

Historical Overview: Kosciuszko, Son of Liberty



Thaddeus Kosciuszko's arrival in North America in the summer of 1776 was characteristically dramatic, as was his departure from Lithuania in 1775. His full name in Polish was Tadeusz Andrzej Bonawentura Kosciuszko. He had left Lithuania in 1775 fleeing threats from a magnate who refused to let his daughter marry a 'low noble' (meaning that his family lacked cash but owned an estate) like Kosciuszko. Upon hearing "the shot heard around the world", the rebellion of the American colonies, he was eager to test his military skills serving the ideals of freedom that inspired it.

Upon his arrival to America his ship was smashed on the reefs off the coast of Martinique, and he had to swim to shore clutching the ship's mast. Making his way to Philadelphia, the young officer presented himself to Benjamin Franklin, who enlisted his engineering skills in developing military defenses for the city. From there, he went on to play a key part at several important moments in the Revolutionary War— such as playing a pivotal role in the drafting of battle plans that led to victory at Saratoga, and designing the fortress at West Point, including a small garden still in use today.

In the fall of 1777, the two Battles of Saratoga were a turning point in the American Revolution. Equally important was Colonel Thaddeus Kosciuszko, the Polish engineer, who built excellent field fortifications overlooking the Hudson River. Because of the fortifications and the excellent troops sent by General Washington to aid General Horacio Gates, after fierce fighting the British General John Burgoyne was defeated at Saratoga which rallied the American cause.

On October 18, 1776, Congress, "Resolved, that Thaddeus Kosciuszko, Esq., be appointed an engineer in the service of the United States... and the rank of colonel." Kosciuszko was well-educated in military science completing schooling in Warsaw and Paris. General George Washington certainly came to know and appreciate the man who said of Kosciuszko, he "is a gentleman of science and merit." It was Kosciuszko's European classical education, but especially his warfare and military science training, that assisted him in his duties as chief engineer. Throughout the Revolution, Kosciuszko designed fortifications of strategic posts in the Northern and Southern American Revolutionary Campaigns.

Toward the end of the war, Kosciuszko met then Virginia Governor Thomas Jefferson. Kosciuszko was surprised when he learned "that the man who wrote that 'all men are created equal' owned slaves." One of Kosciuszko's dearest friends was a free African New Englander named Agrippa Hull who accompanied him throughout the American Revolution. Perhaps because of their friendship, Kosciuszko pressed Jefferson to allow him to use the back-pay owed him from his Revolutionary War service buy, free, and educate Jefferson's slaves. Upon his departure from the United States to fight for Polish freedom, that Kosciuszko, unable to reconcile what he saw as a blatant contradiction did, indeed, leave in his will his Revolutionary War earnings for the express purpose of buying Jefferson's slaves their freedom and education. When he left America for the last time, Kosciuszko named Jefferson the executor of his will, directing that all his American assets be sold and used to

buy and free slaves. This was reiterated just prior to Kosciuszko's death in 1817. But on this matter Jefferson proved evasive and, in the end, seemed unwilling to indulge Kosciuszko and did not execute Kosciuszko's last wish. However, because of Kosciuszko's will, many have come to acknowledge that Kosciuszko is one of the very first American Revolutionary War heroes to explicitly oppose slavery. Upon the war's conclusion, Kosciuszko's was acknowledged and he was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General. It has been said that Washington presented two pistols and either a sword or a ring to Kosciuszko to honor his service and friendship. Thomas Jefferson revered him as a dear friend and wrote in admiration, "He is as pure a son of liberty as I have ever known."

Returning to Europe in 1784 to prevent foreclosure on his family's estate, Kosciuszko found his country corrupt and utterly beholden to Russia. His experience in the American Revolution led to a Revolution in Poland, which passed the first written democratic constitution in Europe, second in the world only to the American Constitution. He joined the ranks of reformers advocating independence, greater social equality, a stronger central government with a standing army, and a more democratic constitution. "Kosciuszko saw the Polish reform movement as a continuation of the American Revolution, and hoped that it would not stop until all slaves, serfs, and oppressed peoples were treated as equals," writes Storozynski. In 1789, Kosciuszko was commissioned to help train soldiers for a new Commonwealth army. His plan was to create units drawn from all social classes, including peasants and Jews. He was badly injured and captured on the battlefield by Russian troops and held in captivity. After his release from the Russian prison Kosciuszko received praise from his military compatriots, including fellow American Revolutionary War heroes and Society of Cincinnati members, such as Lafayette and Gates.

Archival letters show that while President, Jefferson followed Kosciuszko's suggestion to establish a military school like those in Europe which resulted in the signing of the legislation which established the USMA at West Point (the American Revolutionary fortress built by Kosciuszko) which honors him to this day with the tallest statue at West Point, the Kosciuszko monument. Years later, Jefferson had even wrote to his dear friend and offered to have the ailing and permanently injured Kosciuszko buried next to him at Monticello so as to be buried in the "land of liberty" together. This was not to be. Kosciuszko was ultimately buried in the Royal crypts in Kracow.

