



Cleveland State University
EngagedScholarship@CSU

World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures
Faculty Publications

Department of World Languages, Literatures,
and Cultures

2004

The Story Behind CSU'S Lafayette Collection OR: How a French Aristocrat Brought Two "Ohio Sons" Together

Tama L. Engelking

Cleveland State University, t.engelking@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clmlang_facpub

 Part of the [Diplomatic History Commons](#)

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Publisher's Statement

(c) 2004 Tama Engelking

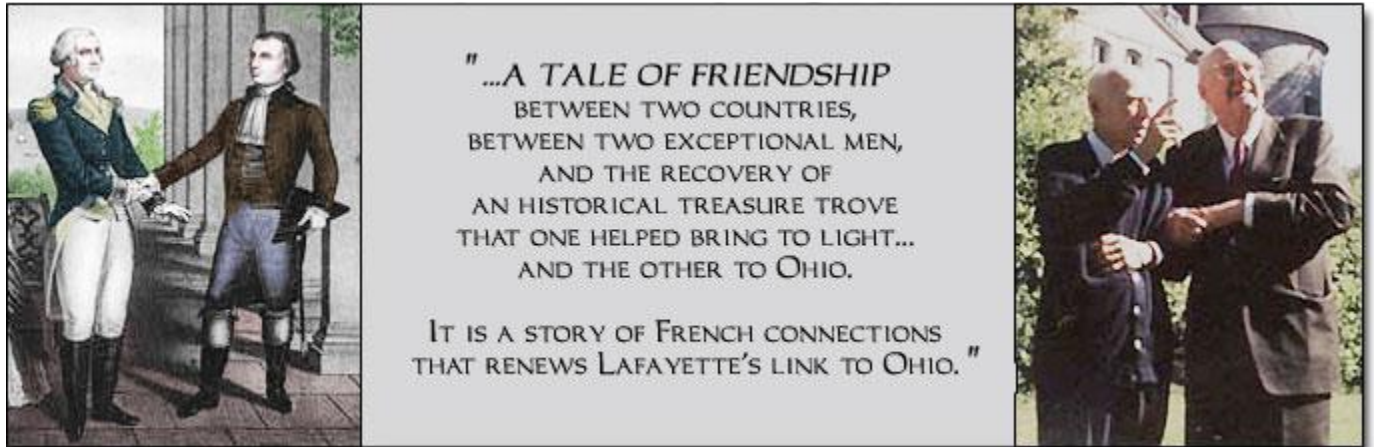
Recommended Citation

Tama L. Engelking. (2004). The Story Behind Cleveland State's Lafayette Collection, or How a French Aristocrat Brought Two Ohio Sons Together. The Marquis de Lafayette Collection.

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

The Story Behind CSU'S Lafayette Collection OR: How a French aristocrat brought two "Ohio Sons" together

By Tama Lea Engelking, Associate Professor of French
Cleveland State University



In the Special Collections Room at Cleveland State University you might see a well-dressed gray-haired man bent over a microfilm reader. His cane leans against the table as he concentrates on deciphering the elegant eighteenth-century script on the microfilm copy of a letter he's reading. The handwriting belongs to Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier, the Marquis de Lafayette, and the letter is addressed to his good friend and mentor, George Washington. This letter is one of the over 25,000 documents discovered in Lafayette's chateau Lagrange in 1956 by his last living direct descendant, comte René de Chambrun. The man reading the letter is John Horton, a native Ohioan and Cleveland State alumnus whose friendship with Chambrun led to the library's acquisition of the microfilm collection in 1997. Theirs is a tale of friendship between two countries, between two exceptional men, and the recovery of an historical treasure trove that one helped bring to light... and the other to Ohio. It is a story of French connections that renews Lafayette's link to Ohio. That is where our story begins, on a beautiful day in May, 1825.

When the Marquis de Lafayette came to Ohio in 1825, he was greeted by all the pomp and circumstance one might expect for this illustrious French patriot who had so valiantly defended the cause of liberty during the American Revolution. The Marquis, who in the spirit of equality preferred to be called General Lafayette, had been invited by President Monroe to be a "Guest of the Nation" at the request of Congress. This honor entailed a triumphant fourteen-month tour of all twenty-four American states (182 towns in all!) which Lafayette undertook in the company of his son, George Washington Lafayette.

