

Lafayette & L'Hermione

Symbols of French-American Friendship

BY RACHEL JIRKA





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The American Revolution Institute of the Society of the Cincinnati promotes knowledge and appreciation of the achievement of American independence, fulfilling the aim of the Continental Army officers who founded the Society of the Cincinnati in 1783 to perpetuate the memory of that vast event. The Institute supports advanced study, presents exhibitions and other public programs, advocates preservation and provides resources to teachers and students to enrich understanding of our War for Independence and the principles of the men and women who secured the liberty of the American people.

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In March 1780, King Louis XVI entrusted the marquis de Lafayette with a message for George Washington—a message the American commander-in-chief has been hoping to receive for nearly five years. The twenty-two year old Frenchman boarded a French navy vessel bound for the United States and set off on a fateful voyage.



In the summer of 2015 a replica of this very ship, the *Hermione*, will arrive in Yorktown, Virginia, for a tour of the East Coast of the United States, celebrating the conclusion of a twenty-year effort to rebuild the ship. The Society's latest exhibition, on view through September 6, uses the Society's collections to pay tribute to this achievement.

Lafayette's voyage marked a turning point in our War for Independence—the moment when the futures of the United States and France were tied together. The modern *Hermione* honors the continuing friendship between France and the United States while celebrating the impressive tradition of French naval architecture. The *Hermione* is a monument of craftsmanship, a tribute to the greatness of the French sailing navy of the eighteenth century, and above all, a reminder of the historic relationship between France and the United States.

Marie, Paul, Joseph, Roch, Yves, Gilbert de Mottier de La Fayette Deputé d'Auvergne à l'Assemblée Nationale en 1789: Elu Commandant Général de la Garde Nationale Parisienne le 15 Juillet. Franz Gabriel Feissinger, engraver; after Jean Urbain Guérin. Paris: Chez l'auteur, ca. 1789. Gift of Frank Mauran.



Conclusion de la Campagne de 1781 en Virginie. Le Marquis de la Fayette, Maréchal de Camp des Armées du Roi, et Commandant de la Garde Nationale Parisienne
Noël Le Mire, engraver; after Jean-Baptiste Le Paon
Paris: Chez le Mire, Rue et Porte St. Jacques
No. 122, [ca. 1781]
Gift of Trayford Partridge Klotz, 1964

Lafayette and Washington

During the summer of 1777, a young French aristocrat arrived at George Washington's headquarters, brimming with zeal for American liberty. His name was Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier, the marquis de Lafayette. From his childhood Lafayette yearned for a way to distinguish himself while proving his loyalty to country and King. When war broke out between Great Britain and her American colonies, Lafayette seized the opportunity to fight for a cause that inspired him. Louis XVI refused to give Lafayette and his companions permission to join the American army as volunteers, but Lafayette defied the King's order and sailed for America. Shortly after Lafayette arrived in Philadelphia, the Continental Congress voted to make him a major general and assigned him to General Washington's staff. Lafayette's youth and enthusiasm quickly ingratiated him with his fellow Continental Army officers. Washington invited Lafayette into his close military family and became a mentor to the young Frenchman.

Lafayette was wounded the first time he went into combat, at the Battle of Brandywine. While recovering he devised strategies for French participation in the war. He also drew close to Washington. Lafayette supported Washington during the trying winter at Valley Forge and Washington supported Lafayette's growth as an officer. After France and the United States signed the treaty of alliance in 1778, Washington relied on Lafayette to smooth the relationship between the two nations.

Relations between France and America were rocky during the first months of the alliance. A bit discouraged – and a bit homesick – Lafayette began to consider how to contribute to the American cause from his homeland. He also wanted royal affirmation: “I am urg'd by my duty as by patriotic love, to present myself before the king, and know in what manner he judges proper to employ my services.” With Washington's encouragement, Lafayette departed for France at the end of 1778.

