



# Jefferson, Trumbull, and painting 'Yorktown'

Thomas Jefferson recognized the talents of American artist John Trumbull and was intrigued by Trumbull's plan to create a series of paintings depicting important moments in the American struggle for independence.

Jefferson was serving as U.S. minister to France when the two men met in London in the spring of 1786, and he suggested that the young artist visit Paris. Trumbull recalled in his autobiography that Jefferson "kindly invited me to come to Paris, to see and study the fine works there, and to make his house my home, during my stay."

Trumbull arrived in Paris that summer and brought with him studies for the first two paintings planned for his series, depictions of two 1775 events, the battle of Bunker Hill and the American attack on Quebec. Trumbull was pleased that they received Jefferson's "warm approbation." However, during this visit Jefferson likely suggested themes other than those built around battles. Trumbull noted that "during my visit, I began the composition of the Declaration of Independence, with the assistance of his information and advice." It is very possible that another scene was discussed at the same time, for soon after he returned to London from Paris, Trumbull began studies for what would become *The Surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown*.

Neither Jefferson nor Trumbull had been at Yorktown at the time of Cornwallis' surrender to George Washington's American forces on Oct. 19, 1781. Trumbull was en route

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## Yorktown Painting

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back to the United States from England, where his art studies had been interrupted by imprisonment for his anti-British statements. Jefferson was with his family at Monticello, where they had returned after fleeing from British troops in the summer during raids

on the Charlottesville area. Perhaps with some personal bitterness, Jefferson hoped for a “stroke” that would force England to grant American independence, and predicted that Cornwallis would not escape Virginia. Both came to pass.

The presence of French forces at Yorktown played a vital role in the British surrender, and the French officers who were at the scene were the focus of Trumbull’s second trip to Paris, in the late fall of 1787. Before leaving London, he sent Jefferson a list of those officers whose portraits he hoped to take. His trip was a success, and of these portraits he wrote: “I regard these as the best of my small portraits; they were painted from the life, in Mr. Jefferson’s house.”

On this same trip he painted Jefferson into his study for *The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America*, and later would honor Jefferson’s daughter Martha with a miniature taken from this study portrait. For Jefferson, he promised one of his small oil studies made for *The Surrender at Yorktown* once the large painting was complete.

Trumbull was not able to present Jefferson with the promised oil study until after he had returned to America, added portraits of the American officers and sketched the Yorktown battlefield. He wrote to Jefferson in October 1791: “I had not forgotten my promise, tho’ it was made so long since. ... I wish it were now a more valuable testimony than it is of [my] Gratitude and Esteem.”

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The Architect of the Capitol

**Detail from Trumbull's  
*The Surrender of Lord  
Cornwallis at Yorktown.***



## Yorktown Painting

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Despite Trumbull's disclaimer, Jefferson must have regarded the gift as a valuable record of an important moment in American history. According to his catalog of paintings, he displayed Trumbull's study in the Parlor at Monticello.

— GAYE WILSON

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