A barge carried him and his entourage from Kentucky across the Ohio River to Cincinnati where he was met by a throng of enthusiastic citizens. Speeches were given, flowers were strewn in his path by school children, fireworks exploded (including one that spelled out Lafayette's name and changed thirteen stars representing the original states into twenty-four), gala balls were thrown in rooms overflowing with patriotic ornamentation, and an impressive array of thousands of military men, many of them fellow veterans of the War of Independence, marched in parades to honor General Lafayette. The outpouring of affection and gratitude deeply touched the 67-year old national hero. His visit created a souvenir industry of previously unheard of proportions as artists and craftsmen turned out thousands of keepsakes to Lafayette-crazed American citizens in the form of medallions, plates, bowls, fans, handkerchiefs, scarves and other mementos, not to mention the poems, songs and marches composed for the occasion. The honors continued long after his departure as more than 600 cities, towns, villages, counties, lakes, rivers, and other landmarks, including Lafayette College, were named after the much revered hero and his home, Lagrange. The river town of Marietta Ohio, where Lafayette is remembered as their first tourist, commemorated his visit there by naming their grand hotel after him in 1914.

It is easy to understand why America was so eager to express its appreciation to General Lafayette. His deep ties to the United States are a well-known and often-told story of friendship, patriotism and love of freedom. When the 19 year-old aristocrat Lafayette first came to the colonies in 1777, determined to serve in the Continental Army at his own expense, George Washington took him under his wing and came to regard him as an adopted son. The young Frenchman's generosity was such that he eventually spent more than half of his considerable personal fortune on the cause of American liberty.

Lafayette played a decisive role in the Revolutionary War. Not only did he help to secure French aid for the struggling Continental Army, but he also distinguished himself in numerous battles including Yorktown, a turning point in the war. Lafayette played an important role in the French Revolution as well, importing to France the American-style democratic values he cherished as he modeled the "Declaration of the Rights of Man" after our own Declaration of Independence, with advice and encouragement from his good friend Thomas Jefferson. As the commander of the Paris Militia during the French Revolution, Lafayette signed the order to demolish the Bastille and afterwards sent the key to this defeated symbol of tyranny to George Washington at Mount Vernon, where it is still on display. When forces turned against the moderate Lafayette during the French Revolution, resulting in his arrest and imprisonment in Austria as a traitor, he sent his young son to America to be watched over by his namesake and godfather, George Washington.

General Lafayette lies buried in Paris under American soil taken from the foot of Bunker Hill. After the American military came to the aid of the French during World War I, General Pershing paraded his army into Paris on July 4, 1917, and held a special ceremony at Lafayette's tomb where an officer pronounced the famous words "Lafayette, we are here!" His grave is watched over by an American flag that even the Nazis dared not remove when they entered Paris in World War II.

While Lafayette's bonds with America are part of the historical record, his specific connection with Ohio is still a story waiting to be told. As he stepped onto Ohio soil that May day in 1825,

he could not have anticipated that one of his direct descendants would return to Cincinnati generations later to marry the daughter of one of its most prominent citizens, and that this Ohio connection would in turn foster a friendship between two men that would result in Lafayette's return to Ohio in the form of an important archive of his personal papers. These papers were discovered by the Marquis de Lafayette's great-great-grandson in the Chateau "La Grange-Bléneau" where his illustrious ancestor had spent the last three decades of his life.

Lagrange, located in Brie about forty miles east of Paris, had originally come into Lafayette's possession through his wife. Adrienne de Noailles de Lafayette inherited the chateau after her mother, sister and grandmother were guillotined during the dark days of the French Revolution referred to as the "Terror." Adrienne herself was also imprisoned, but James Monroe subtly contrived to have her released. As the new American Ambassador, and long-time friend of Lafayette who had served with him in the Revolutionary War, he arranged to make frequent visits to Adrienne in prison along with his wife. These visits embarrassed the Committee of Public Safety so much that they were obliged to free her. Lafayette and his wife retired to Lagrange in 1799, where he became something of a gentleman farmer, reentering politics in 1815 and again in 1827. He entertained many prominent Americans at his country estate over the years. One frequent visitor was James Fennimore Cooper, author of *The Last of the Mohicans*, whose room at Lagrange was named after him since he stayed there the longest.

