

# Lafayette's *Hermione*: A TransAtlantic Story

by David Lincoln Ross

The 1779 frigate *Hermione* (air-mee-OHN) was the sleek French warship that carried General Lafayette to America in 1780, a voyage that directly culminated in the French-assisted American victory at Yorktown in 1781. The current *Hermione* is an authentically built replica, launched last year and, at press time, halfway across the Atlantic, bound for the United States. Her cruise up the Eastern seaboard, visiting

## Dueling Empires, On Land and At Sea

After Spain's spectacular failure to topple Queen Elizabeth's kingdom with its mighty armada in 1588, England took control of the seas. Over the next three centuries, the British Royal Navy became inextricably linked with establishing and maintaining a global empire. Except perhaps for the Dutch, with their own expansive commercial empire lashed together by a vast flotilla of warships and merchant vessels in



Marquis de Lafayette, 1791, depicted as a Lieutenant General. Painting by Joseph-Désiré Court (1797–1865).

under the direction of his king, who chose a suitable bend in the wide Charente River, twelve miles upstream from the Atlantic, to create an instant city whose sole role was to build France's navy. There, in this protected spot where the English would never dare to attack, Colbert spent millions to create a state-of-the-art port facility, arsenal, and shipbuilding center in less than a decade's time.

Having ceded a vast part of its North American territories and much of present-day India to Great Britain in the treaty ending the Seven Years' War (1756–63), known in the US as the French and Indian War, France was itching for revenge. As the fight for independence intensified in Britain's North American colonies, France upped the ante in 1778 by signing a treaty with the Americans, recognizing their independence. With that move, the American East Coast became a new battleground between Britain and France.

## Lafayette et La Frégate *Hermione*— a Soldier, a Ship, and a Cause

Inspired by the Americans' quest for independence and perhaps seeking personal vengeance—Lafayette's father had been killed by the British in the Seven Years' War—the nineteen-year-old Frenchman first sailed to America in early 1777. There,



*Hermione is on her way to the United States.*

ports that played key roles in the War for Independence, will celebrate and reaffirm the long friendship between France and the United States. In addition to her goodwill message, *Hermione's* voyage will pay tribute to the inspiring courage and moral example of a man known as the "Hero of Two Worlds," Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roche Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, whose arrival on the US East Coast bolstered American morale and augmented forces at a critical time in the American Revolution. In addition to the history the visiting ship will revive, this ambitious project, more than twenty years in the making, exemplifies the Lafayette family motto, "Cur non," or "Why not?"

Here is the unlikely story about how the *Hermione*—both the original 18th-century frigate, and her 21st-century recreation—reached our shores, the first one in 1780, the second, 235 years later.

the mid-1600s, no other nation-state could effectively challenge Britain's nautical reign during Europe's golden age of sail in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In France's case, it certainly was not for want of trying. From Bourbon monarchs during the *ancien régime* to Napoleon until Trafalgar, France sought to match its continental dominance with one on the seas through a well-financed mercantile and military program of shipbuilding. From the French realm's Mediterranean littoral to the Bay of Biscay and north along the Atlantic coast to the English Channel, her kings underwrote the construction of ports and forts in a bid for oceanic hegemony.

Therein lie the origins of the original *Hermione*, constructed over about five months in 1779–1780 in Rochefort, a purpose-built town established a century before, during the reign of Louis XIV. It was French minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert,

PHOTO BY FRANCIS LATREILLE. COURTESY ASSOCIATION HERMIONE-LAFAYETTE

CHATEAU DE VERSAILLES

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the well-connected Lafayette was soon introduced to General George Washington and joined his senior staff as one of the general's aides-de-camp. But the "insurgents," as American patriots were called at Versailles, were in dire need of more men and matériel to turn a largely defensive strategy of avoiding a direct battle with British troops into an aggressive thrust to defeat the invading Redcoats once and for all. In this effort, Lafayette proved an invaluable asset. Along with Ben Franklin, then representing the United States government in Paris, Lafayette helped persuade King Louis XVI and his foreign minister, the Comte de Vergennes, to send French soldiers and arms, as well as engage their formidable navy, to defeat King George III's British forces in a joint land-sea campaign.

In 1778, Lafayette returned to Versailles to cajole and charm Vergennes, Queen Marie Antoinette, and the king to back the Americans in their fight against the British. To fully appreciate France's underlying motive in spending millions to support the American cause, it should be recalled that this theater of war was only one among several, and not necessarily the most important, as France battled to challenge Great Britain's worldwide dominance. From India to the Caribbean to Canada and, on the US East Coast, from Georgia north to Maine, this was war on a global scale involving two bitter imperial rivals. It was—to lift a term from the nineteenth century—*realpolitik* writ large, involving men, arms and sea power as never before.

