It's the 200th anniversary of the original French connection

Two centuries ago this Wednesday, the Continental Congress granted a general's commission to an adventurous young Frenchman known as the Marquis de La Fayette. It was the first step in 200 years of almost unbroken friendship between his country and the United States.

By Don McLeod
Associated Press

When France entered the war for American Independence and turned the tide toward the ultimate victory, George Washington turned to his young French protege and said, "You have done more than anybody to bring about this great event."

For Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier, the Marquis de La Fayette, was not the ordinary European adventurer come to reap fortune and fame from the American tragedy. He was one of the richest young men on the Continent and one of the more socially prominent. His family had been important for at least eight centuries, and by marriage, he was linked to one of the foremost clans in France.

His American adventure, begun with a story book defiance of king and family, caught the fancy of his nation.

La Fayette was born on the family estate in the province of Auvergne on Sept. 5, 1757. His grandfather had died in battle and his father, away campaigning in the seven years' war with England, would die two years later in the battle of Minden.

Consequently, the young Marquis was raised in a world of women with the memory of brave men. "The seed of self-esteem and even of ambition became evident early in his development," and he admitted "I was all on fire to have a uniform."

After completing his military training at the Acadamy of Versailles with the sons of the other first families, he joined the corps of Black Musketeers of his grandfather and then the Noilles Regiment of his new family.

La Fayette's commanding officer, the Count Charles-Francois de Broglie, was an ardent sympathizer with the American cause, and in the summer of 1773 gave a dinner for the Duke of Gloucester, brother of the English king but a dissenter on the American question.

Before the evening was through, La Fayette claimed, he was determined to go to America and join the fight for freedom. Perhaps he was a young man with no other battlefield who wanted to follow family tradition of bravery, but of America he told his young wife he left behind: "I'm working for my glory, I work for their happiness."

Although Silas Deane, the American representative in Paris, lacked such authority, he was so impressed with La Fayette that he promised the Marquis a commission in the Continental Army.

La Fayette's father-in-law, the powerful Duke D'Ayen, took kindly to the idea. "This sort of thing is all very well for the Vicomte de Noiltes (a young relative also bent on American adventure), who is strong, energetic, and sufficiently determined to undertake anything," the Duke said, "but what on earth would you find to do over there?"

Despite the Duke's rages, royal disapproval and even an arrest warrant, La Fayette chartered a ship and sailed for America.

To help pull off his departure, he went to London while arrangements were being made secretly for his voyage. He visited his wife's uncle, the French ambassador, and was presented to George III, an effective smoke screen which foretold his audacity and cunning.

The opposition was so furious that La Fayette had to sail without returning to Paris to bid farewell to his pregnant wife. But she understood, as did most of France. His exploits had made him a national hero before he even reached America.

But America was another matter. Foreign volunteers were not always welcome. American officers were jealous of them. Washington found most recruits from Europe "only a new source of embarrassment."

Congress usually dealt with Deane's recruits by sending them to Washington, who had to find places for them or discourage them as politely but as forcibly as possible.

What chance then for a boyish officer who spoke little English, had no real experience at war and demanded to be a general? When he said he wanted only to serve as an unpaid volunteer, wherever Washington might need him, he was accepted.

Wednesday is the bicentennial of his commissioning and an important first seed of the alliance that won American independence and survived almost without interruption for the two centuries since.

La Fayette adored Washington, perhaps as the idealized father he had never known.

"He is a man truly made for this revolution which, but for him, could never have been brought about," La Fayette wrote. "I admire more and more with every day that passes, the beauty of his mind and character."

And the austere commander-in-chief took to the eager young aristocrat. Despite his obvious deficiencies, La Fayette represented perhaps what Washington needed most, an officer who was willing to obey orders.

Even if Washington may have exaggerated the youth's part in the French alliance, it was not by much. La Fayette became the most persuasive voice calling France to arms.

"With the help of France, we shall, though at some cost, carry the victory to the cause which I have at heart because it is a just one: because it does honor to mankind; because it is of importance to my country," he wrote home.

As the Revolution approached decision, Washington entrusted La Fayette with defense of his beloved Virginia. Britain's Lord Cornwallis scolded. "The boy," he sneered, "cannot escape me."

But the boy general pointed and retreated with the skill of a Fabian and drew Cornwallis into the final trap at Yorktown, where a French fleet and thousands of French soldiers and sailors helped win American Independence.

La Fayette could not have known then that the Revolution would soon spread to his own country, that he would take a turn which would clash with the kind of liberty he had learned in America.

But he did know that he had helped shape a nation which would become the sure and worthy asylum of virtue, honesty, tolerance, equality and tranquility.

The prosperity of America is linked with the prosperity of all mankind," he believed. "She will become the sure and worthy asylum of virtue, honesty, tolerance, equality and tranquility."