Lafayette lost what was left of his family's fortune during the French Revolution and was forced to live off of his Lagrange property until the U.S. Congress came to his rescue. In payment for his military service, it awarded Lafayette 11,500 acres of land along the Ohio River. The land grant was later transferred to a parcel of land in the newly acquired Louisiana territory. Thomas Jefferson hoped to entice Lafayette into becoming governor of the new territory where tensions between French and English settlers ran strong. According to Jefferson, one Lafayette was worth more than 10,000 soldiers, but Lafayette chose to remain in France where he died in 1834. America mourned his loss by draping the congressional chambers (where his portrait still hangs along with Washington's) in black and muffling the Liberty bell to toll his death. Lagrange remained in the Lafayette family, passing into the hands of René and Josée de Chambrun at the death of Chambrun's uncle in 1956. René de Chambrun, the last direct descendant of Lafayette, traces his ancestry back to General Lafayette's youngest daughter Virginie, named after George Washington's home state. He and his wife decided to undertake the enormous task of restoring the chateau, which had fallen into considerable disrepair. One day in 1956, while René and Josée de Chambrun were touring the many rooms of the vast 15th-century mansion they had just inherited, they discovered a wing on the third floor that had been closed off for many decades. What followed has been described by French historian André Maurois as "resembling a fairy tale."

They entered into the Lafayette library at the top of the northwest tower. Not a single object had been moved. The mail from the general's last days was in the drawer, unopened. Handsome books offered to him by the American states were lined up on the shelves; the gold of their bindings gleamed brightly as if new. In the drawers they found the general's seals, his dear recollections of Washington; in the attics of the Polish Corridor, thousands of letters written by him, by his relatives, by his wife, by their children and grandchildren.

Protected over the centuries by the thick walls and low humidity of the chateau, more than 25,000 documents filling sixteen rooms lay waiting to be discovered. These papers ranged from Lafayette's personal correspondence with major American military men and political figures, including the first seven Presidents, to letters from his wife and children including a moving one smuggled in to him in prison announcing that his wife and daughters were on their way to join him. Among the prizes of the collection is a hand-written draft of the "Declaration of the Rights of Man" with Lafayette's final corrections; a secret code he used to correspond with George Washington; a rare letter in the hand of Martha Washington, written after the death of her husband and accompanied by a leaf taken from Washington's grave on which his adopted daughter had inscribed a portrait of Lafayette; a first-person account of the Battle at Yorktown; copies of all the speeches he gave on his triumphant tour of the U.S.; and a multitude of household records detailing such bits of daily life at Lagrange as lists of experimental crops, bills from his tailor, boot maker, and pharmacist, and an inventory of the books in Lafayette's library.

Chambrun spent the next forty years organizing and cataloguing this remarkable archive. News of his discovery brought many historians to his door, but Chambrun denied them all access to the collection with the exception of André Maurois whom he authorized to write a biography of Adrienne de Lafayette. Chambrun himself produced a beautiful book using the documents he discovered covering the period of 1792-1797 when Lafayette languished in an Austrian prison. Finally, in 1995, he gave the Library of Congress permission to microfilm the archive, but with the stipulation that the original documents never leave Lagrange. It took two years and several microfilm teams from the Library of Congress to film the 50,000 pages. It was a tremendous undertaking made even more difficult by the fact that only one room of the chateau, the kitchen, was equipped with electricity, and there was very little heat. The original collection continued to be housed at Lagrange while a single microfilm copy was held by the Library of Congress. This situation, however, would change with the entry of John Horton into the picture.

