

Baron von Steuben: From Prussian Soldier of Fortune to Inspector General

By Don Heinrich Tolzmann

Introduction

Baron von Steuben justifiably occupies an honored place in the annals of American history for the role he played as Inspector General in organizing the Continental Army during the American Revolution. It is for that reason that the Steuben Monument was erected and dedicated in his honor in Washington, D.C. in 1910. The Monument symbolizes not only Steuben's contributions to America, but in a broader sense it stands also for the contributions German-Americans have made to this country. The occasion of the centennial celebration of the Steuben Monument in 2010 provides the opportunity to celebrate these contributions to the making of America.

The Steuben Monument Centennial also provides us with the opportunity of taking a closer look at Baron von Steuben. Rather than simply engaging in a recitation of his rather well-known contributions, I would like to compare some biographies of Steuben to see what light they shed on his beginnings and how this soldier of fortune came to be the Inspector General of the Continental Army. The first biography of Steuben appeared shortly before the American Civil War, almost six decades after his death in 1794. (1)

This biography was written by Friedrich Kapp, editor of the New Yorker Abend-Zeitung, who arrived in New York in 1850 after participating in the Revolution of 1848. Fortunately, the Steuben Papers were located nearby at the New York Historical Society. In 1858 Kapp's work appeared in German in Philadelphia under the title : *Leben des Amerikanischen Generals Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben*. In the following year, an English-language edition was published in New York as: *The Life of Frederick William von Steuben, Major-General in the Revolutionary Army*. Both editions sold well, becoming veritable classics that have remained in print ever since they were published. (2)

Kapp described his work as "the first attempt...at a complete biography of General von Steuben." (3) Since that time, several biographies have been

published, but Kapp's work has never been replaced and any consideration of Steuben's life and work must go back to this massive work of more than seven hundred pages. (4)

In the introduction to Kapp's biography, George Bancroft, one of the leading American historians of the time wrote that Kapp: "has brought to his undertaking the scholarly habits and criticism of the learned men of Germany, and has left nothing within his reach unconsidered. We have in his production the most complete and trusty account of Steuben's career, drawn directly from contemporary sources, authenticated by the use of the original papers of Steuben himself. Neither has the zeal of the biographer led him to exaggerate the hero's merit; he is painted to the life with his defects and his great qualities." (5)

Kapp notes in his introduction: "I have allowed, as much as possible, evidence and persons to speak for themselves, and certainly nobody can reproach me with having even partially adopted a 'Fourth of July oration style.'" He goes on to stress that it has been his "most earnest endeavor to adhere strictly to impartial truth and justice, and avoid allusions and erroneous conclusions." (6)

With regard to sources, Kapp writes that he researched the Steuben Papers which consist of sixteen volumes of manuscripts at the New York Historical Society. He also interviewed the personal secretary of Steuben, John W. Mulligan. He writes of him: "This venerable gentleman, now eighty-six years of age...related to me with quite remarkable vigor and freshness a number of characteristics and traits and stories of Steuben's life. I would that every biographer may find so reliable an authority, and so amiable and instructive a narrator as Mr. Mulligan." (7)

Kapp comments on the documentary nature of his work: "The arrangement of my book may not be exactly in conformity with the artistic requirements of biographical writing; but the fact that the greater part of my material is new, and hitherto unpublished, and that in order to attain my chief object, to portray

Note: Presented at the Steuben Monument Centennial in Washington, D.C., 4 December 2010, sponsored by the Steuben Society of America.

Steuben in the light of his time and the judgment of his contemporaries, I was obliged to copy the greater number of the documents without abridgement..."(8)

Aside from editing a German-American newspaper, Kapp was actively involved in politics as a member of the newly founded Republican Party, but decided to return to Germany after the Civil War and was then elected to the Reichstag. (9) In addition to his work on Steuben, he published several works on German-American topics that are still in print, including a biography of Baron De Kalb. Most important, however, was his biography of Steuben, of whom he writes: "The life of Steuben

is one of the most interesting and eventful of the many brilliant and stirring scenes of the eighteenth century." (10) It is, therefore, not surprising that Steuben has continued to be of ongoing interest to historians, painters, and sculptors, as well as a topic of debate.

