

# **Prelude to Yorktown**

## **The War Comes to Virginia – 1781**

September 10, 2009

Fairfax Resolves Chapter  
Virginia Society  
Sons of the American Revolution

# How does one learn about this period in the war? It's Hard! There are few accurate sources.

Timeline of the American Revolution

[http://www.mce.k12tn.net/revolutionary\\_war/timeline\\_of\\_the](http://www.mce.k12tn.net/revolutionary_war/timeline_of_the)

October 4, 1777	Battle of Germantown - Americans retreat
December 19, 1777	Encampment at Valley Forge for the Winter.
February 6, 1778	Ben Franklin encourages France to sign an alliance with the United States
June 19, 1778	Evacuation of Valley Forge Winter Quarters.
June 28, 1778	Battle of Monmouth
December 29, 1778	Savannah taken by the British
1779	Lafayette goes to France to plead for help
September 1779	John Paul Jones's <i>Bonhomme Richard</i> captures the British <i>Serapis</i>
May 12, 1780	Charlestown, SC taken by the British
August 16, 1780	Gates defeated by Cornwallis near Camden, South Carolina.
September 23, 1780	Benedict Arnold's plot to surrender West Point frustrated.
October 7, 1780	King's Mountain - British defeated
1780	Rochambeau arrives in America with 5,500 men.
1781	Powerful French fleet under deGrasse arrives - Block British naval force in Chesapeake Bay
January 17, 1781	Cowpens - British defeated
March 15, 1781	Guilford Court House - Americans defeated
1781	Greene clears interior of South Carolina and Georgia of the enemy
October 19, 1781	Cornwallis surrenders at Yorktown
November 30, 1782	Provisional Peace
September 3, 1783	Treaty of Peace of Paris



# The War in the South

1778-1781

The British decided to focus their attention to the South as loyalists support was strong in many areas there.

December 29, 1778

Clinton's troops captured Savannah, Georgia.

May 1780

Clinton's troops took Charlestown, South Carolina.

August 1780

British were victorious at Camden, South Carolina.

October 1780

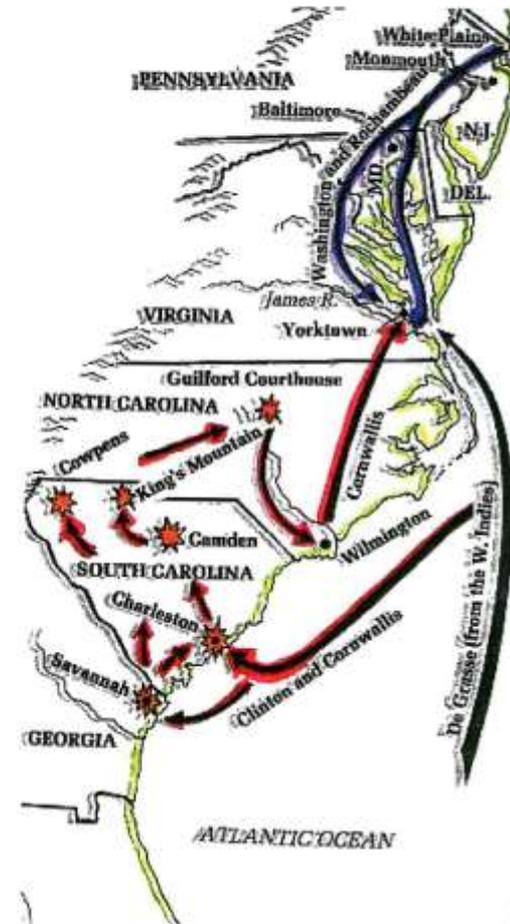
Patriots captured 1000 loyalist troops at border of North and South Carolina.

January 1781

Patriots won at Cowpens, North Carolina.

March 1781

Guilford Courthouse in North Carolina - British forced to retreat to Yorktown as casualties got so great.



A very detailed map of the action in the Carolinas, but almost nothing about the fighting in Virginia. And Lafayette's presence is not shown.

**Timelines**

- :1784-1767
- :1768-1774
- :January-June 1775
- :July-December 1775
- :1776
- :1777
- :1778
- :1779
- :1780
- :1781
- :1782
- :1783
- :1784-1794

**Battles/Campaigns:**

- :Battles: 1775-1779
- :Battles: 1780-1781

**People**

- :The South: 1775-78
- :The South: 1779-80
- :The South: 1781-83

**PatriotResource.com:**

- [Main Index](#)
- [Film Index](#)
- [Film: Gladiator](#)
- [Film: The Patriot](#)
- [Film: Tomb Raider](#)
- [Film: General](#)
- [Film: Fantasy](#)
- [Film: Sci-Fi](#)
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1781

January 17 - **Battle of Cowpens**, South Carolina.  
**Brig. General Daniel Morgan** defeats **Lt. Colonel Banastre Tarleton**.  
 January 24 - **Lt. Colonel Henry Lee** and **Francis Marion** raid Georgetown, South Carolina.  
 February 1 - The British occupy Wilmington, North Carolina.  
 February 10 - **Brig. General Daniel Morgan** retires to his home in Virginia due to painful sciatica.  
 February 14 - **Maj. General Nathanael Greene** crosses the Dan River into Virginia.  
 February 25 - Pyle's Hacking Match; Haw River, North Carolina.  
 Continental **Lt. Colonel Henry Lee** surprises and massacres Tory militia.  
 March 15 - **Battle of Guilford Courthouse**, North Carolina.  
**Lt. General Charles Cornwallis** defeats **Maj. General Nathanael Greene**.  
 March 16 - The British control Chesapeake Bay following the First Battle of the Capes.  
 April 25 - **Battle of Hobkirk's Hill**; Camden, South Carolina.  
 Lt. Colonel Francis Lord Rawdon defeats **Maj. General Nathanael Greene**.  
 May 10 - Lt. Colonel Francis Lord Rawdon abandons Camden, South Carolina.  
 May 11 - British outpost at Orangeburg, South Carolina surrenders to **Thomas Sumter**.  
 May 12 - **Lt. Colonel Henry Lee** and **Francis Marion** capture Fort Motte, South Carolina.  
 May 15 - **Lt. Colonel Henry Lee** captures Fort Granby, South Carolina.  
 May 22-June 19 - **Maj. General Nathanael Greene** lays siege to Ninety-Six, South Carolina.  
 July 17 - Patriots capture British garrison at Moccasin's Corner, South Carolina.  
**August 1 - Lt. General Charles Cornwallis** occupies Yorktown, Virginia.  
 August 26 - French fleet arrives off Virginia coast.  
 September 2 - French troops begin landing south of Yorktown, Virginia.  
 September 5 - The French maintained control of Chesapeake Bay at the Second Battle of the Capes.  
 September 8 - Battle of Eutaw Springs, South Carolina.  
 Lt. Colonel Alexander Stewart defeats **Maj. General Nathanael Greene**.  
 September 12 - Tories capture Governor Thomas Burke at Hillsborough, North Carolina.  
 October 19 - **Battle of Yorktown**, Virginia.  
**Lt. General Charles Cornwallis** surrenders to **General George Washington**.  
 November 18 - British evacuate Wilmington, North Carolina.  
 December 1 - **Maj. General Nathanael Greene** captures garrison at Dorchester, South Carolina.  
 December 28-29 - **Lt. Colonel Henry Lee** unsuccessfully attacks Johns Island, South Carolina.

1782

February 27 - British House of Commons advises King George III to end the war with America.  
 March 26 - Maj. General Guy Carleton becomes **Commander** of the British Army in America.  
 July 11 - British evacuate Savannah, Georgia.  
 September 27 - Formal peace negotiations begin in Paris, France.  
 November 30 - Preliminary treaty recognizing American independence is signed.  
 December 14 - Charleston, South Carolina is last British outpost to be evacuated.

1783

February 4 - Britain announces end of hostilities with America.  
 April 11 - Congress announces end of hostilities.  
 April 15 - Congress ratifies preliminary peace treaty with Britain.  
 September 3 - The **Treaty of Paris** is signed, ending the Revolutionary War.

< [Southern Theatre Timeline: 1779-1780](#)

[Timelines: Index](#) >

Gen. Morgan's sciatica is more important than Lafayette's duel with Cornwallis in this timeline.

**January 20, 1781** - Mutiny among American troops at Pompton, New Jersey. The rebellion is put down seven days later by a 600-man force sent by Gen. Washington. Two of the leaders are then hanged.

**March 15, 1781** - Forces under Gen. Cornwallis suffer heavy losses in the Battle of Guilford Courthouse in North Carolina. As a result, Cornwallis abandons plans to conquer the Carolinas and retreats to Wilmington, then begins a campaign to conquer Virginia with an army of 7500 men.

**May 21, 1781** - Gen. Washington and French Gen. Rochambeau meet in Connecticut for a war council. Gen Rochambeau reluctantly agrees to Washington's plan for a joint French naval and American ground attack on New York.

**June 4, 1781** - Thomas Jefferson narrowly escapes capture by the British at Charlottesville, Virginia.

**June 10, 1781** - American troops under Marquis de Lafayette, Gen. Anthony Wayne and Baron von Steuben begin to form a combined force in Virginia to oppose British forces under Benedict Arnold and Gen. Cornwallis.

**June 11, 1781** - Congress appoints a Peace Commission comprised of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Jay and Henry Laurens. The commission supplements John Adams as the sole negotiator with the British.

**July 20, 1781** - Slaves in Williamsburg, Virginia, rebel and burn several buildings.

**August 1, 1781** - After several months of chasing Gen. Greene's army without much success, Gen. Cornwallis and his 10,000 tired soldiers arrive to seek rest at the small port of Yorktown, Virginia, on the Chesapeake Bay. He then establishes a base to communicate by sea with Gen. Clinton's forces in New York.

**August 14, 1781** - Gen. Washington abruptly changes plans and abandons the attack on New York in favor of Yorktown after receiving a letter from French Admiral Count de Grasse indicating his entire 29-ship French fleet with 3000 soldiers is now heading for the Chesapeake Bay near Cornwallis. Gen. Washington then coordinates with Gen. Rochambeau to rush their best troops south to Virginia to destroy the British position in Yorktown.

**August 30, 1781** - Count de Grasse's French fleet arrives off Yorktown, Virginia. De Grasse then lands troops near Yorktown, linking with Lafayette's American troops to cut Cornwallis off from any retreat by land.

**September 1, 1781** - The troops of Washington and Rochambeau arrive at Philadelphia.

**September 5-8, 1781** - Off Yorktown, a major naval battle between the French fleet of de Grasse and the outnumbered British fleet of Adm. Thomas Graves results in a victory for de Grasse. The British fleet retreats to New York for reinforcements, leaving the French fleet in control of the Chesapeake. The French fleet establishes a blockade, cutting Cornwallis off from any retreat by sea. French naval reinforcements then arrive from Newport.

**September 6, 1781** - Benedict Arnold's troops loot and burn the port of New London, Connecticut.

**September 14-24, 1781** - De Grasse sends his ships up the Chesapeake Bay to transport the armies of Washington and Rochambeau to Yorktown.

Much is wrong here!

