

Battle of Yorktown: The War's End

In fleeing the South and marching his troops into Virginia, British General Cornwallis made a serious tactical error. His army arrived in Yorktown, Virginia in August 1781. This small town, located between the York and James rivers, is situated on a narrow peninsula. (See map, page 20.)

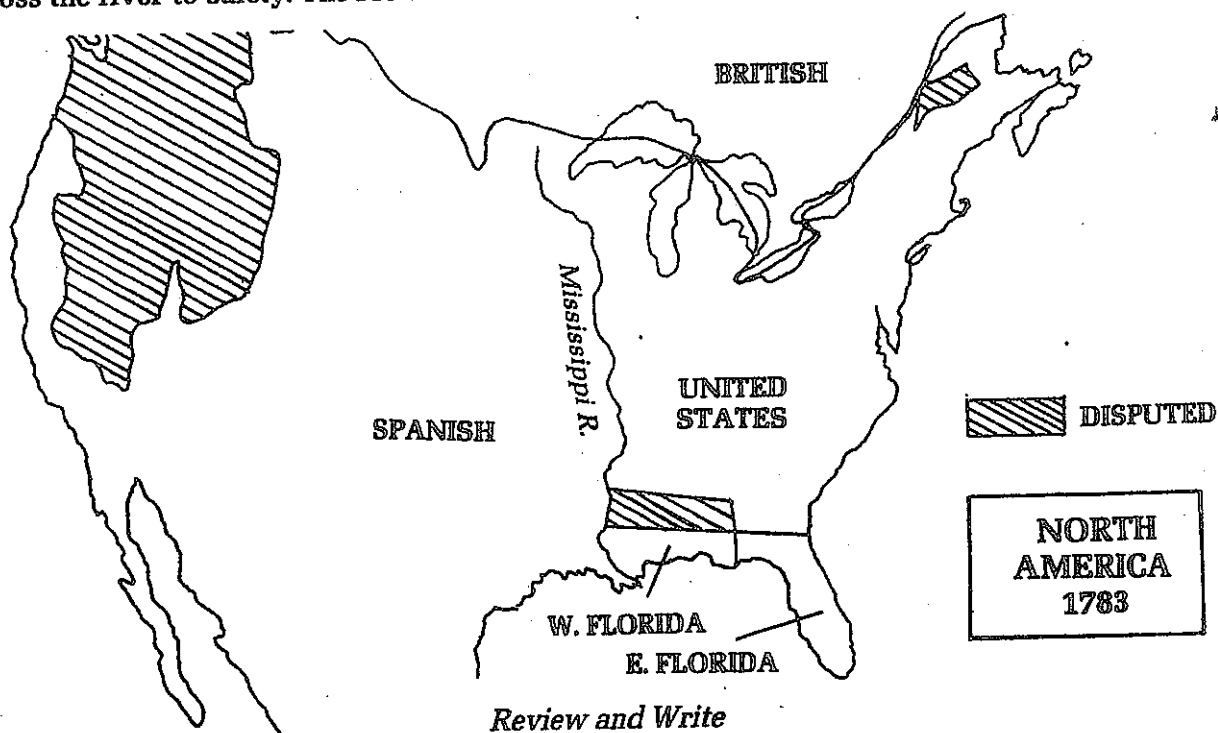
Washington, along with his ally, General de Rochambeau and his French army, moved their troops secretly from New Jersey south to Virginia. Meanwhile, a French fleet, led by Admiral de Grasse, sailed into Chesapeake Bay and blocked Cornwallis' hopes of evacuating his army by sea.

The Battle of Yorktown began late in September 1781. The British general sent pleas for troop reinforcements and even considered ferrying his men across the river to safety. The French and

Americans began a long bombardment, with the French artillery proving highly accurate.

No reinforcements, the continuous bombardment by French and Americans, and the loss of two key redoubts, or hilltop fortifications, to a night attack led by Washington's aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Hamilton, led Cornwallis to see there was little hope left for his army. He surrendered to Washington on October 19, 1781. Although it was not yet clear, the war was as good as over.

During the surrender ceremony, the British band played "The World Turned Upside Down." The American band responded, on the order of General Lafayette, a French officer-volunteer in Washington's army, by playing "Yankee Doodle."