Lafayette and the French Alliance

Lafayette arrived in France in February 1779. For defying the royal order, the King placed Lafayette under house arrest at the Hôtel de Noailles. The punishment was nominal; the Hôtel de Noailles was a mansion and soon Lafayette was asked to present himself at Versailles. Welcomed once more at court, Lafayette used his friendship with Washington to excite the court about the American cause. Lafayette implored France's prime minister, the comte de Maurepas, and the foreign minister, the comte de Vergennes, to send a French army to support Washington.

After a projected invasion of Britain stalled in the fall of 1779, Vergennes finally turned to Lafayette's proposal to send an army to America. Urging immediate action, Lafayette warned Maurepas that if “our clocks are slow, we shall see the operation fail for lack of diligence or of time.” The government moved quickly to dispatch an army to America.



Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, Conseiller d'Etat Ordinaire, Ministre et Secrétaire d'Etat et Chef du Conseil Royal des Finances
Vincenzo Vangelisti, engraver; after Antoine François Callet
The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

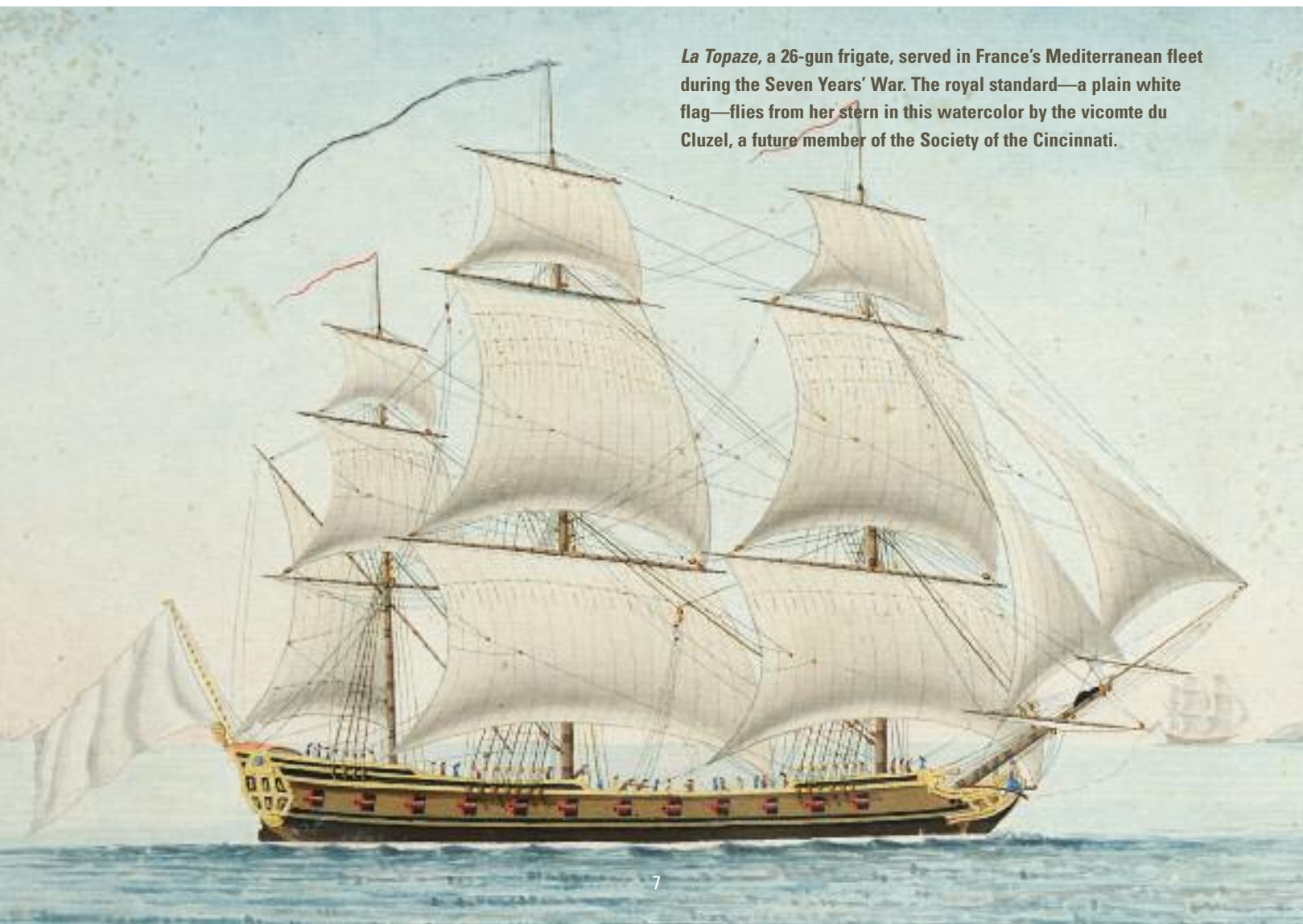
L'Hermione

