

The French Connection

France had long been enemies of their neighbors across the English Channel. While the two had competed in the Hundred-Years War (ca. 1337-1453) for territorial sovereignty in continental France, one could say Britain and France then partook in a second Hundred-Years War (ca. 1689-1815) for global commercial and military power.

Each empire was wary of the other gaining too much wealth, land or naval prowess, and engaged in at least eight major conflicts against each other during this period. (LOC) Their interests crossed the Atlantic and tensions developed in North America.

In 1749 the French were becoming concerned with the Pennsylvania and Virginia traders in the Ohio River Valley. That summer they sent an expedition of 247 men under the command of Captain Pierre-Joseph Céloron de Blainville down the Ohio River. Céloron buried lead plates in the ground stating the French claim to the land.

When he returned to Canada he had a bleak report. The Ohio River Valley Indians “are very badly disposed towards the French.” In order to keep the valley he recommended that the French build a fortified military route through the area.

In 1752, the Marquis Duquesne was named Governor of Canada. His instructions were “to make every possible effort to drive the English from our lands ... and to prevent their coming there to trade.”

The next year he began building a series of forts along the waterways in the Ohio River Valley. The first two forts were at Presque Isle, on the south shore of Lake Erie, and Fort LeBoeuf on French Creek, a tributary of the Allegheny River.

Meanwhile, Robert Dinwiddie, the Governor of Virginia, was granting land in the Ohio River Valley to citizens of his colony. In 1753, he received instructions from the King of England “for erecting forts within the king’s own territory.”

Dinwiddie was very upset about all the French activity in the Ohio River Valley. He sent a young volunteer, George Washington, to deliver a letter to the French demanding that they leave the region.

Later, in 1754, George Washington (a British officer) was sent to the Ohio River Valley with the Virginia militia. He and his troops were told to take the “Lands on the Ohio; & the Waters thereof.”

While at Will’s Creek (what is today Cumberland, Maryland), Washington learned that the French were in control of the Forks of the Ohio and the fort the British had built there. Washington proceeded forward with the construction of a road across the mountains.

Washington learned from Tanaghrisson that a band of French soldiers were camped only a few miles away. (Tanaghrisson was a Seneca sent by the Iroquois Confederacy to govern the Delaware and Iroquois in the Ohio River Valley (he was given the title “the Half King” and he sided with the British.))

On the night of May 27, 1754, Washington and 40 soldiers began a dark and wet overnight march. It was morning before they arrived at the Half King’s camp. Together they decided to surround the French.

CLAIMS BEFORE AND AFTER FRENCH AND INDIAN WARS



Then, the shot was fired. This skirmish invited retaliation from the French and their American Indian allies. Although officially not at war, both France and Britain supported the fighting by sending troops and supplies.

What became known as the French and Indian war in North America and Seven Years War elsewhere settled into a stalemate for the next several years, while in Europe the French scored an important naval victory and captured the British possession of Minorca in the Mediterranean in 1756.

However, after 1757 the war began to turn in favor of Great Britain. British forces defeated French forces in India, and in 1759 British armies invaded and conquered Canada.

Facing defeat in North America and a tenuous position in Europe, the French Government attempted to engage the British in peace negotiations. After these negotiations failed, Spanish King Charles III offered to come to the aid of his cousin, French King Louis XV, and their representatives signed an alliance known as the Family Compact on August 15, 1761.

The terms of the agreement stated that Spain would declare war on Great Britain if the war did not end before May 1, 1762. Originally intended to pressure the British into a peace agreement, the Family Compact ultimately reinvigorated the French will to continue the war, and caused the British Government to declare war on Spain on January 4, 1762, after bitter infighting among King George III's ministers.

Despite facing such a formidable alliance, British naval strength and Spanish ineffectiveness led to British success. British forces seized French Caribbean islands, Spanish Cuba, and the Philippines. Fighting in Europe ended after a failed Spanish invasion of British ally Portugal.

