

Horology 1776: Part 2

By Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

“Horology 1776” is the title of the 2020 NAWCC Ward Francillon Time Symposium, which will be held October 1–3 in Philadelphia, PA. In the November/December 2019 *Watch & Clock Bulletin*, I began a series of articles on the symposium theme. I continue with the intriguing story of the heavy gold pocket watch presented to the Marquis de Lafayette by General George Washington after their October 1781 victory over Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown. This defeat and surrender led to the end of the long war and our nation’s independence from British rule.

In December of that year, Lafayette sailed back to France with the watch and did not return to America until he was invited by President James Monroe to visit in 1824. He extended his stay to more than a year and visited all 24 states then in the Union. In 1825, while in Nashville, TN,

the treasured watch was stolen and disappeared despite the offer of large rewards for its safe return.

Decades later in 1871, John R. Ward of Austin, TX, stumbled across the watch at a pawnbroker’s auction sale in Louisville and purchased it for \$75, but he did not announce the find. Within a few years however, the story reached the U.S. Congress that, in 1874, authorized \$300 to purchase the watch and return it to Lafayette’s descendants. At a ceremony at the American embassy in Paris that year, the watch was handed to Lafayette’s grandson. I own an original of the February 6, 1875, issue of *Harper’s Weekly* with an article about the famous watch and a large illustration of the formal presentation ceremony.

The inner rear cover, or cuvette, of the open-face watch was engraved, “G. Washington to Gilbert Mottiers De Lafayette. Lord Cornwallis Capitulation Yorktown. Dec.r 17th 1781”. The outer back cover had a complex scene, in deep bas relief, representing Mars and the Goddess of Peace. The verge-fusee movement was signed “E. Halifax, 1769”. The current location of the watch is unknown.

This is just another of many compelling stories of horology in the American Revolution. Many more are coming in these pages and at the symposium. Please join us in historic Philadelphia for this groundbreaking conference. Details, including a list of prominent international speakers, can be found at www.horology1776.com.

About the Author

Bob Frishman chairs the NAWCC Ward Francillon Time Symposium Committee. “Horology 1776” will be the fourth symposium he has created and organized. See more about him at www.bell-time.com.



Illustration from *Harper's Weekly Supplement*, February 6, 1875. COURTESY OF BOB FRISHMAN.



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