Recent Steuben Research

Recently, two articles appeared, both dealing with the same question, which struck me as worthy of addressing, as responding to the question will help us further understand Steuben and at the same time teach us more about the Steuben biographies.

An article by Thomas Fleming appeared in 2006 in the American Heritage Magazine and was entitled "The Magnificent Fraud." It carried the subtitle "How a lying poseur gave America its army." Fleming argues that Steuben misrepresented himself as a lieutenant general who had served in the Prussian Army, whereas "he had never advanced beyond the rank of captain." Steuben then revised his curriculum vitae, according to Fleming, when he "discovered how many knowledgeable European officers were in the American army. An old soldier such as Baron Johann De Kalb, whom Congress had made a major general, was likely to have a working knowledge of the past and present lieutenant generals in the Prussian army and might start asking questions. De Kalb would be far less likely to know the names of all the Prussian colonels, and a lieutenant general from Baden would be totally unknown to him – and scarcely worth of comment. Extravagant titles were common in these little states." (11)

Upon his arrival in America, Steuben was, therefore, referred to in Congress as a "lieutenant general in foreign service," rather than one who had been in Prussian service. However, Fleming notes: "Neither the president nor Congress ever specifically repudiated the Prussian title, which continued to



The Steuben Monument in Washington, D.C.

be accepted by most Americans without a smidgen of doubt.” (12)

In 2008, Paul Lockhart, the author of a new biography on Steuben, commented on this same topic in an article that appeared in U.S. News and World Report. He wrote that: “Historians of the Revolution have taught us that Steuben was a talented fraud, a shameless self-promoter who falsified his titles and credentials in order to seek preferment in the Continental Army. But his military expertise was no affectation.” (13)

These recent comments raise a question that needs to be addressed. To respond to it, we can turn to Kapp’s biography of Steuben and compare it with the findings of the most recent biography by Paul Lockhart. This will serve the two-fold purpose of responding to the question, and also illustrate the status of Steuben research, past and present.

Kapp writes: “It appears that this pretense formed one of the subjects of conversation with the French ministers, and that it had been suggested by them. Politically they were right, as Steuben, had he been introduced only as a major or colonel to Congress, would never have been able to gain the important and influential position in America that he wanted for the introduction of his inspection and discipline. There was probably not a member of Congress who had ever heard of the Margraviate of Baden. The more imposing title of lieutenant general secured Steuben the right place in the American army. Even Franklin, who lived then in Paris, confounded Steuben’s being an aid-de-camp to Frederick II with the fictitious rank given him by the French diplomacy. And, in the United States, from his arrival to the present day, he usually was called a Prussian lieutenant general. So much is certain, that



Participants in the Steuben Monument Centennial:

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if Steuben had been a general, his position would have been so elevated, that he would never have crossed the Atlantic.” (14)

Several points can be made here with regard to Kapp's explanation: First, the idea of referring to Steuben as a Prussian lieutenant general came from the French ministers of state to promote and secure his service in the American Revolution. There were various reasons why France was interested in the American Revolution, but most important was finding a way of striking back at Britain for the humiliating defeat it had just suffered in the Seven Years War, known in America as the French and Indian War. This resulted in the loss of Canada to Britain, a tremendous setback for France.

Kapp refers to Steuben's meetings with two high-placed statesmen. The first and most important statesman was Count De St. Germain, the French Minister of War. He openly hinted at a Franco-American alliance in his discussions with Steuben and also urged him to offer his services to the Revolutionary cause. Kapp writes: “St. Germain was well aware that Steuben was perfectly competent to perform the task. Being himself an ardent admirer of the Prussian school of military discipline and tactics, which in former years he had in vain tried to introduce into the Danish army, and which he now equally in vain tried to introduce into the French army, he had made the acquaintance of Steuben, when the latter, after the termination of the Seven Years War, had just returned from the field, and he had formed a favorable opinion of the sound judgment and military ability of King Frederick's aid-de-camp.” (15) Steuben also met with Count De Vergennes, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, who also urged him to offer his services to the Americans, stating: “Go, succeed and you will never regret the step you have taken.” (16)

