

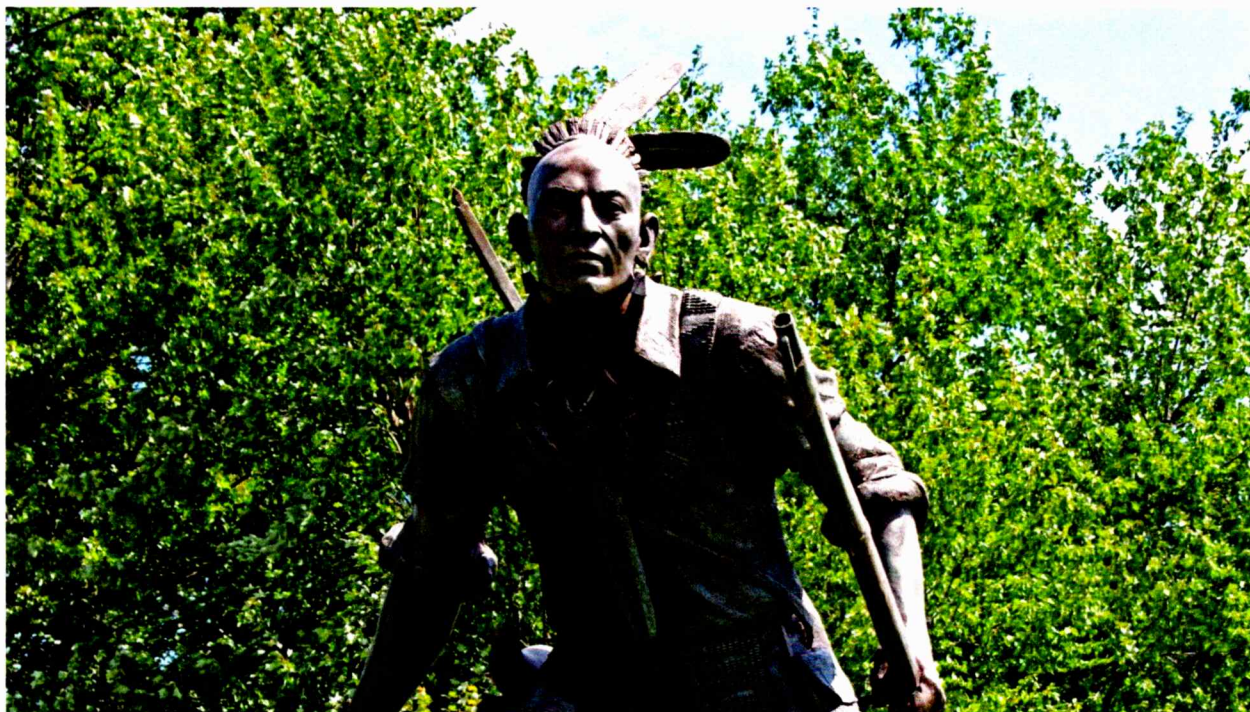
## Remembering Lafayette in Dutchess County

Based on a talk given by Bill Jeffway at Fishkill, New York

September 19, 2024 will mark the 200th anniversary of Revolutionary War Major General Lafayette's visit to Fishkill, part of a late-in-life "Farewell Tour" that lasted 13 months and included all 24 States. The question is: *should we recognize next year's anniversary, and if so, why?*

Let us consider an answer, through the lens of local history, where we find that admiration for Lafayette transcends not just centuries, *but social and economic class, faith, gender and race*. He inspired not only George Washington, but Indigenous Peoples, free and enslaved Blacks, the working class, women, defenders of Irish Catholics, US soldiers, generals...and US Congressmen. Let me explain.

In the nearby image of Daniel Nimham [a memorial statue], you see the face of an Indigenous Person who fought for the American cause. Lafayette was known for earning the trust and engaging the Oneida during the war. They called him, *great warrior*, in their native language, as a sign of respect.



*Daniel Nimham monument, Fishkill, New York*

For generations, many parents named their newborn son in honor of Lafayette. In 1783 Fishkill's Captain Comfort Ludington and wife Elizabeth named their newborn son, deLafayette Ludington. In 1827, Thomas and Jane Williams, a free Black couple in Union Vale named their newborn son Lafayette Williams. Lafayette Williams grew to serve, and die, in the Civil War in 1865, in the US Colored Troops. He is buried at the national cemetery in City Point, Virginia.