In late 1779, on receiving the go-ahead from Louis XVI and Vergennes, Lafayette traveled to Rochefort, where a frigate was being built that would take him back to Boston. This was the original *Hermione*, and it was this ship that carried Lafayette with the news—at the time top secret—that France was increasing its support in a very substantial fashion by sending a full expeditionary force to America.

In March 1780 Lafayette boarded *Hermione* and sailed for Boston, arriving on 27 April. In late September 1781, a French fleet under Comte de Grasse denied British Rear Admiral Thomas Graves and his fleet entry into the Chesapeake Bay. With this achievement and the involvement

of French troops under Comte de Rochambeau, everything fell into place for American and French forces on land and at sea to undertake a pivotal siege of British forces under General Cornwallis at Yorktown.

Blocked from seaward and surrounded on land, British troops surrendered to American and French forces on 19 October 1781. The tipping point in their long struggle for independence, victory at Yorktown culminated in the 1783 Treaty of Versailles, in which the British recognized the United States of America as an independent nation.



*Lafayette's role in the American Revolution has not been lost on Americans. His image is included in John Trumbull's famous painting (above), Surrender of Lord Cornwallis (1820, oil on canvas, 12' x 18'), on display in the Rotunda of the US Capitol. Lafayette is depicted on horseback with American troops, 2nd to the right of George Washington (on the brown horse), under the American flag. When Lafayette died in Paris in 1834, President Andrew Jackson ordered that he be honored with the same funeral honors as George Washington and John Adams. In France, the American flag was raised over his grave and continues to be flown there today. In 2002, the US Congress made him an honorary citizen, recognizing him as someone "who gave aid to the United States in a time of need." Dozens of American cities and towns, parks, a university, US naval ships, monuments, and even a mountain in New Hampshire are named for him.*

### The *Hermione* Project: More Than a Ship

Fast-forward in time to almost twenty years ago, when a small group of French men and women dreamed up the idea of constructing an authentic replica of General Lafayette's eighteenth-century ship in Rochefort. Until the 2012 launch of *Hermione*, the only tall ship representing France in modern times has been the 1896 barque

*Belem*, a sail training ship. The memory and interpretation of France's long seafaring heritage needed a boost. In 1997, the non-profit Association Hermione-La Fayette was formed to not only recreate the ship, but also revive important elements of France's maritime and artisanal heritage in the process.

Achieving this grand ambition began with rebuilding the Port of Rochefort. Its naval dockyards had closed in 1927, and the area was heavily bombed in World War II. The port's seventeenth-century buildings, including the historic ropewalk—the



(above) Port of Rochefort, 1762 by Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714–1789). Rochefort's centerpiece was its ropewalk, the *Corderie Royale*, then the longest building known in Europe. At almost 1,300 feet long, this magnificent structure was devoted exclusively to manufacturing rope. If France's ships of the line and frigates required millions of board feet of stout oak and other timber from her royal forests and pine masts from the Baltic, they also needed miles and miles of cordage and rope of varying sizes and weights to rig them. A single square-rigged warship from the Age of Sail might need more than twenty miles of rope for standing and running rigging. (left) Sea trials in France.



a new ship on Age-of-Sail lines. Importantly, the regional government of Poitou-Charentes in western France also stepped up by providing additional financial assistance in the intervening years, under the leadership of Ségolène Royal, then-president of Poitou-Charentes and currently France's minister for ecology, sustainable development, and energy. And it has paid off. To date, more than four million visitors have visited Rochefort to see the *Hermione* in various stages of construction in one of the original dry docks near the *Corderie Royale*, especially since her launch in 2012; their donations, via ticket sales, have financed more than half of the 25 million Euros it cost to build the ship.

Plans for the replica ship were based on those of a contemporary sister ship that had been seized in 1783 by the Royal Navy and well documented by the British Admiralty. Like most replica vessels sailing today, concessions were made in the design to accommodate modern safety and sanitation requirements, and there is an engine room with an engine (two, actually) and a generator. Nevertheless, from the visitor's standpoint, *Hermione* looks much like the original did and will be operated the same way as when sails were a ship's only form of propulsion. The construction of the ship also served to revive the maritime skills

and culture of the Age of Sail and, because all the work was done in the public eye, share that rediscovered heritage with the millions of visitors who came to see and learn.