Kapp refers to the assumption of the Prussian title as having emerged in conversations with these French ministers of state. Steuben bought into the idea and no doubt had this in mind in 1790, when he wrote to Alexander Hamilton: “No person, sir, is better informed than yourself, how difficult it was, at that time, to introduce a foreigner into your army, even without any condition whatever. If, however, I should be charged with having made use of illicit stratagems to gain admission into the service of the United States, I am sure that the army will acquit me, and I flatter myself, so also will the citizens of the republic in general.” (17)

Turning now to the recent biography of Steuben by Paul Lockhart, we find that he writes: “The act of deception was not actually Steuben's but

rather a team effort” on the part of his promoters. He also notes that it was Franklin and his partner Silas Deane who were “the principal conspirators.” (18) In an article entitled “The Rich Legacy of a Forgotten Founder,” Lockhart also comments on the two American representatives in Paris, Benjamin Franklin and Silas Deane, noting: “Franklin and Deane were suitably impressed by Steuben's credentials, but they were not authorized to grant rank of any kind. All the commissioners could do was to suggest that the baron journey to America and look for work on his own. Steuben took this as rejection, but his desperation drove him to accept what little the American commissioners could offer. And they, in turn, did their best to make him more marketable. Franklin and Deane knowingly falsified Steuben's service record, informing Congress and Gen. George Washington that he had been a lieutenant general and personal aide to Frederick the Great. The ruse worked. When Steuben arrived in America at the end of 1777—styled in the French manner as the baron de Steuben—he was greeted as a conquering hero.” (29)

A second point to take note of with regard to Kapp's biography is his comment that Franklin confused Steuben's service in the Prussian army with the “fictitious rank given him by the French diplomacy.” However, it appears that Franklin's confusion was not made out of ignorance, but rather was intentional on his part. It was a clever, but crucial twist of the truth: Yes, Steuben was Prussian, he had served in the Prussian army and he was a lieutenant general, albeit not in the Prussian Army. However, all of these facts were thrown together in a pot and out came Baron von Steuben re-cast as a Prussian lieutenant general.

Accordingly, Steuben received letters of recommendation from Franklin. Almost immediately after Steuben's arrival in America, however, the matter was clarified as to his status. Congress issued a resolution stating: “Whereas, Baron Steuben, a lieutenant general in foreign service, has in a most disinterested and heroic manner offered his services to these States as a volunteer, Resolved, That the president present the thanks of Congress, in behalf of these United States, to Baron Steuben, for the zeal he has shown for the cause of America, and the disinterested tender he has been pleased to make of his military talents, and inform him that Congress cheerfully accepts his services as a volunteer in the army of these States, and wish him to repair to General Washington's quarters as soon as convenient.” (20)

Historical Context

A few words are in order here about military life to place this matter in historical context. Steuben basically was a soldier of fortune, a free agent and contractor for military service. He had no job security or tenure whatsoever and operated in the highly charged political arena of 18th century European court life. His family came from the landless lower nobility and four of his uncles had made a career out of service in the Prussian army. His own father, Wilhelm Augustin von Steuben, joined the Prussian Army at age sixteen. With no land holding and this kind of military history, it was not surprising that Steuben followed in their footsteps. His life reads like a military life with little, or no time left for anything else.

He was born in 1730 at the Prussian military fort in Magdeburg and by the age of 14 served under his father in the War of Austrian Succession. Steuben refers to "the troubles of military life" and recalls the "frequent changes in address" that were part of such a life. Kapp writes that Steuben: "from his earliest infancy, saw nothing but soldiers and things pertaining to war." He also notes: "As a son of a poor officer, Steuben's only prospect was to gain for himself an honorable position and distinction on the field of battle." (21)

In 1747, at the age of 17, he joined a Prussian infantry regiment, attaining the rank of first lieutenant by 1755 when the Seven Years War broke out. By 1761, he had risen to the rank of captain and remained in Prussian service until the end of the war in 1763, then leaving the Prussian army, as his service was no longer required. In his final years of service, he held the position as an aide-de-camp on the general staff of Frederick the Great, serving as liaison between the King and the Quartermaster-General, a position from which he no doubt learned much that would aid him for his career in America.

