

Siege of the Anniversary Literature

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From September 29th through October 19th, 1781 the bustling port of Yorktown Virginia, was besieged by an allied army of French and American forces. Contained with the city was a British Army under the command of General Cornwallis trying to survive while under the stress of siege. It is a battle that involves all aspects of the military of the period. The fighting during the siege was varied and dramatic, with cavalry mееes, night surprise attacks, sinking of ships, and a deafening bombardment of artillery. It is fondly remembered and celebrated annually at the location where the battle was fought with modern French officers participating in festivals, parades, and reef laying. That lingering memory of the siege of Yorktown has given spawn to a small but consistent literature about the siege. Mainly following the anniversaries, the monographs on the siege tell a mostly similar story about the siege, some do offer new ideas with age and perspective. Within the literature written on the siege of Yorktown, there are some common themes the works fall into. The theme of literature is: it follows anniversary events and pro-American and military focus

In a broad sense of a timeline of the literature written on the siege of Yorktown, there is a massive gap from the publication of Johnston's book and the build-up to the bicentennial of the event. As the gap in the literature is from 1881 to 1931 until another anniversary at the 150 years from the siege of Yorktown. The works that were published for the Sesquicentennial are less scholarly than the rest of the works on the topic, as these are mostly guidebooks. So for the anniversary, the Yorktown battlefield was formed into a national park therefore, they needed some literature on the event so guests to the park were able to understand the siege. With the publication of these works in the 1930s starting with *The Story of the Campaign and Siege of*

Yorktown by H. J. Eckenrode in 1931.¹ This publication marked that the National Colonial Historic Park would be the driver of future research and publication on the topic. As the 150th anniversary of the siege was approaching it was more populated with works being published than the gap from the 100 to the 150th as there were two different publications: *Yorktown and the Siege of 1781* by Charles E. Hatch jr in 1952 and *Beat the Last Drum: the Siege of Yorktown, 1781* by Thomas J Fleming in 1963.² These two works do not fit the pattern of being directly on an anniversary date, but they are close to the 200th. Once the 200th anniversary hit in 1981, a report for the National Park Service was written which would become the main part of Jermone Green's important book later on, but strangely no large monographs were written on the subject. As the 225th anniversary arrives four works are published about the siege of Yorktown and the surrounding campaign. These books varied in scholarship and reason for publication. Robert Seileg's *March to Victory : Washington, Rochambeau, and the Yorktown Campaign of 1781* was created for the Washington- Rochambeau route as essentially a pamphlet.³ While another piece of literature one was created as a reassessment from a British author on the subject. In John D Grainger, *The Battle of Yorktown, 1781 : A Reassessment* he provided that absent British view of the conflict.⁴ On top of that another book was also published for scholars sake Richard M Ketchum's *Victory at Yorktown : The Campaign That Won the Revolution*.⁵ Finally for the crest of the wave of literature around the 225th there is the capstone work Jerome A Greene's *The Guns of Independence the Siege of Yorktown, 1781*, which includes the most detailed and well

¹ H. J. Eckenrode *The Story of the Campaign and Siege of Yorktown*. (Washington: U.S. G.P.O.) 1931

² Charles E Hatch, *Yorktown and the Siege of 1781*. Rev.. ed. United States. National Park Service. (U. S. Govt. Print. Off.) 1957,

Thomas J. Fleming *Beat the Last Drum : The Siege of Yorktown, 1781* (New York: St. Martin's Press) 1963

³ Robert Selig, *March to Victory : Washington, Rochambeau, and the Yorktown Campaign of 1781*. (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History), 2005.

⁴ John D. Grainger *The Battle of Yorktown, 1781 : A Reassessment*. (Warfare in History. Woodbridge, Suffolk ; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press) 2005

⁵ Richard M. Ketchum, *Victory at Yorktown : The Campaign That Won the Revolution*. 1st ed. (New York: Henry Holt) 2004.

respected modern study of the siege of Yorktown, was published on the eve of the 225th anniversary of the siege.⁶ Green's book does include some aspects that others do not such as extreme detail regarding usually disregarded things. This takes form in the appendix of the book that includes topics from, how to load a siege mortar to a cross section of the siege works at Yorktown. So this book then is for everyone from historians to wargamers to living historians. This pattern of publications being around anniversary events continues into the present and definitely into the future, as a book *The Road to Yorktown: Jefferson, Lafayette and the British Invasion of Virginia*⁷ by John R. Maass in 2015 and *In the Hurricane's Eye: The Genius of George Washington and the Victory at Yorktown* by Nathaniel Philbrick published in 2018 follow the pattern of the past.⁸ As the same with the books published in the 1950s these books also follow the anniversary pattern. These more recent books also mark that the study on the battle overall is done so only specific parts of the siege are being studied now, things like naval history, as Philbrick's book concentrates on. If patterns are to be believed then when the 250th anniversary arrives in 2031 there will be more publications on the siege and these will be differential ones on the specifics of the battle rather than a grander overview. The intensity of the literature on the siege of Yorktown follows anniversary events and the build-up to anniversaries. The literature to look into in the future is becoming more specific and will be on more specific topics since that is where there is a gap in the literature. Since the literature revolves around anniversary events it means one can see the evolution of scholarship as new sources come to light one. Meaning that it is a commemoration event that gets attention and therefore books sales as that is the way the literature is written.

