On October 9, 1781, General George Washington and a crowd of soldiers and officers stand around an enormous 18-pound iron cannon in the American Grand Battery outside Yorktown, Virginia. Don Troiani’s research turned up a list of the artillery used by the Continental Army at Yorktown in the collection of the National Archives. This allowed him to paint the cannons and their carriages with accurate detail.

From this position, the Revolutionary forces with their French allies have surrounded a British army and besieged them. It is an overcast day with temperatures in the 50s. A large American flag – the Continental standard – with six-pointed white stars and alternating blue and red stripes, flies over the earthworks. Washington has the honor of firing the first American cannon of the siege. With officers including the Marquis de Lafayette and Henry Knox looking on, he has just touched a burning wick to the cannon’s fuse, igniting it. Soldiers cheer. An officer with a spyglass watches to see where the first cannonball will land in the British lines.

This first shot was part of the opening salvo in the Siege of Yorktown, the battle that would lead the British to negotiate for peace and end the Revolutionary War.