

GENERAL VON STEUBEN IN WASHINGTON DC

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When I first titled this talk, I thought it would be clever to call it: “General von Steuben in Washington, DC,” knowing full well that this would have been a physical impossibility. The city of Washington DC, in fact, was founded in 1800 some five years after Steuben’s death. Implicit in the title, however, is the idea that the name Steuben did exert a major symbolic influence in the city, right up to the outbreak of World War I. Physically, this is demonstrated by the fact that there are or were two public Steuben statues in the immediate Washington area, plus a bust in the Pentagon, not generally accessible to tourists.

Furthermore, Steuben’s fame and name frequently served the local German American community as a role model and rallying point. His fame in drilling and organizing the American Revolutionary Army, and his national popularity were vicariously used to enhance the status of the German American community. Specifically, they held several Steuben festivals beginning in the 1850s, which were popular summer events for the entire Washington community. The festivals were also the occasion to raise money to erect Steuben statues, at first for other cities and later for Washington itself.

This paper will describe how the name Steuben was used as a heroic symbol by the German American community in Washington for most of the 19th century, and will trace the history of the two major statues erected in the general’s honor.

GENERAL VON STEUBEN VISITS MOUNT VERNON

To return for a moment to the title—in my research I found my assumption that Steuben had never been to Washington, while technically correct, was not quite the whole story. I was pleased to learn that Steuben had in fact been in the immediate Washington area, at least once, prior to the actual founding of the city.

On November 3, 1780, Baron von Steuben and General Nathaniel Greene, both serving on General Washington staff, departed from Philadelphia heading south to begin the American campaign against British forces under Lord Cornwallis in Virginia and the Carolinas. By November 12th, the two generals reached Mount Vernon, the plantation home of General George Washington near Alexandria, Virginia. Here they were graciously received by Mrs. Martha Washington and put up for the night. In reaching Mount Vernon, which is a short distance from the DC line, Steuben is likely to have transited at least some portion of the area where Washington now stands. Thus, it is quite probable that Steuben did at least ride across the land that was to become the national capital.

Afterwards, Gen. Greene wrote a polite thank you letter to General Washington saying:

“Mount Vernon is one of the pleasantest places I ever saw...Baron Steuben is delighted with the place and charmed with the reception we met with.”¹

Greene’s description was apparently somewhat exaggerated, because Steuben wrote to his aide, Duponceau, that he was charmed by Martha Washington’s hospitality and he revered General Washington greatly, but that the Mount Vernon mansion itself did not meet his taste:

‘If General Washington were not a better General than he was an architect, the affairs of America would be in a very bad condition.’²

STEBEN SOLDIER AND PERSON

Let me make a few comments about Steuben’s character. To my mind, it was not only his success as a professional soldier and organizer of armies but also his character that ultimately caused the name Steuben to become a shining symbol for German Americans of that day.

Steuben was first and foremost a professional soldier and diplomat. A soldier like his father before him, he was trained as a staff officer under the harsh discipline of King Frederick the Great and was considered a courageous and resourceful soldier in several engagements during the Seven Years War. The harshness and brutality of soldiery during this period is well illustrated by the story of Frederick the Great and Captain Zieten

On a campaign in Silesia, Frederick gave orders one day that all fires and lights were to be extinguished in his camp by a certain hour. To make certain that his order was obeyed the King himself went the rounds. As he passed by the tent of a certain Captain Zieten, he noticed the glimmer of a candle, and upon entering found the officer sealing a letter to his wife. Frederick demanded to know what Zieten thought he was doing and asked if he did not know the orders for lights out: The captain threw himself at the king's feet, unable to deny or excuse his disobedience. Frederick instructed him to sit down and add a postscript to the letter, which Frederick himself dictated: " Tomorrow I shall perish on the scaffold." Zieten wrote what he was told and was duly executed the following day.

In relating this story I do not mean to say that the character of Steuben was anything like the brutality demonstrated by King Frederick—quite the contrary. Steuben was a professional soldier and could be hard and cuss out his charges in royal fashion, but according to the reports of almost everyone he ever came in contact with Steuben the inner man was in reality loving, generous, well-liked and admired. (Perhaps his greatest fault was his complete incompetence in how to manage his own money. In this regard he was apparently hopeless.)

