

STUDENT GUIDE FOR

Friedrich Wilhelm August Heinrich Ferdinand von Steuben

REVELATION

ABOUT THE

REVOLUTION!

SAVIOR OF THE CONTINENTAL ARMY
FATHER OF THE AMERICAN MILITARY



HISTORY
UNERASED

PUTTING LOST HISTORY IN ITS
RIGHTFUL PLACE—THE CLASSROOM

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Case Study: Does the memorial statue of Baron Von Steuben in Lafayette Park offer an accurate portrayal of his legacy?

I. Historical Background and Context

Baron Friedrich Wilhelm August Heinrich Ferdinand von Steuben was born in 1730 in Magdeburg, Prussia (now part of present-day Germany), into a military family that would shape his destiny as one of history's most influential military reformers. His father, Captain Wilhelm von Steuben, served as an engineer lieutenant in the Prussian Army, and at the age of 17, he followed in his father's footsteps and joined the Prussian military. He served with distinction during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), rising through the ranks and gaining invaluable experience in European military tactics and discipline. Towards the end of the war, he was promoted to the rank of Captain and became *aide-de-camp* to King Frederick II, commonly known as Frederick the Great.¹ Despite his experience, after the war ended, von Steuben found himself without a position, as the Prussian Army was drastically reduced in peacetime, leaving many experienced officers seeking new opportunities. For his service in the Seven Years' War, Steuben was awarded Prussia's House Order of Fidelity in 1769, and by 1771, he had begun going by the title of "Baron." In 1777, following a chance meeting in Paris, Steuben's name would become forever entwined in the fabric of American history.

Von Steuben's fortunes changed dramatically when he met Benjamin Franklin in Paris in 1777. Franklin, serving as American ambassador to France, was traveling across Europe to secure support for the new United States' Continental Army in its fight for independence against Great Britain. The war had been going badly, and by the time Steuben and Franklin met in Paris, the situation had become dire; a string of defeats in New York, New Jersey, and Delaware had forced the Army to retreat and set up an encampment in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, west of Philadelphia, where the Continental Congress had also been forced to flee.

Franklin recognized the Baron's potential value to the struggling Continental Army and helped arrange his passage to America. In a letter to General George Washington, Franklin described Steuben this way:

*"He goes to America with a true Zeal for our Cause, and a View of engaging in it and rendring it all the Service in his Power. He is recommended to us by two of the best Judges of military Merit in this Country, M. de Vergennes and M. de St. Germain who have long been personally acquainted with him, and interest themselves in promoting his Voyage, from a full Persuasion that the Knowledge and Experience he has acquir'd by 20 Years Study and Practice in the Prussian School may be of great Use in our Armies. I therefore cannot but wish that our Service may be made agreable to him."*²

¹ Mary Stockwell, Ph.D. [Baron Von Steuben](#). The George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon. Center for Digital History.

² Franklin, Benjamin. "[Benjamin Franklin to George Washington, 4 September 1777.](#)" Benjamin Franklin Papers: Series II, 1726-1818; 1774, June 10-1777, Sept. 4 (vol. 18). Library of Congress.

Von Steuben and his aides arrived at Valley Forge in late February 1778, during one of the darkest periods of the Revolutionary War, when George Washington's army was demoralized, poorly supplied, and lacking in basic military discipline. Von Steuben was soon appointed Major General as well as Inspector General of the entire Continental Army, and despite speaking little English, he immediately set to work transforming the ragged colonial forces into a professional fighting force.

In his new role as Inspector General, von Steuben was tasked with the job of reviewing the Army's equipment, skills, living conditions, and overall readiness. He soon came to the determination that in all these areas, the Continental Army was in dire straits and needed to be overhauled immediately if the United States was to survive. Steuben recruited 120 members of the Continental Army and trained them to serve as an honor guard for General Washington and serve as an example to the rest of the Valley Forge regiment. He personally drilled the soldiers in European military tactics adapted for American conditions. Von Steuben simplified complex maneuvers, established proper camp sanitation that dramatically reduced disease, and instituted a system of military hierarchy and discipline that had been lacking. His training methods emphasized practical battlefield skills rather than mere parade ground precision, and he worked tirelessly alongside the common soldiers, earning their respect and transforming their effectiveness as a fighting force.

