

LAFAYETTE VISITED CALDWELL 200 YEARS AGO: A LOCAL MYSTERY SOLVED

Dr. David Cowell and Mr. Greg Crump, Board Members of the Grover Cleveland Birthplace Memorial Association, have been busy this past year trying to solve a mystery about the famous French General, Marquis de Lafayette, and Caldwell, N.J.

General Lafayette's visit to Caldwell was noted in all the local histories in the 50th Anniversary Celebrations of the American Revolution. He was invited by President John Quincy Adams and toured the United States in 1824 and 1825 visiting New Jersey twice. General Lafayette was the last living general of the war having volunteered onto Washington's staff as a teenager from France.

Lafayette's visit, while noted in all the Caldwell histories, was questioned by all the Lafayette groups as the dates and routes were not cited in the footnotes. The Grover Cleveland Birthplace, while trying to plan for the 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence Celebrations, wanted to kickoff the event with the 200th anniversary of Lafayette's visit but couldn't get the approval or sponsorship of the Lafayette and NJ250 groups unless the visit was supported from primary sources—letters, journals, newspapers, and the like of the period.

The GCBMA decided to find the records. Thanks to the NJ League of Historical Society Library and Archives and the research of Greg Crump, a GCBMA Board Member, two sources were found—"The New Jersey Eagle" and "The Sentinel of Freedom", both newspapers from Newark and both with stories about Lafayette's visit on Bastille Day, July 14, 1825. There is also a story of the carriage breakdown, and the repair of the carriage by Samuel Corey, whose house still stands in West Caldwell. The plaque on the cannon mount on the town green mentions that Peter Decatur donated the cannon to Caldwell to replace the one that blew up while saluting Lafayette when he passed through in 1824. This is incorrect. The GCBMA research found that Commodore Stephen Decatur never had a brother named Peter. It was his brother John Pine Decatur who donated the cannon to Caldwell, and Lafayette passed through in 1825, not 1824.

Caldwell has a special link to Lafayette. After both Rev. James Caldwell and his wife Hanna were killed by the British during the Revolution, Lafayette adopted one of their nine orphaned children, brought him back to France, educated him, and raised him to adulthood.

On February 18, 2025 John Becica, the NJ250 staff researcher, and the American Friends of Lafayette group accepted the GCBMA's findings and invited the Caldwells to participate on Bastille Day, July 14th. The Lafayette Trail Group has noted the visit as "plausible". Perhaps someday a marker will be placed in Caldwell.

The GCBMA will ask the Borough Council to proclaim July 14th as Lafayette Day and the local merchants and restaurants to take advantage of the celebrations and have special events and meals and wines. Copies of the newspapers will be on display as part of the Ice Cream Social this July 4th at the Birthplace.

All West Essex historical societies and history lovers are urged to help the GCBMA flesh out the records of Washington, Lafayette, General Green and other visitors to the area during and after the Revolutionary War.