Washington's admiring farewell letter to Steuben is well known. It was significant that Washington wrote his letter of generous praise as the very last action he took as commander in chief of the American army. Washington's use of the salutation: My dear Baron, were unusually warm and significant words for the

cool and dignified Washington, hardly ever used by Washington in public correspondence.

More striking yet was the admiration that Steuben evoked from his troops. As he was leaving the army in the summer of 1783, the officers of two New York regiments got together and penned him their own farewell letter which read:

“...permit us, the Officers of the two New York Regiments of Infantry to express our feelings towards you on this occasion. The essential and distinguished services you have rendered this Country, must inspire the breast of every Citizen of America with sentiments of gratitude & esteem, but we, Sir, feel sentiments of another nature. Your unremitted exertions on all occasions to alleviate the distresses of the Army—and the manner in which you have shared them with us, have given you more than a common title to the character of our Friend—as our Military parent we have long considered you. –Ignorant as we were of the profession we had undertaken, it is to your Abilities & unwearied assiduity we are indebted for that Military Reputation we finally attained. We therefore feel ourselves bound to you by the strongest ties of affection, and we now take leave of you with that regret, which such sentiments must occasion.

Wishing you long to enjoy in health and happiness, those rewards which your services have merited & which a grateful people cannot fail to bestow, we have the honor to remain.

Sir,
Your most Obedt. and Very humble servants³

POST REVOLUTION PERIOD

Steuben embodied the ideal of the war hero and was known nationally as the “drillmaster” of the Revolutionary, but it was in the 1850s that his name took on special significance for his fellow German Americans. What was it about the 1850s, which turned German American attention once again to their national hero? In a word it was “nativism”.

Nativism was a political movement of the time, which opposed and feared the large influx of Roman Catholic immigrants from Germany and Ireland. Some Americans, especially among the well-to-do classes, viewed the immigrants as a

threat to traditional American culture and its unique political system. A political party was formed to combat this immigrant threat and was named *The American Party*, or popularly called *the Know-Nothings*. Its main political ideology was “nativism” and one of its goals was to adopt tougher anti-immigrant measures.

The *Know-Nothings* achieved considerable success in a few local and state elections in the 1850s, but had little success nationally. Both Baltimore and Washington DC elected Know Nothing mayors and councilmen in the 1856 municipal elections. The outspokenness of some radical German political refugees from the failed revolution of 1848 played into the anti-German sentiment in America. The German Democratic Association, for example, largely composed of so-called Forty-Eighters, took extreme stands. Advocating the abolition of the presidency, the right of the people to change the Constitution as they pleased, and universal suffrage were among the milder proposals. Additionally, some among the Forty-Eighters made no effort to Americanize themselves because they expected the imminent overthrow of the reactionary German states and a quick return to the Fatherland. The most arrogant felt that all America should be Germanized.⁴ Such views, however, were not representative of most Washington Germans.

Nevertheless, Washington’s German and Irish immigrants suffered verbal and physical attacks at the hands of *Know-Nothing* thugs. A gang attack on the crowd at the Washington Saengerbund picnic in 1854 resulted in several serious injuries to the peaceful German picnickers. The high point of the *Know-Nothing* aggression came during Washington’s mayoral election in 1856. At that time, Washington and neighboring Baltimore were home to several gangs of violent rowdies. These gangs were sometimes hired to cause trouble at the polling stations during elections. Baltimore had by far the more notorious gangs, many with colorful names.

One of the Baltimore gangs, the Plug Uglies, was hired by the *Know Nothings* to come to Washington on Election Day to intimidate Irish and German voters. Arriving by train from Baltimore, the Plug Uglies bullied their way to the second ward polling station at the Northern Liberties Market (present day Mt. Vernon Square) and began pushing and using shoemakers' awls to stab several "foreign-looking" citizens lined up to vote. A riot ensued, and election officials closed the polls. Mayor Magruder of Washington rushed to the White House to ask President Buchanan for help in restoring order. The President sent for the U.S. Marines, who promptly marched up 7th St. at the double, and after a volley of shots were fired on both sides, order was restored, and the election proceeded. The result of this incident was that several deaths and serious injuries to innocent voters and bystanders, including a few Germans.

