

Durfee Home Welcomed M

In the early summer of 1776, a tall, red-headed Frenchman of 20 arrived in Philadelphia. He had joined the American Revolution in spirit, and having left behind wife, children and career, was about to join the rebels in fact. He was Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette.

Congress frowned on his credentials, but was amazed to find he did not want a general's rank, but only "to be near the person of General Washington 'till such time as he may think proper to entrust me with a division of the army."

Washington and Lafayette soon met and developed an enduring friendship. Lafayette went on to lead troops and indeed a division of Washington's army at battles from South Carolina to Vermont.

In 1777, Lafayette, with 1,200 men, faced a superior British force in Richmond, Va.

This was his first independent command, operating on strange country with no one to whom to turn for advice. He wrote to Washington: "Were I to fight a battle I should be cut to pieces, the militia disperse and arms lost. Were I to decline fighting, the country would

think itself given up. I am therefore determined to skirmish, but not to engage too far."

And he added: "Were I always equal to the enemy, I should be extremely happy in my present command, but I am not strong enough even now to be beaten."

Lafayette was later to join with the great names of yesteryear as the new nation, armed with a Declaration of Independence, succeeded in getting the British to surrender at Yorktown, N.Y.

It was just three months after Col. Joseph Durfee had repulsed a British attack on Fall River that Lafayette was known to have come through this area. And about this time, it is thought, the young Frenchman visited the Durfee family here.

It was Aug. 28, 1778, that Lafayette rode to Boston from Newport for a two-day stay.

His purpose was to try to induce Count D'Estaing with his French fleet to attack the British in Rhode Island. But the count refused, instead agreeing to send several battalions to aid the colonials in Rhode Island. But a retreat made the plan go awry.

It is recorded that Lafayette was again in Boston for a few days about Sept. 27, 1778. By Dec. 11, Lafayette was seriously ill, and arrived in Boston enroute to France. A month later when he left he claimed his return to health had been aided by Madeira wine given him by people in Boston.

Woven into the Lafayette story and his visit here, is the house being refurbished at 94 Cherry St., now known as the Lafayette-Durfee house. It was here, the French patriot is said to have stayed in his treks to and from Boston and Newport.

Facts surrounding the old estate were provided in part by Miss Caroline Durfee of 316 Winter St. She is the sixth generation following Thomas Durfee, who is believed to have built the house in 1750 on a vast tract of land that went from the Taunton River on the west, to North Watuppa Pond on the east.

The narrow tract had its south boundary about Bedford Street and ran to about where Turner Street and the old railroad station are located.

Thomas Durfee built his house on a site which now is taken by the Superior Courthouse on the east side

of North Main Street. The old well adjacent is known as Durfee's Well and was, supposedly, dug about the time the house was built.

The Durfee name goes back at least to the year 590 A.D. Then the name was spelled "Wlph" which is an early German form of the name Wolf. One of the Wlph's was named Louis I of France, and was a son of Charlemagne.

That the family had a long tenure in France can be seen by the name being modified to D'Urfe. An ancient structure, the Chateau D'Urfe is still located in the Loire section of France.

The family fled from Rochelle in France to either Holland or England.

Probably the first Durfee (the name had again undergone modification) to arrive in this country was another Thomas Durfee. He was born in 1643 in Exeter, England. He died in Portsmouth, R.I., about 1721.

His son, Benjamin Durfee, II, and his wife Prudence (Earle) Durfee are recorded as having been in Tiverton.

The Thomas Durfee who built the structure now located here was born in Tiverton on Nov. 5, 1721, and died in Freetown in 1796. His wife was Patience

Borden.

Thomas Borden and a judge, the legislator, friend of John Adams, signer of the Declaration of Independence, when vice numbered Judge Durfee acknowledged of town culture and

Col. Joseph Durfee serving with the White Plains across Rhode Island, probably one of the invitational his father a homestead

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Thomas Durfee, a lawyer and a judge, later served in the legislature and was a friend of John Hancock, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. At a time when villagers here numbered only a hundred, Judge Durfee's home was acknowledged as the focus of town government, culture and news.

Col. Joseph Durfee, after serving with Lafayette in White Plains and in battles across Rhode Island, probably offered Lafayette the invitation to stay with his father and family at the homestead here.

Another tie with Lafayette was through his military aide, Robich Foucauld. Young Foucauld had married a D'Urfe in France before leaving to fight for the colonists. It is thought that he was anxious to meet his American relatives.

Whether for one or all of those reasons, Lafayette did visit and sleep in the Durfee house here.

At some point, Thomas Durfee mortgaged his land to raise funds for the General Congress. A ship builder, Jerethmel Bowers, took it over from creditors. Although Congress later paid Durfee his money back, the currency was so

low in value the loss was great.

The old house was moved about the North Main Street property when the land was divided up by subsequent owners, the Rodneys. It has had a number of tenants since then, one of them being a Miss Lewin, a teacher, who lived in it for over 40 years.

Three years ago Miss Durfee initiated a move to purchase the house and restore it to its original condition.

The task is a gigantic one. Normal updating and modernization of the 18th Century house over the years, has extensively changed both its exterior and interior. The one-family cottage had been made over into a four-apartment house with 16 rooms. Three families still reside there and will, until the exterior work is finished and the focus on returning the house to its colonial design is completed.

Armed with a \$5,000 grant from state Bicentennial funds, and with the help of experienced restorers, with Vaughn Baasch of Westport, contractor, in charge, the Lafayette-Durfee Historical Foundation, Inc. has already brought about several major changes.

Asbestos shingles have

been removed, leaving the way for clapboards similar to those of the colonial period. The doorway and frame have been replaced and the entrance is resuming its original form.

The proper number of pane windows and shutters will also be restored to the shape the house probably was in long before Walter Chaloner, Miss Durfee's grandfather, sold it.

At the time the house was still on North Main Street, but had been moved back to accommodate the extension of that roadway and make way for the horse car line.

The Davis Anthony family later owned the house and sold it to Charles J. Lewin, in order to build a larger home. Lewin had it moved to the present Cherry Street site about 1887.

The structural changes, while numerous, still allow the old home to be returned to its original form.

Artifacts and antiques will be exhibited in the house, Miss Durfee said, when restoration is complete.

One of them is a piece of the tapestry from the bed that Lafayette slept in. Its rich multicolor print includes pineapples, symbolic of hospitality, and pomegranates, a sign of

plenty or fertility. The design also has a star in its center.

Lafayette thanked the Durfee's for their hospitality by sending them two French greyhounds after he had returned to his native France.

Over the old threshold of the Durfee House passed Fall River's citizens of yesteryear, Lafayette, and others instrumental in the formation of the young America.

Patience Borden Durfee must have scurried out of the house that May day in 1778 when it was reported the British had landed to sack the city. She loosed her collection of prized deer in the park adjacent to the home, lest the British take them for food.

But the animals had become so domesticated that they later returned freely to the enclosure. The British were routed, never to return.

And for old Thomas Durfee to give up the homestead for lack of funds must have been tragic.

Now with the nation's Bicentennial spirit uniting with the spirit of the rebellion, the working committee wants and hopes to restore the historic house to its colonial elegance.



The statue of Marquis de Lafayette and his noble steed has adorned Lafayette Park here since 1916 when it was presented to city by the people of French descent. The bronze statue was designed by Arnaldo Zocchi of Rome. It rests on a base of Fall River granite.

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