1. Lafayette arrived in Virginia months before Jefferson's escape.

2. Cornwallis never chased Gen. Greene's army in Virginia.

# An Outline of American History (1994)

## Chapter Three

### Victory and Independence (13/14)

In July 1780 France's Louis XVI had sent to America an expeditionary force of 6,000 men under the Comte Jean de Rochambeau. In addition, the French fleet harassed British shipping and prevented reinforcement and resupply of British forces in Virginia by a British fleet sailing from New York City. French and American armies and navies, totaling 18,000 men, parried with Cornwallis all through the summer and into the fall. Finally, on October 19, 1781, after being trapped at Yorktown near the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, Cornwallis surrendered his army of 8,000 British soldiers.

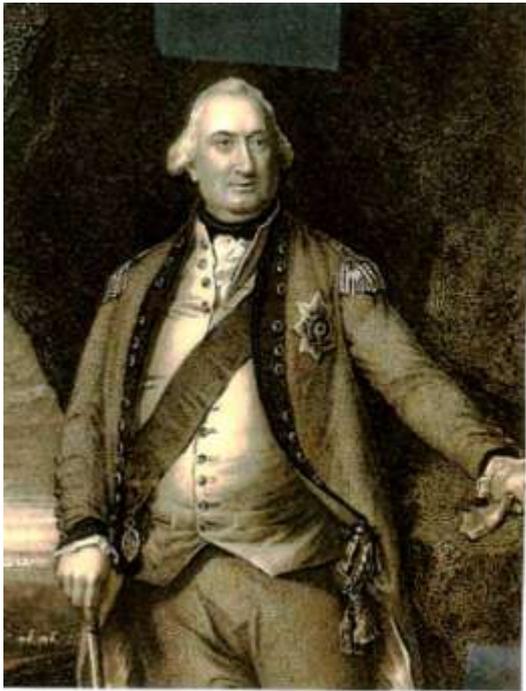
Although Cornwallis's defeat did not immediately end the war -- which would drag on inconclusively for almost two more years -- a new British government decided to pursue peace negotiations in Paris in early 1782, with the American side represented by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and John Jay. On April 15, 1783, Congress approved the final treaty, and Great Britain and its former colonies signed it on September 3. Known as the Treaty of Paris, the peace settlement acknowledged the independence, freedom and sovereignty of the 13 former colonies, now states, to which Great Britain granted the territory west to the Mississippi River, north to Canada and south to Florida, which was returned to Spain. The fledgling colonies that Richard Henry Lee had spoken of more than seven years before, had finally become "free and independent states." The task of knitting together a nation yet remained.

This summary does not tell us very much and misses the real story.

In March 1781, in response to the threat of Cornwallis, General Washington had dispatched Marquis de Lafayette to defend Virginia. The young Frenchman had 3,200 men at his command, but British troops in the state now totalled 7,200.<sup>[36]</sup> Lafayette skirmished with Cornwallis, avoiding a decisive battle while gathering reinforcements. It was during this period that Cornwallis received orders from Clinton to choose a position on the Virginia Peninsula - referred to in contemporary letters as the "Williamsburg Neck" - and construct a fortified naval post to shelter ships of the line.<sup>[37]</sup> In complying with this order, Cornwallis put himself in a position where it would be easy to become trapped. With the arrival of the French fleet under the Comte de Grasse and Washington's combined French-American army, Cornwallis found himself cut off. After the Royal Navy fleet under Admiral Thomas Graves was defeated by the French at the Battle of the Chesapeake, and the French siege train arrived from Newport, Rhode Island, his position became untenable. He surrendered to Washington and the French commander the Comte de Rochambeau on October 19th, 1781.

In three sentences this summary tells the heart of the story.

What really happened?



## Gen. Lord Charles Cornwallis

Dec. 3, 1738 - Oct. 5, 1805

43 years old in 1781

*"The boy cannot escape me"*  
Cornwallis to Gen. Clinton, Spring 1781



## Marquis de Lafayette

Sept. 6, 1757 – May 20, 1834

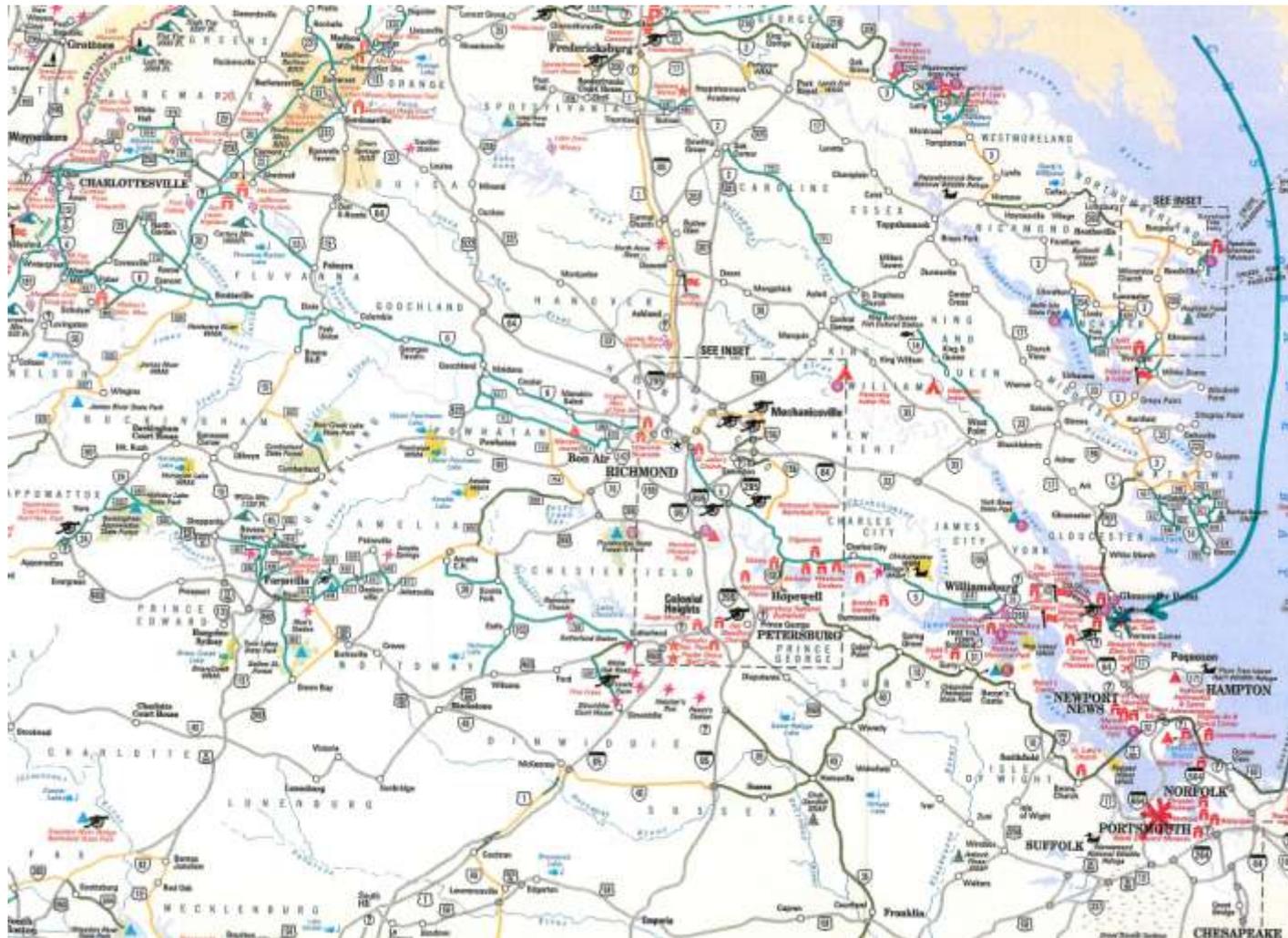
24 years old in 1781

*“Were I to fight a battle I should be cut to pieces, the militia dispersed, and the arms lost. Were I to decline fighting, the county would think itself given up. I am therefore determined to skirmish, but not to engage too far, and particularly to take care against their immense and excellent body of horse, which the militia fear as they would wild beasts.*