Washington Germans reacted to the nativist attacks by closing ranks as seldom before in the face of the common threat. German organizations such as the Turners, the militia, the singing groups, and the churches grew more popular and stronger. A specific response was to jointly sponsor social activities well attended by local German Americans. It was at this time that the first Steuben and Schiller Festivals started. These events, while open to all, specifically served to weld the German community together. The added attraction was that the festivals were fun and popular with the general public.

Commenting on a Steuben Festival in Baltimore, Dieter Cunz, the eminent German American historian wrote:

"It was seldom possible to unite all these divergent groups so that they could appear together ...The Steuben celebration of 1858 was such an occasion. It was hoped that by forcefully drawing the attention of the public to General Steuben, who immediately after his arrival in America reorganized the American army and then rendered valuable assistance to the birth of the young nation, the nativists and Know Nothings, who were trying to hinder immigration and naturalization, could be made ridiculous. All the Germans were united in the battle against the Know-Nothings."⁵

THE STEUBEN FESTIVALS OF 1850s

There were two large German American festival in the 1850s. Detailed reports were carried in the local newspapers. The Steuben Festival on September 19-20th 1859 was the more dramatic. Severe weather hit the city with full force just before the scheduled event. Heavy rain brought flooding along the banks of the usually peaceful Potomac. The Festival was to be held at Arlington Springs (now Arlington National Cemetery) on the Virginia side of the river. The main route to the Festival over the Long Bridge (near today's Fourteenth St. Bridge) between the District of Columbia and the Virginia shore was awash and impassible.

The big question for the festival organizers was how to get there. Because the previous Steuben Festival two years before had been such a great success, large crowds were anticipated--and not just from the local German-American community. The Steuben Association together with local German American organizations, including the marching bands, the singing societies, the Turners, and the Yaeger Militia Company organized the festivities. Like the very popular Oktoberfests that we know today, many non-German-American visitors were expected to also attend to enjoy the fun, dancing, contests, and feasting which formed an integral part of the event.

One possibility would have been to hire boats in Georgetown, then a Washington suburb, to ferry the crowds across the turbulent waters. Due to the unexpectedness of the storm, however, no boats had been arranged for ahead of time and were therefore not available. Indeed, the racing water in the river would have meant a riskier crossing, and the relatively few boats available even in the best of times could not have easily accommodated the large crowds of eager passengers anyway.

The only solution was to walk from Georgetown to Arlington over the old Aqueduct (near the present day Key Bridge between Georgetown and Rosslyn). The Aqueduct was essentially an enlarged footpath alongside the pipeline bringing drinking water from Virginia to the District. As a result, on a fine sunny day in Washington, hundreds of people set out from their homes on foot, crossed the Aqueduct and marched a further mile back along the Virginia shore before reaching the Arlington festival grounds. Because of the crowds, progress was slow, both coming and going, but the determination of the hundreds of German and non-German folks alike to have fun at the Steuben Festival was evident.

What was the festival like? The local newspapers gave glowing accounts. It all started with a big parade. When the signal gun was fired early on Saturday morning, a long procession of marchers started off from the City Hall (near present day Judiciary Square) and made their way to the Aqueduct Bridge. The parade was accompanied by Wither's, Wagner's and Schroeder's Bands, all three well-known German-American marching bands which were very much in evidence for all kinds of civic activities. The route of march was down Third St. N.W., up the Avenue (as Pennsylvania Ave. was then called), past the President's House (now the White House), around Lafayette Square (where the Steuben Monument was later erected) and finally further along the Avenue to Georgetown and the Aqueduct. Large crowds watched the parade then fell in behind the marchers for the trek to Arlington.