While it is known that Thomas Jefferson willingly helped and promised to carry out the wishes of his friend Kosciuszko's enthusiastic will; however, it is also a matter of record that Jefferson did not end up doing so. Many scholars and historians now contemplate the direction the United States would have taken had Thomas Jefferson done so. Kosciuszko truly believed that equality and liberty for all was the only means to a sound future. True to his word, upon his death, and because he abhorred human bondage of any kind, Kosciuszko did grant freedom to the serfs living on his small European estate. While Kosciuszko was admired for his viewpoint, most European magnates were no more willing to arm their peasants and release their serfs than the American Founders and plantation owners had been to allow their slaves freedom; a situation which would later come back to haunt the United States one hundred years hence.

Background Resources:

- Colonel Thaddeus Kosciuszko, National Park Service, Ninety Six, National Historic Site, South Carolina <https://www.nps.gov/nisi/learn/historyculture/colonel-thaddeus-kosciuszko.htm>
- Thaddeus Kosciuszko: A Polish Son of Liberty, Hero of the American Revolution, Kosciuszko Foundation <http://www.junipercivic.com/historyArticle.asp?nid=73#.WjPuclK-Ki4>
- Thaddeus Kosciuszko, 'Son of Liberty' <https://www.monticello.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/2001wthad.pdf>
- Pure Son of Liberty, A review of The Peasant Prince: Thaddeus Kosciuszko and the Age of Revolution, by Alex Storozynski <http://www.claremont.org/crb/article/pure-son-of-liberty/>
- *Shocking Comments About Kosciuszko* By West Point Curator, *By PostEagle on January 6, 2015* <http://www.posteaglenewspaper.com/tries-to-rewrite-american-history-by-slandering-kosciuszko/>
- *Tadeusz Kościuszko's Last Will & Testament: An Unwritten Chapter in American History*, Mikołaj Gliński, Published: Oct 14 2017, Condor.com

Primary Research Sources, Society of Cincinnati Library

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- **Kosciuszko--forefather of American artillery** / Brink, Elizabeth Camille., 1932. Call Number: VF Ko'sciuszko, Tadeusz, 1746-1817
- **Kosciuszko in the American Revolution** / Haiman, Miecislaus, 1888-1949. -- New York city: Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America, 1943. Call Number: 923.5439 K86ha, 1943, MB
- **Liberté, égalité, fraternité: the American Revolution & the European response** -- Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing Co., 1989. Call Number: 973.31 L695, MB
- **Memoir of Thaddeus Kosciuszko, Poland's hero and patriot: an officer in the American army of the Revolution, and member of the Society of the Cincinnati** / Evans, Anthony Walton White, 1817-1886. / Society of the Cincinnati. -- New York: Geo. A. Thitchener, printer, 1883. Call Number: 923.5439 K86eva, 1883, M MB
- **The peasant prince: Thaddeus Kosciuszko and the age of revolution** / Storozynski, Alex. -- New York: Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Press, 2009. Call Number: 923.5439 K86st 2009 MB
- **Tadeusz Ko'sciuszko (1746-1817): American Revolutionary War patriot and national hero of Poland** / Mizwa, Stephen P. (Stephen Paul), 1892-1971. -- [S.l.: s.n., 1967]. Call Number: 923.5439 K86mi, 1967, MB

Additional Resources, Society of Cincinnati Library

- **Ko'sciuszko, Tadeusz, 1746-1817 [engraving]** - Portraits; Member portrait (Ko'sciuszko, Tadeusz), Signed: J. Grassi pinx; G. Taubert del.; G. Fiesinger inc. "Novr. 12, 1795."

Ko'sciuszko wears the SOC eagle, The Digital Collection, The Society of the Cincinnati, <http://cdm16923.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16923coll5/id/272/rec/1>

- Pulaski, Kazimierz, 1747-1779 - Pictorial works; Ko'sciuszko, Tadeusz, 1746-1817 - Pictorial works, The poster features an illustration of Kosciuszko in the center and Pulaski in the rear, as soldiers for America and Poland. The recruiting text appears first in Polish and below that in English. Poles! Kosciuszko and Pulaski fought for the liberty of Poland and other nations. Follow their example. Enlist in the Polish Army! [poster] <http://cdm16923.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16923coll5/id/239/rec/2>
- **West Point fortification plan on the Hudson river built by Kosciuszko, 1780**, source: Archive "Talking Ages", źródło: Archiwum „Mówią Wieki”, Plan fortyfikacji West Point nad rzeką Hudson zbudowanych przez Kościuszkę, 1780 r., <http://archiwum.rp.pl/artukul/990003-Kosciuszko-przegradza-amerykanskie-rzeki.html>
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Sarratoga : le 17 octobre 1777, le general Burgoine avec 6040 soldats bien disciplines met bas les armes devant les milices Americaines nouvellement tirees de l'agriculture et conduite par HoratioGates [engraving], auvel, Louis-Francois-Sebastien, 1753-1838, art Godefroy, François, 1743-1819, egr., Saratoga Campaign, N.Y., 1777 - Pictorial works Burgoyne, John, 1722-1792 - Pictorial works Gates, Horatio, 1728-1806 - Pictorial works <http://cdm16923.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16923coll5/id/53/rec/2>
- **Will of Tadeusz Kosciuszko, 5 May 1798**, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-30-02-0230>