

680 Miles of Secrecy:

The March to Victory at Yorktown

By David Bosted

The victory at Yorktown, on October 19, 1781, effectively sealed the Continental victory in the American Revolution. The story of how the French and Continental American Armies were able to accomplish the feat of surrounding and capturing General Cornwallis's large British Army is not well known – in part because the march to Yorktown was itself shrouded in secrecy.

The French and Continental Armies needed to conceal their destination for as long as possible. Elaborate ruses were created to make the British think the attack would be on New York, via Staten Island. Assembling the Allied troops in Central New Jersey was part of the ruse. Staten Island was accessible from Central New Jersey. Staten Island was a logical target because it had been the base of operations of the British to originally capture New York.

A part of the deception was the construction of ovens in Chatham for baking French bread. The British were fooled into thinking that a siege of New York was planned. The French Army would need an enormous amount of bread to feed the French troops. The ovens would be essential for a siege. Contracts were signed to purchase bricks to create additional ovens near Staten Island. Bread ovens made a siege of New York seem probable. But the ovens were part of the hoax.

Marching the troops by many routes was another part of the deception. The actual number of soldiers was hard to calculate when many routes were taken. The Watchung Mountains acted as a curtain and a shield to obscure the movement of many troops.

The primitive colonial roads could not stand up to the sheer numbers of troops, cannon, wagons, oxen, and horses if everyone took one route. Also, taking many routes eased the burden of feeding the troops and animals. The French and American troops were NOT told of their true destination, and neither were their officers. Generals Washington and Rochambeau were successful in keeping the actual destination a secret.

The French Army soldiers were professionals. They were experienced and proficient at moving its troops. The French Army had a clever and efficient way of moving their large army through northern Connecticut during the first part of the long march to Yorktown. The French Army formed into four equal units. Each of these contingents was comprised of one regiment, with field artillery and a baggage train. The regiments marched separately, on successive days, along

the same line of march. Each night a division would occupy the same campsite as the previous division had left that morning. By marching far inland during June and July, through northern Connecticut, the British were unable to observe, or interfere with, the troop movement.

Arriving in Princeton, Washington finally informed the military officers that the true destination was another 350 miles to the south, in Virginia. The assembled troops quickly gathered their gear and marched south through Maidenhead (now Lawrenceville) to Trenton. Speed helped to preserve the secret destination from the British for one more day.

Trenton was the halfway point in the epic trek to Victory in Yorktown. Prior to Trenton, deception was crucial. After the crossing at Trenton, speed replaced deception as the critical element.

The crossing of the Delaware at Trenton was an enormous undertaking. This was the largest military movement of the Revolutionary War. While the Delaware River crossing was being made, the 2nd New York Regiment sealed off Trenton at the Shabakunk Creek. This was the same location that Col. Edward Hand had used heroically during the Ten Crucial Days, to prevent the 7000-man British Army under General Cornwallis from trapping Washington's Army at the second Battle of Trenton.

The 1781 gathering of the French and Continental American Armies will be celebrated in an event on August 28 at the historic William Trent House. During the river crossing in 1781, the French artillery assembled at what is now called Trent House prior to ferrying the cannon across the river. 2021 marks the 240th anniversary of the crossing.

After crossing the river, the troops were able to move rapidly toward Yorktown. They dropped the veil of secrecy. Speed was now essential to trap Cornwallis at a little town in Virginia, called Yorktown, on the banks of the York River.

Secrecy and deception had been an essential element in the success of the plan to trap Cornwallis at Yorktown. During June, July, and August, operations and troop movements were covert whenever possible. In September, stealth was dropped. In September, after the Crossing at Trenton, the troops, and the American Revolution, rushed toward a decisive victory.

Note: In the fall of 2020, an online lecture by David Bosted for the William Trent House was part of a growing partnership among the Trent House, the Lawrence Historical Society, and the Trenton Museum Society. TMS is pleased to be a partner in this event. Watch for information about a follow-up exhibit!