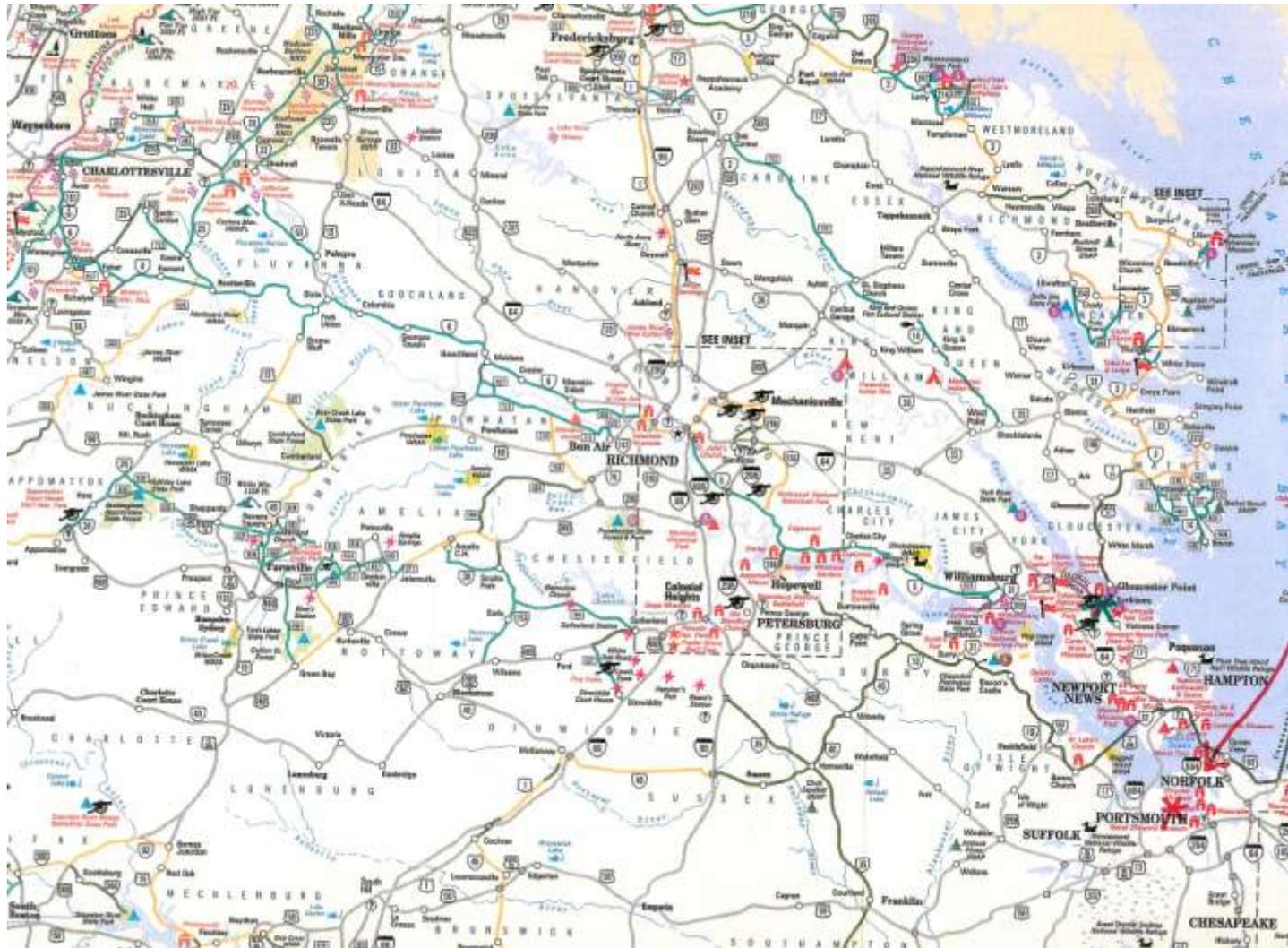
*I am not strong enough to be beaten”.*

Lafayette, Letter to Gen. George Washington, May 24, 1781

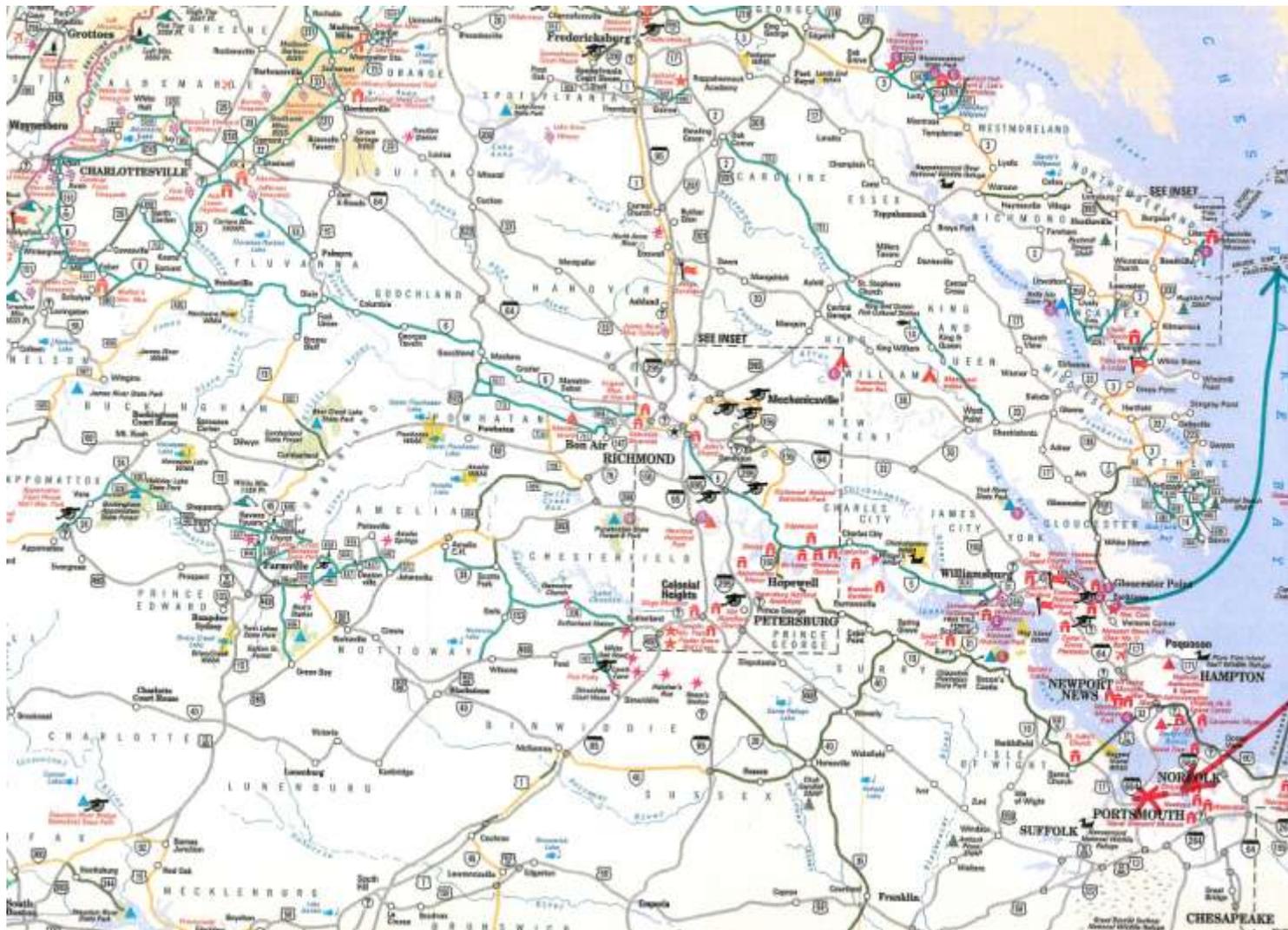




**December 1780 – British forces occupy Portsmouth and raid Richmond.  
Gov. Thomas Jefferson asks Washington for troops to fight back.  
14 March 1781 – Lafayette, with a small escort, arrives at Yorktown**

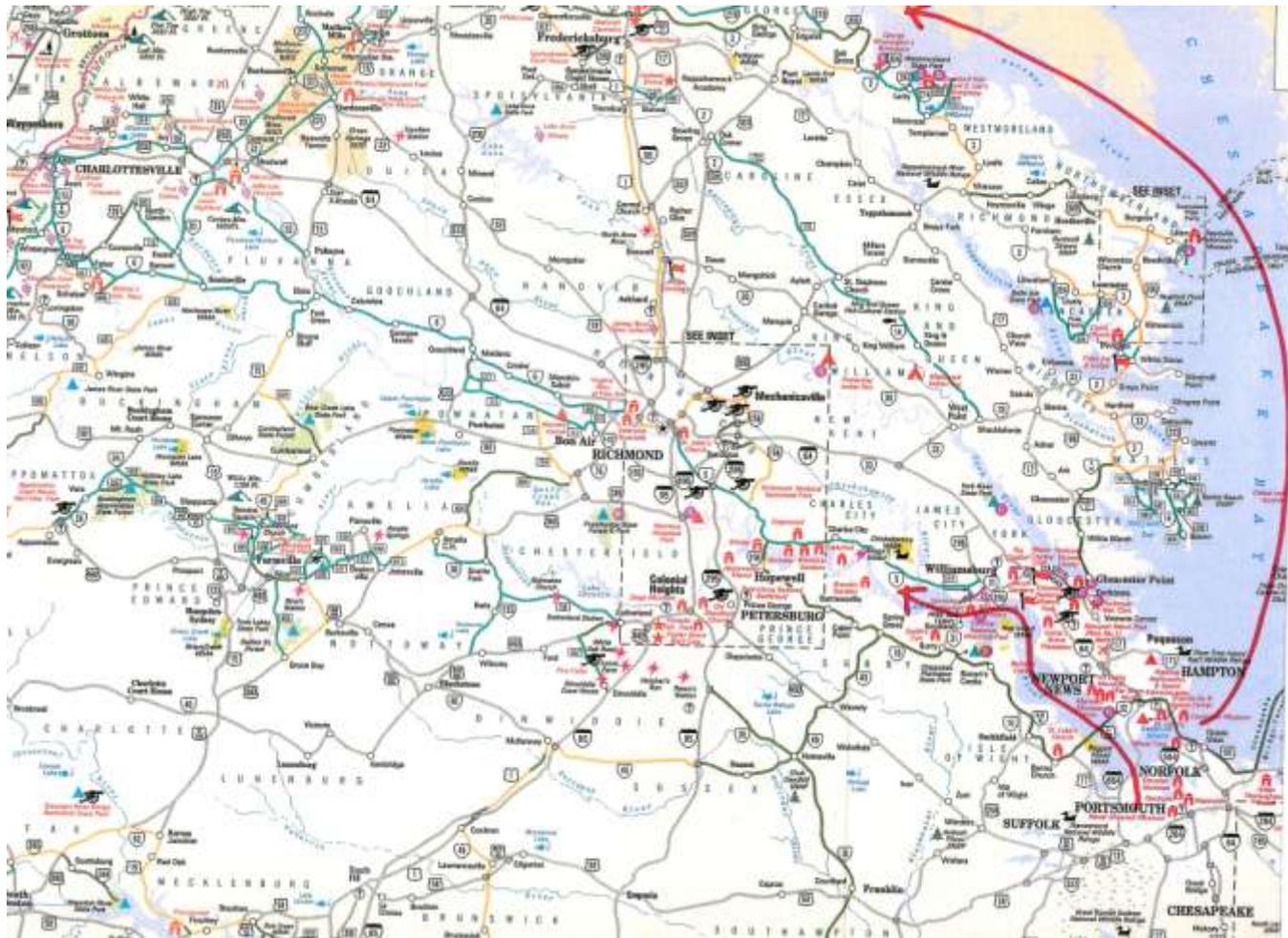


**15 March – Lafayette joins with Steuben, with a small militia force, in Williamsburg.  
16-20 March – Additional British troops arrive under Gen. Phillips. The French navy is repulsed at the “First battle of the Virginia Capes”.**



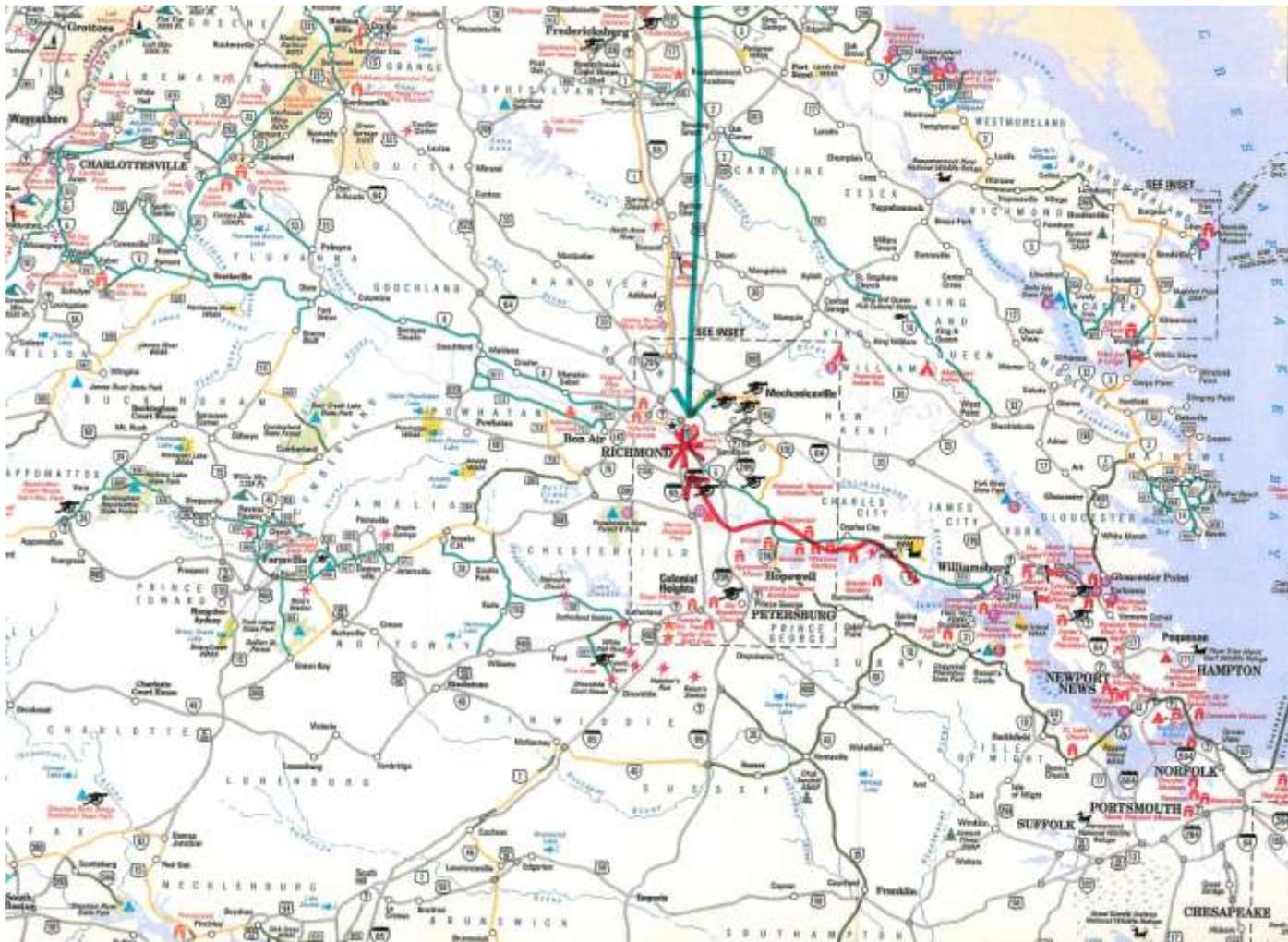
**25 March – Disappointed, Lafayette returns to Annapolis. He then leads his forces back north.**

