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Two Kosciuszkos: Fighting for Liberty

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Abstract
I got in trouble down in the District of Columbia before Christmas. I made the mistake of asking friend and fellow blogger Aaron Urbanski why I should care who Thaddeus Kosciuszko was. He went mildly ballistic. Aaron has a soft spot in his heart for the old Polish general, partially because his last name is Urbanski. I can't begrudge him that.

So the name "Kosciuszko" has been rattling violently around in my head since December. Recently it broke free. And it was because of the Civil War, Gettysburg and a Pennsylvanian general that I found out why Thaddeus Kosciuszko might matter to me. [excerpt]

Keywords
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Disciplines
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Comments
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TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2013

I got in trouble down in the District of Columbia before Christmas. I made the mistake of asking friend and fellow blogger Aaron Urbanski why I should care who Thaddeus Kosciuszko was. He went mildly ballistic. Aaron has a soft spot in his heart for the old Polish general, partially because his last name is Urbanski. I can't begrudge him that.

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On a farm in southeastern Pennsylvania, a young boy heard family stories passed down from generation to generation and sat in wonder. They were stories of excitement, of war, of revolution.

Family stories are powerful. Our ancestors can be exemplars of where we're going and who we are. They can just as easily be signposts on the road of life warding off pitfalls. They stick with us for some reason. Maybe the blood in our veins sings when it hears the stories of the ones in whose veins it coursed before. Maybe humans are just hardwired to love stories.

The 1820s and 1830s were a time of wonder for Samuel Kurtz Zook. He lived on his mother's family farm outside of Philadelphia. Both of his parents were descended from Quaker farmers who lived in the hills north and west of Philadelphia. His mother's father, Welsh immigrant Abijah Stephens, had farmed the lands for years. The young Samuel Zook played across the open fields once plowed by his Grandfather, the first of nine children.

Those fields were special, and so were the tales that revolved around the house. Outside the windows decades earlier, America had been defended. Beyond the walls, America had been saved in the shivering cold. Beyond the doorstep, America was molded in the cold winter of 1777-1778.

Samuel Kurtz Zook grew up playing in the fields of Valley Forge, the winter encampment where George
Washington’s puny and fledgling force of militia became a true army. And the family stories he grew up on were of revolution, excitement, danger and patriotism.

His ancestors were pacifists. They did not fight with that army at Valley Forge. But they did help. Zook’s Grandfather, Abijah Stephens, according to potent legend, had a, "gift in medicine," and was known throughout the area as a sort of doctor, though he had no degree or formal training. Managing a farm and family dozens of miles from the bustling city center of Philadelphia meant fending for yourself and keeping your family safe in spirit and body.

Another decedent of Stephens recounted that his, "grandfather was a self-taught surgeon and practitioner in the art of healing ulcers, abscesses of various kinds, setting of broken bones and dislocations, curing spasms, cuts and bruises." The off-license doctor, his grandson later published, "went early every morning to the camp and stayed late in the evening, waiting on the sick."

Used as a headquarters, the Stevens’ home saw the footfalls of many a famous general cross its threshold. The Marquis de LaFayette frequented the home often. More Frenchmen, Duportale and Duponceau, met the family. And the Polish freedom fighter, Thaddeus Kosciuszko, visited as well.

The monument at Gettysburg to Samuel Kosciuszko Zook / CC Michael Noirot

The mysticism which must have surrounded the family stories of the Stevens and Zook clan seeped into Samuel’s young soul. He was entranced by the fields surrounding his home, commanding, according to one historian, his schoolmates in a company drill. The young children made a game of, "playing on the old fortifications on the site of the Valley Forge encampment." And what better playground to envision the grand victories of the child’s mind?

The young Zook would grow. But the memories of his family and that place remained with him forever. He wore them, quite literally, as a badge on his person. Samuel Kurtz Zook rechristened himself, changing his middle name to Kosciuszko. He took the name of the foreign general who fought as a stalwart defender of true liberty.

Kosciuszko’s name means more. The Pole hated inequity of all stripes. He despised slavery. And Zook would go on to fight in a war over that very question. What was the equitable state of things in America? Did slavery have a place in a nation which had fought so hard, shivered so long at Valley Forge, to craft an America where, "all men are created equal," and were ensured, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

And at Gettysburg, he would fall. He bled, in part, for the death of the benighted institution that his chosen namesake despised. Was battle like it had been in his childhood dreams? Was fighting and dying to save his country as sweet as his imagination had told him it would be so long before on the slopes of Valley Forge?
Samuel Kosciuszko Zook died at Gettysburg on July 2nd, 1863, a death that seemed almost fated. Another Kosciuszko fighting once again to save America from despotic rule.

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*Great assistance for this piece was provided by Chapter 2 of A. M. Gambone’s 1996 biographical history of Zook’s life, "...if tomorrow night finds me dead..." The Life of General Samuel K. Zook: Another Forgotten Union Hero published by Butternut and Blue.*