In 1854, two decades after Lafayette's death, Lafayette's name was invoked by voices for and against Catholic immigrants. The well-known historian, Jared Sparks with Hyde Park family ties, strongly asserted in national press that he knew from personal observation having lived with him for some time at his home, LaGrange, in France, *that Lafayette was tolerant of all faiths.*

In 1914, Red Hook's Victor Chapman joined what came to be called the Lafayette Escadrille, serving as a pilot in the early and emerging practice of armed airplanes at the outbreak of World War One. His untimely death in battle over Germany led to a eulogy at Lafayette's grave in Paris on July 4, 1916 – where Chapman's name was specifically linked to Lafayette as representative of the “good feeling between the sister republics.”

One year later – again at Lafayette's grave in Paris – on July 4, 1917 – US General Pershing and American troops rallied an American public skeptical of the recent US declaration of war on Germany – with the call that became the dominant theme in the war: “*Lafayette we are here!*” Poughkeepsie's American Legion Post is today called the Lafayette Post. It was founded and named by C. Fred Close upon his return from service in France in World War One.

In September 1918, women seeking a national right to vote assembled at Lafayette's statue in Lafayette Square across from the White House and got national attention saying, “*Lafayette, we are here! We, the women of the United States, denied the liberty which you helped to gain, and for which we have asked in vain for sixty years, turn to you to plead for us. Speak, Lafayette!*” By 1920 the amendment was adopted.

In 1958, local Congressman Hamilton Fish III created and led the *Order of Lafayette*, to recognize those who served as officers in France – in either the First or Second World War. Family members today report that Fish proudly told the story (especially to young people) that he had shaken the hand of his grandfather, who had shaken the hand of Lafayette during Lafayette's national tour.

For all the big plays on the global stage, as a hero of two worlds of both the American and French Revolutions, I believe what makes Lafayette distinct is his lifelong, persistent, intimate gestures: a tip of a hat, a bow of respect, a handshake, penning a letter of support, a gift as remembrance.

He kissed the hand of Marie Antoinette and calmed an angry crowd, at least for a time. Lewis Hayden credits his transition from enslaved Kentucky boy – to becoming a leading national Black abolitionist – to the recognition Lafayette bestowed on Hayden during his national tour.

Here in Fishkill, we find among the most beautiful examples of these intimate gestures, the desk Lafayette gave to the Brinkerhoff family during his 1824 visit, to thank them for nursing him from near death in October 1778. You can see it exhibited at the Van Wyck Homestead and Museum on weekends. I highly recommend it.



*Referred to as the "Lafayette desk" by the Brinkerhoff family who donated it to the Fishkill Historical Society in 2013. Recent research by both the Fishkill and Dutchess County Historical Societies tends to confirm the accuracy of what had prior only been oral tradition in the family: that it was a gift to the family from Lafayette during his September 1824 visit as a thank you for taking care of him during a life-threatening illness in October of 1778.*

I recently joined the American Friends of Lafayette, a historical and patriotic organization dedicated to the memory of Lafayette in the United States and France, and we are in the beginning stages of developing plans for the Bicentennial of Lafayette's Farewell Tour. Please contact Arnold Restivo or me if you would like to be involved.



*DCHS Executive Director Bill Jeffway (left) and French Consulate of New York Deputy Consul General Damien Laban stand in front of the wreath placed at the Fishkill Lafayette monument during ceremonies. Contact Bill Jeffway or Arnold Restivo if you are interested in planning for the September 2024 bicentennial of Lafayette's local visit.*

There could be no more important commemoration than in Fishkill in particular, and in Dutchess County more broadly (with the town of LaGrange, named for Lafayette's home, in the south, and the hamlet of Lafayetteville in the north) because of this county's strength in representing the diversity of admiration Lafayette earned.



*Left to right: Fishkill Town Council: Brian Wrye and Louise Daniele, DCHS Executive Director Bill Jeffway, Fishkill Town Supervisor Ozzy Albra, Meltingah Chapter DAR Regent Nancy Giordano, French Consulate of New York Deputy Consul General Damien Laban, Rombout Rural Cemetery President Lisa Daley, Dutchess County Executive William F. X. O'Neal, Fishkill Historical Society President Amy Mackenzie, event organizer and Fishkill Municipal Historian Arnold Restivo.*

### **About the Author**

Bill Jeffway spoke in Fishkill, Dutchess County, New York on August 23, 2023 at the town's exercises rededicating an 1898 memorial to Lafayette. Jeffway is Executive Director of the Dutchess County Historical Society, serves on the Advisory Committee of the Vassar College Inclusive History Initiative, is active with the Poughkeepsie-based Celebrating the African Spirit, and is a member of the AFL's Hudson Valley Farewell Tour Bicentennial Committee. Jeffway has a degree in American Studies and English from Wesleyan University.