By 1763, French and Spanish diplomats began to seek peace. In the resulting Treaty of Paris (1763), Great Britain secured significant territorial gains in North America, including all French territory east of the Mississippi river, as well as Spanish Florida, although the treaty returned Cuba to Spain.

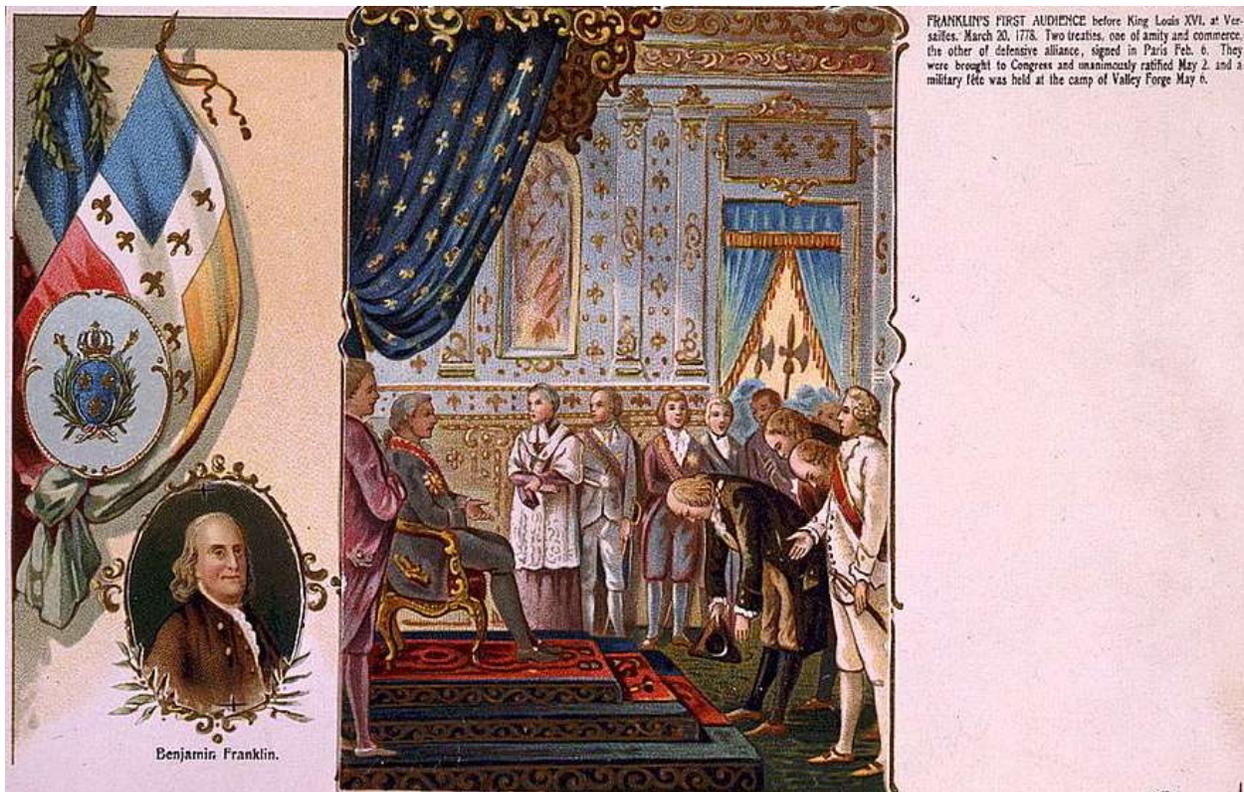
The ink was barely dry on the Treaty of Paris in 1763 before the French foreign ministry began planning and preparing for the "next" war with Great Britain.

As a nation France was determined to avenge its humiliating defeat during the French and Indian War/ Seven Years War, which had forced it to give up Canada and had upset the balance of power in Europe.

As early as 1767 France began following the growing conflict between Great Britain and its North American colonies with great interest, even sending agents to America to discover how serious the colonists were in their resistance to British attempts to tax them without their consent. (Jamestown)

Then, as colonial North Americans escalated their rebellion against Britain and declared independence from the British Empire in July of 1776, top American leaders and diplomats recognized France's potential as an ally and arsenal. The new United States desperately needed money, weapons and outfitting since they did not possess large manufacturing depots for these.

