

James Armistead, America's slave spy gets his freedom, Jan 9, 1787

On this day in history, January 9, 1787, James Armistead, America's slave spy gets his freedom from the Virginia legislature. Armistead was born into slavery in New Kent County, Virginia in 1748 in the household of William Armistead.

After Benedict Arnold's treason, he was sent with 1,600 troops to Virginia in early 1781 to aid in Lord Cornwallis' attempt to take over the southern states. Arnold's troops burned Richmond and were performing raids across the colony. At this time, Armistead, at the age of 33, asked his owner if he could join the Continental Army. His owner agreed and James was assigned to the forces of the Marquis de Lafayette who devised a plan to put James in Arnold's camp as a spy.

James posed as a runaway slave and gained Arnold's trust. Since James knew the local area, Arnold put him in charge of guiding British troops through the local terrain. James used this close proximity to many British troops to listen to their conversation and gain intelligence about their movements, supplies, armaments and plans. James would write down the information in detailed reports and pass it on to other spies who would get the information to Lafayette.

After Arnold returned to New York, James moved on to the camp of General Cornwallis and performed the same actions. While in Cornwallis' camp, James posed as a British spy, serving in the American camp and bringing back just enough intelligence to Cornwallis to earn his trust. This allowed him to travel back and forth easily between both sides and to report any information he found to Lafayette. Sometimes he would carry messages from Lafayette to other spies within the British camp as well.

In the fall of 1781, it was Armistead who found out that 10,000 soldiers were being ferried from New York to meet Cornwallis at

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Yorktown. Armistead's intelligence was given to George Washington who was able to maneuver the French fleet into the harbor to prevent the reinforcements from landing, forcing them to turn around and return to New York. This gave Washington the advantage and opportunity to attack Cornwallis in Yorktown and bring the war to an end. If it hadn't been for Armistead's intelligence, the war may have turned out very differently.

After the war, most Virginia slaves who had served in the Continental Army were given their freedom, but the law was specific that the slaves must have served as soldiers. Since Armistead did not serve as a soldier, but as a spy, the law didn't apply to him and he returned to slavery.

In 1784, the Marquis de Lafayette learned that Armistead was still in slavery and personally wrote a letter of commendation for Armistead. This letter was presented by Armistead with a petition to the Virginia Assembly in 1786 asking for his manumission (freedom from slavery). For his valuable service, Armistead was granted his freedom by the State of Virginia on January 9, 1787.

After gaining his freedom, James took on the name Lafayette and went by James Armistead Lafayette thereafter. He married and eventually purchased 40 acres of land which he farmed and lived on until his death in 1830.