⁶ Jerome A Greene, *The Guns of Independence the Siege of Yorktown, 1781* (Staplehurst, U.K) 2005

⁷ Maass, John R. *The Road to Yorktown : Jefferson, Lafayette and the British Invasion of Virginia*. 2015.

⁸ Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Hurricane's Eye: the Genius of George Washington and the Victory at Yorktown*. (New York: Penguin Books) 2019.

Since the monographs on the siege of Yorktown revolve around anniversary events they do age. The first monograph on the siege is Henry Phelps Johnston's *The Yorktown Campaign and the surrender of Cornwallis, 1781* published in 1881 for the central commission on the American Revolution.⁹ It does suffer from age as it was published almost 100 years before the rest of the monographs on the subject. This is seen in the sources used, and more importantly, the sources omitted. Since many important sources were only available to authors of later anniversary events. An example of change in sources availability is the well-regarded book by Jerome A. Greene, *The Guns of Independence: The Siege of Yorktown, 1781*.¹⁰ Comparing these two monographs on their anniversary events one can see the evolution of the literature over time. As more sources became available as the research and fervor around each anniversary increased, new things were discovered. One example of a source found was the journal of Gerogr Flohr, discovered during the bicentennial research by Rudolf Tross in Zubruken, Germany in the 1980s. This is relevant to one event during the siege of Yorktown, the storming of redoubts #9 and #10. In Johnson's book, his narrative of the storming of Redoubt #9 by French forces does not include Flohr's account of the attack since it had not been discovered yet, while Greene features Flohr prominently in his narrative of the attack.¹¹ Since these works are separated by more than 120 years they are drastically different on the sources that they have and interpret that history with. Through the past hundred plus years the siege of Yorktown has been the subject of scholarship; those works have evolved with the times while the works from over 100 years ago have aged.

These sources are also bound by how they all interpret the siege of Yorktown. Most sources, if not all, view the siege to be the end of the American revolution. Even though the American revolution goes on for another two years most of these sources sum up the whole

⁹ H. J. Eckenrode *The Story of the Campaign and Siege of Yorktown*. (Washington: U.S. G.P.O.) 1931

¹⁰ Jerome A Greene, *The Guns of Independence the Siege of Yorktown, 1781* (Staplehurst, U.K) 2005 248-249

¹¹ Jerome A Greene, *The Guns of Independence the Siege of Yorktown, 1781* (Staplehurst, U.K) 2005 248-249

conflict and close out with the signing of the treaty of Paris. It is an odd narrative because the Siege of Yorktown was in 1781 and the actual end of the war was not until 1783. This is due to the authors being focused on the military aspects of the siege and surrounding events, as what happens after is mostly a diplomatic history rather than a military one. The focus of the narrative is on the last major military action of the American Revolution and does not include the diplomatic events during the last two years of the war or some of the struggles of the continental army during those two years. So unlike other works on the topic, writing about the siege of Yorktown seems to act as the ending chapter of the book on the American Revolution. Unlike other books about battles, authors of the books about the siege of Yorktown chose to sum up the whole revolution in the last chapter of the book. Even though in the history of the revolution there are those two years that get glossed over. Greene's book has those two years as the last 3 pages of his narrative of the siege which includes the treaty negotiations. While in Johnston's book in 1881 he dedicates a whole five lines of text to the last two years of the American revolution. Acting as the contrary view to these books by American authors Grainger, coming from a British background and his book varies greatly on the ending. While the other works in the literature condense the end of the revolution to a short portion at the end, Grainger dedicated two full chapters to the subject. Grainger even goes into detail about the British POWs after the siege while most other books do not do this.¹² There is a tendency of these sources to sum up the whole revolution in a set of short often dramatic sentences.

The authors of these works are almost all Americans and share a vested interest in the dramatic telling of the American Revolution. This dramatic telling is usually done by some of the language used in the titles of the books, as well as the method of telling some of the narrative

¹² Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Hurricane's Eye: the Genius of George Washington and the Victory at Yorktown*. (New York: Penguin Books) 2019.

within the book. Even in the book titles have the idea of the dramatic view one such example is, Nathaniel Philbrick's book states the *Genius of George Washington*.¹³ The most accurate way to describe the method of telling the event is triumphant. This is best echoed in most of the narratives of the surrender of British troops at Yorktown. Almost all of the sources tell the story from the American perspective and the American emotional state during the ceremony. They share the jubilation of the American and French troops on the occasion of the surrender, but these stories seldom dive into what the British soldier felt during the event. While the foil of these American made books, Graingers provide entirely different versions of the whole siege of Yorktown. Grainger instead focuses on the complex and international factors at play during the siege rather than on the ground action of the armies. This is best shown in how his description of the build-up to the siege has an international focus on it due to its constant use of primary documents in block quotes from international authors.¹⁴ Since the works are all written by Americans most likely interested in telling the compelling story that fit a pro-American of the siege of Yorktown instead of a balanced perspective of both sides of the siege, it is leaned towards the Allied armies side of the narrative besides for Graingers book.

