

## ***UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities Podcast***

### **Season 3 Episode 3: Revelation about the Revolution**

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#### **TRANSCRIPT**

Deb Fowler: Hello, and welcome to *UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities — A Podcast for Teachers*. I'm Deb Fowler, executive director of History UnErased.

In this episode, Kathleen will unpack the backstory of a little-known and underappreciated figure connected to the Revolutionary War. Despite a grand statue dedicated to him in Lafayette Square in Washington, DC, directly across from the White House, this individual often goes unmentioned in most US History books. In addition to his backstory, you will also hear commentary from two special guests we interviewed for this episode, the author and illustrator of a graphic novel that invites young adults (or adults of any age) to dive into this *Revelation about the Revolution*!

Take it away, Kathleen!

Kathleen Barker: If I asked you to name a military hero from the era of the American Revolution, who would come to mind? For most of us, I suspect it would be George Washington, but maybe you recall the vital assistance provided by the young Frenchman, the Marquis de Lafayette? Or perhaps you grew up learning stories of Boston bookseller Henry Knox, who used his engineering skills to bolster the Army's artillery supplies during the earliest years of the war.

But what if I told you that the ultimate success of Washington's Continental Army was not due to any of these individuals, but to a Prussian military officer, Friedrich Wilhelm August Heinrich Ferdinand von Steuben? Despite knowing only a little bit of English, von Steuben essentially trained the Continental Army. During the winter of 1778–1779, von Steuben prepared the *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*, the drill manual used by the United States Army until 1812 (although many of von Steuben's ideas are still represented in current Army manuals).

Young von Steuben followed in his father's footsteps and joined the Prussian Army in 1747. He was just 17 years old. In 1762, he became an aide-de-camp to Frederick II (also known as Frederick the Great). von Steuben joined the King's personal class on the art of war, where young officers were trained as military leaders. In 1763, shortly after the conclusion of the Seven Years War (or French and Indian War), von Steuben was discharged from the Prussian army, thanks to a vindictive rival. He went on to spend the next 11 years as a household officer in a tiny German principality. Unfortunately, by 1775, his employer had run out of money. Von Steuben started looking for a new military job, but Europe was actually experiencing a rare period of peace. No one would hire him. There was one fledgling army, however, that was looking for some help.

Fast forward to Paris, 1777, when Benjamin Franklin made an offer that von Steuben couldn't refuse – come to America and help train a ragtag group of farmers to become a well-organized Continental Army. In addition to it being an important opportunity, leaving Europe was a good move for von Steuben

because the Prussian clergy intended to prosecute him for “taking liberties with junior officers.” When von Steuben arrived in America in 1778, George Washington assigned two young French-speaking colonels from his own staff to assist him and to help translate: Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens. Von Steuben soon began leading drills himself, though, twice a day, in full military dress!

Von Steuben’s contributions to American history, not to mention his queerness, have often been erased from textbooks and classroom lessons about the Revolution. We recently met with two individuals who – like the staff of History UnErased – would like to change that! Let’s meet Josh Trujillo, the author, and Levi Hastings, the illustrator of *Washington’s Gay General: The Legends and Loves of Baron von Steuben*, a fantastic graphic novel biography of this amazing figure.

*Josh Trujillo: My name is Josh Trujillo. I’m a Comic Book guy based in Los Angeles, California.*

*Yeah, I’m Levi. I am an illustrator and graphic designer, and comics maker. I live in Seattle, Washington.*

I don’t know about you listeners, but I vaguely remember learning about von Steuben in school and learning nothing except that he was a military genius. There is clearly so much more to von Steuben!