It was also during his service in the Continental Army that Steuben was first introduced to both Captain Benjamin Walker of New York and Captain William North of Maine. Walker's fluency in French proved invaluable to the Baron, who relied on him for communication with the troops and for translating his military manual. Captain William North, who joined von Steuben's staff in May 1779 and served until November 1783, became equally indispensable to the Baron's mission. Both Walker and North would be appointed as Steuben's loyal aides-de-camp and would go on to serve him for the remainder of his life.

With both Walker's and North's assistance, Steuben compiled his training methods into a book in 1779 called *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*. Commonly known as the "Blue Book," it would serve as the United States Military's official field manual until 1812.³

The discipline instilled by Steuben in the regiment at Valley Forge was quickly replicated by General Washington across the rest of the Continental Army, and proved instrumental in the United States' eventual victory over the British through the remainder of the war, until their final victory at the Battle of Yorktown in 1781. Steuben had effectively taken a ragtag group of militiamen and turned them into an effective, well-trained fighting force.

Following the signing of the Treaty of Paris, Steuben resigned his commission in the Continental Army in March 1784, writing:

³ United States Continental Army. Inspector General, General, Friedrich Wilhelm Ludolf Gerhard Augustin Steuben. [Regulations for the order and discipline of the troops of the United States Part I](#). Library of Congress.

"Tho a foreigner, I flatter myself that my zeal for the interests of the United States renders me worthy to participate in the happiness of seeing this Confederacy exalted to that Rank which the Virtue and perseverance of its Citizens have merited."

The same month, he was granted U.S. citizenship by an Act of the Pennsylvania legislature. Also in 1784, he was considered for the position of U.S. Secretary of War, but reportedly:

*"Political cliques and intrigues shelved his aspirations; the threadbare excuse, for the want of a better one, that he was a 'foreigner' to whom such an important post should not be intrusted[sic], was put forward; such was the gratitude of our Republic after a great war, in which Steuben had so forcibly proved his fidelity and force of character."*⁴

Following his rejection for the role of Secretary of War, Steuben settled in New York State and remained close to both Walker and North, at various points living with them and their families. Walker visited von Steuben in New Jersey often, and later in Oneida County, New York. Walker and North also helped manage his business and finances. By the end of his life, Steuben had legally adopted both Walker and North and left both men a large inheritance. John Mulligan, who served as von Steuben's secretary and was present when the Baron passed away on November 28, 1794, inherited von Steuben's library and collection of maps. The closeness of these relationships has led historians to speculate that Steuben had a deeper, potentially romantic connection with Walker, North, and Mulligan at various points in his life.

In 1910, a statue of von Steuben was dedicated in Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C.. Congress authorized funding for the statue through legislation signed by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903.

German-born sculptor Albert Jaegers created the bronze figure, portraying von Steuben as a Continental Army major general bundled in a heavy winter cloak—evoking the harsh conditions he endured while training American troops at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The decoration of the Order of Knighthood, bestowed upon von Steuben by Frederick the Great of Prussia, is visible on the statue's chest.

On December 7, 1910, the statue of Steuben was formally dedicated in a ceremony attended by numerous American and German dignitaries. At the center of the memorial is an elevated depiction of Steuben in full Continental Army uniform inspecting the troops at Valley Forge, with the inscription:⁵

ERECTED BY THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES TO FREDERICK WILHELM AUGUSTUS VON STEUBEN
IN GRATEFUL RECOGNITION OF HIS SERVICES TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE IN THEIR STRUGGLE FOR
LIBERTY.

⁴ Meyer, Herman H. B., and George H. Carters. [*Proceedings Upon the Unveiling of the Statue of Baron von Steuben, Major General and Inspector General in the Continental Army During the Revolutionary War, in Washington, D.C., December 7, 1910*](#). Library of Congress.

⁵ [*"General Von Steuben Statue."*](#) National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

BORN IN PRUSSIA
SEPTEMBER 17, 1730
DIED IN NEW YORK
NOVEMBER 28, 1794

AFTER SERVING AS AIDE-DE-CAMP TO FREDERICK THE GREAT OF PRUSSIA HE OFFERED HIS SWORD TO
THE AMERICAN COLONIES AND WAS APPOINTED MAJOR GENERAL AND INSPECTOR GENERAL IN THE
CONTINENTAL ARMY

HE GAVE MILITARY TRAINING AND DISCIPLINE TO THE CITIZEN SOLDIERS WHO ACHIEVED THE
INDEPENDENCE OF THE UNITED STATES

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While Steuben is in full Continental Army dress, he also wears a sash across his chest as an homage to his service in the Prussian military under Frederick the Great. On an adjacent side of the monument, beneath an engraving of the faces of two men, is the inscription:

