Between Two Republics: American Military Volunteers in Revolutionary France

Christopher Tozzi, Howard University

Historians have long recognized the vital contributions of French soldiers and officers to the American colonists during the American Revolution. Without the assistance of the approximately one hundred French officers who enlisted directly in the Continental Army and the ten thousand French expeditionary troops dispatched to North America between 1779 and 1783, it is doubtful that the colonists would have triumphed in their rebellion against British rule.¹ In addition, the close contact with American republicanism that those French soldiers underwent likely played a role in disseminating revolutionary ideas in France when they returned.² Yet despite the vast body of literature comparing and contrasting the American and French revolutions and exploring the influences of the first on the second, scholars have afforded little attention to the natives of the United States who, bringing full circle the contributions of French soldiers to American independence, served in the armies of revolutionary France.³

To be sure, American military volunteers during the French Revolution comprised only a minuscule group, dwarfed in number by foreigners of other nationalities who bore arms for the French revolutionaries. Nonetheless, throughout the era natives of the United States enlisted in the French military on

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a variety of fronts. A majority were involved in French campaigns in North America, including most notably George Rogers Clark's effort to recapture Louisiana for France in 1793, as well as Ira Allen's project, endorsed by the Directory and only narrowly thwarted by the British navy, to invade Canada with Vermont militiamen serving under the French flag. At the same time, a smaller number of Americans fought with French forces in Europe itself, including Eleazer Oswald, a printer from Philadelphia who despite a lack of French language skills commanded a company of artillery under general Charles-François Dumouriez in Belgium. A handful of Americans were also present in Napoleon's Irish Legion during the early-1800s, and some served aboard French warships, though perhaps unwillingly.

Most of these Americans left behind little evidence explaining why they took up arms for the French at a time when the official policy of the United States was one of neutrality, or how they conceptualized their relationship with revolutionary France. Yet the careers of the two highest-ranking Americans to serve in the French army at this time, colonels John Skey Eustace and William Tate, present fruitful opportunities for addressing questions such as these. The experiences of these two men during the French revolutionary decade demonstrated the extent to which their attachment to France inspired them not only to bear arms on its behalf, but actually to perceive themselves as French. At the same time, however, the constraints that French authorities placed on the ability of these Americans to act on behalf of France and to claim French

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6 On Americans in the Irish Legion, see John Gallaher, Napoleon’s Irish Legion (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 175. Letters of 18 August 1808 and 20 February 1809 in Yj 19, SHD, discussed the enrollment of Americans in the French navy under the First Empire.
nationality highlighted the limits of the cosmopolitan fervor that historians have traditionally attributed to the French revolutionaries.\(^7\) The French Revolution was conceived in universal terms, yet in practice, as both Eustace and Tate discovered, it was subject to boundaries which could not be crossed even by foreign sympathizers willing to risk their lives for the French Republic on the battlefield.

**John Skey Eustace**

Eustace's adventurous life began with his birth around 1760 in Flushing, New York. He enrolled in the college of William and Mary in 1772, but abandoned his studies three years later to enlist in the Continental Army. He served first as an aide-de-camp to generals Charles Lee and John Sullivan, and in 1777 became a major with his own command. At the end of the American Revolutionary War he was inducted into the Society of the Cincinnati and settled in Georgia, where he practiced briefly as a lawyer. Probably for personal reasons, he left the United States in 1784 to begin a series of travels through Latin America which included stops in Cuba, Trinidad and Venezuela. He also lived for some time in Madrid, where he unsuccessfully attempted to open a tobacco factory while lobbying William Pitt to liberate Venezuela from Spanish rule.\(^8\)

By June 1789 Eustace had moved to Bordeaux, where he observed events in Paris with enthusiasm. He became personally involved in the French Revolution in 1792, when with the support of the American consulate he petitioned the French war ministry for a commission in the French army. On April 20 he received the appointment of colonel, and in June began service in the

\(^7\) The classic work on the treatment of foreigners during the French Revolution is Albert Mathiez, *La Révolution et les étrangers: Cosmopolitisme et défense nationale* (Paris: Renaissance du Livre, 1918). More recent studies of foreigners in the Revolution have tended to retain much of Mathiez's central thesis that the revolutionaries were “cosmopolitan” in their thinking and eager to adopt foreigners without reservation until the time of the Terror. The most important examples include Michael Rapport, *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. 4-6; and Sophie Wahnich, *L'impossible citoyen* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997), 13-14.