Frigates were the workhorses of eighteenth-century navies. They carried between twenty-four and forty-four guns, mostly twelve pounders, and were constructed to be fast and highly maneuverable. While they could not afford to exchange fire with ships of the line, which carried fifty to one hundred guns or more, they could outrun or outmaneuver those heavier ships and avoid combat. Their sailing qualities made them ideal for blockading and scouting duties, for escorting convoys and attacking lightly armed merchant ships, and for relaying messages from ship to ship or across the Atlantic, like the message of aid Lafayette and the *Hermione* carried to the United States. The French navy included more than one hundred frigates during the American war. Thirty-five, including the *Hermione* were launched between 1777 and 1780 alone.

Henri Chevillard, a Rochefort ship designer, drew up the plans for the *Hermione* and her three sister ships the *Concorde*, the *Courageuse*, and the *Fée*. Frigates of the class were 145 feet long and had a beam of 37 feet. They drew 16 feet of water fully loaded. The keel of the *Hermione* was laid in December 1778 and she was launched less than five months later. She was rigged, equipped and armed by May 1779. The *Hermione* carried twenty-six twelve-pound guns below and six six-pounder guns topside.

La Freg. Du Roy La Topaze
Antoine-Robert, vicomte du Cluzel
1769-1781
Library purchase

