



**Kościuszko: Hidden Hero of
Revolution and Rights**

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If you are coming from anywhere in America, there is very probably a Lafayette or Fayette Street not far away. There may even be a town called Lafayette. Across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House, you are in Lafayette Park. His is one of four statues on the corners, honoring military heroes who came from overseas to help during the Revolution. You probably guess someone so famous cannot be a 'hidden rebel'.

You're right.

From Lafayette's statue, walking away from the White House, you will see Saint John's Church. Yes, that is where the President held up a Bible on 6-1-2020, during the George Floyd protests. On your right, still in the park, is a statue you saw covered in graffiti. That might not have happened had the Black Lives Matter protestors known Thaddeus Kościuszko's history.



Like Lafayette, he came to fight for Washington's revolution. Both of them won key victories, and then carried revolution home. They both lost, and then languished in prison. Eventually each returned to America to ask his favorite founder to fix the Revolution's fundamental flaw – slavery. Kościuszko donated the bonus for his service, which won the war, to African-American progress.

1. A Refugee for Love

Thaddeus Kościuszko was a gentleman in the original sense: well born. His father was a minor Polish lord. About 31 families worked as serfs on their estates; not enslaved, technically, but bound to the soil. Since Thaddeus was the fourth son, he could not inherit the land, so he attended Poland's School of Chivalry, its military academy. In addition to strategy, he studied drawing and painting, so could illustrate his reports. The king recognized his talents and sent him to Paris for further study. There, he mastered military engineering.

The Army had no post for him when he returned home, in peacetime, so he tutored the children of neighbor 'Hetman' Józef Sosnowski. His rank was higher than a simple Lord, second only to the King. When his daughter Ludwika fell in love with Kościuszko, Sosnowski forbade the match. Although Kościuszko was nobly born, and had distinguished himself in the King's eyes, Sosnowski refused permission them to marry. When the couple tried to elope. Lord Sosnowski's 'guards' to stopped the carriage, beat Kościuszko within an inch of his life, and took Ludwika home. Kościuszko fled to Philadelphia, where the Continental Army was recruiting volunteers.

2. A Test that Stumped Benjamin Franklin

Arriving in Philadelphia, he sought out Benjamin Franklin. Since Kościuszko had fled without documents, there was no diploma. So he asked Franklin to let him take the Combat Engineering exam.

“Who would proctor such an exam,” Franklin asked, “when there is no one here who is even familiar with those subjects?”

Franklin did find a geometry exam, for a start. That did not test Kościuszko’s expertise in surveying terrain and figuring out how to defend it. So, Congress asked him to blockade the Delaware River to protect Philadelphia – and itself. He designed stationary mines, and found the perfect spot to install them. After that, he was commissioned.

Yet, after that, his career had a rough start, similar to Washington’s, in fact. During the French and Indian (or Seven Years) War, Washington gained fame by retreating. As a young colonial-militia officer, he told British General Braddock that the terrain ahead was perfect for an Indian attack. Braddock scoffed at the young colonial . . . until he was fatally shot. The Native Americans attacked just as Washington had said they would. Braddock, dying, put Washington in command. He got the troops safely home.

At first, Kościuszko’s commander overruled him as well. He saw that the British intended to seize control of the Hudson River, which flowed south from New England. This would cut Boston, New York, and New England off from all the rest of the colonies. General Gates assigned Kościuszko to fortify Fort Ticonderoga. He recommended placing cannons on a commanding hill. “No, the hill is too steep, no one could climb it with cannons.”

But British General ‘Gentleman Johnny’ Burgoyne could. His artillery drove the Continentals off. Like Washington, Kościuszko enabled an escape. He had designed a log raft, just in case.

His next battle, Saratoga, would decide the Revolution.

Surveying the Hudson, Kościuszko discovered the exact spot where Burgoyne would build a fort. The Americans got there first. Bemis Heights, on a hill overlooking the Hudson River, was too secure for the British to attack. They tried to go around the fort, but the woods were too thick and the Americans knew the ground. Then they tried to go even further west . . . and lost again, trapped in rain and mud. General Burgoyne surrendered.