As a result, in late-1776, Benjamin Franklin travelled to Paris to try to negotiate economic and military aid. Besides Franklin, Silas Deane, Arthur Lee, William Lee and John Adams played important roles as well in persuading France to send economic and military support to the United States. (LOC)



On the French side of negotiations, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs (1774-87), Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes, served as the primary diplomat.

While initially wary to engage in another costly conflict, Vergennes agreed to provide initial clandestine aid to the United States from 1776 to 1778.

For instance, the French government decided to secretly loan one million livres (French monetary unit) to a fictitious trading firm called “Roderigue Hortalez and Company” that purchased military supplies, arms, and munitions and sold them to the American government.

The French also provided war material and clothing to the Americans through the neutral Dutch Caribbean island of Sint Eustatius, which was probably the single largest source of gunpowder for North American revolutionaries.

In addition, individual French officers and soldiers decided to join the Continental Army’s ranks, most famously the Marquis de Lafayette but also military engineers like Louis Duportail, François Fleury and Maudit du Plessis.

King Louis XVI and Vergennes, however, hesitated to formally join the American cause, waiting for the young United States to prove that they could succeed militarily against the British and would not abandon the cause to form a separate peace.

Such a sign came in the U.S. victory over British General John Burgoyne by American Generals Horatio Gates and Benedict Arnold at Saratoga, New York in the fall of 1777.

Vergennes and the American commissioners came to terms very quickly, signing two treaties on February 6, 1778.

The first, the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, mostly hashed out details concerning French trade with United States vessels.

The second, the Treaty of Alliance promised that France would establish a formal military alliance with the United States should Britain declare war on France due to their now official economic support of the American rebels.

It committed the United States and France to a joint military and no separate peace should Britain declare war (which they soon did). Vergennes dispatched Conrad Alexandre Gérard as the first French minister to the United States to facilitate this alliance.

France's economic support was essential in bolstering U.S. finances, supplying and outfitting the American army and replacing the colonies' lost trade in leaving the British commercial network. France's actions further legitimized the rebellion, helping to convince other rivals of Great Britain, such as the Spanish and the Dutch, to support the U.S. cause. (LOC)

Marquis de Lafayette

Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier Lafayette (Marquis de Lafayette - also spelled La Fayette) was a French aristocrat who fought in the Continental Army with the American colonists against the British in the American Revolution.

He joined the circle of young courtiers at the court of King Louis XVI but soon aspired to win glory as a soldier.

He traveled at his own expense to the American colonies, arriving in Philadelphia in July 1777, 27-months after the outbreak of the American Revolution.

With no combat experience and not yet 20 years old, Lafayette was nonetheless appointed a major general in the Continental Army, and he quickly struck up a lasting friendship with the American commander in chief, George Washington.

The childless general and the orphaned aristocrat seemed an unlikely pair, but they soon developed a surrogate father-son relationship.

The more Washington saw of the young Frenchman, the more impressed he was and the closer the two became. (Britannica)

Lafayette served on Washington's staff for six weeks, and, after fighting with distinction at the Battle of the Brandywine, near Philadelphia, on September 11, 1777, he was given command of his own division. He conducted a masterly retreat from Barren Hill on May 28, 1778.



Returning to France in February 1779, he worked with American emissaries Benjamin Franklin and John Adams to help persuade the government of Louis XVI to send additional troops and supplies to aid the colonists.

Lafayette arrived back in America in April 1780 with the news that 6,000 infantry under the command of the comte de Rochambeau, as well as six ships of the line, would soon arrive from France.

He was given command of an army in Virginia, and in 1781 he conducted hit-and-run operations against forces under the command of Benedict Arnold. Reinforced by Gen. "Mad" Anthony Wayne and militia troops under Steuben, Lafayette harried British commander Lord Charles Cornwallis across Virginia, trapping him at Yorktown in late July.