**26 March – Fresh British troops arrive, bringing total to over 3,000**



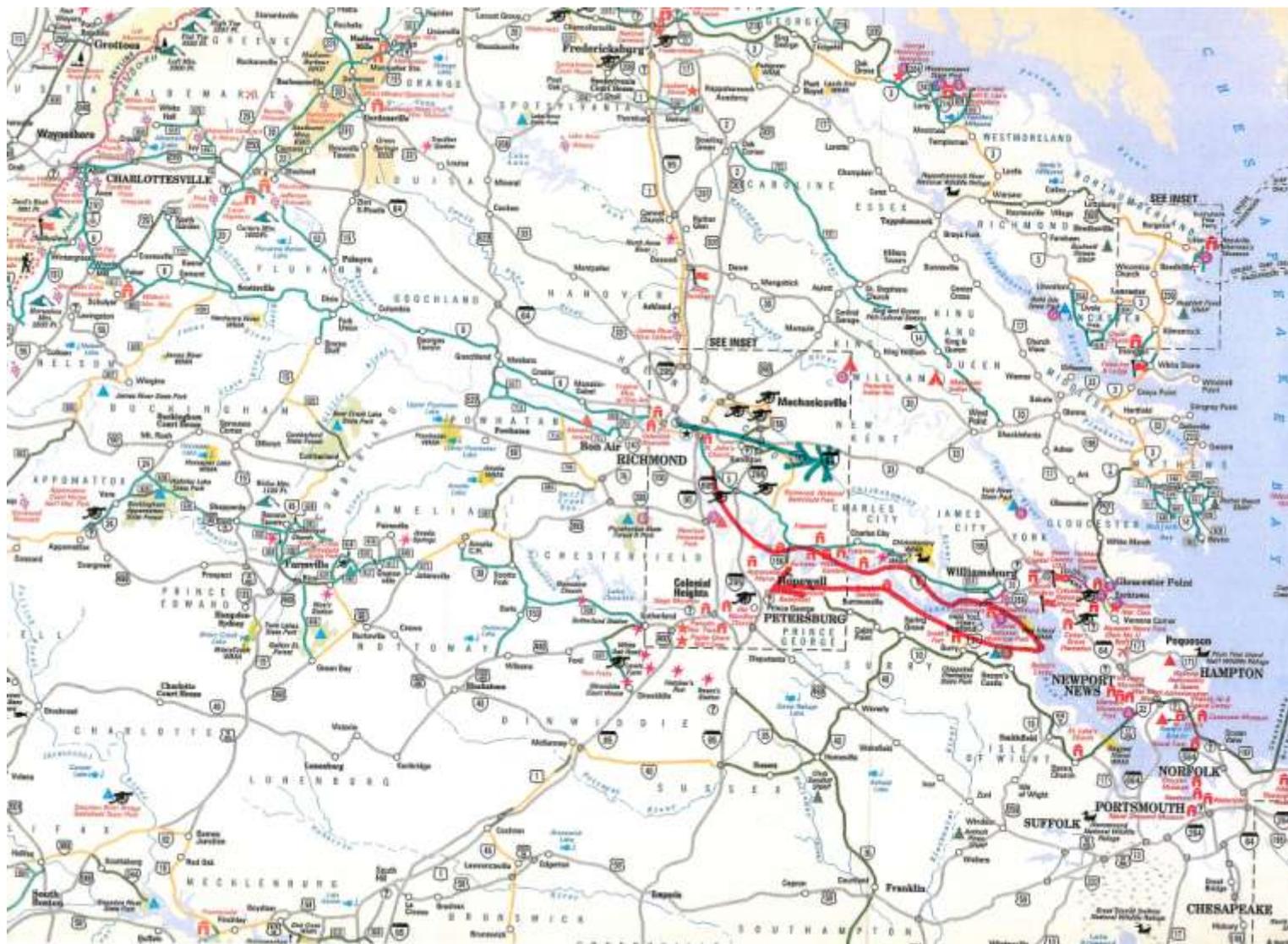
**8 April – Lafayette arrives at Elkton, Maryland and receives orders from Washington to return to Virginia. On 12 April he re-crosses the Susquehanna River. His troops mutiny.**

**18 April – British troops raid up the James River, wrecking havoc. A force goes up the Potomac and occupies Alexandria, which surrenders. Mt. Vernon saved by a servant.**



**18 April – Phillips leads his troops up the James River. Fights the Battle of Petersburg on 25 April.**

**19-29 April – Lafayette leaves Baltimore and after a forced march arrives in Richmond with 1,200 troops. On 30 April Lafayette and von Steuben have a ‘grand review’ of their forces.**



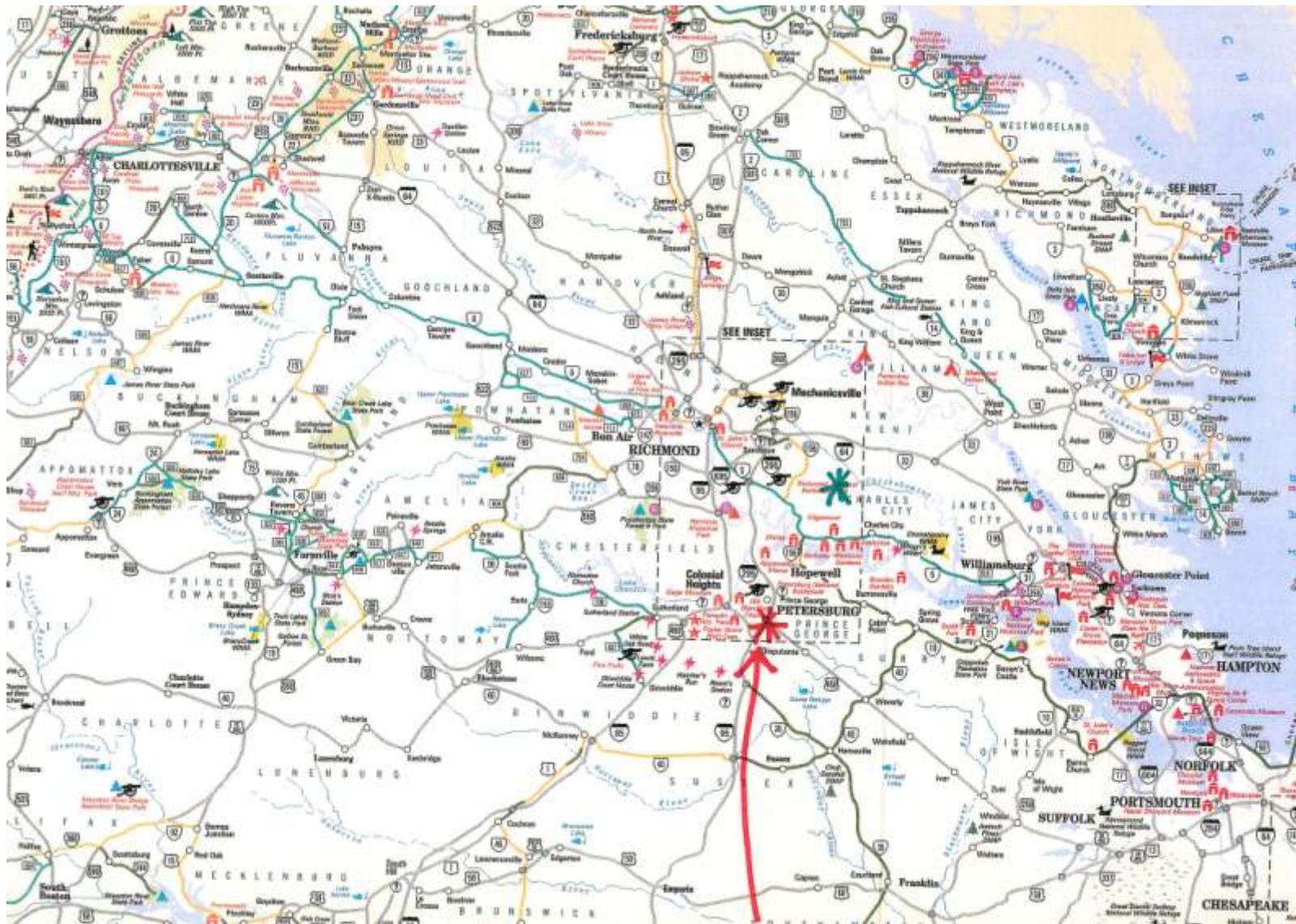
**7 May – Phillips is returning to Portsmouth when he gets orders to meet Cornwallis at Petersburg. On 13 May Gen. Phillips dies of fever.**