COLONEL WILLIAM NORTH
MAJOR BENJAMIN WALKER
AIDES AND FRIENDS
OF GENERAL VON STEUBEN

At the dedication ceremony for Steuben's statue memorial, President William Howard Taft said:

*"When Baron Steuben came to this country, he found Germans who had preceded him, and who, like him, had elected to make this their permanent home. Since his day millions of his countrymen have come to be Americans, and it adds great interest to our celebration and emphasizes the propriety of the action of Congress in erecting this statue to know that the German race since the Revolution has made so large a part of our population and played so prominent a part in the great growth and development of our country."*⁶

⁶ Meyer, Herman H. B., and George H. Carters. [*Proceedings Upon the Unveiling of the Statue of Baron von Steuben, Major General and Inspector General in the Continental Army During the Revolutionary War, in Washington, D.C., December 7, 1910.*](#) Library of Congress.

II. Digital Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary Sources

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Sir

Passy, near Paris, Sept. 4. 1777.

The Gentleman who will have the Honour of waiting upon you with this Letter is the Baron de Steuben, lately a Lieutenant General in the King of Prussia's Service, whom he attended in all his Campaigns, being his Aide Camp, Quartermaster General, &c. He goes to America with a true Zeal for our Cause, and a View of engaging in it and rendring it all the Service in his Power. He is recommended to us by two of the best Judges of military Merit in this Country, M. de Vergennes and M. de St. Germain who have long been personally acquainted with him, and interest themselves in promoting his Voyage, from a full Persuasion that the Knowledge and Experience he has acquir'd by 20 Years Study and Practice in the Prussian School may be of great Use in our Armies. I therefore cannot but wish that our Service may be made agreable to him. I have the Honour to be

His Excellly Gen. Washington

2. United States Continental Army. Inspector General Friedrich Wilhelm Ludolf Gerhard Augustin Steuben. [Regulations for the order and discipline of the troops of the United States Part I.](#) Philadelphia: Printed by Styner and Cist, in Second-street, 1779. Library of Congress.
3. Washington, George. *Letter from George Washington to Friedrich Wilhelm, Baron von Steuben, December 23, 1783.* [[Page 1](#); [Page 2](#)] *George Washington Papers, Series 3, Varick Transcripts, 1775–1785, Subseries 3B, Continental and State Military Personnel, Letterbook 16.* Library of Congress.

Annapolis, December 23rd, 1783

My dear Baron,

Although I have taken frequent opportunities, both in public & private, of acknowledging your great zeal, attention & abilities in performing the duties of your Office; yet I wish to make use of this last moment of my public life, to signify in the strongest terms my entire approbation of your conduct, and to express my sense of the obligations the public is under to you, for your faithful & meritorious Services.

I beg you will be convinced, My dear Sir, that I should rejoice if it could ever be in my power to serve you more essentially than by expressions of regard & affection—but in the meantime, I am persuaded you will not be displeased with this farewell token of my Sincere friendship & esteem for you.

This is the last Letter I shall ever write while I continue in the service of my Country—the hour of my resignation is fixed at twelve this day—after which I shall become a private Citizen on the Banks of the Potomack, where I shall be glad to embrace you, and testify the great esteem and consideration with which I am—My dear Baron Your most Obedient & Affectionate Servant

George Washington

4. H.R. 16. "[An Act To provide for the erection at Washington, District of Columbia of statutes to the memory of Brigadier-General Court Pulaski and Major General Baron von Steuben, of the Continental Army.](#)" Volume 32 (1902–1903), 57th Congress. Image 973. U.S. Congress. February 27, 1903. Chap. 854, Sec. 2. Library of Congress.

5. Meyer, Herman H. B., and George H. Carter, compilers. [Proceedings Upon the Unveiling of the Statue of Baron von Steuben, Major General and Inspector General in the Continental Army During the Revolutionary War, in Washington, D.C., December 7, 1910.](#) U.S. Congress Joint Committee on Printing, 1913. Library of Congress.

6. "[Baron von Steuben Monument.](#)" *DC Historic Sites.*

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7. "[General Von Steuben Statue.](#)" National Park Service.

8. "[The General von Steuben Statue: Interpreting LGBTQ+ Histories of the Revolution.](#)" 2025. National Park Service. Wayback Machine Archive, captured January 18, 2025.

