

# Fayetteville's revolutionary hero Lafayette is one founder whose legacy not tarnished: Pitts

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Fayetteville Observer

**Sept. 12, 2023**

As the city celebrates the birthday of its namesake, the Marquis de Lafayette, I was thinking of how we lucked out when it came to a namesake.

The French hero of the American Revolution can easily fit into modern times without having to make a bunch of embarrassing excuses for him.



Mark Schneider portrays Marquis de Lafayette as he waits inside the Market House before being called to speak to the citizens of Fayetteville Thursday evening, Sept. 6, 2007, during the 250th birthday celebration procession. *Nick Pironio, The Fayetteville Observer*

Turns out, Arleen Fields feels similar. She is president of the Lafayette Society and associate director and archives librarian at Methodist University.

“We really lucked out — there are so many towns and places named for people whose legacy is not as stellar as you would hope,” she said. “But Lafayette was one of the good guys. He was fighting for religious freedom, equality. He was a staunch abolitionist.”

Lafayette, who died at age 76, had been anti-slavery since a young man in his 20s. In 1875, he bought three plantations in Cayenne, the capital of a French colony in South America, with an intention of paying the enslaved labor on the camp, granting them expanded rights and eventually freeing them — an experiment in the “gradual manumission” he supported. But he was snatched up and imprisoned in the French revolution (remember, he was aristocracy) and was dispossessed of his properties, including the plantations.

This brief foray into plantation ownership, however well-meaning, is “a little dicey,” as Fields puts it. But if we need any further proof that the Frenchman was an abolitionist, consider that the great Frederick Douglass considered him one because Lafayette was not just anti-slavery but advocated for racial equality.

And that belief is what separates Lafayette from many of our country’s other esteemed founders. I believe it is one reason the Lafayette Society, which comprises mostly older folks, has been able to form a years long partnership with young history students at Fayetteville State University, a historically Black institution.

I do know the excuses made for Presidents Washington and Jefferson and the others — I reckon I have heard them all.

For example, we have been told they are “men of their time” and people enslaved other people back then.

Problem is there were men of the same time who did not own and would not own human beings, including president No. 2, John Adams. Not to mention: The U.S. trailed England and Europe in abolishing slavery, so there were actually plenty of people worldwide who had rejected the barbaric trade by then.



It's not that Washington and Jefferson, and yeah we gotta throw in James Madison, were men of their time so much as that they were wealthy men of Virginia. The customs and traditions of that state and states across the South led to their most prominent blind spot — i.e., how they could justify continuing chattel slavery even while carving out a nation that became a great experiment in freedom.

## Rich orphan to warfighter

The Broadway smash “Hamilton” brought many of the white men on paper money and from our American history books into a warmer glow, and that includes our guy, Lafayette. In the musical, the Lafayette character comes across as one of the tough guys, rapping that he makes “redcoats redder with bloodstains” and boasts, “I go to France for more funds ... I come back with more guns.”

Now, in real-life, many rappers are just playing tough.

But Lafayette, despite coming from immense wealth, was the real deal. He came from a line of people who had distinguished themselves in combat — for centuries. He enlisted in the French Army at age 14.



*Arleen Fields, president of The Lafayette Society Contributed*

He didn't have to.

“He was the richest orphan in Europe,” Fields says. “He could have sat back, lived the charmed life, hung out at court, did whatever he wanted.”

Instead: “At 19 years old, he decided to come to the United States, volunteer his services, and the rest of his life he kind of put his money where his mouth is.”



Bud Lafferty, president of the Lafayette Society, unveils a check that will endow a history scholarship at Fayetteville State University, at the society's annual meeting on March 6, 2022 at SkyView on Hay. FSU Chancellor Darrell Allison applauds on the left. The endowment stems from a years-long partnership between the Lafayette Society and the FSU Black History Scholars Association, which comprised mostly students. *Contributed*

When you consider Lafayette's foothold in both military excellence and American Independence — that kind of puts some added perspective on the new name, Fort Liberty, for our favorite military base, I would say.

