

James Fayette

Revolutionary War Double Agent

Read the following story and then answer the questions that follow.

A boy named James was born into slavery around the year 1750. He was enslaved by a Virginia tobacco farmer named William Armistead. Armistead sold military supplies to the American army. He and James traveled to Richmond, Virginia, to supply General Lafayette's troops. Lafayette needed more than just supplies. James had heard that an enslaved man could be granted his freedom if he fought for the colonies. Armistead allowed James to join Lafayette as a servant, but secretly Lafayette was teaching him to be a spy!

BENEDICT ARNOLD



Benedict Arnold started the Revolutionary War on the side of the colonists. He fought bravely and won many battles but did not feel appreciated. He did not get a promotion that he expected in 1779. Arnold decided to secretly switch sides to the British. He began spying for the British and working against his own commander, General George Washington. When Arnold was revealed as a spy, he fled to the British army in late 1780 before he could be caught by American troops.

Arnold fought alongside General Cornwallis. James crossed paths with the infamous traitor, Benedict Arnold.

DISGUISE

Lafayette ordered James to dress in raggedy clothes and present himself as a runaway slave to Cornwallis and Benedict Arnold. James offered to guide British soldiers since he knew all the roads. James also foraged for food for the troops. The soldiers accepted his help, but no one really paid much attention to him. This turned out to be a big mistake. Cornwallis, Arnold, and their troops talked about battle plans in front of James. James then sneaked away and passed along the information he learned to Lafayette.

DOUBLE AGENT

The British, and Cornwallis, trusted James so much that they asked him to spy on the Continental Army for them. James agreed and carried information to Lafayette from the British. He gave the British misleading information about American plans. This work as a double agent was risky. If the British had discovered James was a spy, they would hang him right away. If he was caught carrying papers to the British by American soldiers who did not know him, they might execute him as a spy too.

YORKTOWN

James was never caught. The information he passed to Lafayette allowed the Continental Army to trap Cornwallis at Yorktown. The British army had no choice but to surrender on October 19, 1781. James was in Lafayette's camp when Cornwallis paid his visit. Imagine Cornwallis's face when he realized who had tricked him!

FREEDOM

After Yorktown, Lafayette sailed back to France.

The Revolutionary War officially ended in 1783. James received credit for his spying during the war, but he did not earn the freedom he expected. The state of Virginia freed slaves who served for at least a year and had "born arms," which means they carried a weapon into battle. But the law did not extend to enslaved people like James who had served as spies rather than fight on the battlefield. With Armistead's support and permission, James started seeking freedom for himself. He petitioned Virginia's General Assembly to grant him free status in December 1784. His request was denied. When General Lafayette returned to Virginia and learned that James was still not free, he was outraged. Lafayette wrote a testimonial praising James for his dedication and important role in the victory in Yorktown. Lafayette even addressed the General Assembly on behalf of all enslaved people, asking the House of Delegates for "proofs of its love for the rights of all of humanity, in its entirety." James presented a new petition in November 1786 with General Lafayette's endorsement attached. This time, it was approved. James was finally free on January 9, 1787. To honor what Lafayette had done for him, James took the last name Fayette.

LATER LIFE

James married and raised a large family. He purchased 40 acres of farmland near William Armistead's farm in New Kent County. He also purchased family members who were enslaved.



James and Lafayette met one last time when Lafayette returned to the United States in 1824. There was a celebration at Yorktown where Lafayette recognized James in the large crowd and called for the driver to stop his carriage. They had not seen one another in forty years. Lafayette got out and cried out, "James!" and the two friends embraced one another for the last time.

James Fayette spent his remaining years on his property surrounded by his family. Lafayette returned to France and did the same.

Multiple Choice: Choose the best answer.

1. Which best describes James's role in the Revolutionary War? A. He was a soldier for the Continental Army.
B. He was a soldier for the British Army.
C. He was a double-agent but faithful to the Patriot cause.
D. He was a spy for the British Army.
2. Why was James not freed from slavery after the Revolutionary War? A. He had betrayed the Continental Army.
B. He had betrayed the British Army.
C. His owner had not allowed him to serve.
D. As a spy, he did not carry a weapon into battle.
3. What is the main reason James took the last name of General Lafayette? A. Lafayette was his father.
B. Lafayette was his mentor.
C. Lafayette was his friend and helped him gain his freedom.
D. Lafayette saved his life during the war.
4. How did James become part of the British Army at first? A. He offered to become a soldier.
B. He offered to guide them and forage for food for them.
C. He offered to spy for them.
D. He offered to betray Lafayette for them.
5. What would have happened to James if he had been caught spying? A. He would have been executed.
B. He would have been imprisoned.
C. He would have been sent back to Armistead's farm.
D. He would have been captured as a prisoner of war.



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