\(^8\) For a discussion of Eustace's activities prior to the French Revolution, see Lee Kennett, “John Skey Eustace and the French Revolution,” *American Society Legion of Honor Magazine* 45 (1974): 29-43, 30-3. Kennett's essay provides a detailed overview of Eustace's life, but its usefulness for historians is limited by its total lack of citations. In addition, item 4, F/7/4689, AN contains a pamphlet, probably produced by or on behalf of Eustace, detailing his military services in the American Revolution. A list of his professional services in his personal dossier, 4Yd 3927, SHD, at Vincennes also provides some information on his participation in the American Revolution. 4Yd 3927, SHD indicates that Eustace was born on 10 August 1762, but Kennett, “John Skey Eustace,” 30, gave the date as 10 August 1760, without citing a source.
army of Nicolas de Luckner in eastern France, where he soon saw military action. Three months later he claimed to have been in the thick of the cannonade at Valmy, and following that French victory he commanded a brigade of light infantry during the invasion of Belgium.

Despite his integration into French military life, and the aspirations to French citizenship discussed below, Eustace proudly retained marks of his American identity during this time. The corps of officers serving under him included at least one American, a nineteen-year-old from Baltimore whom he appointed as an aide-de-camp. Meanwhile, Eustace demonstrated his pride in his American origins when he ordered the local authorities of the Flemish city of Lier, which his troops captured from the Austrians in the fall of 1792, to rename the main square Place de Washington. He also issued instructions to rechristen various boulevards in the town in honor of himself, general Dumouriez and several French deputies.

While Eustace enjoyed significant success as a military commander during the campaign of 1792, he also acquired powerful political enemies. His relationship with Dumouriez, although warm at first, soured during the Belgian campaign. In addition, he developed a passionate enmity for Francisco de Miranda, a native of Venezuela and later Latin American revolutionary who briefly commanded the Army of the North. Eustace’s rashness, a personal flaw that inspired many poor decisions throughout his life, provided these political adversaries with the means of removing him from his post as the campaign of 1792 wound to a close. On 29 November of that year Eustace took it upon himself

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5 Kennett, “John Skey Eustace,” 33, wrote that Eustace received the commission of colonel on 20 April 1792, but did not cite a source. The list of military services in Eustace’s personnel dossier, 4Yd 3927, SHD, identified the date of his commission as colonel as 5 June 1792 and mentioned no rank held by Eustace in the French army prior to that date. In letters of 1 July 1792 and 5 August 1792, 4Yd 3927, SHD, Eustace expressed dissatisfaction with his rank of colonel, complaining that he deserved a higher appointment owing to his military experience in the American Revolution. According to his list of services, he was promoted to maréchal-de-camp on 7 September 1792. Although he frequently referred to himself as a “general” in French service, I have been unable to locate evidence of his having ever received formal promotion to a rank higher than maréchal-de-camp.

10 Eustace described his service at Valmy in a letter to Thomas Paine dated 23 September 1792, three days after the battle. Archivo del General Miranda, 15 vols. (Caracas: Parra Leon Hermanos, 1931), 7:434. On 26 September 1792 Jean-Paul Marat published a report on the battle of Valmy that mentioned Eustace being present at that engagement. Jean-Paul Marat, Oeuvres politiques 1789-1793, 10 vols. (Brussels: Pôle nord, 1995), 8:4777

11 Archivo, 7:441.

12 On Eustace’s activities in Lier, see the letter signed by him and printed in the 27 December 1792 edition of Marat’s Journal de la République française, in Marat, Oeuvres politiques, 8:5367-8.
to address a letter to the prince of Hesse, commander of neutral Dutch forces in the citadel of Maastricht, inviting the prince to turn over the French émigrés who had taken refuge in that city. Eustace then boldly visited Maastricht in person, where he dined with Hesse. In the wake of this affair Dumouriez denounced the American officer for engaging in correspondence with a foreign general and allegedly interacting with émigrés. On 13 December Eustace was suspended from his military command and ordered to travel to Paris to explain his conduct before the National Convention.

