

When The French Army Came to East Hartford

by Betty Squires



The French Army in East Hartford. This painting of the French Army encampment at East Hartford October 29 - November 4, 1782 is by David Wagner. It shows Rochambeau on horseback surveying all the regiments of his army. It is the only time during the march that all of the French troops camped together. The troops are on East Hartford land near the Connecticut River looking west with Hartford in the distance.

The Continental Army under the command of General George Washington was in dire need of men, money, and supplies. Men from the Colonies went to France on a diplomatic mission to ask for help.

On July 10, 1780, a large French fleet bringing General Jean Baptiste Donatien DeVimeur, Comte DeRochambeau and about 5,000 troops sailed into Narragansett Bay in Newport, RI. After spending a year in Rhode Island, the French Army marched west and reached campsite 6 in East Hartford. While here, Rochambeau made trips to Wethersfield for meetings. It was preferable to leave the troops in East Hartford on the east bank in order to give the artillery and baggage train time to catch up and cross the river on the same day.

Another reason not to camp on the west side was that the outskirts of Hartford were full of gardens and orchards and would require placing the camp too far from town.


East Hartford was also large enough to accommodate the divisional headquarters. Rochambeau was quartered at Squire Elisha Pitkin's house not far from the Old MeetingHouse which was used as a hospital for the French troops. Other French officers stayed at both private and public houses such as Richard Pitkin's Tavern. Stories of dances, barbecues and cattle roasts were told locally for many years.

The Abbe Robin, a Catholic priest with the French Army, reported that during this East Hartford encampment he said the first Catholic Mass in the State of Connecticut on Sunday, June 24, 1781.

The French troops continued their march to Yorktown, Virginia. The allied victory at Yorktown was the

crowning military achievement of the American Revolutionary War. Rochambeau's Army marched north in 1782 and camped again in East Hartford in camp #45 on Silver Lane. Most of the troops sailed from Boston on Christmas Eve 1782.

FRENCH ARMY MAP: ENCAMPMENT #6, JUNE 1781

Gen. Rochambeau and his French Army traveled from Rhode Island across Connecticut in June 1781 to meet Washington in New York. There they would decide whether to attack Yorktown. The French regiments rested in East Hartford while their artillery caught up with them. On the map the 3 symbols, , mark the sites of their camps.

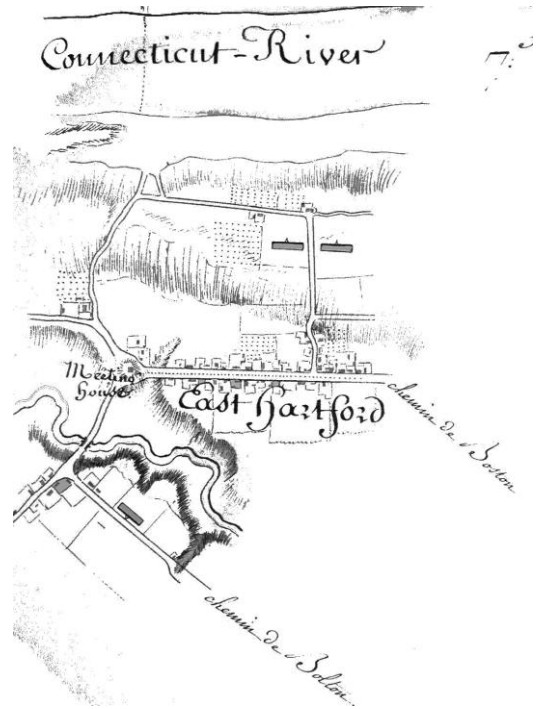
On June 22-24 the Bourbonnais Regiment camped in the meadows near the Ct River.

On June 23-25 the Royal Deux-Ponts Regiment also camped in the meadows near the Ct River.

On June 24-26 the Soissonais Regiment camped on Silver Lane, labeled *chemin De Bolton* on the bottom of the map.

On June 25-27 the Saintonge Regiment camped in the meadows near the Ct River.

Returning from Yorktown, the army camped together on both sides of Silver Lane near the 1781 campsite, Oct 29 – Nov 4, 1782.



This map is from The American Campaigns of Rochambeau's Army 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783, Vol II, translated and edited by Howard C. Rice, Jr., and Anne S. K. Brown, Princeton University Press and Brown University Press, 1972, map 33.