Another example of this focus on the American view is seen in the telling, or lack thereof, of the Battle of Gloucester.¹⁵ When different historians tell the account of this battle they tend to use the Duc De Lauzun account of his fabulous 300 man cavalry charge and medieval cavalry clash with Tarlton of 500 or more men instead of using Johan Ewald or Banister

¹³ Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Hurricane's Eye: the Genius of George Washington and the Victory at Yorktown*. (New York: Penguin Books) 2019.

¹⁴ John D. Grainger *The Battle of Yorktown, 1781 : A Reassessment*. (Warfare in History. Woodbridge, Suffolk ; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press) 2005

¹⁵ One thing to note is that the name of the conflict in Gloucester is under recent scrutiny. In other narratives it is under the name of the Battle of the Hook and even the literature through the past 250 years have varied and never agreed on a proper name for the conflict. While as of the writing of this there is a movement to change the name to the Battle of Gloucester as it is more fitting to the conflict and fair the the location where it took place.

Tarleton's account of the conflict. If they were to use Tarleton's account of the battle it would make the battle out to be an insignificant portion of a foraging expedition, or as Ewald suggests, a disorganized attack. The truth may lay somewhere in between those sources, but it is the fact that the sources use Lauzun's account as the main account that is the issue. As it is choosing a narrative that makes the allied army look in a favored light. As with Grainger's writing of the battle, he only uses Ewald and Tarleton's accounts of the conflict and not Lauzun's. So there is a difference when it comes to focus on the Battle of Gloucester on the accounts used based on the nationality of the author.¹⁶ Contained within some of the sources the authors will even omit the conflict entirely. In *Yorktown and the Siege of 1781* by Charles E. Hatch Jr. it omits the conflict or any troops movements in Gloucester country from a map of the Campaign on page eight.¹⁷ It also only dedicated two lines of brief and un-descriptive text to the conflict on page 23.¹⁸ This omission is most likely due to a few factors, mainly that American troops did not conduct the main action of the battle and it is Gloucester country. With the different tellings of the Battle of the Gloucester, the focus in the sources can be seen as some chose to tell the story differently and from a pro-American side.¹⁹

Along with matching of anniversary events and having a pro-American focus on their works, these works also seem to propagate several folk myths of the surrender as fact. The main myth in question lies in the British troops playing the song *The World Turned Upside Down*, which's tone sounds very similar to *Yankee Doodle*. On page 31 of Hatch's *Yorktown* book he states confidently that the British band did play this song. "The British Army . . . marched out from Yorktown along the York-Hampton Road to the tune of an old British march titled *The*

¹⁶ John D. Grainger *The Battle of Yorktown, 1781 : A Reassessment*, 104

¹⁷ Hatch, *Yorktown and the Siege of 1781*, 8

¹⁸ Hatch, *Yorktown and the Siege of 1781* 13

¹⁹ While Yorktown battlefield is a national park the location of the Battle of Gloucester a highway if paved over it with strip mall, a Kroger and a car dealership on some key locations. On top of that there is no sign on the location of the battle.

*World Turned Upside Down.*²⁰ At the same time Greene makes the point of how the historical documentation is vague and how it has become a folk myth that is told to school children in the United States. Ironically, *Beat the Last Drum: The Siege of Yorktown, 1781* by Thomas J Fleming is cited in Greene's book as his evidence for the disputed detail of the band playing the song.²¹ In reality the answer is the constant scholar's answer to everything, it is more complicated and we will never truly know. Even military convention of the time has that armies surrendering without the honors of war play their own march music, and the song in question is not a british marching tune, it is a popular civilian tone. This is the problem with the lingering American emotions surrounding the event. Even though the surrender of Cornwallis forces happened over 100 to 200 years before the writing of these works, the emotion is still apparently there.

When it comes to the literature on the penultimate event of the American revolution, the siege of Yorktown follows patterns. The first pattern is the books being written around anniversary events and build ups to those dates. These books also hold a resident emotional connection to the grand surrender of Cornwallis' army, so they hold a pro-allied view of their histories. This manifests in not mentioning the plight of the British soldier, the narrative on a battle that Americans did not play a major role in, and in the telling of a folk story that did not happen. Overall the literature follows around anniversary events and contains a pro-American and military focus

“I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.” *Nathan Schultz NGS*

²⁰ Hatch, *Yorktown and the Siege of 1781*, 31

²¹ Thomas J. Fleming *Beat the Last Drum : The Siege of Yorktown, 1781* (New York: St. Martin's Press) 1963

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