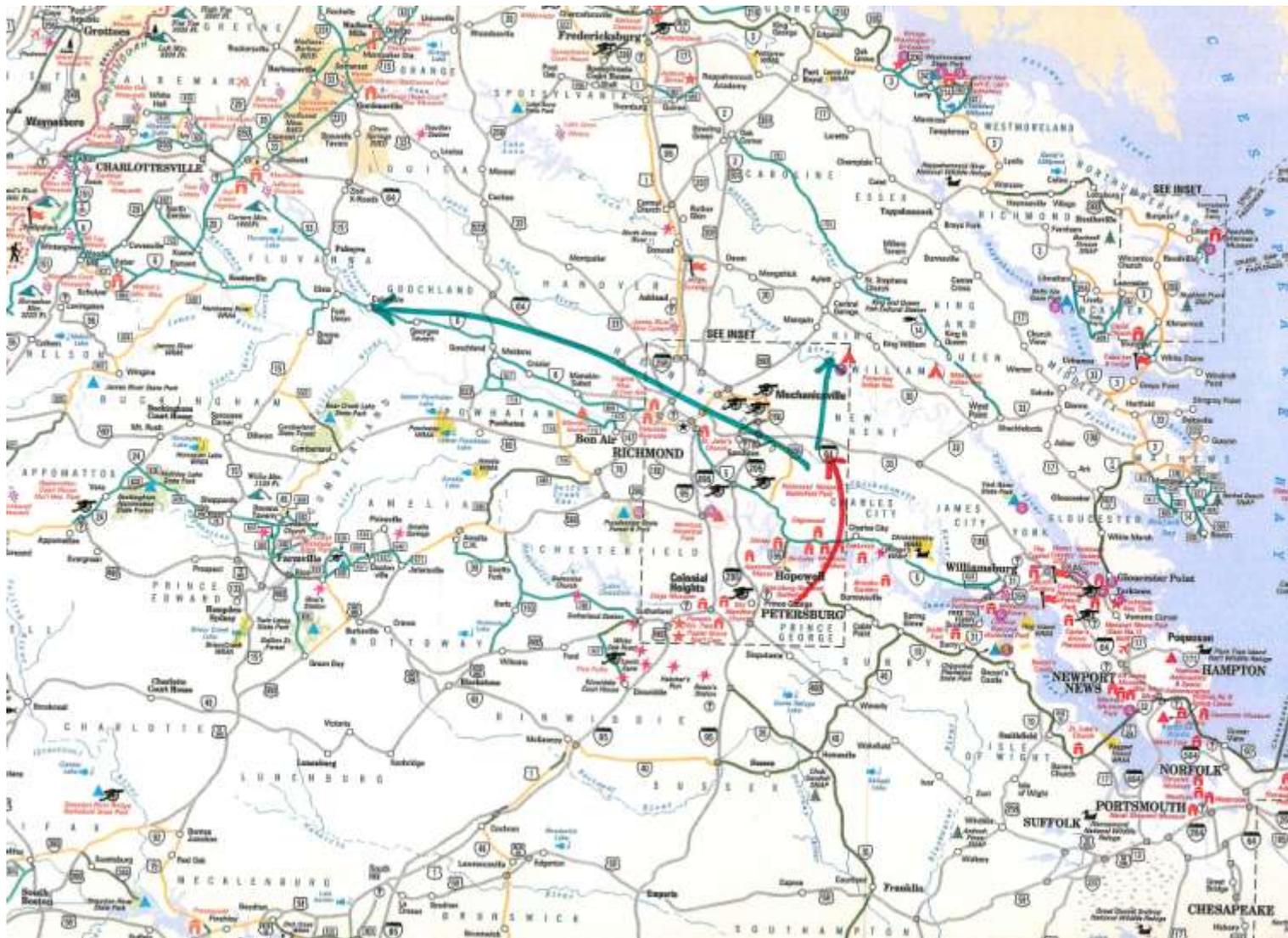
After the “Crossing of the Dan” Cornwallis and the British Army move north into Virginia



**May - The Convention Army of over 3,000 British prisoners from the Battle of Saratoga is moved from Charlottesville to Pennsylvania to avoid being rescued by Cornwallis. The Virginia site is remembered today by the name "Barracks' Road".**

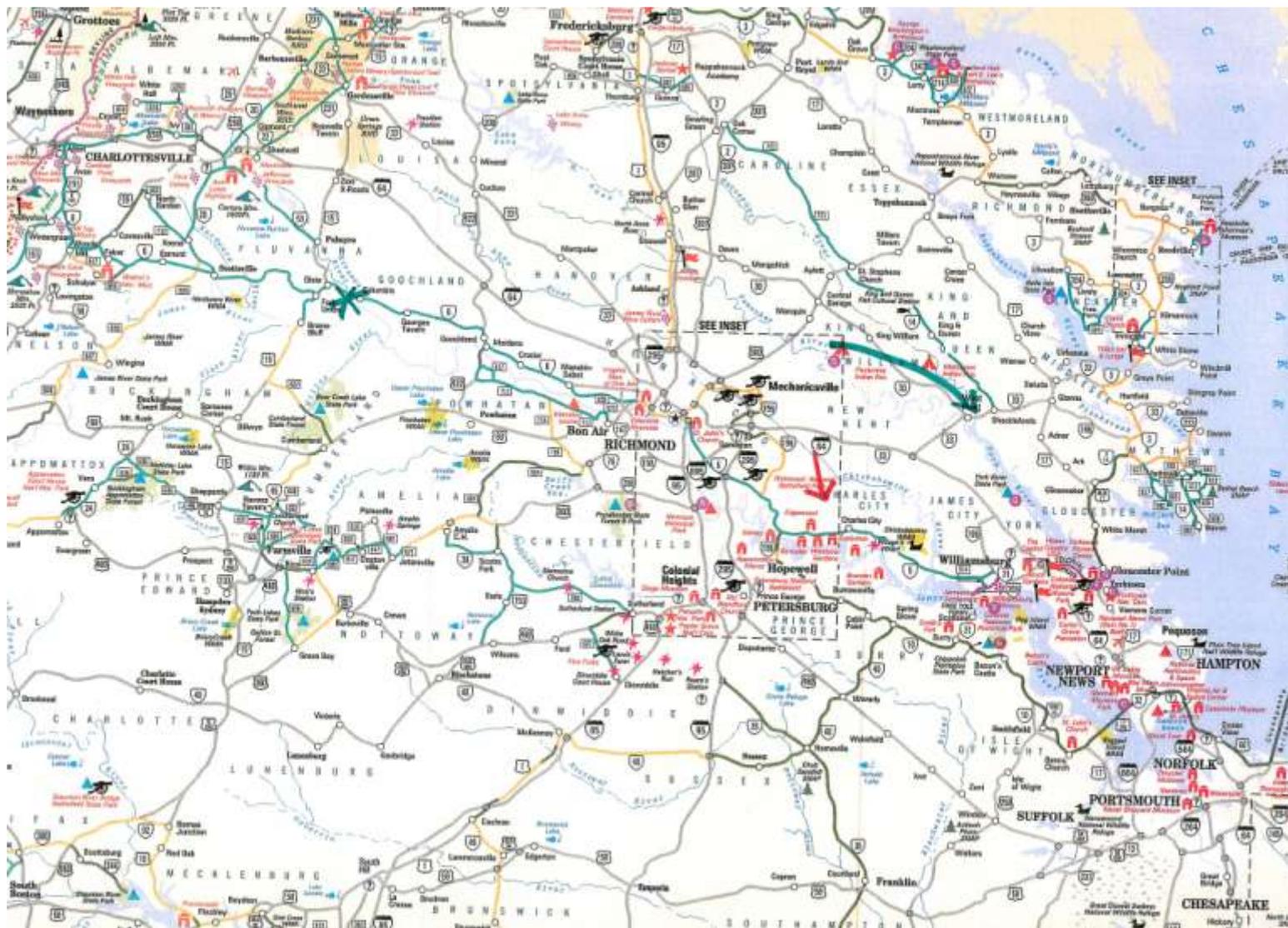


**20 May – Cornwallis joins British forces at Petersburg, bringing British strength to 7,200. Lafayette reorganizes his troops, that now total 1,000 to 3,000 Continentals and militia.**