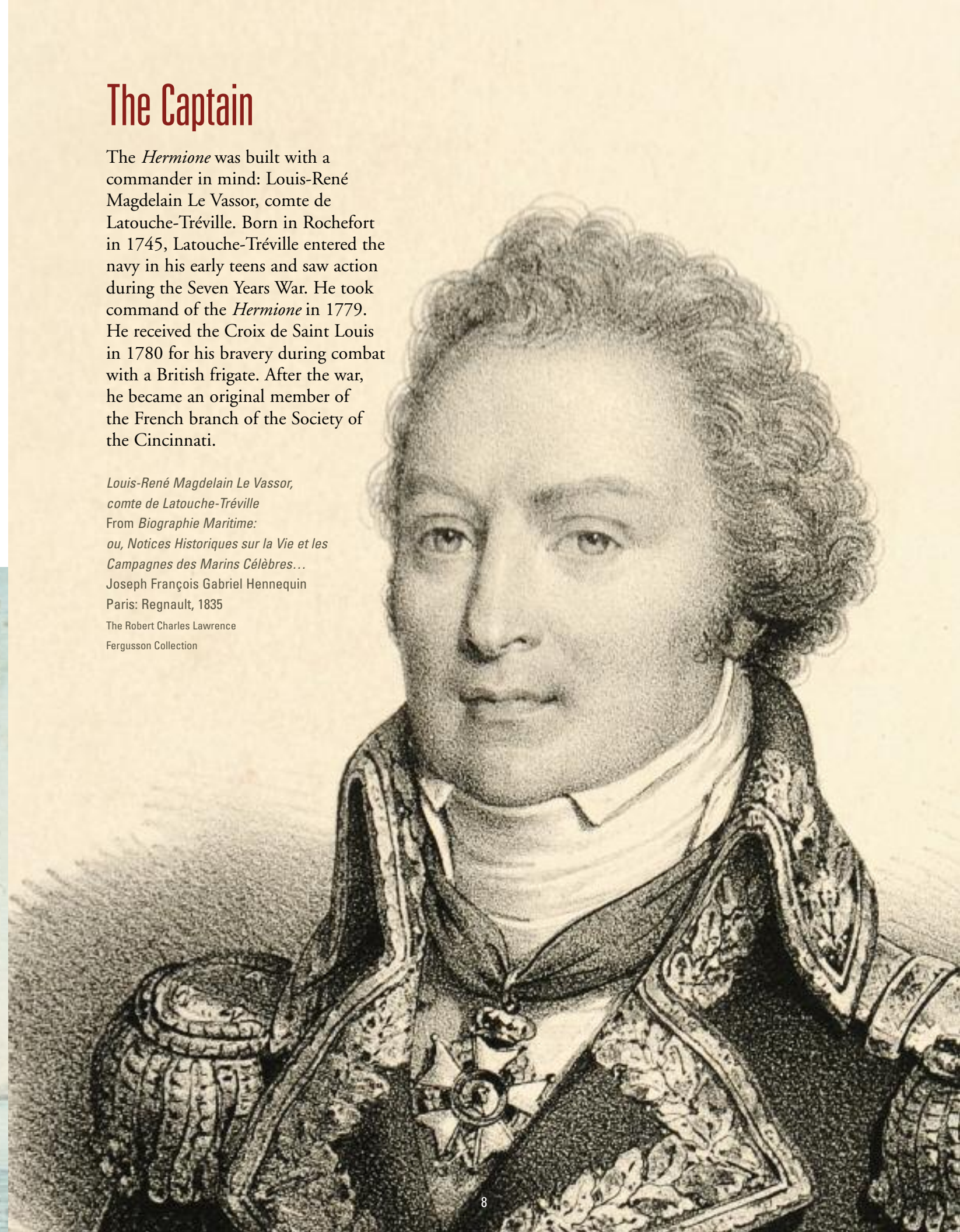
La Topaze, a 26-gun frigate, served in France's Mediterranean fleet during the Seven Years' War. The royal standard—a plain white flag—flies from her stern in this watercolor by the vicomte du Cluzel, a future member of the Society of the Cincinnati.



The Captain

The *Hermione* was built with a commander in mind: Louis-René Magdelain Le Vassor, comte de Latouche-Tréville. Born in Rochefort in 1745, Latouche-Tréville entered the navy in his early teens and saw action during the Seven Years War. He took command of the *Hermione* in 1779. He received the Croix de Saint Louis in 1780 for his bravery during combat with a British frigate. After the war, he became an original member of the French branch of the Society of the Cincinnati.

Louis-René Magdelain Le Vassor, comte de Latouche-Tréville
From *Biographie Maritime: ou, Notices Historiques sur la Vie et les Campagnes des Marins Célèbres...*
Joseph François Gabriel Hennequin
Paris: Regnault, 1835
The Robert Charles Lawrence
Fergusson Collection





The Voyage

On March 10, 1780, Lafayette boarded the *Hermione* accompanied by two officers, a secretary, and six servants. Besides Lafayette and his party, the frigate was home to 302 men, including officers and crew. Taking a northern route, the voyage across the Atlantic lasted forty-five days. *Hermione* moored in Boston Harbor on April 28. Lafayette was pleased with the voyage. He described the captain as a “delightful man” and Lafayette praised him and the *Hermione* to his superiors.