John grew up in the Ohio port town of Vermilion where his family owned a boat building business. His grandfather (whose wife belong to the prominent Grummond family) had arrived there from Detroit aboard one of the family's towing tugs, commissioned with the task of building the Vermilion piers by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and decided to stay. You might say that sailing runs in John's family. His father was a U.S.S. captain when he retired, and John also became a sailor, first joining the U.S. Merchant Marine, then serving as a deck officer in the U.S. Army Transportation Corps during World War II, and eventually managing a fleet of Great Lakes vessels before becoming an executive for Cleveland-Cliffs, which mines and ships iron ore to the steel industry. The Steamship William G. Mather, now a museum docked at the Ninth Street Pier in Cleveland, was once the flagship of the Cleveland-Cliffs fleet. John is proud to point out that he oversaw the installation of that ship's state of the art single marine power boiler, a first for Great Lakes shipping. At age 90, John is still officially credentialed as a first class pilot. He recently renewed his navigation license designating him as a "Master," a title that allows him to sail ships of any tonnage on the oceans and Great Lakes.

John Horton's love for sailing and for the Great Lakes got him interested in exploring the history of this area which was first settled by the French. As John likes to say, "The history of the Great Lakes is a French story." John's life, too, is largely a French story that seems to take shape as we follow his many French connections from point to point. For example, the site of the renowned

French restaurant Chez François was once the boathouse where John's grandfather tied up his tug when he first came to Vermilion. John's father later bought the structure and used it for boat building, converting the upstairs into the Vermilion Boat Club. Among the boats they built there is the Thistle, a famous racing class sailboat, a model of which can still be seen at Chez François. "I decorated this place you know," John joked as he dined with friends at Chez François on the occasion of his 89th birthday. He pointed out traces of white paint on the brick walls of the restaurant that he remembers white washing as a kid.

While the French restaurant connection is just an odd coincidence, John made real connections with the French during World War II. His military career brought him to a hospital ship anchored off the coast of Algeria (then a French colony) for several years during the war, where he was frequently asked to translate. His rough French came in handy in North Africa, where, he says, "it saved my neck more than once." He tells the story of becoming friends with some French girls connected with the French resistance. They looked out for John and once intervened just in time to keep him from being killed when he was mistaken for an assassination target. John was transferred to a troop transport ship and piloted soldiers to Normandy for the D-day invasion. His personal account of this experience can be found in a collection of essays solicited by the Navy called *Assault on Normandy: First Person Accounts from the Sea Services*. "My ship was loading troops for a Japanese invasion when we got the word about the big bomb being dropped," he explains, "so I spent the rest of the war transporting troops home."

After retiring, John's love of French and maritime history led him to pursue a Master's degree in history at the age of 67. His dual interests are reflected in the French/American History Endowment Library Fund that he established at the Cleveland State Library. In 1982, John's study of French history led him back to France when he participated in a Cleveland State study abroad program led by Professors Bethany Oberst, and William Shorrock (who currently serves as Vice provost for Academic Affairs and Faculty Relations at CSU). He followed up that trip by working more seriously on his French language skills, an ongoing project for John who is still a fixture in French classes at Cleveland State. He decided to enroll in a French immersion program in Dijon with his wife during the summer of 1984. It was this trip that ultimately brought him to the doorstep of René de Chambrun's apartment in Paris.

John's research had uncovered the existence of the Lagrange archive outside of Paris. As an amateur historian and devoted fan of Lafayette, he was anxious to get his hands on those papers. Although the secretaries he phoned at the Chambrun foundation that manages Lagrange tried to discourage him, John had the audacity to believe that the comte might actually allow him access to the documents at the family chateau if only he could talk to him in person. Undaunted, John Horton rang up René de Chambrun's law office and had the luck of getting the comte himself on the phone. "I barely got out that my name is John Horton and I'm from Ohio when Chambrun cut me off and told me 'My mother's from Ohio.'"

Chambrun's mother, John soon learned, was Clara Longworth, (la comtesse Aldebert Longworth de Chambrun) a noted Shakespearean scholar who had met Chambrun's father while he was part of a French Military attaché at the French Embassy. Clara belonged to one of the most prominent families in Cincinnati. Her father Nicolas Longworth had been a judge and Congressman who served as Speaker of the House for several terms, and her brother was married to Teddy

Roosevelt's daughter Alice. The room that the comte de Chambrun restored in his mother's memory at Lagrange contains valuable works from her Shakespeare collection including Rowe's famous eighteenth-century edition in seven volumes. She also wrote a well-regarded history of Cincinnati and an autobiography. Chambrun, who considered himself half American, kept in close touch with his Ohio roots. He visited Cincinnati on a regular basis, even becoming a fan of his mother's hometown baseball team. Xavier College in Cincinnati awarded him an honorary doctorate, as it had already done for his mother.