*JT: Yeah, what surprised me most about researching Von Steuben’s life was kind of his humanity and how much I could relate to him. You know, these are people we kind of put on pedestals in a lot of ways, and we don’t think of them as living, breathing humans, but in looking over letters of his that had been translated, looking over people’s recollections of him and his life, it was kind of easy to see some of myself in there as kind of like an aspirational figure who wants more, right? That’s a very human condition. And to see someone who kind of achieved such heights and still felt a little dissatisfied and still wanted that last little bit, felt so human to me.*

*Levi: Likewise, I think I was really sort of charmed by his maybe less admirable qualities, his pettiness, his fabulous, you know, his penchant for stretching the truth and inflating his own accomplishments in order to get ahead. He was a social climber. He’s somebody who I could easily see sort of thriving and striving in our modern culture.*

KB: Von Steuben certainly had a big personality! He was known for traveling everywhere with his spoiled Italian greyhound, Azor, who apparently had a good ear for music. Von Steuben also threw some rather wild parties while in camp. He frequently invited young officers to dine with him, and clothing was occasionally optional. He grew especially close to two of his aides-de-camp: William North and Benjamin Walker, living with them for two years while in camp. We asked Levi about some of the design choices he made in order to bring von Steuben’s story to life on the page.

*LH: We were I think, limited by budgetary reasons to A to A2 color print, and I think that actually was to the book’s advantage. For me, it was a really fun exercise and restraint in having to only use two colors or you know, with the page, it’s essentially 3 colors, right? So you have white, black, and whatever your third color is, which we chose, sort of this not quite Prussian blue, but we decided blue would be the best color. A lot of the primary action takes place in wintertime or in Valley Forge or in situations that are sort of require a cooler tone. But even within that, I think it was really fun to– I certainly stretched my own abilities and knowledge, and you know, making the most out of that limited color range. I think it serves*

*the book pretty well in that it has a sort of, to my mind, a little bit sort of a retro feel, it has like a vintage comics vibe, which I really enjoy and I'm sort of trying to convey.*

KB: In some ways, von Steuben's life and experiences feel far away from our twenty-first-century reality. One of the ways that Josh and Levi help readers make connections between von Steuben's time and today is by inserting themselves into the narrative. We asked them to tell us more about this narrative choice.

*JT: In working on the book, we had a repeated note from our editor, Marika Tamaki, that I want to see more of you, Josh, in the book. And so what they meant by that, I think is they wanted that modern context that we could reflect von Steuben's life against. We knew he was a great figure and he accomplished so much in his lifetime, but what does that mean for us today? What are those parallels that we can connect kind of a modern queer experience to von Steuben's life? Because it might as well be in a far away fantasy Kingdom. So that was a struggle with figuring out kind of what anecdotes, what recollections and what personal stories we wanted to kind of infuse into the work.*

*LH: I think for my part I it was a really fun way to bridge that divide in, you know, the centuries. Josh did I think a beautiful job weaving in a lot of other queer history kind of between to connect the two time periods. We get into a lot of queer history in the 1800s and the early 20th century, and really tie in this concept of lost history and how fragmentary and sort of precious these small records are of these queer lives throughout history, which obviously we've known queer people have existed as long as-people have, as Josh put in the book. But we still rarely get primary sources of their lives, and so when we do, we really kind of cling to that and try to make the most of it in reclaiming it.*

*JT: Um, in researching the book, I went to the USC One Archives, it's the largest LGBTQ archive, I think, in the world. But, you know, they're overwhelmed with materials and personal effects that come to them from thrift shops, from family members that don't know what to do with them, these kind of artifacts, of these lives that have been largely forgotten, erased or hidden from us. And so the one thing that I really took away from that, not physically, but these scrapbooks that they had that were compiled by men of just, they cut out pictures from catalogs and put them together so it looks like two men are in a loving scene, looks like they're having a picturesque picnic, and then they're kind of projecting this fantasy you can tell of a life they wish existed. And so that was really touching to me is this idea that that's a life I'll never know, and we don't have any way to connect to it. We only know so much about von Steuben's life because he was kind of an elevated class, because he had a lot of privilege. But we don't know anything about frontline soldiers who may have been homosexual or queer. We don't know anything about just regular civilians because that conversation hadn't really evolved yet. And so I think what we're trying to do in the book is reclaim a great figure from our shared queer history and hopefully kind of give people the tools or the understanding they need to find figures of their own.*