L’Hermione after Lafayette

Naval Combat off the Coast of Louisbourg (Isle du Cap Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada) between Lapérouse, commander of the frigate “L’Astrée” and Comte de la Touche, commander of the frigate “L’Hermione” against six English warships on July 21, 1781. Auguste-Louis de Rossel de Cercy (1738-1824). Oil on canvas, painted 1788.

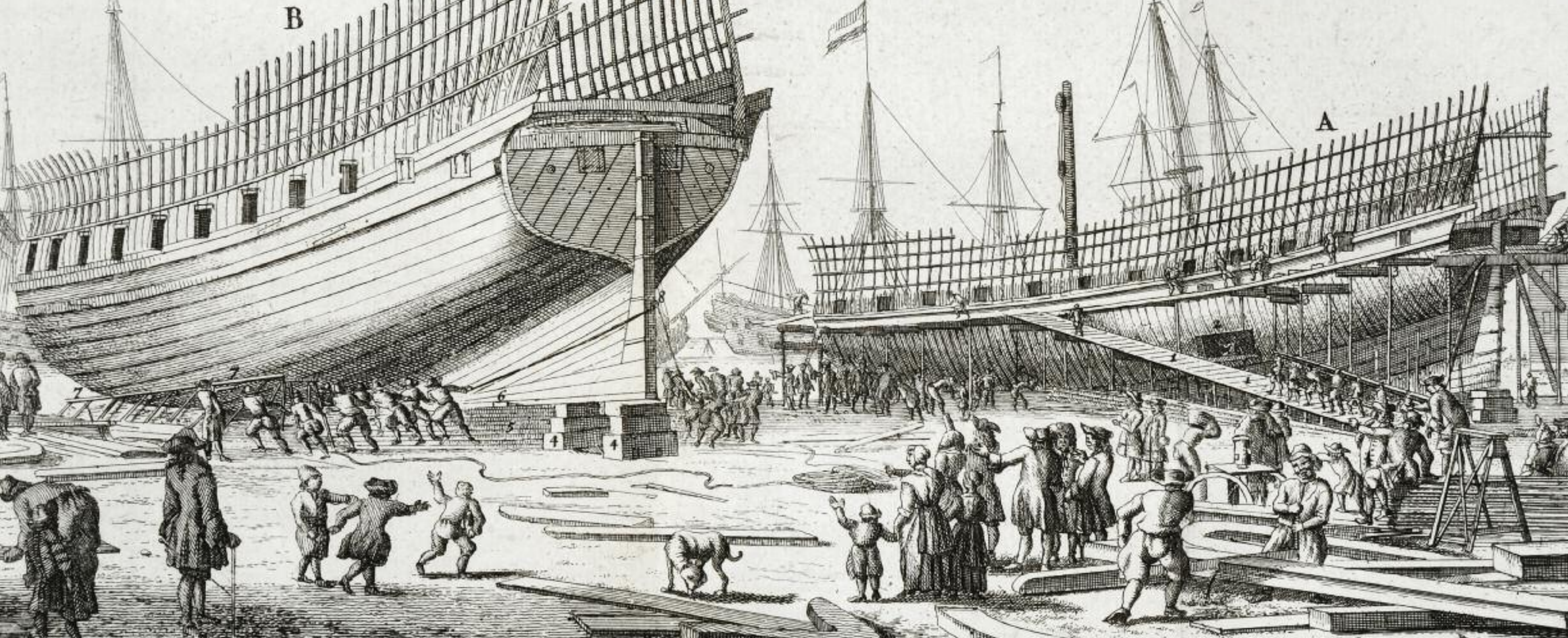
Photo: Gérard Blot. Chateaux de Versailles et de Trianon © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.

After delivering Lafayette to Boston, the *Hermione* put to sea on June 2, 1780. On June 7 she encountered the 32-gun frigate HMS *Iris* off the coast of Long Island. The evenly matched frigates exchanged fire at close range for an hour and a half before *Iris* turned downwind and broke off the battle. *L’Hermione*, with her rigging badly damaged, could not give chase. Latouche-Tréville was wounded in the arm by musket fire. The crew repaired the damage and the *Hermione* resumed her cruise off the American coast.