Courtesy Architect of the Capitol

General Gates and Benedict Arnold got most of the credit, but Gates wrote to a friend in Philadelphia: “the great tacticians of the campaign were hills and forests which the young Polish engineer was skillful enough to select for my encampment.”

One British officer wrote: “The courage and obstinacy with which the Americans fought were the astonishment of everyone, and we now became fully convinced that they are not that contemptible enemy we had hitherto imagined them.” French King Louis XVI recognized the United States, and signed an alliance. The Americans could now obtain supplies which they could not manufacture themselves. Congress declared a National Day of Thanksgiving.

3. Towards a more perfect union

Agrippa Hull, a free Massachusetts man, may have been the first African Kościuszko ever met. No written records say yes or no. But we know that Hull, after two years of service, remained alongside Kościuszko for an additional four years and two months. After fortifying West Point on the Hudson River, they were sent south in October, 1780. They saw some of the war’s bloodiest fighting, together.

They also saw enslaved Southern people escaping to the British in droves. Lord Dunmore of Virginia had promised freedom for anyone who pledged loyalty to the crown. Kościuszko, after serving so long with Hull, could not see African-Americans as enslavers did. In fact, he became so close with him that he invited Hull to come stay with him in Europe.

Hull thanked him, but returned to Stockbridge, MA and worked with Theodore Sedgwick, the abolitionist lawyer who freed Elizabeth Freeman in the Massachusetts Supreme Court, well before Lincoln. Both Hull and Freeman purchased farms alongside what became “Negro Pond.” A historian described how Hull “wedged himself and his ‘good cheer’ into every crowded corner, his impromptu rhymes and his courteous jokes . . . always welcome.” On a trip to West Point, when asked about Kościuszko, Hull replied: “If you wish it, young ladies, you shall have a tale; for when it’s about the General, love and memory never fail.”

They wouldn’t fail the general either.

4. Experienced Revolutionaries Wanted

Kościuszko returned to Poland, where he met his former love Ludwika at a ball. Since her father had married her up the social scale, she was now Princess Lubomirska. Though the meeting was too emotional for both of them to remain for long, her friendship endured. She convinced the King to promote Kościuszko, who began training the Polish army.

In the late 1700s, the ideals of the American and French Revolutions scared aristocrats across Europe. Russia claimed the right to crack down on any such ideas in neighboring Poland. But Russia was busy fighting Turkey in the late 1780s, Poland adopted America's invention, a written constitution, the world's second. In 1791, Poland became a constitutional monarchy, with financial, political, and economic reforms. The military required more resources, since Russia, finished with Turkey, declared war on Poland the next year.

Kościuszko retreated to France, seeking help. When he had been victorious at Saratoga, King Louis XVI was eager to back America. But now France was deep into its own revolution. King Louis was executed; Lafayette imprisoned. There was nothing to do but return to the free Polish army.

In 1794, Kościuszko rallied Poland with "An Act of Insurrection", modeled after America's Declaration of Independence. He proclaims that Poland has been occupied by Prussia and Russia. As the insurrection's leader, he wrote: "I, Tadeusz Kościuszko, hereby swear by God to the entire Polish Nation, that I shall not use the powers vested in me for anyone's oppression, but for defense of the integrity of the borders, recuperation of Nation's sovereignty and strengthening the universal freedom. So help me God and the innocent passion of His Son!"

Poland had just seen a country of citizen farmers stand up to a great power and win. The Battle of Raclawice in April, 1794 brought even more willing fighters to "The Kościuszko Insurrection." He was politically strong enough to outlaw serfdom, a hallmark of the Dark Ages. A Jewish Light Cavalry Regiment, the first all Jewish unit in Poland was formed to help with the two-month siege of Warsaw.

