

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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."*<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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:

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<sup>3</sup> 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."*<sup>4</sup>

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:<sup>5</sup>

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.

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> [\*"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  
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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."*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 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.