The *Hermione* joined a French squadron under Admiral Destouches in the spring of 1781, and participated in the Battle of Cape Henry, near the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, on March 17. The *Hermione* assumed the role typically assigned to frigates in fleet engagements. She stood away from the larger French warships forming the line of battle in order to relay messages and support the larger vessels in the event a gap developed in the line that the enemy might try to exploit. The *Hermione’s* old adversary, HMS *Iris*, assumed the same role behind the British line of battle.

Cruising north after the battle, in May the *Hermione* anchored in Philadelphia, where Captain Latouche-Tréville welcomed members of Congress on board. By midsummer she was off the coast of Nova Scotia, a critical source of supply for the British army in New York. On July 21, the *Hermione* and her consort, the frigate *Astrée*, boldly attacked a British convoy guarded by six warships off Louisbourg, severely damaging the largest British vessel, the 28-gun *Charlestown*, and scattering the rest.

The action off Nova Scotia proved to be the *Hermione’s* most dramatic battle of the war. In his log, Latouche-Tréville recorded the surrender of the British at Yorktown three months later. The *Hermione* returned to France in early 1782. She was refitted and set sail to support the French fleet operating off the coast of India, but was recalled when peace was declared. Her end came in 1793, when she ran aground and foundered in heavy seas on the French coast near Le Croisic, not far from her home port of Rochefort.



This engraved plate shows on the right a ship under construction. Scaffolding surrounds the vessel, allowing workers access to the hull. The first stage of ship construction involves laying the keel, the fin-like protrusion underneath the stern of the ship. The rest of the hull is aligned using the keel for guidance.

Reconstruction and Return

Partially destroyed during the Second World War, the Arsenal at Rochefort was restored in the 1990s. Inspired by Rochefort's shipbuilding tradition and the rejuvenation of the Arsenal, the Centre International de la Mer et de la Ville de Rochefort and the Association Hermione-Lafayette launched an initiative to rebuild the *Hermione*.

Primary source documents were instrumental in developing the reconstruction plan. At the Archives de la Marine in Rochefort, researchers examined a partial plan of the *Hermione* and her sister ships drawn in the 1770s. The National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England, offered a complete plan of another sister ship, the *Concorde*. Marine archaeologists explored the wreck of the *Hermione* off the coast near Le

Croisic and contributed their findings. Specialists used contemporary treatises and manuals to understand eighteenth-century shipbuilding techniques and refine the *Hermione's* design.

The reconstruction was led by the French Center for Nautical Architecture and Industry Research and the Asselin Company, historical restoration experts. The two organizations blended

traditional and modern shipbuilding techniques, insisting on period materials but employing modern tools. Construction lasted roughly fifteen years. During that time the *Hermione* served as working classroom, welcoming over three million visitors. On July 6, 2012, the modern *Hermione* was launched.

L'Art de Batir les Vaisseaux, et d'en Perfectionner la Construction...
Amsterdam: Chez David Mortier, 1719.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection



A view from 2009 of the *Hermione* under construction in drydock at Rochefort. Similar to the engraving from the *Art de Batir les Vaisseaux*, here the construction crew has built wooden scaffolding for the ship. The vessel was built from the ground up. Once the keel was laid, the hull and decks were finished before attention turned to the masts and rigging.



A blacksmith's forge was installed at the Arsenal specifically for the *Hermione* project. At work in the forge, this ironmonger uses traditional techniques to produce hardware to be used as part of the rigging.



Sea trials were conducted between September and November of 2014. Sea trials determine if a vessel is seaworthy and are an important final step in the construction process. *Hermione* sailed along the west coast of France between Brittany and Bordeaux.



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