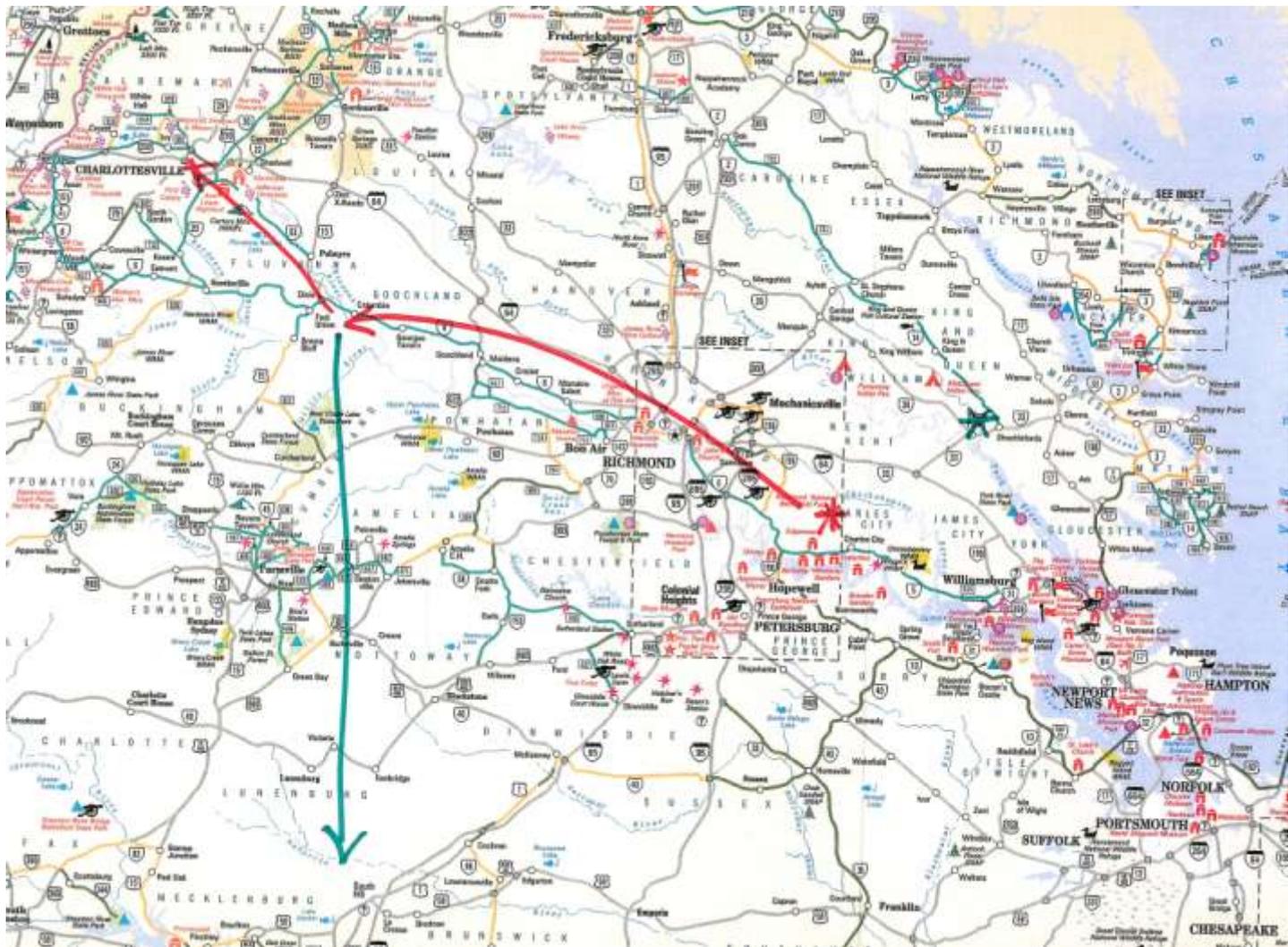


**28 May – Steuben is sent to Point of Rock to defend military supplies.**

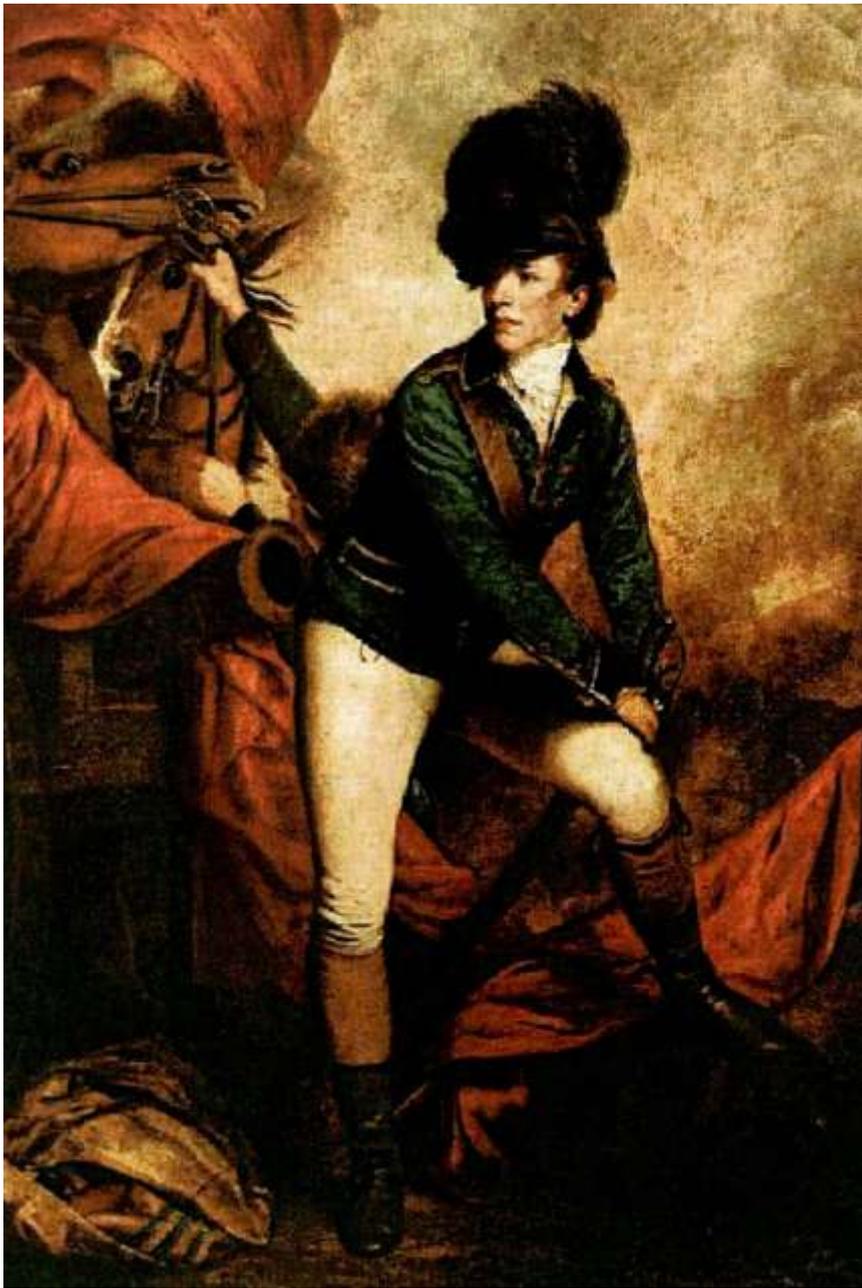
**Lafayette falls back as Cornwallis moves across the James River to Hanover CH.**



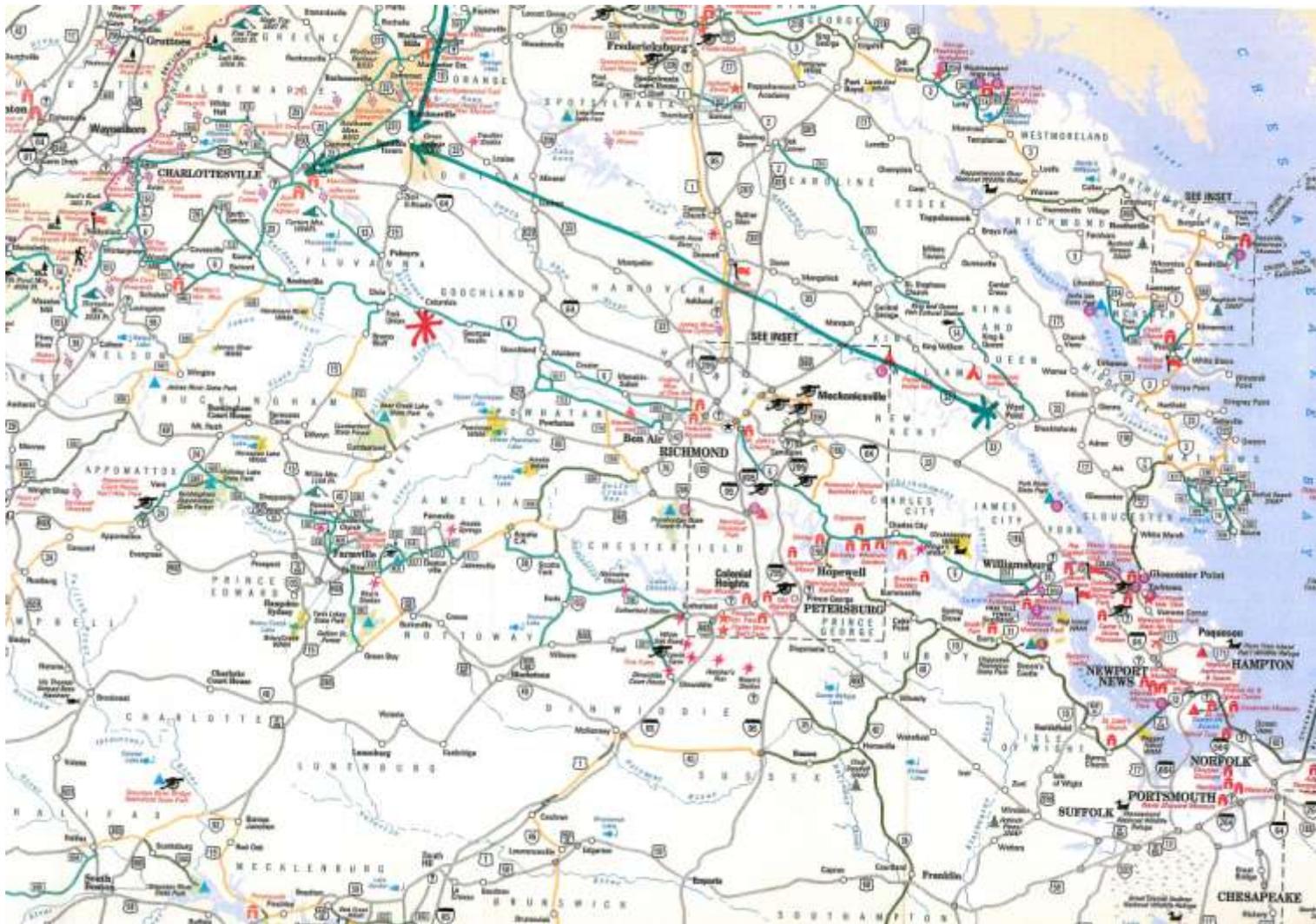
1 June –Cornwallis decides to stop chasing Lafayette and British forces turn south. Lafayette shadows his move.



**3-4 June – Tarleton with his dragoons raid Charlottesville attempting to capture the Virginia legislature. Jack Jowett rides through the night and warns Jefferson at Monticello.**  
**5-6 June – Cornwallis moves to Point of Rocks. Stuben retreats towards North Carolina.**

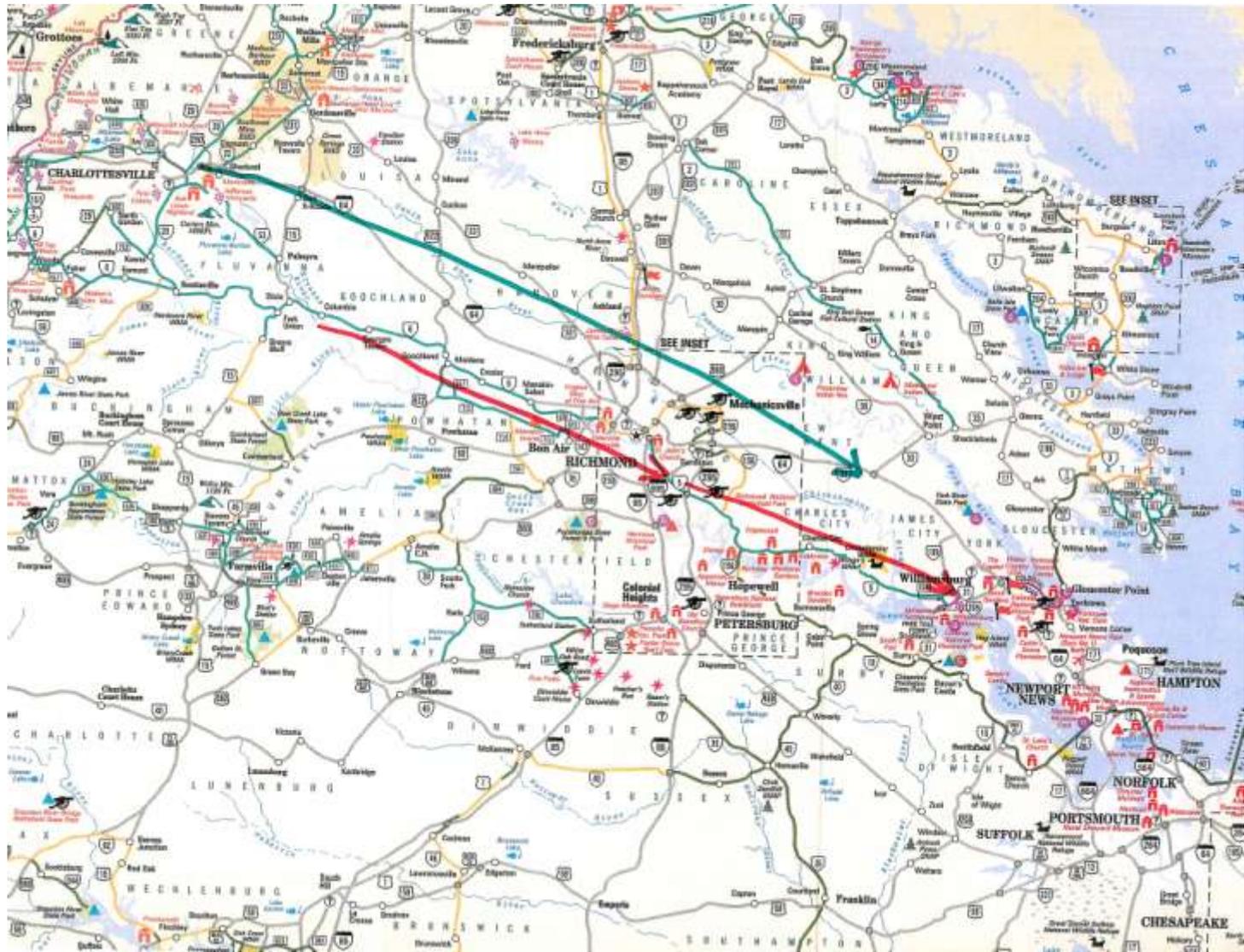


**Gen. Sir Banastre Tarleton**  
"Tarleton's Quarter"



**10 June - Wayne crosses the Rapidan at Raccoon Ford and joins Lafayette. The Continental and British strengths are now nearly equal.**

