

Washington's Second in Command



Although Artemas Ward was technically the first senior officer appointed to the Continental Army, it was Charles Lee who emerged as George Washington's most prominent subordinate during the critical early years of 1775-1776. A former British Army officer, Lee brought professional military experience—and considerable ambition—to the American cause.

A Soldier of Fortune Turned American General

Born in 1732 in Cheshire, England, Lee was the son of British General John Lee and Isabella Buxbury. Educated in Switzerland, he became fluent in several languages before beginning his military career in 1744. Over the years, he served not only in the British Army but also alongside European forces in Russia, Poland, and Portugal, earning a reputation as a seasoned—if unconventional—soldier.

After retiring from British service, Lee settled in America and joined the Continental Army in 1775. Commissioned as second major general, he ranked just

behind George Washington in seniority. Widely respected in the colonies for his experience, Lee advised American commanders during the siege of Boston and helped develop defenses in Newport, Rhode Island, and New York. Reassigned to the Southern Department, he played a significant role in organizing the successful defense of Charleston, South Carolina, during the failed British assault in 1776.

Capture, Controversy, and Return

Lee's promising rise was interrupted later in 1776 when he was captured by British forces following the fall of New York City. During his captivity, he reportedly drafted notes to British General Sir William Howe outlining strategies to defeat the Americans—an act that later fueled suspicions about his loyalty. At the time, however, these writings were unknown to American leaders.

Exchanged in a prisoner swap in 1778, Lee returned to active duty and resumed his rank. He soon became a vocal critic of reforms introduced by Baron von Steuben, further straining relationships within the army's leadership.

The Breaking Point: The Battle of Monmouth

Tensions between Lee and Washington reached their climax at the Battle of Monmouth on June 28, 1778. Commanding the American advance guard, Lee launched a disorganized attack that ended in a chaotic retreat. When confronted by Washington on the field, Lee defended his actions, prompting a sharp and public disagreement between the two generals.

Washington soon brought formal charges against him. Lee was accused of insubordination, disobedience of orders, and misconduct before the enemy. A court-martial found him guilty, and he was suspended from command for one year. Unrepentant, Lee openly criticized the Continental Congress for upholding the sentence. His continued defiance ultimately led to his permanent dismissal from the army in January 1780.

A Complicated Legacy

Charles Lee died in Philadelphia in 1782, a talented but controversial figure whose ambition and temperament often clashed with the leadership he once aspired to replace. Though once regarded as Washington's most capable subordinate, his career serves as a reminder that military experience alone does not guarantee lasting command—or loyalty—in times of revolution.