As an adept navigator of the revolutionary political terrain, however, Eustace calculated that it would be wiser to disregard Dumouriez’s orders. He instead retired to an abbey in Tongerlo, Belgium where, living among the monks and claiming poor health, he resisted several attempts by Dumouriez and Miranda to place him under arrest. It was not until March 1793, when French defeats brought enemy forces within a few miles of the abbey, that Eustace reported himself well enough to travel. A few weeks later, after Dumouriez defected to the Austrians, the war ministry cleared Eustace of the charges against him and offered to restore his commission in the French army. This time, however, Eustace declined, citing Washington’s proclamation of neutrality, although other evidence suggested that the French general under whom Eustace was appointed to serve simply refused to accept him.

Thus concluded Eustace’s brief military career in the French army. He remained in France for some time thereafter, gaining notoriety, and the wrath of the radical journalist Jean-Paul Marat, in May 1793 when he refused to testify against Miranda before the revolutionary tribunal on the grounds that he was a personal enemy of the defendant. He also busied himself developing plans, which he presented to the French government, for the “fraternal invasion of Ireland” and the establishment of what he called a “Gibraltar” for France on the

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13 Eustace’s letter to the prince of Hesse is available in item 4, plaquette 102, F/7/4689, AN.
14 Archivo, 14:5.
15 Kennett, “John Skey Eustace,” 38; Archivo, 12:119.
16 On Eustace’s statement before the revolutionary tribunal and Miranda’s reaction, see the minutes of Miranda’s trial in Archivo, 12:119-20. Jean-Paul Marat subsequently denounced Eustace in his newspaper for having made a scene at the court and “ridiculously denying himself the means of testifying,” while the public prosecutor Fouquier-Tinville later attested that he would have arrested Eustace on the spot for the bizarre disturbance that he caused had more pressing matters not distracted him. Marat, Œuvres politiques, 9:6388; Archivo, 12:159-60. At Miranda’s instigation, Fouquier-Tinville did indeed attempt to build a case against Eustace the following month, but concluded that evidence was insufficient. See Archivo, 13:83.
coast of England.\textsuperscript{17} Such proposals enjoyed little support, however, and in 1797 the Directory, suspicious that Eustace was spying for the British, expelled him from France. His defiance and spirit of independence finally exhausted, Eustace obeyed and returned to Newburgh, New York, where he lived quietly until his death in 1805.\textsuperscript{18}

Such was the basic outline of Eustace’s role in the French Revolution, which despite notable moments on the battlefield and in the courtroom was a minor one. Nonetheless, Eustace from the outset imagined his services for France to integrate him into the French nation and even to confer French nationality. The nuances of his language revealed his sense of belonging in France; in July 1792, for example, shortly after entering the French army, he referred to Louis XVI in a letter as “our good king.”\textsuperscript{19} A month later he described himself as an “adopted citizen” of France, and declared his willingness to “exist for no other purpose than to share in the triumphs and glories of the French.”\textsuperscript{20} Similarly, he affirmed while directing municipal affairs on occupied Belgian territory that his authority derived from his standing as a “citizen and officer of the French Republic.”\textsuperscript{21}

