



A French Hero for a Revolutionary America

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The Marquis de Lafayette, one of the central figures of the American Revolution, was in many ways far more popular in this country than in his native France. And now Lafayette is the subject of PBS' newest historical film, "Lafayette: The Lost Hero."

The film, which premieres Monday at 10 p.m., explores the many sides of Lafayette's life: his wealthy-orphan upbringing and marriage at age 16, his decision to leave for the United States as a teenager, the way he became a beloved hero in this country's war for independence, and most traumatically, his controversial role in the French Revolution that ended in imprisonment.

Many Americans have heard of Lafayette because of his involvement in the Revolutionary War and the dozens of towns in the U.S. named after him. "Lafayette: The Lost Hero" describes the man's journey to America, his military success and his relationship with George Washington in some detail. The film concludes with Lafayette's return to the U.S. in 1824, when he was greeted as a hero.

Viewers learn about the less well-known parts of Lafayette's story, including his failure to steer the French Revolution in a direction similar to the American effort and his relationship with his wife, Adrienne.

Oren Jacoby, the film's writer and director, said he was drawn to the project because of the wealth of material that Lafayette and his wife had left about themselves.

"There is an amazing record that [Lafayette] has left behind in his personal memoir and diary — that really was the core of the film," he said. "I'd never come across a record with so much self-examining. He reveals himself as a human being, and it's all on a very personal level."

This biopic began to develop in the summer of 2007, and Jacoby said that early on, the film was missing a central character who could give the story a connection to modern times.

That character turned out to be Sabine Renault-Sabloniere, a French writer who is a descendant of Lafayette — his great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter, to be precise. In December 2007, Renault-Sabloniere organized an event in Paris with representatives from about a dozen American towns named after Lafayette. From that point on, Renault-Sabloniere became a part of the project, and she appears in the film several times.

Renault-Sabloniere, who has published a novel about Lafayette's wife, wrote in an e-mail that her family has retained very few of Lafayette's artifacts; the majority are kept in a chateau about 40 miles from Paris. Still, she feels a deep connection to the character described in the film.

"I have never been brought up in the worship of Lafayette, although my family is quite proud of her ancestor!" Renault-Sabloniere said. "I made my own research to discover this character and his wife. I feel very close to his ideals: liberalism and humanism."

One of the picture's most moving scenes shows Lafayette trying to calm a mob in front of the Palace of Versailles in the midst of the French Revolution, at a time when the monarchy was becoming less and less popular, by kissing the queen's hand in front of the assembled crowd. The gesture worked at the time, but that episode and its aftermath — which ended with Lafayette in a Czech jail — have skewed French historians' views of Lafayette negatively.

Jacoby loved the scene for its historical and artistic value, but also because he was able to shoot the footage in Versailles itself.

"That was a momentous thing for us that we were able to film that scene in Versailles," Jacoby said. "To be in that place when it's empty, you're imaging Louis and Marie Antoinette where Lafayette stood and the queen stood, and it just happened at the perfect moment."

The film ends with a series of famous quotes by and about Lafayette, but more relevant is a statement made early on by the movie's narrator: "History has an imperfect memory." Few characters in modern times have felt the truth of that comment more than the Marquis de Lafayette.

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