## Lafayette and Native Americans

Don't take my word for it. Come out to some of the birthday events this week and hear for yourself.

Among activities that focus on the Marquis' life are:

— UNC History Prof. Dr. Lloyd Kramer will talk about “Why Is Our City Called Fayetteville? Lafayette’s Life, Ideas and American Tour of 1824-25.” Kramer will discuss how Lafayette is still relevant today. “It isn’t going to be your standard, stuffy, historical lecture,” Fields promises. (1 p.m. Friday, Tony Rand Student Center, Fayetteville Technical Community College. Free.)

— Dr. Jamie Mize, a UNC-Pembroke history professor, will talk about Lafayette's relationship with Native Americans. It is something I had not heard about before. Says Fields: “He was very influenced by them.” ( 7 p.m. Friday, Davis Memorial Library, Methodist University. Free. Reception at 6:30.)



Lafayette Plaza East is located in Cross Creek Park at 200 Green Street in Fayetteville, NC. *Kristen Johnson*

— The Lafayette Trail, a guided trolley and walking tour in downtown Fayetteville, will depart from the Fayetteville Independent Light Infantry Museum on Burgess Street. (Saturday, 8 to 11 a.m., tickets are \$20).

Other events include the kickoff French music concert at 7 p.m. this evening at Haymount United Methodist Church (\$15 tickets; \$10, students) and a birthday party Saturday at Cross Creek Park on Green Street (home of an impressive Lafayette statue) from noon to 2 p.m. with free birthday cupcakes.

## A birthday ball

Famously, Fayetteville, North Carolina, is the only one of dozens of towns and cities across the U.S. named for Lafayette that he actually visited. So, to all the other namesake towns: Boom.

The visit was part of the 1824 to 1825 tour and the folks here threw a ball for him. The ball will be replicated in the 250th anniversary celebration in 2025.

*Rebecca Russell is owner of Beespoke Vintage and The 10 Dresses Project. Contributed*



In the meantime, Rebecca Russell, a period clothes designer and owner of BeeSpoke Vintage, has organized a birthday ball for Saturday from 7 to 11 p.m. at SkyView on Hay.

Russell, who is playing the host, said the ball would include elements of 1820s style and fashion associated with a Regency ball — for women, high waistlines that fall just below the bustline, long hemlines; and for men, knee breaches as well as the tight-fitting pants that were the rage for the era’s younger party goers.

She said 120 tickets had been sold with just under 20 still available (at \$95 and up). Celebrants are coming from the Triangle, Greensboro, Charlotte, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Georgia and Florida, she said. Evening festivities will include waltzes and reels led by a Regency dance master; card tables; and Regency games like dominoes and skittles (not the candy).

Russell and others have adopted, just for fun, made-up, royal-sounding titles for themselves, she said, and the event will add elements of Jane Austen and the hit period TV series, “Bridgerton.”

“Obviously, as Americans, we would have been thumbing our nose at titles at that point,” she said. “My ball is mixing some of those genres together just for the fun of it.”



Rebecca Russell of Beespoke Vintage designed this dress in the late Regency style for a birthday ball for Lafayette scheduled for Saturday, Sept. 9, 2023, at SkyView on Hay in downtown Fayetteville, NC. *Contributed*

## Man in the middle

I can imagine the people who hosted Lafayette nearly two centuries ago would have wanted to do it up nice.

He was an aristocrat, which makes his affinity for democracy for the common people all the more interesting.

Fields and many other Lafayette enthusiasts consider him to be a man in the middle.

“He got ridiculed for *not* having a mistress,” she says. “He was trying to be both a royalist and a populist.

“That’s something that’s very similar today; if you try to take sort of a middle-of-the-road common sense approach these days, nobody likes you.”

“He was so far ahead of his time,” Field said.

Which, by my estimate, puts his name and legacy in just the right time for our era.



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