The French civil and military administrators with whom Eustace interacted, however, never conceded to him the title, either officially or informally, of French citizen. In August 1792, when Eustace petitioned representatives of the National Assembly for formal naturalization, three deputies praised his patriotism and commitment to the cause of liberty on both sides of the Atlantic but described him simply as an “Anglo-American,” plainly avoiding any suggestion that his actions and sympathies might make him French. The Assembly never acted on his request for citizenship.\textsuperscript{22} In a similar vein,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{17} Kennett, “John Skey Eustace,” 39. Eustace mentioned his project for the establishment of a “Gibraltar” in England in a letter to the Directory dated 5 May 1796, item 5, unnumbered dossier, AF/III/186/B, AN.
\textsuperscript{18} Kennett, “John Skey Eustace,” 42-43.
\textsuperscript{19} Letter from Eustace to the war minister, 1 July 1792, 4Yd 3927, SHD.
\textsuperscript{20} Letter from Eustace to the war minister, 5 August 1792, 4Yd 3927, SHD.
\textsuperscript{21} Eustace wrote of his “double qualité de Citoyen & d’Officier-Général de la République française,” item 102, plaquette 4, F/7/4689, AN, \textit{page 15}.
\textsuperscript{22} Letter from Lamarque, Laporte and Bruat (no recipient specified), 27 August 1792, item 102, plaquette 4, F/7/4689, AN; AGL 7:418. On nationality and naturalization procedures during the French Revolution, see Patrick Weil, \textit{How to Be French: Nationality in the Making Since 1789} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 12-29. Eustace claimed, \textit{Archivo}, 7:419-20, that the Assembly did not grant him citizenship because it was too busy with other affairs during the tumultuous month of August 1792, but this position seems dubious given that the deputies did find time to adopt a number of other foreigners, including Thomas Paine, George Washington, Anarchasis Cloots and Jeremy Bentham, as French citizens on 26 August 1792. See also Weil, \textit{How to Be French}, 14-15.
\end{footnotesize}
Dumouriez addressed Eustace as “my dear American general,” but never as a French officer. Dumouriez also emphasized that the French Republic had granted Eustace a military appointment, but that his capacity to operate as a representative of France did not surpass that mandate.\textsuperscript{23}

The reluctance of Eustace’s comrades to recognize him as French, combined with his dismissal from the French army, left him disillusioned with the French revolutionaries. In early 1793, while residing in the Belgian abbey, he threatened to offer his services to the Spanish or Dutch armies because he had suffered “too much ingratitude for being in the service of the French Republic.”\textsuperscript{24} He also retreated at this time from self-presentations as French, referring in a letter from September 1793 to the United States as his singular “patrie” and signing as “Citizen of the United States, J. S. Eustace.”\textsuperscript{25} He similarly signed his next surviving correspondence, from January 1795, as “general J. S. Eustace Citizen of the United States of America,” avoiding pretensions to French nationality even as he continued to claim the title of a military officer, a position he had not held since being suspended by Dumouriez in late-1792.\textsuperscript{26}

**William Tate**

Eustace’s trajectory from self-described French citizen to embittered and marginalized veteran of the French army paralleled the career of William Tate. Like Eustace, Tate, who was possibly born in Ireland but was an established resident of South Carolina by the time of the American Revolution, served as an officer in the Continental Army and joined the Society of the Cincinnati.\textsuperscript{27} After

\textsuperscript{23} Dumouriez to Eustace (12 August 1792), Archivo, 7:415; Dumouriez to Eustace (13 December 1792), item 102, plaquette 4, F/7/4689, AN.

\textsuperscript{24} So Eustace reported to officers sent to the abbey by Miranda to inquire why he had not complied with orders to explain his conduct to authorities in Paris. Archivo, 11:185-7.

\textsuperscript{25} In a letter dated 6 September 1793, Eustace wrote that he was “On the verge of departing for the United States of America, my patrie, with a passport from the Comité de Sureté générale of the National Convention.” Dossier 4, F/7/4701, AN. The header of the letter described Eustace as “Le Gal Eustace, Citoyen des Etats-Unis de l’amérique,” and it was signed “Le Citoyen des Etats Unis J.S. Eustace.” Eustace did not actually return to the United States until several years after writing this letter.

\textsuperscript{26} Letter from Eustace in support of the Irish-born general in the French army Charles Edward Jennings Kilmaine, 25 Nivôse Year III, 7Yd 35, SHD.

\textsuperscript{27} The nineteenth-century author Henry Lewis Williams wrote that Tate was born in Wexford, Ireland, but later historians were unable to confirm this claim. Whatever Tate’s place of birth, it is certain that he settled in North America prior to the American Revolution. One scholar suggested that his family had been murdered by Indians allied with the British during that war, explaining which explains Tate’s enmity for the Hanoverian crown. On Tate’s origins and early life, see E. H. Stuart Jones, *The Last Invasion of Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1950), 275-7.
1789 he became an ardent supporter of the French Revolution and was a founding member of the Republican Society of South Carolina, a political club established in Charleston in 1793 by sympathizers with the revolutionaries across the Atlantic.\textsuperscript{28} Shortly thereafter, the French consul in Charleston, Michel-Ange-Bernard Mangourit, commissioned Tate as a colonel in the French army and authorized him to recruit a force \textit{which} would march under the French flag against Spanish-controlled Louisiana. Tate’s army was to comprise one wing of the expedition that the French ambassador in Philadelphia, Edmond-Charles Genêt, had covertly engineered for seizing enemy colonial possessions in the Americas.\textsuperscript{29} In order to avoid raising tensions with the American government, recruitment for the legion was ostensibly to take place beyond the borders of the United States, but in practice Tate did not respect this stipulation.\textsuperscript{30} By January 1794 he claimed to have enlisted 2,000 men for what he began calling the American Revolutionary Legion, whose members envisioned their mission as part of the same military struggle that was taking place against France’s enemies on the European continent.\textsuperscript{31}