Review and Write

1. Why was moving his army to Yorktown a tactical error for General Cornwallis? _____
2. What nation had become an American ally? How did it aid in the war effort? _____
3. What significance did playing the song "The World Turned Upside Down" have at the surrender ceremony? _____

Use the Map

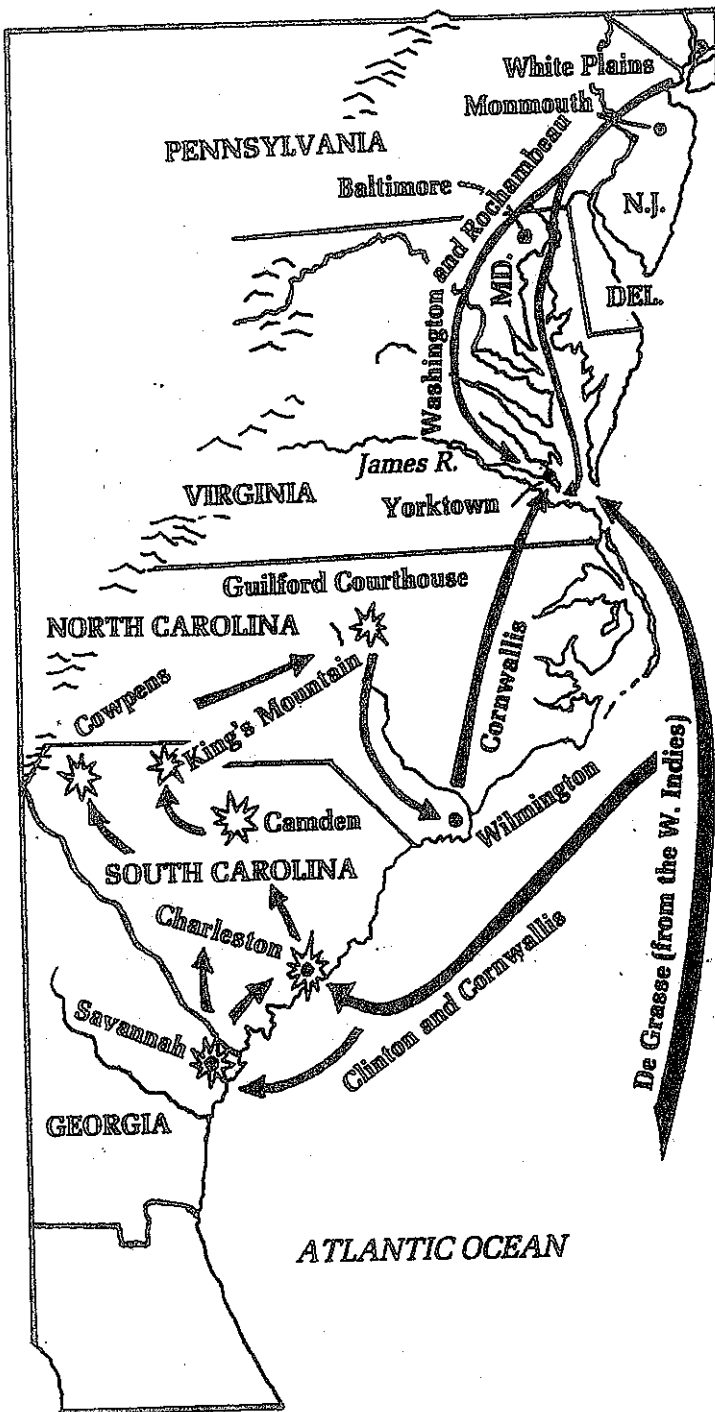
Compare the map to the one on page 3. What had changed in North America during the twenty-year period from 1763-83? _____

By early summer 1778, the war in America had reached a stalemate. Washington's army had come out of its Valley Forge experience trained as never before. Although a major battle was won by the patriot army at Monmouth Courthouse in New Jersey, the British army was allowed to escape and the day's advantage was lost.

A British shift in strategy brought a new focus. As Loyalist support was strong in many areas of the South, it was decided that Sir Henry Clinton, replacing Howe, was to move south with his loyal officer Charles Cornwallis.

Clinton's troops easily captured Savannah, Georgia, on December 29, 1778. In May 1780, they also took Charleston, South Carolina. This was the worst patriot defeat of the war; approximately 5,000 soldiers surrendered to the British. In August 1780, at Camden, South Carolina, the British achieved another victory after many tired and hungry patriots fled from the battlefield.

In October 1780, the Americans finally had some success. At King's Mountain, near the border of North and South Carolina, they succeeded in killing or capturing around 1,000 Loyalist troops, and in January of 1781, the patriots won again at Cowpens, North Carolina. Soon afterward, the southern army was put under a new commander, Nathaniel Greene. The final southern battle against Cornwallis' troops was at Guilford Courthouse in North Carolina, in March 1781. Although the British were able to control the field, their casualties were so staggering that they were forced to retreat. Cornwallis took what was left of his wounded army to Wilmington, and then north to Virginia where he eventually established camp at the tiny tobacco port of Yorktown.



Review and Write

1. What was the last major battle of the war in the North? _____
2. Why did the main theatre of the war shift to the South? _____
3. What easy successes did Clinton and Cornwallis achieve in the South? _____
4. Why was the loss at Charleston such a major defeat for the patriots? _____
5. Where did the Americans achieve success in battle? _____
6. Would you call the British strategy in the South a success or failure? Why? _____