ROCHAMBEAU



Jean Baptiste Donatien DeVimeur, Comte DeRochambeau was born in Vendome, France 1 July 1725. He attended school in Paris and then accepted a cavalry commission. He fought in many wars. In 1761, he was Inspector and served as a provincial governor. In 1780, he took command of the small French force sent to aid the Continental Army. His knowledge and leadership contributed greatly to America's victory at Yorktown. He retired in 1792 but was arrested and escaped execution during the French Revolution. He later regained his former status. He died on May 10, 1807. His image is from the National Archives.

ROCHAMBEAU STAYED HERE

Elisha Pitkin House
Built 1764 on Pitkin Street
Moved in 1955 to Guilford, Ct

Yale graduate Squire Elisha Pitkin was a magistrate of justice in East Hartford and a major commandant of artillery in the Revolution. He was closely identified with the manufacture of gunpowder. He hosted the Comte de Rochambeau in his home when he and his French troops stopped in East Hartford on their way to and from Yorktown.



TROOPS STAYED HERE



Silver Lane Plaque
201 Silver Lane
Erected 1928

Bronze plaque on boulder to commemorate the officers and men of the French Army who camped near this spot in 1781 while on the march from Newport, RI to Yorktown and again on the return in 1782.

FRENCH HOSPITAL

Old Meeting House

From 1698-1836 people met for worship and to transact all public business at the Old Meeting House.

This Second Meeting House 1740-1835 at Main and Pitkin Streets was used as a hospital by the French Army 1781-1782 which Commissary Blanchard had established there. Blanchard arrived on June 18, 1781.

A bronze plaque, affixed to a large boulder, is located on the Main Street – Pitkin Street site to commemorate this historic building.



MONEY HOUSED HERE



Timothy Forbes House
East Hartford
Built circa 1756 - still standing

There is a strong local legend that states that when Rochambeau's French army camped in East Hartford in 1781, the silver coin to pay the troops was stored in the parlor of this house. When the army moved, Timothy Forbes drove the coin in a cart to New York. A brass scale weight, marked with a fleur-de-lis was found inside the wall.

TROOPS PAID HERE

Warren Farm House
Original Drawing 1780s
Silver Lane (now numbers 126-140)

Silver Lane, a dirt tract, was a public highway from 1730.

The French Quartermaster was housed here and paid his troops from this house according to Warren descendants. This house was on the side across from the French encampment. Some people believe the street got its name because of this activity.



18TH CENTURY SILVER FRENCH ECUS



Rochambeau may have used coins like these to pay his army. Denominations from left to right are: 1 ecu (=6 livres), 1/2 ecu, 1/5 ecu, 1/10 ecu, 1/20 ecu. The obverse of each ecu is shown on the top row. The reverse of each coin is shown below.



13 year old John Hudson of the 1st NY Regiment recalled that he and his comrades were each paid 6 ecus for a month's army service under Washington on September 8, 1781 on the way to Yorktown. It was the only time he was ever paid for his service. Washington could not get funds to pay his men and had borrowed money from the French army.

SILVER LANE APPLES

During the Rochambeau encampments, many cattle roasts and parties were held. Ladies came from long distances to dance with the polite French officers in the orchard behind the Roberts house on Silver Lane. The French soldiers were enamored with the delicious apples growing in the orchards. These mild flavored apples were large and round. The skin was green on the bottom half and yellow on the upper part with small spots of tan. They were a late apple. The French named the apples “Belle Bonne” meaning good and handsome. The name was shortened into “Bounders”. While many apples were given away, the locals also sold large quantities of them to the French troops to take with them.



EAST HARTFORD / HARTFORD FERRIES

The Hartford ferries were described as 4 boats, 2 large and 2 small. These boats were flat bottomed with low freeboard and were propelled by oars alone. The larger boats could transport 2 wagons and several horses at a time; the small could carry from 9 to 10 horses. In order to speed up the crossing, boats were procured from the neighboring ferries up and down stream. The State also impressed scows for passage over the Connecticut River.

Each crossing on the Hartford ferry took only a half-hour. Since there were so many boats the operation moved along at a good pace.

1781 – Matthew Dumas, assistant quartermaster was responsible for getting the army across the river.

MEETING AT FERRY CROSSING



Fall 1782

This scene at ferry at the Ct River in East Hartford shows French Major General Marquis de Chastelleux being escorted by the first Rhode Island, a black mounted regiment.

Painted by David Wagner.