Tate’s legion was about to invade Louisiana in early 1794, when the South Carolina state legislature received word of the scheme. State authorities subsequently condemned the men involved for treason and arrested several of them.\textsuperscript{32} Tate and his associates attempted to defend their activities by declaring that it was within their rights “to expatriate themselves and join the forces of

conflicting evidence regarding Tate’s origins, Jones concluded that he was most likely of American birth, “as he certainly was by citizenship and military rank.” \textit{Ibid.}, 277.

\textsuperscript{28} John D. Ahlstrom, “Captain and Chef de Brigade William Tate: South Carolina Adventurer,” \textit{The South Carolina Historical Magazine} 88 (October 1987): 183-91, 186.

\textsuperscript{29} The other major thrust of the campaign was led by George Rogers Clark, who according to one of the French soldiers serving under him recruited a legion of 2,000 Kentuckians and 900 men of French origin. “Documents on the Relations of France to Louisiana, 1792-1795,” \textit{The American Historical Review} 3 (April 1898): 490-516, 513. For more general information on Genêt’s scheme to invade Spanish possessions in North America, see the works cited in note 4 above.

\textsuperscript{30} Ahlstrom, “Captain and Chef de Brigade William Tate,” 187.

\textsuperscript{31} Note of 9 Vendémiaire Year IV, 17Yd 12, SHD. Mangourit wrote to the French foreign ministry at an unspecified date that Tate’s legion contained 4,000 men, but offered no proof for this number. Letter of 10 December 1793, reprinted in Richard Murdoch, “Correspondence of French Consuls in Charleston, South Carolina, 1793-1797,” \textit{The South Carolina Historical Magazine} 74 (Apr. 1973): 73-79, 76. The officers of the legion signed a statement declaring their intention to march against the “Enemies of the French Republic for the Glorious purpose of Breaking the Chains of Enslaved Nations, & thereby contributing to the support of France against the Agregate of European Dispoticism.” Undated document, 17Yd 12, SHD.

\textsuperscript{32} Reports from the South Carolina legislature from December 1793, inserted in 17Yd 12, SHD; Ahlstrom, “Captain and Chef de Brigade William Tate,” 187.
another nation,” but Tate himself ultimately decided that the only way to escape his persecutors in the United States – whom he labeled, in classic Jacobin Anglophobic parlance, “no other than the British & Spanish Partizans” – was to flee to France.33

Once in Paris, Tate never learned to speak the language but continued imagining exotic military adventures that he might lead on behalf of the French Republic.34 In 1796 he proposed a plan to the Directory for the invasion of Bermuda, which he presented as an ideal base for harassing British trade and launching further attacks against British possessions in the New World. He also promised that the former officers of his American Revolutionary Legion would be eager to join him in an invasion of Bermuda if only the French government would supply ships, provisions and additional troops.35

The Directory never entertained this proposal, but instead selected Tate to lead an assault against the decidedly less sunny shores of Britain. That expedition ended in failure, with Tate and his small army taken prisoner shortly after landing in Wales in February 1797. The British exchanged Tate back to France in 1798 and he remained in the country as a civilian until 1809, when he returned to the United States. He resumed there a life of obscurity, notwithstanding his role as chief field commander of the last foreign invasion of Britain, a title he has retained for more than two centuries.36

Although Tate's career in the French army lasted much longer than Eustace's and involved service on two continents, French authorities similarly denied him recognition as a French citizen, either implicitly or officially. In 1799 the war ministry rejected Tate's claim for a payment bonus because of his “status