KB: Another story frequently erased from our textbooks is that of Frederick the Great. Frederick was a military genius who modernized Prussian bureaucracy, reformed the judicial system, and supported the arts. He also happened to be gay. Frederick's father, King Frederick William cultivated a hyper-masculine image, one that young Frederick didn't always live up to. As a teenager, Frederick likely had a relationship with a Page in his father's court, Peter Karl von Keith. When the King discovered the relationship, he sent

von Keith to join a military regiment hundreds of miles away along the Dutch border, while sequestering his Frederick at the family's hunting lodge. The King condemned another one of Frederick's romantic partners, his tutor, Hans Hermann von Katte, sentencing him to death in 1730. Frederick's story provides important context to his relationship with von Steuben.

*LH: I think, obviously, von Steuben is the main subject of the book, but in a way, he's a bit of a Trojan horse to a deeper understanding of the queer history of the time, and other queer figures both in America and in Prussia. And, for me, one of the more interesting sections of the book was the section about Frederick the Great and his relationship to von Steuben. There's a section in the book where we go back further in time to Frederick the Great's early, tragic childhood love story, his sort of first love that ended very tragically and arguably shaped him for the rest of his life. And I think we can all, you know, a lot of us can agree like, oh, Frederick the Great's this very important historical figure, probably not the best human right, probably not the best guy for a lot of reasons. And we're not really trying to make him one, but it certainly humanizes him when we understand what he was coming from. Right? His terrible family life, his abusive father, his sort of first attempt to escape this like terrible situation he was in, and escape with his lover. And I think it's just, it's one other aspect of kind of digging deeper and relating to these figures who have kind of taken on this mythology, you know, the mythical status in historical terms and really humanizing them to ground level that we can all kind of understand and if not sympathize with at least understand a little more.*

KB: With so much fascinating content to digest, we asked Josh and Levi to share one thing they would like our listeners, and their readers, to know about von Steuben....

*JT: One thing I wish people knew more about von Steuben was kind of his prominence in our founding military, our founding revolution. He wrote the Blue Book regulation guide and taught soldiers how to become soldiers, how to maintain supply lines, how to avoid disease, how to fight on the front. And these are all skills that we weren't really prepared for when we went up against the greatest military superpower in the world at the time, Britain. And so I think we have to respect his kind of his brilliance and his tactical mind, and we can't separate his identity from his kind of queerness. There's a lot of conversation even still today about who should be allowed in the military, right? And the truth of the matter is, we've been there from day one, and we did it best.*

*LH: Yeah, I'll add to what Josh was saying a little bit. Something that I really was surprised, happily to learn about von Steuben was that he was so incredibly loyal to his own soldiers, and he really fought for them to get pay, he advocated for their conditions in the army. When he came to Valley Forge, he was absolutely outraged at the conditions they were living in. And, you know, I think really tried to make their lives better in whatever way he can, not only to make them better soldiers, but to, like, bring them out of this misery that they were all in. And obviously, we can't speak to his actual intentions, but after the war, he fought tirelessly for the soldiers to get paid. And Congress was notoriously reticent to pay all of the soldiers that they had owed money to and that they'd made these promises to, including von Steuben, who didn't get paid until many, many years after the Revolutionary War was over and we were a full country. So that to me is sort of advocacy for the common man and, you know, the sort of the soldiers on the ground, which is really closer to where he originally came from. For somebody who is always so eager to kind of climb up the social ladder, for him to kind of maintain that connection to kind of the ground*