The end of the war meant peace for Prussia, but for a professional soldier like Steuben, it also meant the loss of an assignment. The Steuben family had no estate for him to retire to. By way of comparison, George Washington, who also completed his military service in the same war as a member of the colonial militia, could return to Mount Vernon, a landed estate of 6,500 acres. Peace for him meant a return to civilian life, but for Steuben it meant the loss not only of an assignment, but a position as well.

Steuben had no choice but to seek employment at one of the many courts in the German states and succeeded in finding one with a Prussian connection. In 1764, he accepted a position as grand marshal at the court of the Prince of

Hohenzollern-Hechingen, on the recommendation of the Princess of Württemberg and Prince Heinrich of Prussia, the brother of Frederick the Great. In 1771, he accompanied the Hohenzollern prince on a trip to France, making the acquaintance of French diplomats and nobles.

He then took a position at the court of the Margrave of Baden, who in 1769 had bestowed the award of a cross of the order "De la Fidelite," which was only granted to members of the nobility, and bestowed on Steuben the honorific title of "Freiherr." This translates as Baron in English as well as French and was the title that Steuben began to use, becoming henceforth generally known as Baron von Steuben.

A word is in order here about what might be called "title enhancement." The foremost example in the Germanic realm came from the Prussian House of Hohenzollern. The grandfather of Frederick the Great requested and was granted the right by the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1701 of taking on the title of "King in Prussia." However, his grandson, Frederick the Great, did not request, but simply and boldly assumed the title "King of Prussia" in 1772. (22)

Conclusion

Returning now to the question Fleming and Lockhart raised, the answer should be placed in historical context. As we have seen, the packaging and marketing of Baron von Steuben was part of an overarching French strategy of supporting the American Revolution as a means of avenging the loss to Britain in the Seven Years War. This merged with the objectives of the American representatives in Paris who were seeking military officers for the Revolution. Presenting Steuben as a lieutenant general in the Prussian army was an integral part of the ensuing Franco-American strategy. Rather than describing Steuben personally as a fraud, it might be more accurate to describe him as the creation and product of his Franco-American promoters, who engaged in what Steuben himself called "illicit stratagems."

He was a soldier of fortune skilled not only in military tactics and strategy, but also in the contentious court politics of the time. Self-promotion was an integral part of his *modus operandi*. Had Steuben not played along with his promoters, it is doubtful that he would have made it to America. Kapp stresses the following important point with regard to Steuben: "Military distinction and active employment were the chief objects of his (Steuben's) ambition, the immediate motives of his conduct." (23)

In the final analysis we have to agree that deception was an integral part of the process of marketing Steuben. Although the process was questionable, the product was no hoax. There was substance behind the image and Steuben delivered military results, as proven by his record. Additionally, it has to be said that Steuben himself was not the perpetrator of the so-called "illicit stratagems," but rather the subject of them, albeit ones he willingly coalesced with. Our examination of the packaging and marketing of Steuben provides us with a greater understanding of the American Revolution in general and of Steuben's life and career in particular. This is the complex story of how a Prussian soldier of fortune became Inspector General of the U.S.

Kapp concludes his biography by observing: "If Washington must be called the head and soul of the war of the Revolution, Steuben may be considered as one of the strongest arms, as the efficient instrument which served to carry out into practice the projects which Washington conceived. He is, therefore, entitled to an honorable and enduring place in the history of the American people." (24)

And Lockhart notes that Steuben "became an instant legend. Stomping through the snow, he put a single "model company" of Continentals through their paces, teaching them drill as he cursed the awkward soldiers in an incomprehensible mix of French, German, and English. The men fell in love with him, with his exaggerated fits of anger, but above all with his constant attention to their well-being. Within weeks, the entire army was marching and drilling with a grace and precision that rivaled the standing armies of the great European powers." (25)

In conclusion, we might best agree with Steuben's appraisal of the issue at hand: "If, however, I should be charged with having made use of illicit stratagems to gain admission into the service of the United States, I am sure that the army will acquit me, and I flatter myself, so also will the citizens of the republic in general." (26)

The dedication of the Steuben Monument in 1910 and the celebration of its centennial in 2010 would fully seem to confirm his appraisal. (27) Then as now, the Steuben Monument provides us with the opportunity to not only honor Baron von Steuben for his contributions to the American Revolution, but also to learn more about him and how this Prussian soldier of fortune became the Inspector General of the Continental Army. He not only symbolizes German contributions to America, but also the opportunities that America has offered to German immigrants since they first arrived in 1608. He truly is a German-American success story. (28)

