

DR. JAMES THATCHER RECOUNTS THE BRITISH SURRENDER AT YORKTOWN (1781)



Gen. Cornwallis did not attend the surrender ceremony saying that he was not feeling well. His substitute, Gen. O'Hara, first tried to surrender to the Comte de Rochambeau who directed the British officer to Gen. Washington who in turn directed him to Gen. Lincoln. During the ceremony a British band played the song "The World Turned Upside Down."

"At about twelve o'clock, the combined army was arranged...in two lines extending more than a mile in length. The Americans were drawn up in a line on the right...and the French occupied the left. At the head of the former, the great American commander [Washington], mounted on his (horse)...At the head of the latter was posted the excellent Count Rochambeau...The French troops, in complete uniform, displayed a martial and noble appearance...

The Americans, though not all in uniform, nor their dress so neat, yet exhibited a...soldierly air, and every (face) beamed with satisfaction and joy. The (amount) of spectators...was (huge), in point of numbers was probably equal to the military...

It was about two o'clock when the captive army advanced through the line...Every eye was prepared to gaze on Lord Cornwallis...but he disappointed our...expectations; pretending (to be sick), he made Gen. O'Hara his substitute as the leader of his army. This officer was followed by the conquered troops in a slow and solemn step, with shouldered arms, colors cased and drums beating a British march. Having arrived at the head of the line, Gen. O'Hara, elegantly mounted, advanced to his Excellency the commander-in-chief, taking off his hat, and apologized for the non-appearance of Earl Cornwallis. With his usual dignity and politeness, his excellency pointed to Major Gen. Lincoln for directions, by whom the British army was conducted into a spacious field, where it was intended they should ground their arms.

The royal troops...exhibited a decent and neat appearance, as respects arms and clothing, for their commander opened his store and directed every soldier to be furnished with a new suit complete, prior to the (surrender). But in their line of march we remarked a disorderly and un-soldierly conduct, their step was irregular, and their ranks frequently broken.

But it was in the field, when they came to the last act of the drama, that the spirit and pride of the British soldier was put to the severest test: here their mortification could not be concealed. Some of the platoon officers appeared to be exceedingly chagrined when giving the word "ground arms," and I am a witness that they performed this duty in a very un-officer-like manner; and that many of the soldiers manifested a sullen temper, throwing their arms on the pile with violence, as if determined to render them useless...After having grounded their arms and divested themselves of their accouterments, the captive troops were conducted back to Yorktown and guarded by our troops...