*level and the common person, I think that to me was a really admirable part of his character and part of the American story. He was sort of an early advocate for people being paid what they were worth, Josh wrote this beautifully toward the end of the book like his sort of overall story sort of reflects the potential and disappointment of the American dream right. The unrealized potential. America has never realized the potential of its promise in so many ways and in so many ways, you know, people come here to create a better life and yet are blocked in all of these various ways from accessing whatever resources, opportunities that come from simply being born here. But even then if you're born here, there's no guarantee of any of that, right? Like there's very little social safety net. And you know, despite all of that my impression is he was proud to be here and wanted to be. He wanted to be in America and always felt a little bit outside of it.*

*JT: Something I learned in writing the book was broadening my understanding of who gets to write history, who gets to have history, and that was something really eye opening for me. Von Steuben's life is very well documented because of the class he was afforded and the privilege he had. But beyond that his life has never been explored really from a clear lens in a serious way. They focus on his military accomplishments exclusively, almost exclusively his time in the United States, and so it's like he just came fully formed out of a box. When in reality he overcame so much back in Europe, fighting in the Seven Years War, serving under Frederick the Great, becoming a prisoner of the Russians. And so, like you know, he lived this incredible, incredible life that is mostly forgotten. And you know, again we're not trying to make a hero out of him, but we are trying to show someone who is a product of their time and kind of a complex individual that merits our attention for better and for worse.*

KB: After the war, von Steuben was granted U.S. citizenship by the Pennsylvania Legislature in 1784. He formally adopted his companions and aides-de-camp Benjamin Walker and William North. Von Steuben even lived with Walker and Walker's wife in Manhattan for a period in the late 1790s. Walker visited von Steuben almost every year at his property (first in New Jersey and later in Oneida County, New York) and helped manage his business and finances with North. A third young man, John Mulligan, inherited von Steuben's library and collection of maps. Mulligan, who served as von Steuben's secretary, was present when the Baron passed away on November 28, 1794.

In 1910, a statue of von Steuben was dedicated in Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C. It was funded by an act of Congress, which was approved by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903. The artist, Albert Jaegers, was a German immigrant. He chose to depict von Steuben wearing the uniform of a major general of the Continental army, heavily cloaked against winter chill in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The Order of Knighthood, conferred upon von Steuben by Frederick the Great, can be seen on his chest.

The pedestal beneath the statute stands 20 feet high, and includes some *interesting* details, including a group of two statues labeled "Military Instruction." A soldier wearing an ornate helmet holds an empty Scabbard in his left hand. with his right hand he's pointing to the sword in the hands of a Young Man, presumably instructing the young man on how to properly use the sword. Both the soldier and his young student are depicted in the nude. Various plaques honor von Steuben and his companions including one on the back of the pedestal dedicated to "Colonel William North / Major Benjamin Walker / Aides and Friends / of General von Steuben."

The dedication ceremony was quite elaborate. Visitors from every part of the United States came to Washington DC, many of them members of different German cultural and Heritage organizations. The Secretary of War presided at the unveiling, and President Taft addressed the crowd, commenting, “Baron von Steuben came to this country, actuated by the highest motives of patriotism, to help us achieve liberty, and he brought with him that which was without money and without price and which he infused into the rank and file of the Revolutionary Army – discipline and organization.”

The day also featured plenty of music, including some of the Prussian songs von Steuben was said to enjoy, and that his dog Azor perhaps howled, too! Throughout history, von Steuben has gained many monikers, including Savior of the Continental Army, and Father of the American Military, and now a new moniker, Washington’s Gay General.

Big thanks to our very special guests, Josh and Levi. Be sure to pick up a copy of *Washington’s Gay General: The Legends and Loves of Baron von Steuben* at an independent bookstore or library near you!

DF: Kathleen Barker is History UnErased’s program director and is a library and information specialist and public historian with 20 years of experience as a museum and library educator.

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Our theme music is “1986” by BrothaD via Tribe of Noise.

I’m Deb Fowler. Thanks for listening.

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