James Lafayette Spy Activity

Background Information: James Lafayette, sometimes referred to as James Armistead Lafayette, was influential in the American victory at Yorktown. The Marquis de Lafayette recruited James to spy on General Charles Cornwallis and Benedict Arnold. After the American Revolution, James petitioned the Virginia General Assembly multiple times for his freedom until he was at last granted it in 1786.

Main Ideas:

- James posed as a runaway enslaved person who offered to help the British Army in Virginia.
- While he was with the British Army James overheard British plans, which he then told to to the Marquis de Lafayette.
- Due to his status as an enslaved man, many people underestimated James, which gave him the opportunity to learn important information.

Skills:

- Critical thinking
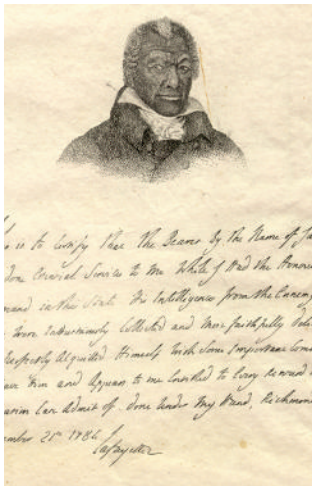- Primary source analysis
- Fine motor skills

Supplies:

- Cipher wheel template
- Scissors
- A brad
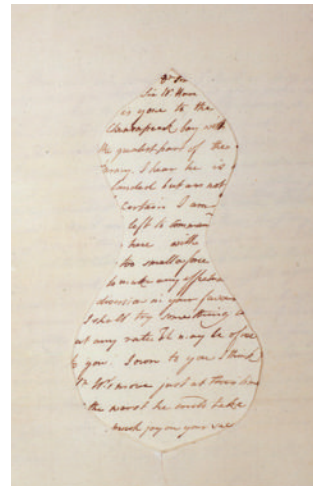

James Lafayette c. 1824 courtesy of the Valentine

Click here to learn more about spying in the American Revolution.

See Lafayette's Petition

Explore the Culper Spy Code

Read a Masked Letter

Questions to Consider:

1. Why could enslaved individuals make good spies?
2. Why would an enslaved individual agree to be a spy?

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S
MOUNT ★ VERNON
THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION

Spies at Yorktown

James Lafayette, sometimes referred to as James Armistead Lafayette, was influential in the American victory at Yorktown. The Marquis de Lafayette recruited James to spy on General Charles Cornwallis and the now British officer, Benedict Arnold. James posed as a runaway enslaved person who offered to help the British Army in Virginia. While he was with the British Army, James overheard British plans, which he then told to the Marquis de Lafayette. This information helped the American and French forces trap the British at Yorktown.

Although James did not use a cipher, ciphers were a common way spies concealed information in the American Revolution. Make your own cipher wheel below to decode the messages about Cornwallis' troops!

James Lafayette c. 1824 courtesy of The Valentine.
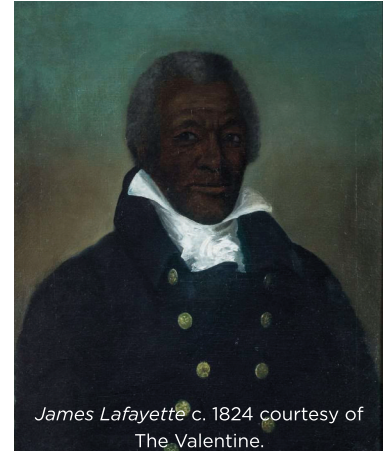
HOW TO USE YOUR CIPHER WHEEL

First, cut out the cipher wheels below and place the yellow one on top of the blue one. Next, secure with a brad. Now you're ready to decode!
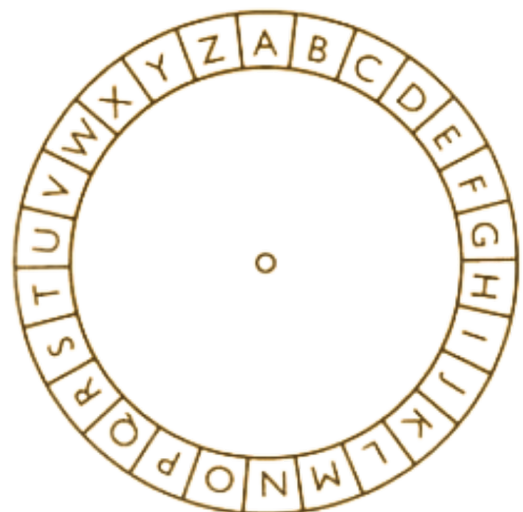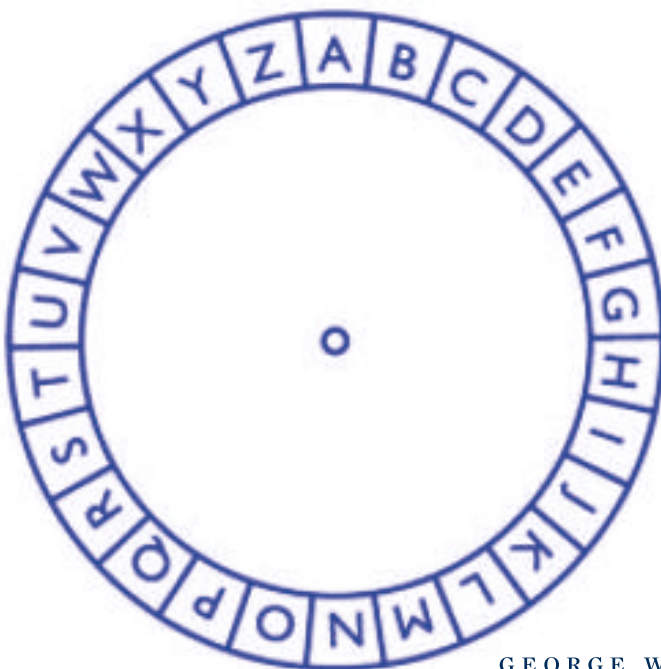
A coded message from another agent will always let you know how to start your cipher. For example, it might say, "*Start your cipher with G.*" You would spin your cipher to line up the yellow **G** with the blue **A**.

Once you line up the appropriate letter with the blue A, your cipher remains in that position until you decipher the entire code. The coded message corresponds to the yellow letters on your cipher. The blue letters will provide you with the decoded message.

For example: *Start your cipher with the letter G.*

George Washington lived at **SUATZ BKXTUT**

Decoded message: George Washington lived at **MOUNT VERNON**

The Surrender of the British forces at Yorktown by John Trumbull courtesy of the US Capitol

Now that you've made your cipher, it's time to start decoding!

1. *Start with the letter K:* MYBXGKVVSC is on his way to IYBUDYGX

   _____ is on his way to _____

2. *Start with the letter Z:* ADMDCHBS ZQMNKC has left UHQFHMHZ

   _____ has left _____

3. *Start with the letter W*: SWODEJCPKJ has met with NKYDWIXAWQ

   _____ has met with _____

4. *Start with the letter M:* MPYUDMX PQ SDMEEQ is in the OTQEMBQMWQ NMK

   _____ is in the _____

5. *Start with the letter Q*: MQIXYDWJED is coming to LYHWYDYQ

   _____ is coming to _____

6. *Start with the letter G:* We will trap the HXOZOYN at EUXQZUCT

   We will trap the _____ at _____