The keel, frames, and planking are all oak, shaped and built by the carpenters from Asselin Inc., a French company that specializes in the restoration of historic monuments. *Hermione's* nineteen sails are linen (flax) with hempen boltropes and built by sailmakers Anne Renault, Alexandre Genoud, and Jean-Pierre Burgaud; they

are machine stitched and hand finished, much like the current suit of sails made for USS *Constitution* and many other replica and historic sailing ships. Her standing rigging is hemp; running rigging is manila. A trio of blacksmiths hand forged the ship's iron fittings, numbering in the thousands of pieces. The ship's anchors and cannons were custom made at two French foundries.

Now that the ship is built and the first part of her mission has been completed, an equally vital mission is finally underway—the *Hermione* is en route to the United

*“The idea was always to celebrate [the Hermione’s] role in the War of Independence. This project was conceived of partly as a historical venture, but partly to help generate employment and tourism to Rochefort.”—Miles Young, president, Friends of Hermione-Lafayette in America. And it succeeded—more than four million people came to Rochefort see the ship being built and outfitted with sails and rigging. Thousands more came to see her off when the ship departed in April for her voyage to America.*



States. The joint mission of the Association Hermione-La Fayette and its US counterpart, Friends of Hermione-Lafayette in America, Inc., is to revive this part of our shared history and remind citizens of both countries of the important ties between them and the spirit of friendship and liberty that sustains this relationship. Lafayette's story is an important part of this legacy as well, both his role in the American Revolution and his spirited motto, "Why not?"—that, "given determination, anything is achievable."

Hermione Voyage 2015 is part of an expansive outreach program featuring pier-side activities and traveling exhibits that will follow *Hermione* from port to port, as the ship makes her way up the Eastern Seaboard. There will also be companion *Hermione*-themed exhibits at the New-York Historical Society, the National Museum of the US Navy in Washington, and the Athenaeum in Boston. In June, Philadelphia chef Walter Staib will host a meal at City Tavern, the oldest tavern in America, where he seeks to recreate the meal that the Continental Congress feasted on with Washington and Lafayette onboard the *Hermione* in May of 1781. Finally, a full-featured website will expand the project's reach to millions of people and will include



(left and below) Although from the outside, the new version of Hermione looks like the 1780 frigate, down below and tucked into hidden spaces are modern contrivances—some for safety, like firefighting equipment and navigational tools and instruments, others are to accommodate 21st-century environmental regulations, such as sanitation. In her lower deck are two modern engines and a generator for electric power. The ship will be sailed traditionally as much as possible, but weather, schedules, and safety will be taken into account when it is time to fire up the engines.

an interactive, educational game, “Tides of Revolution: The Hermione Game,” to perpetuate the legacy of Lafayette’s voyage long after the ship leaves America and sails home to Rochefort, where she will continue her educational mission for future generations. For more information about *Hermione*’s upcoming voyage and her US itinerary, visit [www.hermione2015.com](http://www.hermione2015.com). ⚓

*David Ross is editorial director of Friends of Hermione-Lafayette in America, Inc.*



*Hermione* departed Rochefort on 18 April 2015, bound for the United States. When *Sea History* went to press, the ship was underway in the Atlantic. The trans-Atlantic crossing is expected to take 27 days with an expected landfall at Yorktown, VA, by the 5<sup>th</sup> of June. From there, she and her companion exhibits will travel up the East Coast, stopping in Mount Vernon, VA; Alexandria, VA; Annapolis, MD; Baltimore, MD; Philadelphia, PA; New York, NY; Greenport, NY; Newport, RI; Boston, MA; Castine, ME; and Lunenburg, Nova Scotia.

The ship has partnered with Tall Ships America and will be participating in the 2015 Tall Ships Challenge. See [www.sail-training.org](http://www.sail-training.org) for more information and updates on port stops and dates.

PHOTO BY L. BAILLIARD

# LAFAYETTE'S Hermione Voyage 2015™

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## TALL SHIPS CHALLENGE® Atlantic Coast 2015



### LAFAYETTE'S Hermione Voyage 2015

This summer, Tall Ships America's TALL SHIPS CHALLENGE® series returns to the Atlantic Coast with an international fleet of tall ships. Jointly organized with Friends of Hermione-Lafayette in America, the series is titled "Lafayette's HERMIONE Voyage 2015 in partnership with TALL SHIPS CHALLENGE® Atlantic Coast 2015" and marks the US debut of the French tall ship, L'Hermione. Join us for this historic voyage as tall ships race and sail their way into port cities along the Atlantic Coast in celebration of the long history of Franco-American friendship and cooperation.



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For more information, visit [www.tallshipsamerica.org](http://www.tallshipsamerica.org)