

## FRENCH ARMY MONETARY SUPPORT



### Order to Rochambeau to Pay for All His Purchases

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In May 1780, France sent an army of some 450 officers and 5,300 non-commissioned officers and enlisted men under General Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau, to America to help the Americans win their independence from Great Britain.

King Louis XVI of France knew Congress could not support its own American troops. By 1780, the paper money printed by Congress since 1775, and by the states as well, had lost most of its value. Only gold and silver bullion had kept its value, but there had never been much of it in the colonies. The king informed Rochambeau that he would provide for the needs of the troops he sent from Europe. Upon arrival in Newport, Rhode Island, in July 1780, Rochambeau informed General Washington of his orders from Louis XVI, telling Washington there would be funds to pay for everything the French army would need.

### Transporting Large Amounts of Cash

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To support his army, Rochambeau needed at least 375,000 *livres* each month. He used paper bills of exchange drawn on the Ministry of War in Paris for his larger purchases but paid his army and hired help in coin. During the years his forces were in America, 1780 through 1783, they received approximately 14 million *livres* in 11 separate shipments. The funds came

either in convoys or by fast frigates that were able to out-race British vessels and avoid capture. Coins were packed in barrels tied with lines and buoys so they could be retrieved if they had accidentally fallen into the sea or if they had to be thrown over board. On land, wagons carried the barrels. When Rochambeau marched across Connecticut in June 1781, to join Washington in New York just before the Yorktown campaign, eight wagons carried his funds. His army rested briefly in East Hartford and local lore maintains that the money was stored in Timothy Forbes' house for protection. It also tells that Mr. Forbes was hired to drive one of the wagons to New York for \$2.00 a day in coin. These two *dollars* were 2 Spanish milled silver *dollars*, the famous 'pieces of eight'. There were no coined American dollars.

### Paying the French Soldier

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Rochambeau always paid his soldiers in coin, mostly with French silver *écu*<sup>1</sup> but occasionally with silver Spanish milled *dollars*, as in 1781 when Admiral de Grasse brought funds from the Caribbean to America. Since coins were minted of gold or silver, they had a value in themselves irrespective of where they were minted or whose portrait or coat of arms they wore. French soldiers found their foreign coins welcomed by the cash-starved Americans.

The pay-period stipulated in army ordinances was 30 days, but in emergencies the time could be extended to 60 days. A common soldier earned only about 15 *livres* or 2.5 *écu* every 30 days. Of these, seven *livres* were withheld from his pay for food and equipment stoppages

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<sup>1</sup>*In America, in buying power 1 silver Fr écu = 1 Sp silver dollar = 6 livres. In this brochure 'livres' refer to amounts of money, not specific coins.*

leaving him about eight *livres* to spend. He could not buy much. A pound of bread in Newport in 1780 cost almost one *livre*. A hired wagoner like Mr. Forbes was paid \$2.00, or about 12 *livres*, a day, more than a soldier had to spend in a whole month.

There is a legend in East Hartford that the French troops were paid in silver coin on Silver Lane. No record has been found for the actual payment date for Rochambeau's army in June 1781. But all four regiments were here during part of the time when they would have been paid. While they were here, it is said, French soldiers used their wages to pay the people for sewing, mending, and baking gingerbread and pies. At this time the colonies had little hard cash. The people of East Hartford were delighted to earn this "good money".

### Admiral de Grasse Raises Funds for Rochambeau

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By June 1781, Rochambeau was facing serious financial problems. His funds were running low. He wondered whether his bills of exchange would continue to be accepted for his army's purchases. When his bills were exchanged for cash, there was a 30% loss in value incurred in the process in the colonies. This loss was too large for him. He also doubted there were enough funds here for his troops. He decided to ask Admiral de Grasse to get a loan of 1.2 million *livres* in coin in Santo Domingo and bring it with him when he sailed north in August 1781. Rochambeau would repay him with bills of exchange, which de Grasse could exchange at face value in the Antilles. De Grasse tried to raise the funds. He and Captain de Charette even offered their properties as security for a loan but without success. De Grasse then asked France's

Spanish allies in Cuba for help. Hours after a public appeal for funds was made in Havana, the money was on the way to de Grasse. Spain repaid the donors in September 1781, most with 2% interest. On 30 August 1781, de Grasse's fleet reached Chesapeake Bay with the funds for Rochambeau's army.

### **Rochambeau Loans Funds to Washington to Pay His Army**

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In the summer of 1781, Washington marched south from New York to Yorktown to fight Cornwallis. With him went 2,500 men from the northern Continental Army and 4,100 men from Rochambeau's army. The Americans were very disgruntled. They wanted the pay they had not received in many months. And they wanted their pay in coin. Merchants were only accepting hard cash. Congress' initial issue of paper currency had no value and was being recalled. There was little faith left in Continental paper money. Washington believed that if he could get his army just one month's pay in coin its morale would improve. \$20,000 was thought to be sufficient. Robert Morris, Congress' Superintendent of Finance, tried to raise this amount for Washington but failed. Finally he asked Rochambeau for a loan. When Rochambeau learned that de Grasse had arrived with 1.2 million *livres* in coin, he loaned Morris \$26,600 in silver coin. This, with \$6,200 dollars Morris did raise, supplied the funds necessary to pay Washington's army. On 8 September 1781 the American Continental Army was paid in hard cash near Elkton in Maryland. For many of these American soldiers this was the only time in the war they were paid in coin. From Elkton the two armies continued south to Yorktown.

### **Afterward**

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When Admiral de Grasse sailed north with Rochambeau's funds he came with his powerful fleet of 28 men-of-war, 24,000 naval officers and sailors, 5,200 marines, and 3,300 infantry under the marquis de St. Simon. His fleet blockaded Lord Cornwallis' 8,100 men in Yorktown. About 18,500 men from the armies of Washington and Rochambeau, LaFayette's forces, militia, and French marines laid siege to Yorktown on land. After 3 weeks, on 19 October 1781, the British surrendered in the Revolution's last major battle. On 3 September 1783, Great Britain recognized an independent America.

Most of Rochambeau's army was here from July 1780 through 1782. He himself left in January 1783. By December 1783 all his men had left. During that time his army spent 14 million *livres* wherever it went from Yorktown to Boston. The officers spent one million *livres* or more of their own private funds. On average, army expenditures may well have put 50,000 silver coins a month into the economy besides bills of exchange backed by the Royal Treasury in Paris. This inflow of money with real, sustained value helped begin the conversion of the failed, mostly paper based, American financial system to one based on gold.

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*King Louis XVI is profiled on the brochure's 1779 French coin. This coin was found in the walls of East Hartford's ca 1773 David Little Tavern. The tavern stood near Rochambeau's quarters and French army campsites. Did a French soldier lose this coin? We don't know. Photo is by John Egan.*

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*The Fleur-de-Lys icon is from [earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/maps/yorkmap/map.jpg](http://earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/maps/yorkmap/map.jpg)*

## *French Army Monetary Support In the American Revolution, 1780-1783*



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Connecticut Commission on Culture and  
Tourism



Washington-Rochambeau Rev. Route  
Marker Unveiling, Oct 16, 2005  
East Hartford, CT