**12 June – Lafayette’s forces improve an old back road – “the Marquis Road” - and they get around the British.**



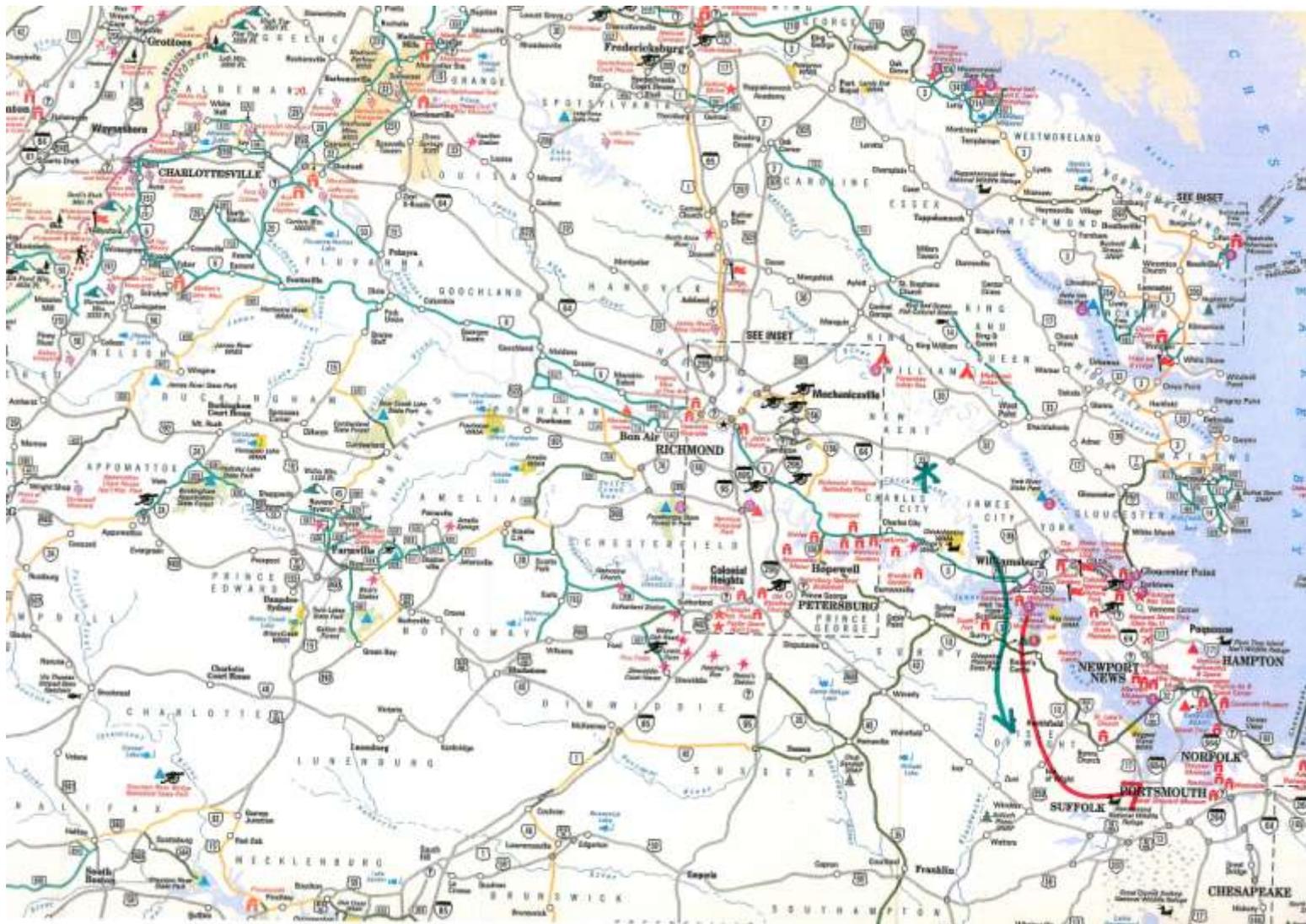
**12 – 25 June – Cornwallis decides not to attack the strengthened American forces and returns to Richmond and then Williamsburg. Lafayette and his troops follow.**



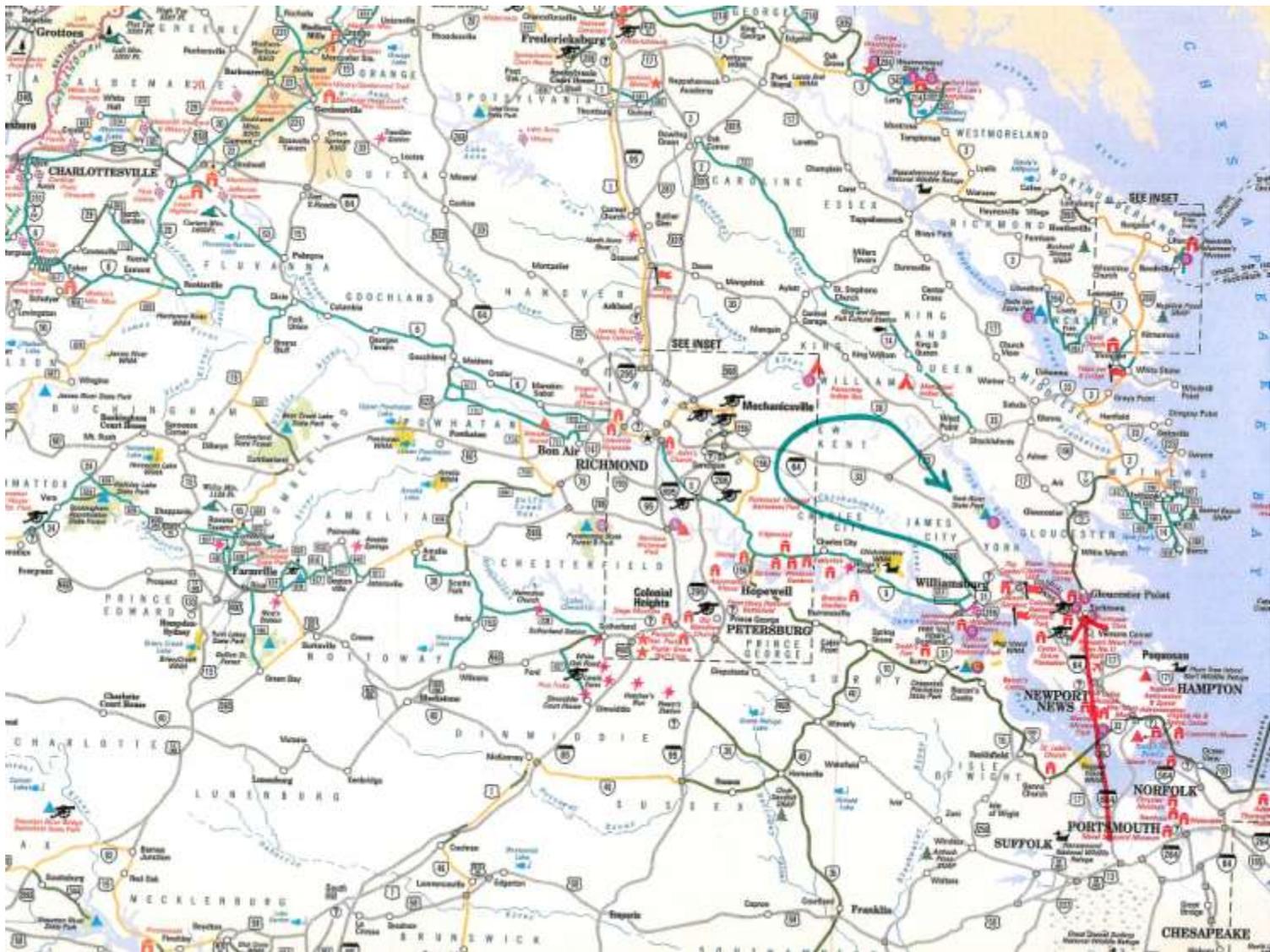
**9-24 July – Tarleton and his British dragons ride over 400 miles.  
“Francisco’s Fight”**



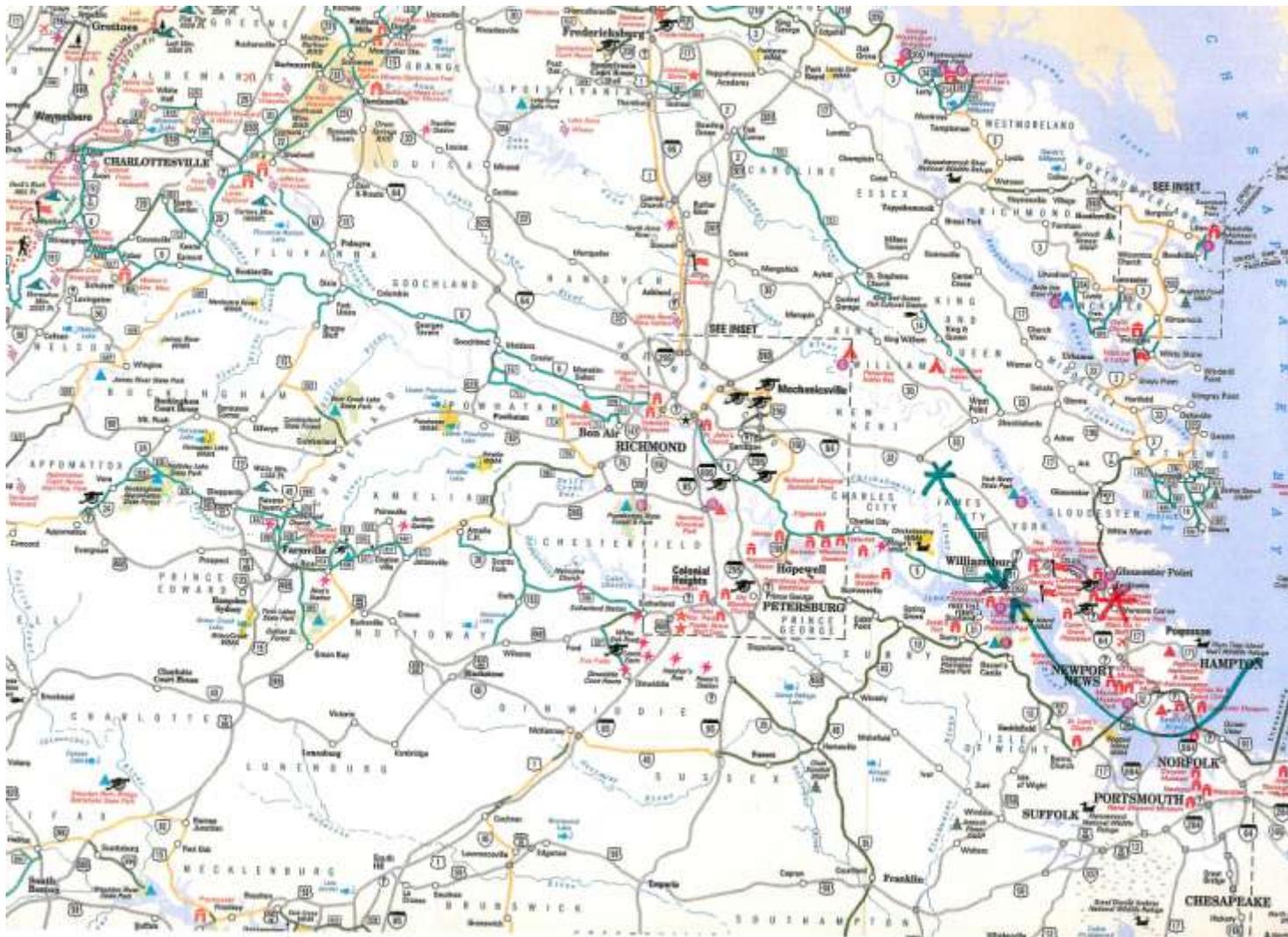
**“Francisco’s Fight” – At Ward’s Tavern, wounded militiaman Peter Francisco fights off 11 British Dragoons. When they ask for his silver buckles Francisco steals one of their sabers. He kills 3 and wounds 6. He then scares off Tarleton by pretending a large American force is nearby. Francisco takes the horses that were left behind and sells them in Richmond. He keeps the best horse, which he names “Tarleton”.**



