Battle of the Capes, allowing critical siege artillery to be brought to General Washington.

September 14, 1781

Generals Washington and Rochambeau reached Williamsburg. American and French forces continued to arrive during the month of September.

September 17, 1781

General Clinton in New York learned the French fleet had blockaded the Chesapeake Bay and Lord Cornwallis was trapped. General Clinton began to gather a relief force to save Lord Cornwallis.

THE SIEGE BEGINS

September 28, 1781

American and French forces marched out of Williamsburg and traveled the eleven miles to Yorktown.

October 6, 1781

Allied forces began to dig a long zigzag trench, called a parallel, which gave them cover as they approached the British positions.

October 9, 1781

Allies began bombardment of British positions at Yorktown.

October 11, 1781

General Washington ordered work to begin on a second parallel which brought the Americans within several hundred yards of the British lines. The second parallel could not be completed until the Americans took British Redoubts Nine and Ten, part of the British defense line.

October 14, 1781

American and French forces seized Redoubts Nine and Ten, two small earthen forts which anchored the eastern portion of the British defense lines.

**October 16, 1781
(before dawn)**

British attempted an ill-fated counterattack to stop the American advance. Lord Cornwallis knew his options were limited.

**October 16, 1781
(late evening)**

Lord Cornwallis attempted to ferry his troops from Yorktown to Gloucester Point on the north side of the river. The British hoped to break out and flee north while abandoning their sick and wounded soldiers. A bad storm during the night stopped the transfer of British troops from Yorktown to Gloucester Point.

October 17, 1781

A British drummer and an officer waving a white flag mounted British fortifications. They sought a truce to discuss surrender terms. On the same day, a British fleet left New York to relieve Lord Cornwallis.

October 17-18, 1781

Surrender terms were finalized at Moore House in Yorktown.

FINAL ACT

October 19, 1781

Surrender terms were signed.

October 28, 1781

The British relief fleet reached Virginia and learned that Lord Cornwallis had surrendered. The fleet returned to New York several days later without engaging the French navy.



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