9. Blakemore, Erin. "[The Revolutionary War Hero Who Was Openly Gay.](#)" *History*, A&E Television Networks, June 14, 2018. Last updated January 31, 2025.

10. [Statues.](#) Highlighting the Baron von Steuben Statue. Valley Forge National Historical Park. National Park Service.

11. Stockwell, Mary. [Baron Von Steuben.](#) Center for Digital History. The George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon.

III. “Building a Statue” Primary Source Improv Activity

Historical Context: The Baron von Steuben statue in Lafayette Park honors Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, a Prussian military officer who came to Valley Forge in 1778 and transformed the Continental Army. Before Steuben arrived, American soldiers were poorly trained and often didn't know basic military skills. Steuben taught them how to march, use bayonets, and fight as a real army. His training was so effective that Baron von Steuben is regarded as the “Savior of the Continental Army” and for defeating the British.

Over 100 years later, Congress passed a resolution to recognize Baron von Steuben for his crucial role in American independence. [Richard Bartholdt](#) (Republican - Missouri), introduced H.R. 14644 on May 22, 1902, the House bill to erect a statue of Baron Steuben in Washington, D.C.. [Abraham Brick](#) (Republican - Indiana), introduced H.R. 16, a bill to erect a statue of the late Brig. Gen. Count Casimir Pulaski in Washington, D.C.. A few weeks after H.R. 14644 was introduced, it was merged with H. R. 16. On July 1, 1902, H.R. 16 was renamed to include both Pulaski and Steuben. H.R. 16 included \$50,000 to build Steuben’s statue and was passed into law on February 27, 1903.⁷ The statue was placed in Lafayette Park, directly across from the White House, alongside monuments to other foreign Revolutionary War heroes like Lafayette. When the statue was dedicated in 1910, President Taft and approximately 10,000 people attended the ceremony. The monument is a tribute to how America remembered and thanked the foreign allies who helped the young nation survive its fight for freedom.

Fast Facts

- Created by German-American sculptor Albert Jaegers, this statue portrays Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben (1730-1794) as he inspected American troops in 1778 during the American Revolution.
- It shows von Steuben wearing the uniform of a major general of the Continental Army, heavily cloaked against the rigors of the winter at Valley Forge.
- It consists of a 10-foot-tall bronze statue of von Steuben placed atop a 15-foot-tall base of pink granite.
- The statue was erected on the northwest corner of Lafayette Park in 1910.
- Baron von Steuben’s two closest aide-de-camps, Colonel William North and Major Benjamin Walker, are immortalized on the southeast side of the monument.
- The statue was dedicated on December 7, 1910.
- The statue is now owned by the National Park Service.

Source: [General Von Steuben Statue. National Park Service.](#)

⁷ *United States Statutes at Large, Volume 32 (1902–1903), 57th Congress. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1902. Page 973, Library of Congress*

Scenario A Objective: You will explore the details in the Baron von Steuben statue and discuss the meaning, characteristics, and significance of how Baron von Steuben is portrayed and the possible creative and political conversations and decisions that took place.

Scenario A: Setting: *A committee meeting around a large conference table to discuss what the artist should include on the statue, the statue design, and its purpose. The year is 1903.*

- **Albert Jaegers**, the German-American sculptor who created the statue, asks the committee to share the values they think should be included in the statue. What do they know about Baron Von Steuben, and what do they want to recognize? ([Jaegers' obituary in the New York Times](#))
- **Cass Gilbert**, one of the architects who assisted Jaegers with designing the base, speaks about weight and size. What type of material is needed to hold up the statue?
- **Thomas R. Johnson (T.R. Johnson)**, the other architect who worked on the pedestal's design, speaks about the beauty of marble and granite.
- **Richard Bartholdt** (Republican - Missouri), who introduced H.R. 14644.
- **Abraham Brick** (Republican - Indiana), who introduced H.R. 16.
- **Augustus Saint-Gaudens**, sculptor whose opinion "had much to do with the decisions of the commission." ("[Steuben Honored by the Nation He Helped Create](#)." November 27, 1910. The New York Times.)
- **Richard Bartholdt's congressional aide**, who takes notes and interjects with their opinions.
- **Abraham Brick's congressional aide**, who takes notes and asks clarifying questions often.

Scenario B Objective: You will explore the details in the Baron von Steuben statue and discuss the meaning, characteristics, and significance of how Baron von Steuben is portrayed and how individuals in 1910 may have reacted during the unveiling of the statue.

