James Armistead was born enslaved in 1748. During the American Revolution, he volunteered with the patriot forces under the French officer, the Marquis de La Fayette. Working as a spy, Armistead was able to infiltrate British General Cornwallis’ camp and provided valuable information that lead to the Franco-American Victory at Yorktown in 1781. Because he was a spy, he did not benefit from the Act of 1783, which emancipated any enslaved soldiers who fought for the Revolution. Armistead instead began petitioning Congress for freedom, finally receiving his manumission in 1787.
Martin, John B., James Armistead Lafayette portrait, 1824, oil on canvas, The Valentine, Richmond, Virginia.