Notes

1. See: Friedrich Kapp, *The Life of Frederick William von Steuben, Major-General in the Revolutionary Army, With an Introduction by George Bancroft*. (New York: Mason Brothers, 1859). Hereafter cited as: KL.
2. See: Friedrich Kapp, *Leben des Amerikanischen Generals Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben*. (Philadelphia: Schaefer & Koradi, 1858).
3. KL, p. ix.
4. See, for example: Rudolf Cronau, *The Army of the American Revolution and its Organizer: Rudolf Cronau's Biography of Baron von Steuben*. Edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 1998; John McAuley Palmer, *General von Steuben*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1937); and: Paul Lockhart, *The Drillmaster of Valley Forge: The Baron de Steuben and the Making of the American Army*. (New York: Harper, 2008). Also, reference should be made to: Jürgen Brüstle, *Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben: Eine Biographie*. (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2006).
5. KL, p. vi.
6. Ibid, p. x.
7. Ibid. p. xii.
8. Ibid, pp. ix-x.
9. For a list of Kapp's numerous works see: Henry Pochmann and Arthur R. Schultz, *Bibliography of German Culture in America to 1940*. (Millwood, New York: Kraus International Publications, 1982), pp.186-87, items no. 5549-5575.
10. KL, p. 38.
11. Thomas Fleming, "The Magnificent Fraud: How a Lying Poseur gave America its Army," *American Heritage Magazine*. (February/March 2006) available online at: http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/2006/1/2006_1_58.shtml.
12. Ibid.
13. Paul Lockhart, "The Rich Legacy of a Forgotten Founder," *U.S. News and World Report*. (27 June 2008) available online at: <http://politics.usnews.com/news/national/articles/2008/06/27/the-rich-legacy-of-a-forgotten-founder.html>. Also, see his new biography: *The Drillmaster of Valley Forge: The Baron de Steuben and the Making of the American Army*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).
14. KL, p. 74.
15. Ibid, pp. 69-70.

16. Ibid, p. 75.
17. Ibid, p. 74.
18. Paul Lockhart, *The Drillmaster of Valley Forge: The Baron de Steuben and the Making of the American Army*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 44.
19. Paul Lockhart, "The Rich Legacy..." U.S. News and World Report.
20. KL, p.
21. Ibid, p. 46.
22. Regarding Frederick the Great, see: Robert B. Asprey, *Frederick the Great: The Magnificent Enigma*. (New York: History Book Club, 1986).
23. KL, p. 77.
24. Ibid, p. 648.
25. Lockhart, "The Rich Legacy..."
26. See footnote no. 18.
27. Regarding the Steuben Monument, see: Hans Pohlsander, *German Monuments in America: Bonds across the Atlantic*. New German-American Studies, Vo. 33. (Oxford: Peter Lang Pub. Co., 2010).
28. For further information about the Steuben Monument Centennial, see the author's article "The Steuben Monument Centennial," *Steuben News*. (March/April 2010). Here I noted that: "In 1902, Rep. Richard Bartholdt of Missouri introduced a bill in Congress for a monument of Baron von Steuben to honor his contributions to the winning of the American Revolution.

The bill was approved and Albert Jaegers, a German-American artist, set to work on creating a statue for Lafayette Park, which is located directly in front of the White House in Washington, D.C...The statue was dedicated on 7 December 1910, with thousands in attendance, with the statue officially unveiled by Helen Taft, daughter of President Taft...In 1911, the U.S. presented a replica of the Steuben Monument to Germany and sent Rep. Bartholdt to Germany to represent the U.S. at its dedication in Potsdam." The proceedings of the dedication of the Steuben Monuments in Washington, D.C. and Potsdam were published in book form and available as: *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 and upon the Presentation of the Replica to His Majesty the German Emperor and the German Nation in Potsdam, September 2, 1911*. Erected by the Congress of the United States, compiled by George H. Carter (1911). For a survey of the role played by German-Americans in the Revolution, see the author's article "The German Contribution to the American Revolution," *The Palatine Immigrant*. 35:2(2010): 25-29.