At the base of Kościuszko's statue, there are Polish soldiers. Instead of guns, one carries a scythe. These were sharp curved tools, used for cutting and harvesting. On the other side one carries a long spear, called a pike. Soldiers armed only with these tools managed to capture cannon, brought in to defend Warsaw.



Holding out for two months, mostly without even guns, was a legendary achievement. But without help from an industrial power such as France, the Polish efforts were doomed. The country was divided between Prussia, Austria, and Russia. Kościuszko was wounded in the final battle, and recovered as a prisoner in the Peter and Paul Fortress in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Serfdom was re-established, with reluctant farmers and their leaders exiled to Russia. There would be no country of Poland for over a century.

Kościuszko might have remained there forever, but for bad blood between Russian Empress Catherine and her son Paul, the ruler after her death. He released Kościuszko, who was celebrated in Scandinavia and Britain while he was on his way back to America.

5. Back to the Battles

Like many Revolutionary War veterans, Congress owed him back pay (about 445,000 2021 dollars), and he had been promised a bonus of land, it what is now Ohio. Kościuszko wanted to use it in yet another fight for freedom. His will, regarding his American assets:

“I Thaddeus Kosciuszko ... hereby authorize my friend Thomas Jefferson to employ the whole thereof in purchasing Negroes from among his own or any others and giving them Liberty in my name, in giving them an education ... and in having them instructed for their new condition ... in their duties as citizens ... and in whatsoever may Make them happy and useful, and I make the said Thomas Jefferson my executor of this”

On learning that the Polish people were caught up in the Napoleonic wars, he hastened back to Europe. He did celebrate the Fourth of July with Lafayette in France, when he had business there.

Polish troops were fighting with Napoleon, who sought Kościuszko's support. He presented three demands: first, Poland would become a constitutional monarchy, like the United Kingdom. Second, that the serfs would be freed, and third, that Poland's boundaries would be

restored. Napoleon refused, so Kosciusko would neither support nor condemn him. Napoleon said that he “attached no importance.” to one who “was only a fool.”

Kościuszko was not the one who attacked Russia -- in Winter -- with an unsupplied army. Napoleon’s ethics proved as deficient as his judgment: most of the Poles who had survived the Russian Winter were dispatched to the Caribbean to reconquer Haiti and re-establish slavery in French possessions. Lafayette, another European volunteer veteran of the revolution, had purchased tropical plantations to hire freed people, and worked to convince Washington to join him in freeing enslaved people. Napoleon took over the land and re-enslaved the people. Poles who had trusted Napoleon felt twice betrayed, fighting neither for freedom nor for Poland.

The Russian tsar then sought to enlist Kościuszko. He saw that the emperor was no more interested in reestablishing Poland than Napoleon had been, and remained aloof.

He fought poverty by personal charity, acknowledging poor peoples’ humanity by visiting them personally. It was the most an aging and ailing hero could do.

6. A Civil Rights Legacy

He continued corresponding with Jefferson, who called him "as pure a son of liberty as I have ever known, and of that liberty which is to go to all, and not to the few or the rich alone." In his last letter, a month before he died, Kościuszko reminded Jefferson of his promise to distribute his American assets. "After my death," he wrote, "you know their fixed destination."

Jefferson never did purchase and free enslaved people, as the will directed. He turned the job over to the County Court, requesting that it appoint an executor. Subsequent wills, written to distribute the European Kosciusko estate, went to court. In 1852, the US Supreme Court awarded the remainder of his estate to European relatives.

While the Virginia executor had control of the American estate, a portion established the first school for African-Americans. Since Virginia frowned on educating freed people, the Kościuszko school was established in Newark, NJ.

Booker T. Washington describes paying his respects during a trip to Poland: “buried in the cathedral at Cracow, which is the Westminster Abbey of Poland...Kosciuszko lies in a vault beneath the marble floor As I looked upon his tomb, I thought how small the world is after all, and how curiously interwoven are the interests that bind people together. Here I was ... farther from my home than I had ever expected to be ... paying my respects to a man to whom the members of my race owed one of the first permanent schools for them in the United States.”