



The Guns of Independence: The Siege of Yorktown, 1781

Jerome Greene

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The siege of Yorktown in the fall of 1781 was the most decisive engagement of the American Revolution. The campaign has all the drama any historian or student could want: the war's top generals and admirals pitted against one another; decisive naval engagements; cavalry fighting; siege warfare; night bayonet attacks; and more. Until now, however, no modern scholarly treatment of the campaign has ever been produced.

By the summer of 1781, America had been at war with England for six years. No one believed in 1775 that the colonists would put up such a long and credible struggle. France sided with the colonies in 1778, but it was the dispatch of 5,500 infantry under Rochambeau in the summer of 1780 that shifted the tide of war against the British.

In early 1781, after his victories in the Southern Colonies, Lord Cornwallis marched his army north into Virginia. He believed the Americans could be decisively defeated in Virginia and the war brought to an end. George Washington believed Cornwallis's move was a strategic blunder, and he moved vigorously to exploit it. Feinting against General Clinton and the British stronghold of New York, Washington marched his army quickly south. With the assistance of Rochambeau's infantry and a key French naval victory at the Battle off the Capes in September, Washington trapped Cornwallis on the tip of a narrow Virginia peninsula at a place called Yorktown. And so it began.

Operating on the belief that Clinton would arrive with reinforcements, Cornwallis confidently remained within Yorktown's inadequate defenses. Determined that nothing short of outright surrender would suffice, his opponent labored day and night to achieve that end. Washington's brilliance was on display as he skillfully constricted Cornwallis's position by digging entrenchments, erecting redoubts and artillery batteries, and launching well-timed attacks to capture key enemy positions. The nearly flawless Allied campaign sealed Cornwallis's fate. Trapped inside crumbling defenses, he surrendered on October 19, 1781, effectively ending the war in North America.

Penned by historian Jerome A. Greene, *The Guns of Independence: The Siege of Yorktown, 1781*, now available in paperback, offers a complete and balanced examination of the siege and the participants involved. Greene's study is based upon extensive archival research and firsthand archaeological investigation of the battlefield. This fresh and invigorating study will satisfy everyone interested in American Revolutionary history, artillery, siege tactics, and brilliant leadership.

About the Author: Jerome A. Greene is a retired historian with the National Park Service. He is the author or editor of many books, including *Morning Star Dawn: The Powder River Expedition and the Northern Cheyenne, 1876*, *Washita: The U.S. Army and the Southern Cheyennes, 1867-1869*, and *Indian War Veterans*. Mr. Greene resides in Colorado.

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