

**The Siege of Yorktown**

*Siege of Yorktown, (September 28–October 19, 1781), joint* [*Franco-American*](https://www.britannica.com/event/Franco-American-Alliance) *land and sea campaign that entrapped a major British army on a peninsula at* [*Yorktown*](https://www.britannica.com/place/Yorktown-historical-Virginia)*,* [*Virginia*](https://www.britannica.com/place/Virginia-state)*, and forced its surrender. The* [*siege*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/siege) *virtually ended military operations in the* [*American Revolution*](https://www.britannica.com/event/American-Revolution)*.*

After a series of reverses and the depletion of his forces’ strength, the British commander in the southern colonies, General Lord [Cornwallis](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Cornwallis-1st-Marquess-and-2nd-Earl-Cornwallis), moved his army from Wilmington, North Carolina, eastward to [Petersburg](https://www.britannica.com/place/Petersburg-Virginia), Virginia, on the Atlantic coast, in May 1781. Cornwallis had about 7,500 men and was confronted in the region by only about 4,500 American troops under the marquis de [Lafayette](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert-du-Motier-marquis-de-Lafayette), General [Anthony Wayne](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anthony-Wayne), and [Frederick William, Freiherr (baron) von Steuben](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederick-William-Freiherr-von-Steuben). In order to maintain his seaborne lines of communication with the main British army of General Henry Clinton in [New York City](https://www.britannica.com/place/New-York-City), Cornwallis then retreated through Virginia, first to [Richmond](https://www.britannica.com/place/Richmond-Virginia), next to [Williamsburg](https://www.britannica.com/place/Williamsburg-Virginia), and finally, near the end of July, to Yorktown and the adjacent promontory of Gloucester, both of which he proceeded to fortify.

The American commander in chief, General [George Washington](https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Washington), ordered Lafayette to block Cornwallis’s possible escape from Yorktown by land. In the meantime Washington’s 2,500 Continental troops in New York were joined by 4,000 French troops under the comte de [Rochambeau](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Baptiste-Donatien-de-Vimeur-comte-de-Rochambeau). This combined allied force left a screen of troops facing Clinton’s forces in New York while the main Franco-American force, beginning on August 21, undertook a rapid march southward to the head of [Chesapeake Bay](https://www.britannica.com/place/Chesapeake-Bay), where it linked up with a French fleet of 24 ships under the comte de [Grasse](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Francois-Joseph-Paul-comte-de-Grasse-marquis-de-Grasse-Tilly). This fleet had arrived from the West Indies and was maintaining a sea blockade of Cornwallis’s army. Cornwallis’s army waited in vain for rescue or reinforcements from the British navy while de Grasse’s fleet transported Washington’s troops southward to Williamsburg, Virginia, whence they joined Lafayette’s forces in the siege of Yorktown. Washington was thus vindicated in his hopes of entrapping Cornwallis on the Yorktown Peninsula.

Meanwhile, a smaller British fleet under Admiral Thomas Graves was unable to counter French naval superiority at the [Battle of Virginia Capes](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Virginia-Capes) and felt forced to return to New York. A British rescue fleet, two-thirds the size of the French, set out for Virginia on October 17 with some 7,000 British troops, but it was too late. Throughout early October Washington’s 14,000 Franco-American troops steadily overcame the British army’s fortified positions at Yorktown. Surrounded, outgunned, and running low on food, Cornwallis surrendered his entire army on October 19 (though, either ill—as he claimed—or simply humiliated, Cornwallis did not participate in the actual surrender, having delegated that task to Brig. Gen. Charles O’Hara). The total number of British prisoners taken was about 8,000, along with about 240 guns. Casualties on both sides were relatively light. The victory at Yorktown ended fighting in the Revolution and virtually assured success to the American cause.