The Ohio connection opened the door to the Chambrun-Horton friendship which grew over the years. Not only was John invited to Lagrange, whenever he visited Paris René de Chambrun would wine and dine him in proper French style, served by a team of attentive waiters at his favorite restaurant in the Hôtel de Crillon where Chambrun had the honor of having a dessert named after him. John was also afforded the rare privilege of taking pictures at Lagrange and Pierre Laval's former estate, Chateldon, something that Josée de Chambrun expressly forbade during her lifetime. In René de Chambrun John Horton discovered a remarkable man and kindred spirit. As a direct descendant of Lafayette, Chambrun considered himself an American citizen due to the honorary American citizenship several states had bestowed on Lafayette and all his male descendants in recognition of his service to the United States. This honor, incidentally, was renewed in July, 2002, at the height of U.S.-France tensions over Iraq, when both houses of Congress voted to award Lafayette honorary American citizenship. According to Senator John Warner, who proposed the joint resolution, one of Lafayette's major contributions was bridging the cultural gaps between America and France. "His early influence on America still holds true today as we try to bridge the cultural gaps to many countries across the globe to help cultivate freedom," Warner explained. General Lafayette is one of only six honorary American citizens ever so named.

René de Chambrun was also a cultural bridge builder. Fluent in English, with connections on both sides of the Atlantic, Chambrun became an international lawyer, one of the first admitted to practice in both New York and France. In 1934 he established his law practice, de Chambrun and Associates, setting up his office at a posh Champs-Élysées address where he counted Coco Chanel among his first clients. He was also the President of Baccarat Crystal, opening up international markets for the company in the 1960s. In addition to his other accomplishments, Chambrun was a prolific writer whose many books include a number on the Second World War when he was sent on diplomatic missions to the U.S. and Britain to solicit help for the French cause. President Roosevelt personally asked him to share the story of France's plight with Americans, and the result was *I Saw France Fall*, a book Chambrun reportedly wrote in fourteen days. He also devoted several books to defending his controversial father-in-law, Pierre Laval, the head of the Vichy government in Occupied France who was executed as a collaborator at the end of World War II. The shadow of Laval fell over his son-in-law as well, and Chambrun was tried but acquitted of collaborating with the enemy.

John Horton has read the transcript of that trial, and Chambrun has also shared other documents from his enormous archives, some of which John has translated or plans to. One of his translations, called "The Five Coffins of Napoleon," deals with the transfer of Napoleon's body from St. Helena to France. He is currently translating Josée (Laval) de Chambrun's diaries, as well as unrecorded speeches her father made while President of the Vichy Government in

Occupied France. Chambrun discovered the speeches among José's papers when his wife died, and gave copies to John during one of his last trips to France. On one occasion he also presented John with a valuable Baccarat Crystal paper weight embedded with a portrait of Laval, one of only twenty ever made.

Since Chambrun's death in May 2002, John's visits to France have not been the same. His most recent trip, taken in November 2003, still included a visit to Lagrange, but John felt Chambrun's absence most deeply. On that visit he also made a point of touring the landing beaches at Normandy where so many Americans lost their lives in the cause of freedom. John had last seen the Norman coast from aboard his transport ship on D-Day. On his next trip he hopes to view the *Hermione*, an exact replica of the frigate on which Lafayette arrived in America in 1780 when he brought reinforcements from the French King that would turn the tide of the war. The ship is being built by the *Hermione-Lafayette Association* which plans to sail it from Rochefort to Boston in 2007.

At age 90, John Horton can appreciate how his life has come full circle. He singles out his friendship with René de Chambrun as perhaps the most important link in a chain of events that brought him over and over again to France. Well-read and accomplished businessman of the same generation, both impeccable gentlemen and sharp dressers who were bibliophiles and history buffs, Chambrun and Horton are men cut from the same cloth who seemed destined to become close friends. Like the friendship between Washington and Lafayette, theirs spans the gap separating their respective cultures.