Scenario B: Setting: *the unveiling of the statue with President Taft, members of Congress, and community members. Approximately 1,000 people were in attendance.*

- **President Taft**, who presides over the ceremony
- **Albert Jaegers**, the German-American sculptor who created the statue, asks the committee to share the values they think should be included in the statue. What do they know about Baron Von Steuben, and what do they want to recognize? ([Jaegers' obituary in the New York Times](#))
- **Richard Bartholdt** (Republican - Missouri), who introduced H.R. 14644.
- **Abraham Brick** (Republican - Indiana), who introduced H.R. 16.
- **New York Times reporter**, who interviews as many people as possible about their reaction to the statue.
- **Washington D.C. Police officer**, who is protecting President Taft.
- **A woman walking by with her dog**, who is shocked at various aspects of the statue.
- **A 15-year-old student** who loves studying the American Revolution and is writing a story for their school newspaper. They have many questions about what is included on the statue.

IV. Discuss the Following Analysis Questions

1. What is depicted in the Lafayette statue, and what are the possible motivations for creating and sharing the statue?
2. What is the evidence of Baron von Steuben's impact on the transformation of the Continental Army and the lasting effects on the United States military organization?
3. How did the harsh conditions at Valley Forge both challenge and enable von Steuben's military reforms?
4. What could have been Baron von Steuben's motivations to embark on the journey from a Prussian officer to a Revolutionary War military leader under George Washington?
5. For what reason might the sculptor, Albert Jaegers, have chosen to include a plaque commemorating Steuben's connection with both Walker and North?
6. How is military training depicted in the details of the statue?
7. How did Baron von Steuben's leadership and the institution of the military influence social change beyond the success of the Continental Army?
8. How have policies enacted by the United States military impacted broader governmental and social structures?
9. Does Baron von Steuben's service to the Continental Army help us understand the ideals of American democracy today? If so, how?

V. Extension Activity: You have been commissioned to design a statue honoring Baron von Steuben in your city or town. Your task is to create a proposal for the statue and accompanying plaque that captures what you believe are his most significant achievements and legacy.

Learning Objectives for the Extension Activity:

- apply your knowledge of the historical significance of Baron von Steuben through the process of this case study and your analysis of primary and secondary sources;
- synthesize information to create a meaningful historical commemoration;
- develop skills in historical interpretation and public memory.

A. Create a detailed proposal for a Baron von Steuben statue that includes:

- Purpose: What is the memorial concept and goals for this public commemoration?
- Location: Where would you place this memorial and why?
- Overall Design: Describe the physical appearance (statue, monument, installation, etc.)
- Symbolic Elements: What specific symbols, imagery, or text would you include?

B. Design an informational plaque or panel that would accompany the statue that includes:

- **Essential biographical information**
- **Key achievements** (2-3 most important contributions)
- **Historical impact** (why Baron von Steuben matters to American history)
- **A meaningful quote** about Baron von Steuben

C. Write an explanation of your design choices that includes:

- Why did you select the specific information to highlight?
- How does your design reflect his most important contributions?
- What message about Baron von Steuben would you like visitors to understand?

Additional Baron von Steuben Statues and Monuments in the United States:

1. [Steuben Memorial State Historic Site, Oneida, New York](#)

Located in Steuben, Oneida County, New York, this memorial honors the "Drillmaster of the American Revolution" at the site where Baron von Steuben was buried in 1804.

2. [Baron von Steuben Statue, Utica, New York](#)

A monument commissioned in 1921 by the Steuben Society was created by sculptor J. Otto Schweizer, inscribed as "MAJOR GENERAL FRIEDRICH WILHELM BARON VON STEUBEN" and "ORGANIZER OF THE AMERICAN ARMY"

3. [Valley Forge National Historical Park, Pennsylvania](#)

A statue overlooking the Grand Parade at Valley Forge commemorates von Steuben's contributions to training the Continental Army during the winter of 1777-1778. The monument was moved to its current location along Route 23 on September 10, 1979.

4. [Von Steuben Statue, Wisconsin](#)

The Steuben Monument is located in Washington Park at the intersection of West Lisbon Avenue, Lloyd Street, and North Sherman Boulevard, showing Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben in his Revolutionary War uniform.

UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities Podcast

Season 3 Episode 3: Revelation about the Revolution

[**LISTEN**](#)

TRANSCRIPT

Deb Intro: 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.

Levi Hastings: 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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