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Lafayette, hero of Revolutionary War, celebrated

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NEW YORK - "Lafayette, we are here."

So said an aide to "Black Jack" Pershing when the American general and his troops reached France in 1917, joining the Allies' war against Germany.

It was payback for the service rendered by the Marquis de Lafayette to the fledgling United States in its war for independence 140 years earlier.

But *le temps marche*, as the French say - "time marches on." Memories fade.

While hundreds of American counties, cities, squares, streets and schools bear the name Lafayette, how many people today could identify the Revolutionary War hero?

"Not many," says Richard Rabinowitz, curator of a new exhibit on the Frenchman at the New-York Historical Society.

"The American Revolution has ceased to be a story that we tell in our popular culture," he said.

The Historical Society, founded in 1804 when the name of the city was sometimes hyphenated, had student volunteers visit locations bearing the name Lafayette, including a city park with a statue of him, and ask passers-by who he was.

"Almost nobody knew," said Louise Mirrer, the society's president and CEO. "One person said, 'Sounds French.' "

Lafayette's pivotal role in history is more compelling than most fiction: The young nobleman volunteered to fight in the American Revolution, became George Washington's surrogate son and a general at age 19, and survived a battlefield wound to play a key role in the final victory over the British at Yorktown.

His current anonymity is quite a comedown for Marie Jean Paul Joseph Roche Yves Gilbert du Motier Lafayette, who was widely described as "the greatest man in the world" during a triumphant return 40

years later to the country he had helped create.

On that 1824-25 trip, "he confirmed the deepest beliefs that Americans had about themselves, a national identity of America as an exceptional nation," said Lloyd Kramer, a historian and author of the biography *Lafayette in Two Worlds*. "It was a great national ritual of celebration."

The Historical Society exhibit, marking Lafayette's 250th birthday and based on an earlier one at George Washington's Mount Vernon home, opened last week and runs through Aug. 10.

It focuses on the 13-month victory lap that took Lafayette, then 67 and the last surviving general of the American Revolution, to all 24 states and as far west as St. Louis.

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