On the festival grounds, the activities were numerous. The younger set and the adept of foot headed for the dance pavilion where Fisher's string band held sway. The Washington Star reported that the dancers' quick feet were busily employed during the day in treading the intricate mysteries of the waltz. In back of the pavilion was a speaker's rostrum decorated by draperies, which were festooned with picturesque medallions. To the right was a large painting of General Steuben and to the left one of Benjamin Franklin. Over the rostrum hung

the flags of the Yaegers and the other festival organizers. Mr. Eberly, president of the Steuben Association, addressed the crowd in German and then in English congratulating one and all on their successful efforts in organizing a festival to celebrate the life and accomplishments of General von Steuben.

Following the speeches, the *Washington Star* paper reported that:

“the company then dispersed through the grounds to enjoy themselves during the succeeding hour in the thousand diversified amusements provided, for which our Teutonic fellow-citizens are so justly celebrated, delightful vocal and instrumental music from the singing societies and the several bands forming a prominent ingredient. At one o’clock, the Turners marched with their band to a site on the grounds where targets had been set up for a crossbow-shooting contest. The athletes among the Turners then performed gymnastic exercises to loud applause. One of the hits of the day was the greased pole-climbing contest and it was noted that no one got more than half way up the pole.”⁶

Another popular contest was the cock-striking competition. In this activity a rooster was placed on the top of a barrel and covered by a basket. Contestants were blindfolded, spun around several times and sent off with a stick to try to knock the basket off the barrel. Anyone who hit the basket, with only one swing being allowed, got the rooster as a prize. Amid much laughter at the many contestants who tried and failed to find the mark, three contestants did manage to topple the basket and win a rooster.

What was it that was so attractive and why did people attend the Steuben Festival in such numbers? There are several reasons. For the German-Americans it was a chance to meet and greet their fellow ethnic friends and relations. There was an element of showing off as well as pride. They gathered to celebrate an authentic German-American hero, General Baron von Steuben, who was recognized as such by everybody from George Washington on down. For the attendees as a whole, the Festival was a fun occasion for parents and children alike, where *Gemütlichkeit* was pervasive and enjoyment the order of the day.

Toward evening, tired but satisfied and happy with the fine outing, the crowds wandered back across the Aqueduct and walked home. As the *Evening Star* reported it: "During the entire day the utmost good feeling prevailed inside the grounds, and at early nightfall the procession formed in line, and proceeded homewards in good order."⁷ What else would one expect from a German crowd?

THE STEUBEN MONUMENT OF 1870

The Civil War of 1861-65 followed by the turbulence of Reconstruction brought an end to the earlier form of Steuben festivals, but German American gatherings continued in local beer gardens and at popular picnic spots around the District. One of the most popular spots was the Schützenverein Park on 7th Road in Washington. A Steuben Memorial Committee, which had collected money for a statue of Steuben at the earlier festivals, continued its fund raising.

After many years of preparation and fund raising by the Committee the corner stone for a bust of General von Steuben was laid in May 1870 on the grounds of the Schützenverein Park. The *Evening Star* excitedly anticipated the event:

"The Steuben Monument—The corner stone laying on Monday next at 4 o'clock our German citizens will lay in the Schützen Park the corner stone of the monument to the memory of Baron Steuben, a distinguished volunteer officer in the Revolutionary War. The monument is being cut by Mr. Jacques Jouvenal of this city and will be surmounted by a bust of Steuben two and a half feet in height while on the panels of the pedestal will be appropriate inscriptions. The Grand Lodge of Masons will lay the corner stone and the Saengerbund will sing appropriate pieces, while the Marine Band will perform suitable selections of music. The President, the Cabinet officer, General Sherman, Vice Admiral Porter, Baron von Gerolt, the American Ministers, both Houses of Congress, and distinguished personages have been invited and will attend. Senator Schurz of Missouri and Rep. Mr. Degener will speak in German, and in English. As General Steuben was rendered valuable and to the American people in the War of the Revolution. It is to be hoped that all will turn out to honor his memory."⁸

The Schützenverein held its Grand May Festival on May 16 and 17, 1870. The day began with a salute fired in the Schützen Park. This was followed by a parade, which began at the Victoria Hotel on Pennsylvania Ave., N.W. at 9 a.m. The U.S. Marine Band lead the procession followed by well over 100 members of the Schützenverein. The route of march was a long one and it wasn't until 1:30 PM that the parade arrived at the Schützen Park. Schützen President Vogt gave a short speech of welcome followed by lunch. "Target firing commenced immediately afterwards as well as tenpin bowling and other amusements. The Marine Band played concert music, and a good string orchestra performed in the pavilion. The German singing societies were also present.