As a local legacy of this long and remarkable friendship, the Lafayette papers have been brought to Cleveland. John had long joked with Chambrun about getting copies of the papers kept at Lagrange for the library at Cleveland State. They were constantly giving each other gifts of books and papers, so it was a natural request. Although the comte never said no, he didn't say yes until after the microfilming was complete. John pursued the idea in earnest beginning in 1995 after he wrangled an invitation to the gala thank-you party the Library of Congress gave to mark its acquisition of the archive. "I just called them up and asked to be invited. I know they did some checking up on me with the Chambrun people in Paris, but a few days later an invitation arrived." John followed up with formal letters requesting a copy of the archives, and James Billington, the Librarian of Congress, finally agreed to sell John a copy of the archive films if Chambrun approved. Billington likely assumed this would be the end of the matter since Chambrun had made it clear that the Library of Congress would be sole depository of the microfilm, and may not copy or lend it. John Horton, however, knew he could play the Ohio card with his friend. "My pitch was to remind Chambrun, 'You're an Ohio son. Don't you think you owe it to us to give us a copy of the papers?'" Once he agreed, "Chambrun was very protective of me," John explains, "and wouldn't okay the transfer until he confirmed that I only had to pay the duplication costs for the microfilm, and not share in the \$300,000 it cost to microfilm the documents."

Thus Lafayette came to rest in the Special Collections room at Cleveland State University in 1997 in the form of 6,400 feet of microfilm containing the more than 25,000 documents that René de Chambrun had found hidden away at Lagrange. John Horton paid for the reproduction of the collection using funds from the French/American History Library Endowment Fund that

he had established in the interest of documenting the close historical connections between the two countries. His gift is a reminder of the many connections between our state and France. Cleveland State's library now shares the honor of owning a copy of this archive with the Sons of the American Revolution, who, with John Horton's help, have also obtained a copy for the new library they are building in Louisville.

When the Library of Congress celebrated their acquisition of the collection, President Clinton wrote a letter to Chambrun formally thanking him for making the papers of the Marquis de Lafayette available for study at the Library of Congress. In his letter he speaks of Chambrun's generosity that "strengthens the bonds of friendship and the shared commitment to freedom that France and America have enjoyed for two centuries." John Horton's story is also a tribute to the bonds of friendship. It is thanks to his friendship with comte René de Chambrun that students, scholars, history enthusiasts and others will have access to the Lagrange archive documenting Lafayette's remarkable friendship with America without leaving home.

The collection at Cleveland State University is being digitized to make it more widely available through the World Wide Web. The library is creating bilingual versions of the difficult to read eighteenth-century manuscripts with pictures of the original hand-written pages followed by typed transcriptions and translations. Related artifacts such as seals, commemorative plates, and historic signatures will also be represented on this internet site to help bring these historical documents alive. For this plan to be realized, the library needs volunteers to translate selected documents. Anyone interested in and qualified for the task should contact George Lupone, the Associate Director of the library at Cleveland State.

At least one local scholar has already taken advantage of the archive at Cleveland State University to shed light on previously unknown aspects of Lafayette's personal life. June K. Burton, a retired historian from the University of Akron, discovered apothecary receipts among Adrienne de Lafayette's household records that reveal large doses of lead were used in her treatment. She was able to conclude that the mysterious and painful illness that took Adrienne's life at age 48 may have been lead poisoning. Burton's discussion of this case has become part of a book she is finishing on medical practices in the Napoleonic Era. Her work allows us a glimpse of the many treasures that wait to be discovered in the Lagrange papers. Their greatest value may lie in what they reveal about the social history of the period, about the more intimate aspects of Lafayette's years at Lagrange, and about the many personal relationships he cultivated on both sides of the Atlantic.

John Horton is, of course, a staunch supporter of the library's efforts to make room for Lafayette in cyberspace. He has done his part in keeping the legacy of Lafayette's friendship with this country alive and well by bringing Lafayette back to Ohio. An Ohio native, John is counting on modern technology and the good will of Francophones across the state and elsewhere to make Lafayette's triumphant return here a lasting success.