33 Ahlstrom, “Captain and Chef de Brigade William Tate,” 187; letter from Thermidor Year III (exact date unspecified), 17Yd 12, SHD.
34 All of Tate's correspondence in AF/III/186/B, AN, is in English with French translations attached, suggesting that he did not speak French. In addition, according to Jones, The Last Invasion, 53, 57, he relied on the Irish revolutionary Theobald Wolfe Tone, whom he befriended in Paris and who lived near him on rue Vivienne, to translate the orders given by general Lazare Hoche for the invasion of Britain in 1797.
35 On Tate's project for invading Bermuda, see item 32, dossier 658, and items 62, 63, 70 and 83, dossier 859, AF/III/186/B, AN. A letter from the war ministry, dated 7 Fructidor Year IV, item 694, dossier 254, AF/III/147, AN, granted Tate permission to purchase 1200 guns, five cannons and other military provisions, which were probably intended for the invasion of Bermuda. However, the Directory never acceded to his requests for French troops and warships to assist in the expedition, and he ultimately abandoned the idea.
36 Ahlstrom, “Captain and Chef de Brigade William Tate,” 188-91.
as an American.”

A decade later, by which time Tate had resided in France for the ten years required to claim French nationality, the French police labeled him only an “American officer, formerly a colonel in the service of France.”

Throughout his long experience as an officer in the French army and resident on French soil, Tate remained a foreigner in the eyes of French authorities, despite the services he had offered to France on both sides of the Atlantic and the staunch republican sympathies he had expressed during the revolutionary decade.

**Conclusions**

The reluctance of the French governments that Eustace and Tate served to recognize them in any way as French was disillusioning to both men. For historians, it also highlights the constraints which bound the French revolutionaries’ lofty pronouncements regarding the cosmopolitan promises of the Revolution. Both Eustace and Tate, through their actions and statements, expressed committed loyalty to and belief in the French revolutionary state. Yet their French counterparts, from the time of Eustace’s enlistment in the summer of 1792 to Tate’s departure from France in 1809, consistently sidestepped or rejected the notion that the two Americans might be regarded as French themselves. This reluctance flew in the face of cosmopolitan rhetoric, particularly prevalent during the first several years of the Revolution, that proclaimed France’s commitment to the natural rights of all peoples and presented the revolutionary war as a struggle for universal liberty. It also contradicted the spirit of decrees such as that of 2 August 1792, which promised French nationality to soldiers from foreign armies who deserted to the French camp.

The treatment of Eustace and Tate under the Directory and Napoleon was less at odds with the official pronouncements of the French state, which had retreated by that time from cosmopolitan rhetoric. Nonetheless, the experiences

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37 Tate attributed the war ministry’s refusal to grant him the payment typically offered to officers who had been taken prisoner of war to “ma Qualité d’américain.” Tate to the director Barras, 31 March 1799, 17Yd 12, SHD.

38 Dossier 1601, F7/6528, AN. In 1809, the nationality provisions of the Constitution of 1799 remained in vigor, with French nationality granted to any foreigner who resided in France for a period of ten years and declared his intention to become French. A decree of 17 March 1809 extended to Napoleon the right to approve or reject any naturalization requests, but there is no evidence that this provision affected Tate. See Weil, *How to Be French*, 19, 31, 35.


of these two Americans during the later years of the revolutionary era as well highlighted the extent to which the French Revolution and its legacy were conceived as a specifically French project. Meanwhile, the disillusionment with France that Eustace and Tate came to express, and the eventual return of both of them to the United States, reinforced the notion that foreigners had little role to play in the affairs of France during the revolutionary era. Thus contemporary foreign observers of the French Revolution might declare, as Eustace did, that “I have ever considered the fate of the american Commonwealth as inseparably wedded to the existence of [the French] Republic.”41 Yet as much as the Revolution in France might have influenced democratic movements elsewhere, serving France and being French, as both Eustace and Tate eventually learned, were two distinct qualities.

41 John Skey Eustace, Letters on the crimes of George III. Addressed to Citizen Denis; by An American Officer, in the Service of France. Part I & II (Paris: Anjubault, Year II), ix-x.