

Sketch: Siege of Yorktown - William Markham and Mary Wathen

Sometime in the latter half of the 19th Century a Markham descendant penned notes of her grandmother, Judith Markham, daughter of William Markham and Mary Wathen. In speaking of her grandmother she revealed, "Her father (William Markham) was a Revolutionary soldier, who sickened and died in Yorktown during the siege. Her mother, who was a Wathen, took small pox, from a sick soldier whom she entertained, as he was returning home from Yorktown, and died leaving three children, a son and two daughters."

William Markham and Mary Wathen were two of a company of Virginians who gave their lives during America's War for Independence. William Markham is not among the records of the DAR. He does not even appear on a Virginia Militia list. But, the remembrance of a great-granddaughter marks his service to us all.

The siege at Yorktown Virginia was the final battle of the American War for Independence from the British. In mid-September of 1781 General George Washington, leader of the American Continental troops, and Comte de Rochambeau, leader of the French army, were meeting in Williamsburg Virginia to discuss plans for encircling the British army at Yorktown. They were joined there by the Marquis de Lafayette, who was leading a large contingency of Virginia Militia. By the 28th of September 1781, the siege at Yorktown had begun. It lasted approximately twenty-one days.

We do not know what drew William Markham to Yorktown in September and October of 1781. Was he a militia soldier, or was he serving the cause in some other capacity? Four of his brothers gave significant service during the war – John Markham was a Captain in the American Continental army, and Bernard Markham and George Markham raised and led companies of militia from Chesterfield county Virginia. Likewise, Vincent Markham served as Captain of militia troops in neighboring Powhatan county Virginia. It is a little surprising that no military record appears for William Markham who may have been the oldest of the brothers.

The family account indicates that William Markham ". . . was a Revolutionary soldier, who sickened and died in Yorktown during the siege." In 1781 he was probably forty to forty-five years of age, married, and the father of three surviving children. He had lived most of his childhood and early adult years in Chesterfield county Virginia. But about 1767, following his marriage to Mary Wathen, he removed west to Bedford county Virginia. Records suggest that he remained there about six or seven years. Then, about 1774-75 he appears to sell out his homeplace in Bedford county Virginia and it is thought, but not proven, that he returned to Chesterfield county Virginia before the War.

The Chesterfield county Virginia Militia was called out on a number of occasions between 1775 and 1781. Defense of vulnerable communities, and the guarding of military stores was often the assignment. Most of the terms of service were short, lasting a few days or perhaps a few months. The British arrived enforce in Virginia in early 1781, and did mass destruction to property in and around Chesterfield county. Actual fighting was limited to a few small conflicts.

When Lafayette gathered Virginia troops and headed toward Yorktown in September 1781, it is possible that William Markham went with him. During the early days of October regular volleys of gunfire were exchanged between the British troops and the Americans, along with their French allies. The Americans and French built a series of trenches, moving steadily closer to the British troops, and gradually weakening British defenses. By mid-October the deed was accomplished and the British surrendered.



Seige of Yorktown, 1781.

William Markham may have died of illness during the Siege period, or shortly thereafter. Both malaria and smallpox worked their deadly ways through the troops. It is unfortunate that we do not have more decisive evidence of William Markham's activities during the American Revolution. But, there is some small support for his great-granddaughter's statement concerning his death at Yorktown Virginia in September or October of 1781.

At the January Court 1782 of Chesterfield county Virginia two things happened. First, Bernard Markham, brother of William Markham, took over as administrator for the estate of their father, John Markham who had died in 1770. Then it was "Ordered that Stephen Pankey Jr, David Patteson, William Scott and Walter Scott or any three of them being first sworn, do appraise the estate of William Markham, dec'd." This goes along with the idea that William Markham died in the later part of the year 1781. I have not been successful in locating William Markham's inventory, nor any further documents related to his probate.

The remembrance of a determined great-granddaughter may be the only remaining mark we have of William and Mary Wathen Markham's service to their country.

Do you want to know more?

[Link to William Markham](#)

[Sketch: Chesterfield County Virginia during the Revolution](#)

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