

James Fayette: What's in a name?

When a new baby is born, many parents spend a great deal of time picking out just the right name! Sometimes we like the name our parents chose. Sometimes we don't. Sometimes, people give us nicknames. Sometimes we like them. Sometimes we don't! There's a lot that determines what name we end up with as adults. In the end, we can keep or change our name if we want. We decide!

One thing no one likes is when someone gets your name WRONG!

That's what has happened to James Fayette!

James was born enslaved, so we don't really know who chose his name. His parents may have been allowed to name him. But, sometimes, the enslaved were given their name by those who claimed to own them. Sometimes, they were only given a first name. Sometimes, they were given the surname (last name) of their enslavers, but not always. Whoever named him, they named him simply "James".

When James' freedom was finally restored to him (all men are born free-it is something taken, not given), he chose the name "Fayette", the name of his friend, the Marquis de La Fayette. We know this because it is how James signed his name whenever he collected his pension. Few people could read and write back then compared to today, and being able to actually sign your own name was a big deal! As you can see, James signed his name clearly and boldly, so it could not be misread!!!

The receipt below is what we call "a primary source document". That means no one else is telling us this man's name. HE is telling you his name by his own signature! You may find his name signed "James Lafayette" by lawyers and legislators on documents they drew up. But, in proving what name James chose to be known by, these would be considered "secondary source documents".

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What would Lafayette think about James being called by the wrong name and why?

Is there anything you can do as a class to help restore James Fayette's name?

(Suggestion: Have the class compose a letter explaining why "James Armistead" is incorrect. Sign it from your class and email it to a website that is identifying James Fayette incorrectly.)

FINAL THOUGHTS

In French, the name is written as two separate words. La Fayette means "the Fayette". James studied French as a child and would have known this.

By using the name "Fayette" instead of "Lafayette", we remember James as a hero with his own distinct name, but that name reminds us of his connection, his love, and his admiration for his friend, Lafayette!

PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT

[p 2: Receipt dated March 13, 1819 signed by James Fayette as follows:

*By Mar: 13 Recd warrant of my Co
of Co. James Fayette*

[p 37: Receipt dated March 19, 1830 signed by the veteran as James Fayette and acknowledging receipt of his semiannual pension of \$20. The veteran died August 9, 1830.]