A French fleet and several additional American armies joined the siege, and on October 19 Cornwallis surrendered. The British cause was lost.

Lafayette was hailed as the "Hero of Two Worlds," and on returning to France in 1782 he was promoted to maréchal de camp (brigadier general). He became an honorary citizen of several states on a visit to the United States in 1784. (Britannica)

Later, as a leading advocate for constitutional monarchy, he became one of the most powerful men in France during the first few years of the French Revolution and during the July Revolution of 1830.

French Impact on the Outcome of the American Revolution

French participation transformed what might otherwise have been a lopsided colonial rebellion into a significant war, with potential to become another global conflict.

The British, it turned out, had little appetite for this - especially when other European powers such as Spain and the Dutch Republic proved willing to support the colonists. (history-com)

Without France's aid, American revolutionaries might have been seen by other major powers merely as treasonous subjects rebelling against their rulers.

French willingness to negotiate with Franklin and successors conferred legitimacy on American leaders.

The Treaty of Amity and Commerce of 1778 formally acknowledged the United States as an independent nation and opened the way for Americans to continue trading internationally.

Over time, France also enlisted the aid of other major European powers (Spain allied itself with the United States in 1779) while sidelining others, like Austria, which never joined the war but made clear it would back France in any wider conflict. (history-com)

From the earliest days, America's uprising depended on French willingness to provide open-ended credit that enabled Deane and his partners to ship supplies to the beleaguered revolutionary forces. Ultimately, France provided about 1.3 billion livres of desperately-needed money and goods to support the rebels.

Estimates suggest that at the colonists' October 1777 victory at Saratoga, a turning point in the war, 90-percent of all American troops carried French arms, and they were completely dependent on French gunpowder.

That triumph prompted the French to open their coffers wider. Once the relationship was formalized in twin agreements early in 1778 (the Treaty of Alliance and the Treaty of Amity and Commerce), the flow of supplies soared, along with the numbers of soldiers and sailors crossing the Atlantic to fight for the American cause. (history-com)

France helped make the victory of the United States possible. Continental soldiers used French weapons and wore French-made uniforms and, by the end of the war, they fought alongside French soldiers.



Surrender of Lord Cornwallis, a painting by American artist John Trumbull depicting Cornwallis and his army (center) surrendering to French (left) and American (right) troops, at the conclusion of the Siege of Yorktown in 1781.

The French army and navy battled the British all over the world, from Asia and Africa to the Caribbean, which stretched the capabilities of the British war effort in America. A number of Revolutionary War battles didn't even include Americans - the last battle of the war occurred when British and French ships clashed off the coast of India in 1783. (American Revolution Museum)

Roughly 12,000 French soldiers served the rebellion, along with some 22,000 naval personnel aboard 63 warships. Lafayette was the one of the earliest and most prominent officers to join. (Jamestown)

The comte de Rochambeau, commander in chief of all French forces, played a crucial role in containing the English fleet and in the final campaigns. The comte de Grasse reinforced revolutionary forces in

Virginia with French troops from Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) in the Caribbean, then dealt Britain's navy a decisive defeat at the 1781 Battle of the Chesapeake. It would be an army led by Washington, Lafayette and Rochambeau together that struck the decisive blow at Yorktown.

Following the Yorktown surrender, France's diplomatic support (and yet another loan) proved critical in reaching a formal end to the conflict, with the 1783 Treaty of Paris. Both the French and the Americans refused British offers of separate peace agreements, and French foreign minister Vergennes took a key role in brokering the treaty.

Ultimately, it wasn't until Britain and France settled their differences that the Americans finally signed the Treaty of Paris. (history-com)

The French national debt incurred during the war contributed to the fiscal crisis France experienced in the late 1780s, and that was one factor that brought on the French Revolution. In the end the French people paid a high price for helping America gain its independence. (Jamestown)

Information here is primarily from US State Department; Britannica; Ohio History Central; Michigan State University; National Park Service; Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation (Jamestown Settlement & American Revolution Museum); Library of Congress; American Revolution Museum; history-com

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young