

The Articles of Capitulation at Yorktown



The **Articles of Capitulation at Yorktown**, signed on October 19, 1781, marked the dramatic end of the campaign that effectively decided the American Revolution. After weeks of siege by the combined American and French forces, more than 7,000 British and Hessian troops under Charles Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown to the allied armies commanded by George Washington and Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau. At sea, the trapped British position had already been sealed by the French fleet under François Joseph Paul de Grasse, whose victory in the Battle of the Chesapeake prevented relief by the British navy. The surrender did not immediately end the war, but it effectively ended major combat and forced Britain toward negotiations.

The surrender terms were spelled out in a formal document known as the Articles of Capitulation. Their provisions governed how the defeated British army would lay down its arms and how its officers and soldiers would be treated in captivity. In total, the agreement compelled thousands of British and German troops to surrender as prisoners of war. Land forces were taken into custody by the American Continental Army, while naval personnel and vessels fell under the authority of the French fleet.

One of the most memorable elements of the surrender was the ceremony itself. On the day of capitulation, British and Hessian troops marched out of their defensive lines with their "colors cased," meaning their regimental flags were furled in a sign of defeat. Their drums beat a British or German march as they passed between lines of victorious allied soldiers. The terms specifically prohibited the playing of American or French tunes, preserving a measure of dignity for the defeated army even in surrender.

The treatment of officers reflected the military customs of the eighteenth century. British officers were allowed to retain their sidearms and personal baggage and were permitted to remain near their regiments. Rather than being confined like common soldiers, they were released on parole—a promise not to take up arms again until formally exchanged. Ordinary soldiers, however, were placed in confinement and distributed among camps in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

The victors also demanded the transfer of all military equipment and supplies. Artillery pieces, ammunition, military chests, uniforms, and public stores were turned over to the allied forces. These materials were valuable spoils of war and symbolized the complete collapse of the British position at Yorktown.

Provisions were also included for the wounded and sick. Hospitals were to be maintained and staffed by British surgeons to care for injured soldiers, ensuring that medical treatment continued despite the surrender.

One clause created a narrow loophole regarding Loyalists. The British were permitted to send the sloop-of-war *Bonetta* to New York carrying dispatches that would not be inspected. This provision quietly allowed some Loyalists and other individuals to escape the besieged town before the ship departed.

Interestingly, the Yorktown terms closely mirrored those the British had imposed on American forces at the Siege of Charleston in 1780. By adopting similarly strict conditions, the allied commanders underscored that Yorktown represented not just a victory, but a decisive and symbolic turning point in the war for American independence.