At 4 p.m. President Grant accompanied by General Horace Porter arrived on the grounds and was greeted by the Reception Committee while the Marine Band played "Hail to the Chief" and a 21-gun salute was fired. An "elegant collation" was served to the President, the Cabinet members, General William T. Sherman, several Senators and Congressmen, the German Ambassador, Baron Gerald, and the other distinguished guests.

After lunch Mr. Anton Eberle, President of the Steuben Association gave remarks in German and English honoring the service and memory of Baron Steuben and related the many difficulties and delays over the years in completing the project. The tenacity of many German Americans over the years had now come to a successful conclusion and the monument was finally ready for dedication. He emphasized that besides being an illustrious American patriot and hero in the war for Independence, Baron von Steuben served as a respected hero and role model for all German Americans

As was often the custom in those days, the corner stone of the monument was laid in a ceremony conducted by the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of Washington DC. The main speaker for the occasion was the newly elected and famous German American Senator Carl Schurz of Missouri, who

gave a stirring address in German. He pointed to the paradox that troops trained by von Steuben had fought against the German mercenary troops (called the Hessians) serving in the British army. Schurz pointed out that their feudal German rulers had in effect sold the German units in the British army to King George. This was in stark contrast to the volunteer service of Baron Steuben and very different from the volunteer militia and regular soldiers of German American background in the ranks of the Civil War army.

The saga of the Steuben monument in Washington is a sad one. The monument stood in Schützen Park until 1893 when the Park was closed. The monument was moved to an obscure site at the German Orphan Home in semi-rural Anacostia in Southeast Washington. A similar fate occurred in 1966, when the old German Orphan Home was sold and a new orphan home built in Upper Marlboro, a few miles outside of Washington. The monument was relocated to a spot adjacent to the new Orphan Home where it still stands today--neglected, scarcely visible and in need of repair. In an ironic repeat of history, the status of the Steuben statue is once again in question. The Board of Directors of the Orphan Home sold the property in 2000, and the question of what will happen to the statue now and will it ever find a permanent home is unresolved.

STEBEN MONUMENT- LAFAYETTE PARK

The final appearance of Baron Steuben as a symbol for German Americans, both locally and nationally, occurred in the early part of the 20th century, marking a highpoint for German Americans.

On December 7, 1910 a statue of Frederick William Augustus Henry Ferdinand, Baron von Steuben, Major General and Inspector General in the

Continental Army, was unveiled in the northwest corner of Lafayette Park directly across from the White House in Washington, DC. Several years before, Rep. Richard Bartholdt of Missouri had begun the drive in Congress to secure funds for a Steuben statue. On February 27, 1903 Congress finally voted an appropriation of \$50,000 to commission and erect a monument in Lafayette Park.

Secretary of War, the Hon. Jacob Dickinson, presided at the ceremonies attended by a large group of American politicians and military leaders. Kaiser Wilhelm of German dispatched a large contingent from Germany including some German troops. That delegation was lead by the German Ambassador Count von Bernstorff. German and American military units, including bands, and many local and national German American marched through the streets of Washington viewed by thousands of spectators who lined the route.

President William Howard Taft gave the dedicatory address and the President's daughter, Miss Helen Taft, unveiled the monument.

In his address, the President 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...The Germans who have become American citizens and their descendants may well take pride in this occasion and in this work of art, modeled by the hand of an American of German descent (Albert Jaegers), which commemorates the valued contribution made by a German soldier to the cause of American freedom at the time of its birth.⁹

German-Americans celebrated the occasion in great numbers and were actively involved in the planning of the day's events. Visiting and local German American organizations taking part included: a mounted escort made up of the

officers and delegates of German-American societies accompanying Grand Marshall Charles Schwegler. Schwegler himself represented the US Volunteers and German Civil War units of the GAR (Grand Army of the Republic), the American Legion of the day. Other units of the parade included: veterans of the Steuben Regiment (Seventh New York Volunteers), the National Association of German Veterans and Warrior Societies of North America, the Northeastern Singers' Association, the Turner Societies of New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia; and the Virginia and West Virginia State associations of German American Societies.