- 5 July – Cornwallis moves some troops across the James but sets a trap for the following American forces at The Battle of Green Springs. The ruse almost works.**
- 8-17 July – The British forces are fully across the James and move to Portsmouth.**

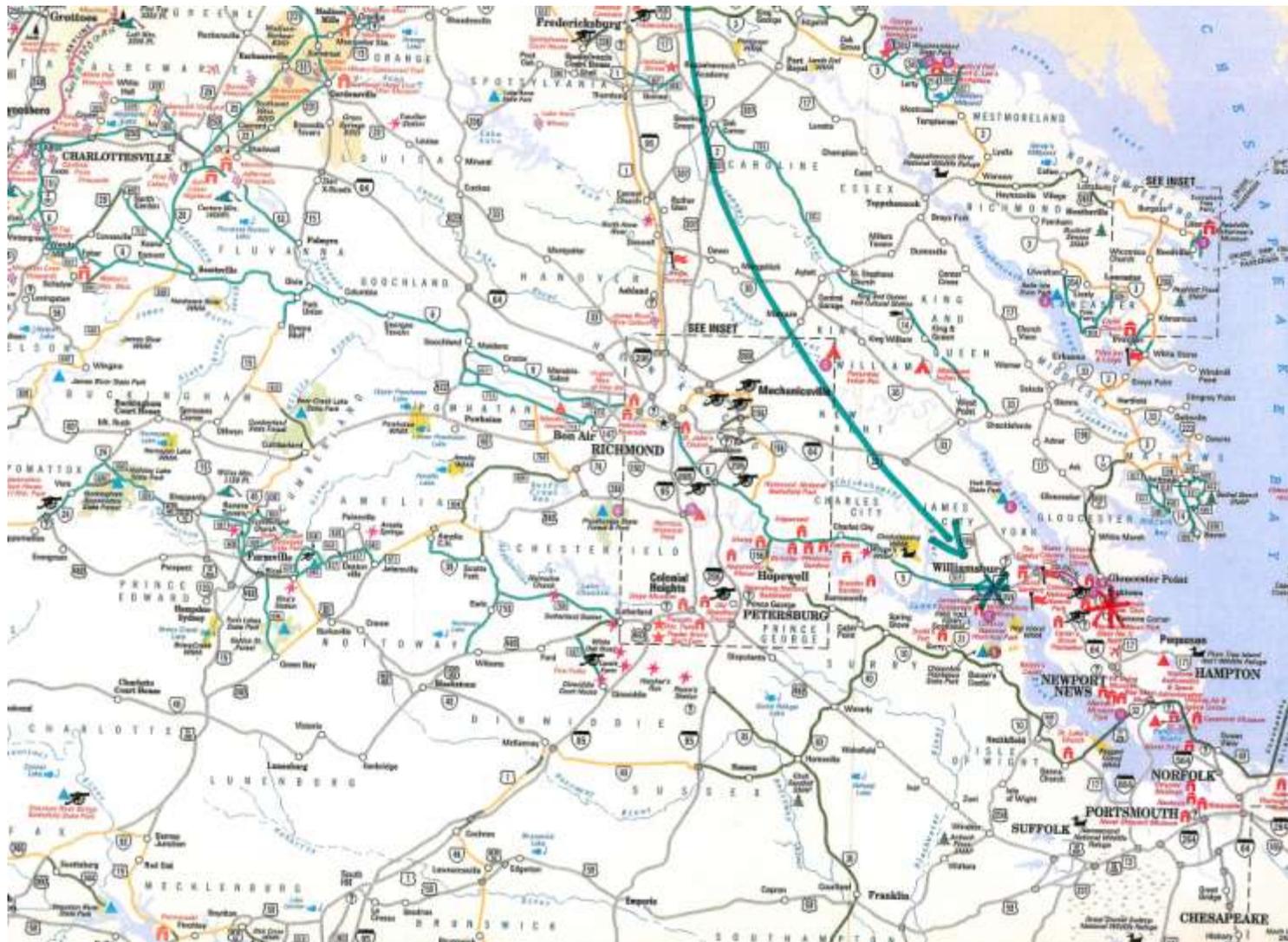


**20 July – Gen. Clinton orders Cornwallis to Yorktown, which he occupies on 1 August. Lafayette is confused by the British movements and stays nearby.**  
**14 Aug – “Decision Day”, Gen. Washington decides to move his army to Virginia.**



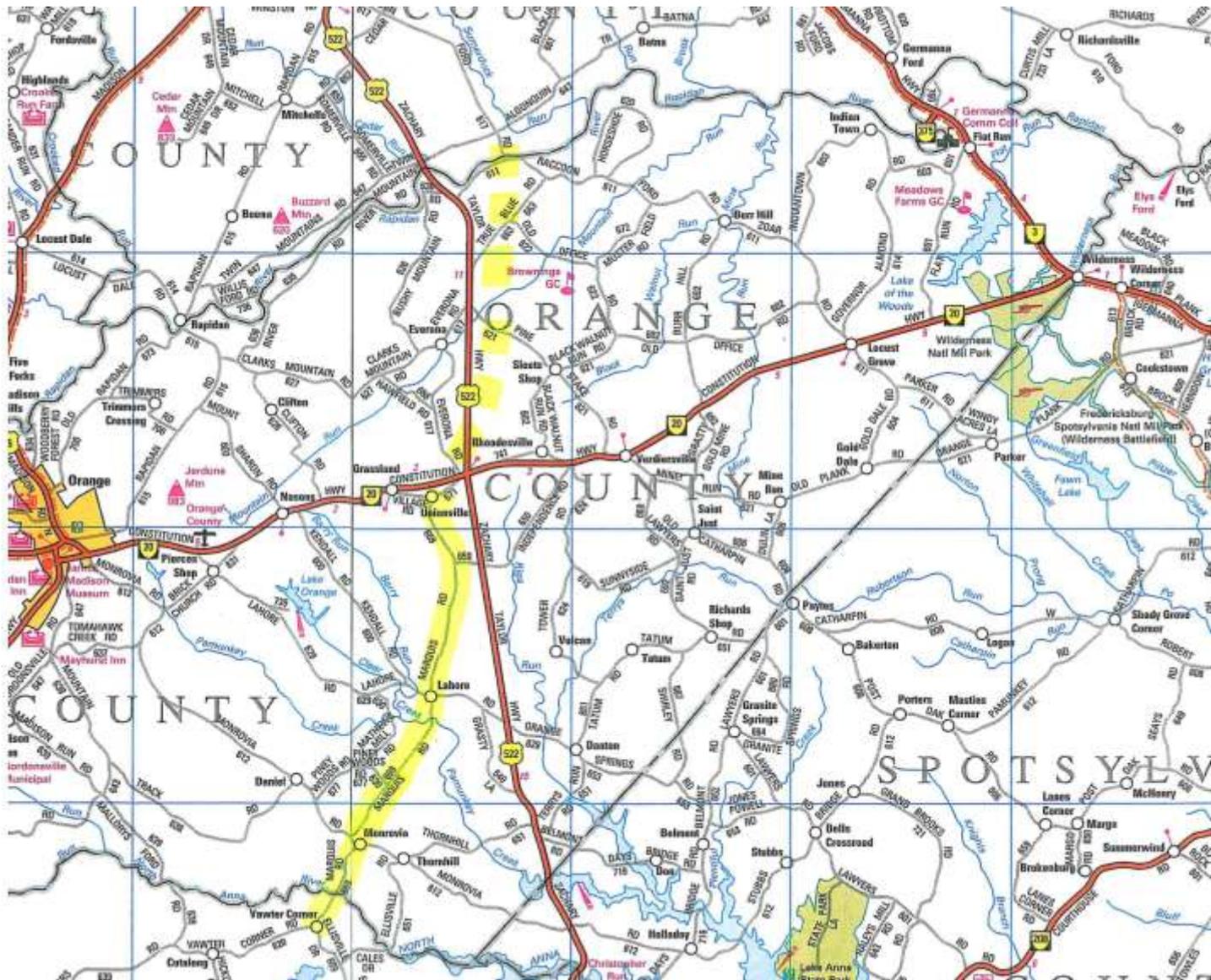
**2-3 Sept – 3,100 French forces, which arrived on 30 Aug, meet Lafayette at Jamestown.**

**Allied armies move south and march through Philadelphia.**



**14 Sept – Gen. Washington arrives at Williamsburg with Rochambeau.**

**26 Sept – The Allied army completes its arrival at Williamsburg. Lafayette's forces join them. The stage is set for the last act.**



The "Marquis Road" today

# The W3R Home Page

Remember the Rigors and Joys of Last Year!



America's March to Yorktown (AMtY) marchers at Yorktown in 2006, by Kay Nelson  
See [AMtY site](#) and [W3R-US reports and photos of the march](#)

[Four photos of sending and returning the baton](#)

[Photo of the June 4 wreath-laying at Rochambeau's grave](#)

[Two photos of the Aug 19 Dobbs Ferry walk](#)

[Photo of re-enactors in Boston May 19](#)

## 2007 Sept 06: W3R-US Celebrates the Birth of Lafayette

It will take many candles to decorate the cake for the 250th birthday of the Marquis de Lafayette, for whom Lafayette College (in Easton PA) is named. Lafayette was a born into a titled family, and he was the equivalent of a West Point-educated officer in the French army. He was so deeply dedicated to freedom and liberty that he chartered a ship at his own expense to sail to the U.S. and offer to serve in the Continental Army. Lafayette's understood true liberty to be "the fruition of the enactment of the rights of man", and his life was devoted to global citizenship and service.

Throughout the 2007-08 academic year Lafayette College will celebrate Lafayette's birth with special

**The Revolutionary War in Central Virginia celebrated today**



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***Welcome to the City of Petersburg Revolutionary War Site.***

Long prior to its gaining prominence as a major Civil War siege battleground, our City was a major link in the communications and logistics between the northern and southern theaters of the American Revolutionary War. So much so was Petersburg's importance in that war, that the British army of King George III launched a significant invasion into Virginia in 1781 with Petersburg as its principle target. Herein you will find information on the Battle of Petersburg, significant historical sites related to the revolution, Petersburg's Living History Program (annual reenactment in April of each year), and Major General William Phillips (the eminent British commander who died and is buried in Petersburg).

The historical information on this site is written by Robert P. Davis, 1SG, USA (Ret). Mr. Davis is a Revolutionary War historian, member of the Company of Military Historians, and the author of "Where a Man Can Go. Major General William Phillips, British Royal Artillery. 1731-1781" Published by the Greenwood Press, Westport CT, 1999. Copies of the book are available at the Petersburg's Tourism Gift Shops.

**The Revolutionary War in Central Virginia celebrated today**

## Suggested Reading:

*The Revolution in Virginia 1775-1783*

John E. Shelby, 1988

*Angel in the Whirlwind*

Benson Bobbrick, 1997

*The American Revolution in the Southern Colonies*

David Lee Rissell, 2000