In the evening, four large banquets were held to celebrate the day and to toast Baron von Steuben: At the Willard Hotel, some five hundred guests heard from Ambassador von Bernstorff and Dr. Charles Hexamer, president of the National German-American Alliance. Members of the Society of the Cincinnati, which Steuben had helped found, met at the Army and Navy Club. The Washington Kriegerbund hosted a banquet for visiting Kriegerbund members and other veteran's groups from several East Coast cities. Last, but not least, there was a "Kommers" hosted by the District of Columbia Turnverein at the National Rifles' Armory for hundreds of visiting Turners from all over the country.

The ceremonies on December 7, 1910 were impressive, probably the high tide of German American acceptance and recognition by the City of Washington and the country. While it was not the first time that a President, Cabinet, and high officers of the country all attended and helped celebrate a German American event in the city-- **it was the last time**. A few short years later, the outbreak of World War I, and a generation after that, the horror of World War II practically eliminated German Americans from prominence in national public life, a position from which they have yet to recover.

CONCLUSIONS

A few points about Steuben and his influence on Washington DC and on America:

Steuben was vital to the emergence of an effective American fighting force. Without his organizing ability, it would have been very difficult to achieve victory in the War of American Independence. In the past, Steuben's importance was nationally recognized by erecting monuments and memorials around the country-- Washington DC alone had two major statues plus a bust in the Pentagon.

Beyond that, he was a man known for generosity and warmth, who inspired friendships—of course he also made a few enemies with his sharp criticisms of some politicians. Among his close friends and supporters were such exalted names as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton. There were also those among the ordinary citizens and particularly soldiers who served under him who named their children after him or changed their own names to Steuben in honor of a man they respected, loved, and admired.

German Americans of an earlier era looked to Steuben in their time of need. His name was used in Washington over the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries as a heroic symbol around which German Americans could rally and identify. During the difficult period of attack by the *Know-Nothings*, the Steuben Festivals served to build favorable public relations for beleaguered German Americans. The events were popular with the general public and boosted German American prestige. They also served as fundraisers to collect money to commission a statue.

During the Civil War, German militia units in Washington City and many German Americans serving as soldiers in the Union Army brought further credit to local ethnic Germans. President Grant with cabinet officers and Congressional leaders at the Schützen Park and President Taft together with even more high officials attended dedication ceremonies for Steuben statues in the city. The Steuben statue in Lafayette Park next to the White House was the high point because its symbolism went beyond the city to have national as well as international implications.

The high tide for German Americans in the early 20th century was short lived, however, and soon devastated by the two World Wars, a condition that the symbolism of even Steuben was powerless against. The sad saga of the Schützen Park Steuben statue mirrors the German American downward spiral. Once the largest ethnic group in America and respected, if not loved, German Americans are now possibly the least well known ethnic group and are struggling to find a place in current American society. Is it possible that Steuben, the symbol, could once again have a role in the rescue?

ENDNOTES

¹ John McAuley Palmer, General Von Steuben, Port Washington: Kennikat, 1966, p.238.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 315.

⁴ Laurence F. Schmeckebier, History of the Know Nothing Party in Maryland, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1899, pp. 47ff (Schmeckebier cites the arguments of T.S.Baker's "Lenau and Young Germany in America")

⁵ Dieter Cunz, The Maryland Germans, Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1948, pp. 281f

⁶ *Evening Star*, Sept. 20, 1859, p. 3.

⁸ *Evening Star*, May 13, 1870, p.3.

⁹ Proceedings Upon the Unveiling of the Statue of Baron von Steuben, Washington, DC, GPO, 1912, pp. 49-51.



STATUE OF BARON VON STEUBEN,
Lafayette Park Monument, Washington, D. C.